

Updating the Official Gospel: Canadian Military History's Third Wave

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Updating the Official Gospel: Canadian Military History's Third Wave

HISTORICAL WRITING ABOUT THE ARMIES Canada fielded in two world wars and Korea is in the midst of a third wave. It began in the mid-1990s around the time that 50th-anniversary celebrations of the Battle of Normandy and the liberation of Europe renewed popular and academic interest in the subject. This essay explores three landmark works constituting some of the best writing in this group: Terry Copp's *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003); Tim Cook's *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1999) and William Johnston's *A War of Patrols: Canadian Army Operations in Korea* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2003). What distinguishes these third-wave scholars are their efforts to reopen the question of what happened when Canada's ground forces arrived on the battlefield.

Despite preliminary work done in the 1920s and 1930s on an official series of volumes concerning Canada in the Great War, the first significant wave of historical writing about Canada's wartime past began immediately after the Second World War, led by Charles P. Stacey, a civilian historian made chief of the Army General Staff's Historical Section. In the 1950s and the 1960s, this organization produced the *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, widely touted then, as now, as the definitive works on Canada's ground forces in battle. These works represented a monumental effort on the part of dozens of historical officers gathering documents and interviews with participants to produce a masterful three-volume narrative of Canada's experience in the 1939 to 1945 war. The momentum and interest generated by this project led to two more monographs, a single volume on the Great War Canadian Expeditionary Force and another on Canada's role in Korea.¹ These five volumes form the core of what could be called the first wave of Canadian military history. True to the standards of the day, the official volumes offered a traditional, top-down account of Canada's military forces in action. Decisions and plans of senior commanders provided the framework and focus for as much critical analysis as was possible in a time when many of those commanders held powerful positions in the postwar army. In keeping with this focus on leadership and a mandate to include all Canadian battles in the narrative, examination of the minutia of combat was necessarily limited. Given spacial restrictions, rarely was it possible for the official account to proceed below discussions of 4000-man brigades or 800-man battalions. Such was the domain of regimental histories produced by unit associations across the country. These latter works vary greatly in historical value, depending on the author.

1 Col. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Second World War: Volume I, Six Years of War, The Army in Canada, Britain, and the Pacific* (Ottawa, 1957); Lt-Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Second World War: Volume II, The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Ottawa, 1956); Col. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Second World War: Volume III, The Victory Campaign, Operations in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Ottawa, 1960); Lt-Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1914-1919* (Ottawa, 1962); Lt-Col. H.F. Wood, *Strange Battleground: The Operations in Korea and Their Effects on the Defence Policy of Canada* (Ottawa, 1966).

They range from virtual unit scrapbooks prepared by former members to excellent monographs prepared by professional scholars like Reginald Roy, Will Bird and, most recently, Donald Graves.² These works are filled with important details from interviews and otherwise unavailable documentary evidence, making them eminently useful. However, they are obviously limited in scope to specific units.

A second discernable wave of historical writing appeared in the later stages of the Cold War. Using the official histories as the battlefield gospel, this group of historians focussed either on adding colour to accounts of battle and wartime life or adding depth concerning external economic, social and political factors that influenced the battlefield.³ A second, smaller group, which included contemporary military practitioners, concentrated on evaluating Canadian army leadership in the Second World War. Some in the first group, influenced by trends in social and popular history, explored the impact of command decisions on individuals at the "sharp end" who held little capacity to influence events.⁴ The latter grew from professional military interest in command decision-making at a time when the possibility of a conventional Third World War inspired a body of didactic history aimed at avoiding mistakes made in previous wars.⁵ Neither body of writing sought to challenge the official histories' narrative of battle, and instead magnified the Historical Section's subtle critique that public and government defence indifference in the years before Canada's three 20th-century wars cost the nation dearly when eager but untrained "citizen-soldiers" lurched into battle led by equally unprepared generals. Historians writing during this time made significant contributions to our knowledge of matters influencing events on the battlefield, but few were prepared to significantly revise what Canadians understood about what happened on the battlefield.

As the Cold War faded into the past in the 1990s, a third wave of outstanding scholarly writing on Canada at war materialized amidst a veritable flood of popular publications. This wave capitalizes on recent trends in social and cultural history emphasizing comprehensively detailed case studies to assemble as complete a picture as possible of life within an historical event or period for ordinary people. In military history, this means creating a clear picture of what happens in combat when private soldiers, led by sergeants and junior officers, set to putting their generals' plan into effect. The task is indeed possible, if time consuming, for Canada's three major 20th-century wars represent some of the most richly documented events in the country's history.

Documentary evidence utilized by this wave includes traditional correspondence

- 2 R.H Roy, *Sinews of Steel: The History of the British Columbia Dragoons* (Kelowna: 1965); Will Bird, *No Retreating Footsteps: The Story of the North Novas* (Hantsport, 1983); Donald E. Graves, *South Alberta: A Regiment at War* (Toronto, 1998)
- 3 See Stephen Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto, 1988); Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War*, (Toronto, 1982); Roger Sarty, *Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence, 1860-1945* (Toronto, 1982).
- 4 See Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* (Toronto, 1993) and Dan Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour* (Edmonton, 1986).
- 5 The best example of this group is Lt-Col. John English, *The Canadian Army in Normandy: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York, 1991).

and planning papers of commanders; but, more importantly, small-unit after-action reports, radio transmission logs and administrative statistics are mined with a quantitative thoroughness associated with social history and not generally possible in the broad, official histories. These sources are combined with a more creative utilization of letters, diaries, scrapbooks, unit newspapers, art, poetry, songs and, when possible, interviews to understand how soldiers perceived themselves and their surroundings as well as to test old assumptions about how Canada responded to the challenge of war.

Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in the ground-breaking new study *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* by Terry Copp. Copp is a long-time Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University and a well-known activist on behalf of veterans and for the preservation of Canadian military historic sites through the Canadian Battlefields Foundation. Those not familiar with his scholarly achievements should know *Fields of Fire* is much more than a 267-page monograph. It is the fruition of twenty years of research into what he calls the “fine-grain details” of what happened when Canadian units entered combat in Normandy. Reflected in the pages and footnotes of *Fields of Fire* is Copp’s time spent with the documents, veterans and on the battlefields giving him an intimate knowledge of Canadian personalities at all levels of command, the tactical, operational, strategic and psychological circumstances behind decisions and events, and, most importantly, how the terrain over which Canadian battles took place shaped the course of events. His history of combat is strengthened by including the latest research into cultural and social questions concerning Canada at war, including sport, motivation, off-duty social activity, the proportionality of sacrifice, battle exhaustion and leadership structures. The study also considers training, development and the professionalization of the Canadian army during its long waiting period in England. Copp argues that although there was significant room for improvement, the members of the Canadian army made far better use of their time in the United Kingdom preparing themselves for war than the established interpretation suggests.

Copp’s narrative of the Canadian army in Normandy is at once a supplement to the broader strokes of Stacey’s *Victory Campaign* as well as a challenge to many of Stacey’s conclusions. Copp’s principle argument is straightforward: “The achievement of the Allied, and especially the Canadian armies in Normandy has been greatly underrated, while the effectiveness of the German Army has been greatly exaggerated” (p. 13). To those who suggest the Allies only succeeded against a more skilful German opponent by resorting to overwhelming numbers and material employed in an unimaginative manner, Copp counters that these advantages are vastly overstated, especially considering that the Germans most often held the more significant advantage of defending dug-in positions. In such circumstances, Copp contends, Normandy “was a victory won primarily by Allied soldiers employing flexible and innovative operational and tactical solutions to the challenges confronting them” (p.13).

Central to Copp’s argument is the question of the relative strength of the opposing forces. His battlefield evidence reveals that the Allies, particularly in the British- and Canadian-manned eastern end of the Normandy bridgehead, never held the 3:1 numerical superiority ratio demanded by staff college textbooks for a successful attack against prepared defences. Allied planners anticipated this and therefore

developed an artillery-based doctrine intended to take advantage of known German tendencies to man their front with a portion of their forces while holding back the remainder for immediate counter-attacks on Allied penetrations, just as they had done in the last war. Equally similar to their own proven tactics of 1918, Anglo-Canadian doctrine centred on the “bite and hold” principle. These tactics used predictable artillery barrages to force Germans underground while Allied infantry rushed forward to arrive amid enemy positions the moment the shelling lifted. Instead of advancing deeper after killing or capturing the defenders, the next Allied step called for assaulting troops to dig in, to select good fire positions for automatic weapons, mortars and anti-tank guns, and to choose the best viewing points for artillery-forward observations officers. When the inevitable enemy counter-attack materialized, German soldiers faced the tactical disadvantage of exposing themselves and their vehicles as they advanced into prepared killing zones. While not glamorous, this method proved highly effective at achieving the Allies’ stated strategic goal of destroying the German army. General Montgomery emphasized that “we must engage the enemy in battle unceasingly; we must ‘write off’ his troops; and generally we must kill Germans” (p. 187). Neither this goal nor the Anglo-Canadian method for achieving it figures in the established Canadian interpretation of Normandy.

Copp argues that heavy Anglo-Canadian reliance on artillery did not stifle tactical flexibility as the majority of commentators suggest. Sound pre-invasion tactical training and the flexibility born of an incomplete doctrinal development process provided commanders with an intellectual toolbox for solving the tactical problems. The proof for these bold statements emerges from Copp’s narrative. To begin with, he illustrates that pre-landing firepower hurled at German beach defences was ineffective. Canadian infantrymen and supporting tanks and engineers were thus left to fight their way through those defences using basic small-unit fire and movement tactics of which other commentators claimed they were not capable.

The validity of the Allied artillery-based doctrine for handling the famous German mobile formations proved itself in the days immediately after 6 June. Much of the German army’s infantry and tank strength was bled away in costly counter-attacks against well-prepared fortress positions like the one manned by 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade during their little-known defence of Bretteville-l’Orgueilleuse and Norrey-en-Bessin. Copp’s account demonstrates that every weapon in the Canadian army inventory was put to use not just to “repel” counter-attacks, but to kill the counter-attackers. This included all weapons available to frontline infantrymen that others suggest were rarely employed. Copp’s interpretation of these decisive, early-June battles sheds light on the decision made by 2nd British Army commander, Miles Dempsey, to limit the depth of his D-Day advances. Copp’s evidence establishes a solid case that halting early to prepare defences on chosen ground better facilitated Allied aims of destroying their enemy at sustainable cost to themselves than would meeting German Panzer divisions on the move.

Critical to Copp’s interpretation are Allied intelligence reports containing information taken out of “Ultra” signals decrypted from German “enigma” coding machine transmissions. These reports provided Allied commanders with details, if not always consistently, about enemy strength, dispositions and intentions; significantly, they remained classified when the army official histories were written. The degree to which *Fields of Fire* and other recent studies demonstrate that Allied planning and

decision-making was based upon exploiting Ultra intelligence is alone a justification for updating the official narrative.⁶ Copp's combination of Ultra intelligence and a bottom-up approach to combat also yields new conclusions about Canadian battles south of Caen on the road to Falaise. Copp uses Ultra decrypts to add Allied and German strategic context to these events which are all-too-often approached in a tactical vacuum consisting only of Canadians and small SS Panzer battlegroups. He explodes the conventional wisdom that the 2nd Canadian Corps and then the First Canadian Army were unable to defeat an inferior enemy due to weak leadership, initiative and motivation. Instead, he argues that operations like *Spring* and *Totalize* were conceived not as breakthrough attempts but as holding attacks on the eastern end of the bridgehead where Ultra revealed the Germans most feared a breakthrough. This pressure was intended to draw German attention away from large American breakout forces on the western end and from British supporting attacks in the centre. Copp reveals that the price paid so that Patton's Army could breakout into the undefended French countryside was that Canadian soldiers with limited resources and dangerous manpower shortages had to fight and die pressing against the most powerful German positions in Normandy. In these circumstances, Copp finds more success than failure because Canadian units convinced German commanders that a threat to Falaise existed out of proportion to actual Allied strength committed there.

Historians misinterpret this diversionary success because several elite Panzer formations were able to disengage and move west for the suicidal Mortain counter-offensive. Copp demonstrates that this shift does not reflect diminished German concern about the possibility of a Canadian breakthrough. Instead, fresh, fully manned infantry divisions, previously held in the Pas de Calais by Allied ruse, were fed into the line opposite exhausted Canadian formations. Yet not only did the Canadians manage to smash these new divisions, they also prevented the full disengagement of German armour for Mortain. Most histories of the fighting south of Caen fail to mention these fresh divisions. Instead they fixate on the second and third stages of operations when the advance is slowed by Panzer battlegroups hurled back into the line by anxious German commanders to repair gaping holes torn by the Canadians. Even then, historians select examples of battlegroups catching Canadian units on the move or of sensational errors such as the disaster which befell the British Columbia Regiment when it became lost on route to Point 195. They seem to avoid the more frequent examples of German counter-attacks being shot up with great loss after driving into prepared Canadian killing zones.

To his open vindication of Canadian combat effectiveness during the fighting north of Falaise, Copp adds guarded criticism of General Montgomery's handling of the battle. He argues that Montgomery failed, for some reason, to reinforce the Canadian drive on Falaise or to provide the First Canadian Army with clear instructions when it became evident that German forces remaining in Normandy were being encircled in

6 In the latest naval official history volume, the Department of National Defence Directorate of History and Heritage notes the work was deliberately delayed until such time as Ultra decrypts became available because they were deemed essential to understanding how Allied and Canadian operations were conceptualized. See W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1943, Volume II, Part I* (St. Catherines, 2002), p. xvii.

a great pocket in August 1944. This decision once again condemned the First Canadian Army to attempt an impossible drive, with insufficient forces, through the only intact German defence line left in Normandy. The result was that some of the trapped Germans escaped and the reputation of Canada's army was forever tarnished. Copp's account of decisions in American, British and Canadian headquarters and of the circumstances leading up to the final sealing off of the Gap on 21st August is the most thorough to date, clarifying that Canadian commanders do bear some responsibility. Yet Copp concludes that more important questions remain unanswered about both Montgomery's apparent desire to spare the Second British Army for pursuit operations at the expense of Canadians at Falaise and US General Omar Bradley's contradictory justifications for his decision not to close the Gap from the south. What is clear is that, under these circumstances, closing the Falaise Gap was impossible for there were not enough Canadian and Polish soldiers in the vicinity to form a continuous defence line to block it. Furthermore, Copp demonstrates that those Canadians and Poles who fought their way into crucial choke points at the edges and in the middle of the Gap, and then held them as a sea of desperate German soldiers threatened to overwhelm them from two sides, deserve admiration rather than the condemnation received thus far from historians.

Copp does not purport to suggest that the Canadian army in Normandy was beyond reproach. Indeed, *Fields of Fire* identifies its share of problems within Canadian and Allied forces; however, Copp's commitment to understanding why events occur and why decisions are taken means that those problems are often explicable, if not always forgivable, given the circumstances and information available at the time. Copp argues that Col. Stacey's official interpretation – that the British and Canadian generalship in Normandy was superb despite inadequacies among Canadian soldiers and junior leaders – is in need of revision. Copp finds that British and Canadian senior leadership was at best satisfactory, and that victory was won primarily because of the strength and skill of soldiers and junior leaders. That Canadian units "suffered considerably heavier casualties than other divisions in 21 Army Group" was not the result of insufficient training and poor leadership but "the product of a greater number of days in close combat with the enemy", most of which were spent in diversionary operations against the best of the German army so that others could secure the glory. It is for these reasons that Copp contends "The Canadian citizen army that fought in the Battle of Normandy played a role all out of proportion to its relative strength among the Allied Armies" (p. 267).

It is not surprising that in Canada and Great Britain, where similar official narratives lauding the generalship still predominate, reviewers savaged Copp's work.⁷ However, many shortcomings reviewers found in *Fields of Fire* are more akin to an unwillingness to accept Copp's evidence and conclusions rather than actual problems with the book. Most tellingly, American military historians, whose research is also finding flaws in mainstream interpretations of the war, recently honoured *Fields of Fire* with the Society for Military History's 2004 Distinguished Book Award for Non-

⁷ See, for example, Brian Reid, review of *Fields of Fire* by Terry Copp, in *The Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin*, 6, 3 (Fall/Winter 2003), pp. 66-71 and Donald E. Graves, review of *Field of Fire* by Terry Copps, in *Canadian Military Journal*, 4, 3 (Autumn 2003), pp. 65-7.

US Military History. Most likely, critical Canadian reviews are an indicator that Copp is succeeding in his goal of shaking the foundations of established Canadian military history and changing the paradigm through which we construe the Second World War.

The 1939-45 conflagration is not the only war historians are asking new questions about. The nation's Great War experience remains a focal point for cutting-edge research which again finds gaps in the official histories. In *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War*, Canadian War Museum historian Tim Cook reveals that poison gas was a significant feature in every battle on the Western Front after 1915, yet its presence is missing from the historical record. Partly because of post-war revulsion at the use of gas, fears that it would be a major weapon in future wars and misunderstandings about its employment and utility, Cook finds few references to chemical warfare in British and especially Canadian literature. The one exception is the legendary stand by 1st Canadian Division in the 2nd Battle of Ypres against the German army's first use of chlorine gas. Cook sifts through the terrifying details of this battle to expose that the heroic defence that spawned the Canadian Corps' fearsome reputation was based not merely on unshakable resolve, but on the confidence soldiers placed in their officers. Thus, when junior field commanders with chemistry backgrounds recognized signs of chlorine and ordered their men to breath through urine-soaked handkerchiefs, most men did as they were told.

Ironically, this first and last significant appearance of gas in the Great War narrative exemplified characteristics in the Canadian Corps that enabled it to function ever more effectively as the war went on, despite the fact that, with each battle, gas increased in lethality. Central to this story is the formation and development of a largely unknown unit formed first to defend against gas attacks, and then to employ chemical weapons against the enemy. "The Canadian way of war was steeped in poison gas", Cook argues. "The Canadian Corps Gas Services grew in stature as the gas war progressed in deadliness, intensity and frequency. Combining education and drill, Gas Services played a key role in forcing the troops of the Canadian Corps to follow strict anti-gas guidelines that saved thousands of lives and strengthened the corps' fighting efficiency" (p. 211).

Cook's study builds on the work of Bill Rawling and others who reject the mythology that the Great War was a case of "Lions led by Donkeys" where the flower of western youth was carelessly squandered by unimaginative generals unable to break the trench deadlock; Cook argues, instead, that a gradual British and Commonwealth tactical and technological learning process produced a doctrine not only to break out of the trenches but to defeat the German army on the battlefield.⁸ This group of historians also suggests the Canadian Corps adapted to the new battlefield quicker than British corps mainly because the Canadians remained homogeneous. In contrast, the British corps continually interchanged component formations preventing them from acquiring familiarity and trust, or from drawing on

8 Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto, 1992); see also Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (Westport, 1997).

collective experiences to develop common procedures and training methods.

Cook joins this debate by divulging how Canadian Corps Gas Services contributed to that learning curve and benefited from homogeneity. The Canadians, Cook suggests, “were wary of how gas had already been successfully used against them, and recognizing their unique organization in the more stable Canadian Corps as compared to their British Counterparts, were able to instigate fundamental changes quicker than the rest of the BEF” (p. 122). This included appointing gas officers to coordinate measures to provide early warning of gas attacks, decontamination in the aftermath and, most importantly, training soldiers how to survive this new enemy with knowledge and good gas discipline. The corps also developed a gas school to train field commanders. As Cook states, “The goal [of Gas Services] was to impart a realistic understanding of what could be confronted at the front, control a possible epidemic of gas casualties, and ease fears of all soldiers regarding the expanding gas war by developing an active defence against it” (p. 117). Cook makes use of cultural sources, especially soldiers’ letters and diaries, to measure the success of these efforts. Interestingly, much like Jonathan Vance’s *Death So Noble*, Cook finds that the common Canadian soldier’s perception of gas, like the war in general, differs from images portrayed in the anti-war literature of the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Cook argues that Canadian Gas Services training, education and defence programs transformed gas from a terror weapon into just another trench peril to be avoided with vigilance and good discipline, albeit one that provoked constant fear and fatigue.

In order to conquer the effects of gas warfare, Canadian and British Gas Services had to remain ever vigilant to new threats. It was the Germans, with their superior pre-war chemical industry and willingness to accept international shame for being the first to use each successively deadlier gas, who held the initiative in the gas war. From their first fumbling use of chlorine released from buried cylinders through to the employment of gas shells and finally to the development of the vile, lingering, slow killer that was mustard gas, the Allies were always on the alert to new types of German gases and methods of employing them. The Canadian Corps Gas School played a particularly important role in rapidly disseminating information about new gases and how to defend against them, thus helping curtail the inevitable and potentially demoralizing rumours that arose with the introduction of each new German gas weapon or tactic.

Cook reflects the third wave of Canadian military history because he is not content to establish his argument about the extensive nature of gas warfare and rest it on a few select examples. Instead he writes gas into the Canadian operational narrative, from the first usage during the 2nd Battle for Ypres in 1915, through the Somme in 1916, Vimy and Passchendaele in 1917 right up to the peak of gas warfare in the German 1918 Spring Offensive and the highly successful Canadian attacks of the Last Hundred Days. Like Copp, it is from Cook’s study of the role of gas in every Canadian/Allied and German engagement that his principal findings emerge: gas was integral to Canada’s Great War experience, both as an enemy weapon to be defended against and as a useful tool in the Canadian artillery inventory. Prior to publication of *No Place to Run*, few were probably aware of the extensive use of both Canadian gas

9 Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997).

shells and captured German gas shells in breaking up counter-attacks on Vimy Ridge in April 1917; nor was it common knowledge that Canadians faced mass quantities of mustard gas as they clung tenaciously to Hill 70 or that the Germans used a variety of gasses to force Canadians at Passchendaele to wear their gas masks for prolonged periods in order to exhaust them physically and mentally. Cook informs the reader that combinations of irritant and deadly gasses in enormous quantities were the core of the great German Spring Offensive of 1918 that ripped out the centre of the British front and caused panic in Allied Headquarters.

By the end of 1917 gas was so essential and widespread in use in Canadian Corps' operations that control passed from Gas Services specialists directly to the Royal Canadian Artillery who integrated gas shell bombardments into routine fire plans. In particular, gas was employed in "counter-battery" shoots to saturate German artillery positions, limiting their capacity to respond to Canadian infantry advancing in the open. Gas shell concentrations would again be used in conjunction with traditional high-explosive shells to break up German counter-attacks. Cook states "Gas worked most effectively as part of a system of weapons . . . [w]ith the introduction of gas shells and the general acceptance by the artillery of their uses, gas became a constant factor on the Western Front. Although there were no repeats of the panic of April 1915, gas was a valued weapon within the attack doctrine of all armies" (p. 231).

While Canadian soldiers found ways to minimize physical gas casualties, it was in the psychological realm that this weapon did the most harm. Among Cook's most important contributions are his terrifying depictions of how gas made an already atrocious life in the trenches due to mud, shells, rats and decaying corpses even more hellish. He argues that this human factor of war is what is most absent from official histories concerned as they must be with real numbers and tangible operational results. The problem is particularly evident with regard to gas casualties, which were extremely difficult to verify. Soldiers rendered unconscious in the open by gas and subsequently ripped to pieces in a high-explosive barrage as well as soldiers with non-lethal bullet or fragment wounds unable to get their masks on before gas clouds overcame them were likely recorded as casualties of traditional weapons.

The problem of verification combined with good Canadian gas discipline led many historians to conclude that despite its initial shock on unprepared units, gas was an ineffective weapon. Cook cites a typical example of a German gas attack employing 600 canisters over a mile of trench causing only 12 specifically gas casualties. Cook argues these numbers were not only probably higher, but that the real measure of the weapon was that "all the men in that area would be affected one way or another. The repeated disruption of sleep, the fear of having one's respirator fail, in addition to the very real discomfort of wearing a respirator and the difficulty of breathing while carrying out any work were all factors that . . . withdrew from the soldier's 'courage account'" (p. 217). That soldiers could continue to function in the gas environment with the proficiency they did is a testament to Canadian Gas Services' efforts and to the fortitude of the Canadian Corps.

Cook's and Copp's identification of the Canadian fighting soldier as a victim of official history misinterpretation or omission is not exclusive to the First and Second World Wars. It also applies to what many call Canada's forgotten war in Korea, the subject of William Johnston's important new book. Johnston had an equally difficult task as Copp in that he set out to deconstruct the narrative established in the 1966

official history *Strange Battleground* and subsequently reinforced by more recent findings by David Bercuson and Brent Watson.¹⁰ The consensus was that Canada's initial response to a United Nation's request for ground forces in Korea was a near disaster. The so-called Special Force raised under Minister of National Defence Brooke Claxton's ill-conceived program consisted of hastily recruited 2nd Battalions of Canada's three regular infantry regiments, made up allegedly of swashbuckling "soldier of fortune" types who signed on for 18 months of adventure. The Special Force was said to be poorly trained, inadequately equipped and badly led and the Canadian army's performance in Korea only began to improve in 1952 after the Special Force rotated home and was replaced by the "professionals" from the Canadian army's three regular battalions.

As with Copp, Johnston establishes that this simplistic analysis is based on incomplete knowledge of what happened in combat, or, for that matter, the composition of the Special Force. Outside the Battle for Kap'ong, little hard evidence has ever been offered as to how the first rotation of "soldiers of fortune" fared, in part due to what Johnston sees as a professional bias on the part of the official historian, Lieutenant-Colonel H.F. Wood. Wood led the professionalized 3rd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in the third rotation and wrote an official narrative which conveys "the professional army's disdain for the Special Force volunteers". Discourse on the volunteer first rotation in combat is conspicuously absent in Wood's *Strange Battleground*, while anecdotes about its unprofessional conduct out of the line are commonplace. According to Johnston, "Wood gave an official endorsement to the public's perception that the Special Force had been a collection of misfit soldiers of fortune, men who were later replaced at the front by the spit-and-polish professionals of the regular 1st Battalions" (p. xvii). This negative public image, not unlike that of the Canadian army in the early 1990s, grew from media reports about the drunken behaviour of a small but highly visible minority within the Special Force. Johnston suggests that recent literature only reinforces Wood's assessment because it provides no context to these reports nor does it measure the Special Force in combat.

Johnston's primary goal is to write the virtually non-existent history of the Special Force as well as to significantly revise existing interpretations of the two subsequent regular force rotations. He is comprehensive in his account of the formation and training of the Special Force and each and every combat operation conducted during the first rotation, from the famous stand at Kap'ong to the endless large and small patrols conducted to dominate no-man's-land after the mobile war turned static in mid-1951.

Contrary to the established interpretation, Johnston contends that the Special Force was the "most combat-ready force Canada has ever fielded at the outset of a conflict" (p. xix). This was due to the fact that nearly all of the volunteers for officer and non-commissioned officer positions in the 2nd Battalions were filled with experienced Second World War combat veterans. These men shunned the idea of peacetime, garrison soldiering in the post-nuclear age, but were drawn back to the colours by the

10 David Bercuson, *Blood on the Hills* (Toronto, 1999); Brent Watson, *Far Eastern Tour: The Canadian Infantry in the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Montreal, 2002).

lure of serving in action. Most importantly of all, Johnston claims, this group included highly successful and well-motivated former sub-unit and unit commanders (who took charge of the three Special Force battalions and their component companies), including well-known names like Jim Stone and Jacques Dextraze. In addition, the man Claxton asked to lead the Force was none other than the nation's most famous brigade commander from the last war, the larger-than-life John M. "Rocky" Rockingham, hero of Vierreres Ridge in Normandy and Operation Switchback in the Scheldt. The volunteer privates in what Johnston calls "Rocky's Army" may not have had the same experience, but most were keen, fit and eager to listen to and learn from the knowledge and experience of their sergeants and officers.

In response to recent criticisms that British-style equipment and doctrine were outdated and ill-suited to Korean conditions, Johnston describes a carefully weighed decision at Canadian Army Headquarters to capitalize on the veteran junior and senior leaders' familiarity with those weapons and tactics to make good the comparatively short time available to train what became 25th Canadian Brigade. This decision, Johnston argues, meant the brigade's training task was less onerous than the hardships faced by Canadian troops in 1914 and 1939. If anything, Rockingham's troops were too keen and well prepared as most of the mischief they caused at a training camp in Washington State happened after they heard the war might be over before they got there. It was this rabble-rousing that contributed to the myth that they were a ragtag lot of misfits.

The proof of Johnston's argument and the strength of his work lie in his battle narrative. It begins with the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI), thrust into the line ahead of the rest of the brigade; they were the first to provide Canadian occupation presence when General Douglas MacArthur prematurely boasted that the war was nearly won and the first to help stop the surprise Chinese intervention and counter-offensives. This well-known turn of events set the stage for the now-legendary 2PPCLI stand on Hill 677 along the Kap'yong River in central Korea. Johnston's thorough re-creation and analysis does justice to Canada's most famous action of the war by avoiding overstating the achievement. It may be true, he argues, that the Chinese attack down the Kap'yong Valley was but a diversion for a renewed drive on Seoul and that the Canadian battalion was backed by strong fire support and American reinforcements arriving by the hour, but the fact remains that the Patricia's stood their ground against a superior enemy force, despite being encircled on ground that did not permit mutual support between companies. That they tenaciously clung to their slit trenches, Johnston asserts, was entirely due to the combat experience and aggressive spirit of the unit's officers and NCOs. The stand also occurred at a time when morale in the United Nations Eighth Army was still suffering after a number of bitter defeats and hasty withdrawals, therefore justifying the US Presidential Unit Citation awarded to the unit as a symbolic turning point.

However, Kap'yong and the small number of other actions fought by the remainder of the brigade when it arrived on a still-fluid battlefield represented only a small portion of the fighting and of Canadian losses suffered in Korea. As the title of Johnston's book suggests, most of that story is found along a static front in the "war of patrols" that dragged on during the years of peace talks after the UN decided it was satisfied that it had "defeated North Korean aggression, rather than the aggressor" and the Chinese were satisfied their border was no longer in danger by mid-1951. During

this next phase, the author informs us, Rockingham's brigade dominated no-man's-land with a vigorous patrol program intended to provide early warning of enemy action and to keep Chinese defences off-balance by mounting regular raids. By meticulously detailing nearly every one of the patrols, Johnston can claim, without challenge, that the patrols and raids conducted by the Special Force volunteers under Rockingham were the epitome of military planning, discipline, aggressive leadership and professionalism. Indeed, Johnston claims the skill and determination of the Special Force "misfits" to do their jobs well stands in sharp contrast to the "spit-and-polish" professionals who followed in the next rotation from May 1952 to May 1953.

When comparing the regular force 1st Battalions of the second rotation with the Special Force units, Johnston finds the regulars come up short. He lays blame for this at the feet of the second rotation's regular army officers, especially Brigadier M.P. "Pat" Bogert and his three battalion commanders. Johnston suggests the four were less experienced and less driven than their Special Force predecessors and more interested in polishing buttons and holding mess dinners than in maintaining an aggressive defence. Johnston maintains "Contrary to the image of competence suggested in *Strange Battleground*, the Canadian Brigade languished in mediocrity throughout Brigadier Bogert's year in command – much to the annoyance of at least some of the Allies in the Commonwealth Division" (p. 256). In fairness, Johnston adds that Canadian Army Headquarters was guilty of not affording the second rotation the same opportunities for collective training that "Rocky's Army" benefited from in the eight months prior to its deployment.

The results Johnston describes – a deadly combination of unmotivated leaders and poor training – are deeply disturbing. During the second rotation, the aggressive Canadian patrolling program was sharply curtailed. Most of the 1st Battalions' patrols ventured only to listening posts a few hundred yards beyond their positions. These were ineffective as the "standing patrols" always returned to the same locations using the same routes that became known to increasingly aggressive Chinese patrols. Moreover, the meticulous reconnaissance patrolling and planning conducted prior to Special Force raids were not employed by the regulars, and this turned their few attempts to carry the fight to the enemy's side of no-man's-land into disasters. Johnston also contends that Bogert's regulars suffered more casualties during their rotation as a result of their passivity than Rockingham's "misfits" lost during their tour, in spite of the fact that the Special Force tour included the bitter battles of Kap'yong and Chail-li. Losing of control of no-man's-land not only made the smaller number of regular force patrols easy prey for Chinese ambushes, it also enabled Chinese troops to conduct the same kind of destructive raids on Canadian trench lines that the Special Force routinely conducted on the enemy in the previous year.

Johnston writes that a "dugout mentality" prevailed during the second rotation, with officers up and down the chain of command unwilling to leave the safety of their bunkers to lead from the front as had been common practice under Rockingham, Dextraze and Stone. He is hyper-critical of the "so-called professionals who either failed to understand the keys to successful military operations or lacked the drive and determination to carry them out" (p. 283). Johnston backs his attack on the official history's contention that the Canadian Brigade was a model of professionalism under Bogert with the post-war testimony of Major Harry Pope, a company commander in 1st Battalion of the Royal 22e Regiment and a staunch critic of many of his colleagues

– particularly his own battalion commander. More importantly, Johnston tests the sanitized brigade War Diary which served as the basis for *Strange Battleground* against individual patrol reports and other tactical-level sources that reflect a deteriorating situation in front of the Canadian lines. Further evidence that a problem existed was revealed when Brigadier J.V. Allard and the third rotation of newly-recruited regulars took over in May 1953. Allard immediately recognized the weakness of Canadian positions and patrolling methods and took steps to correct them.

Hidden somewhat in the shadow of his assault on the regular army is Johnston's analysis of external circumstances contributing to this dark chapter in Canadian military history. Most importantly, the transfer between the first and second rotations in the 25th Canadian Brigade coincided with significant efforts to rebuild and reinforce the Chinese army in Korea after the disastrous losses suffered during failed offensives in 1950-51 and UN counter-attacks. In the aftermath of these events, many Special Force patrols encountered an enemy desperate for breathing space and uninterested in holding a front too closely to UN positions, especially given the vast disparity in firepower between the two sides. This began to change just before Rockingham handed over command to Bogert. The regulars, in turn, faced a Chinese opponent that grew more powerful by the month in artillery, mortars, machine-guns, field fortifications and knowledge of how to conduct a successful, protracted defence.

Unfortunately for the 1st Battalions, increases in Chinese combat power occurred at a time when the only news from Korea concerned peace negotiations. This had the combined morale-sapping effect of curtailing Canadian public interest in the fighting while convincing many regular soldiers there was no point risking their lives when they expected the negotiations to conclude any day. This no doubt exacerbated the problem arising from the leadership of Bogert and his three battalion commanders.

The author goes to great lengths establishing Rockingham's reputation and skill, including adding an introductory chapter on his conduct in Normandy. Johnston also carefully examines the decision-making process inside "Rocky's" brigade headquarters in Korea and his success in working with the battalions under his command. To a lesser extent, the same is done for Allard in the third rotation. Johnston does not afford Bogert the same type of analysis. A brief biographical paragraph suggests his command experience was brief and highlighted only by the "Boforce" taskforce operation in Southern Italy and equally brief periods leading brigades in the north. Most of his wartime career was spent as a staff officer. What is missing, though, from Johnston's analysis is that Bogert brilliantly led the West Nova Scotia Regiment through the lonely Dittaino Valley battles in Sicily and that "Boforce" succeeded in its critical mission during the Battle of Salerno through the leadership and drive of Bogert, which is spoken of to this day in legion halls around western Nova Scotia.¹¹ Bogert also led brigades at San Fortunato and in the battles for the northern Italian rivers during the bloodiest and most demoralizing fighting of the entire Italian campaign. In addition, he served as senior staff officer in 1st Canadian Infantry Division after its strength-sapping winter of patrolling on the Ortona front

11 Lee A. Windsor, "Boforce: 1st Canadian Infantry Division Operations in Support of the Salerno Bridgehead", *Canadian Military History*, 4, 2 (Autumn 1995), pp. 51-60.

and he played a key role in rebuilding the formation for its great victories against the Hitler and Gothic lines. Indeed, Pat Bogert was no stranger to the problem of finding ways to motivate men in difficult situations, which makes his tenure of command in Korea doubly tragic and puzzling.

The question of Bogert's leadership may merit further investigation; nonetheless, *A War of Patrols* is still the most comprehensive and balanced history of the Canadian army in the Korean War. While operational level maps are scarce, the book is well supplied with excellent tactical maps and oblique air photographs which, along with author's vivid description and discussion, illustrates the unique terrain problem presented by the Korean landscape. This careful emphasis on terrain is another hallmark of the third wave of Canadian military history.

The Canadian army of today was significantly shaped by its experience in Korea. Indeed, the multi-battalion regular regiments, the integration of armoured units into infantry brigades and even the establishment of a second light machine-gun in every rifle section were all either lessons from Korea or expediencies forced on the shrunken regular army in its first postwar commitment. These are among the most interesting of Johnston's conclusions. The similarities between the Korean War and the ongoing, high-intensity peace-support operations of the last thirteen years are thought-provoking. Like the Korean deployment, these operations are conducted by small bands of professional soldiers projecting the national interest with the barest measure of government and public knowledge or support. On this matter there is complete consensus in all histories of the Canadian army in Korea, including Wood, Bercuson and Watson. The question is essential for understanding how Canada's citizen army, known and loved by the nation in two world wars, evolved into the forlorn regulars of the post-war period, condemned to risk life and limb around the world on a routine basis with little notice paid to them by their nation – at least until 11 September 2001 once again reminded Canadians that they needed their men and women in uniform.

The theme linking these three works is that the Canadian official histories of the nation's ground forces in the Great War, the Second World War and Korea are in need of expansion and revision. However, the case against them can be overstated. The official histories all embody the high standards of scholarly professionalism and research rigour found in C.P. Stacey's Historical Section of the Canadian Army General Staff. The work of Stacey and his team continues to provide the basic narrative structure for understanding this chapter of Canadian history. Nevertheless, new sources, new social and cultural approaches and the new perspective now possible in a post-Cold War world means the official battle narrative is no longer the last word on the history of the Canadian army in combat. Just as importantly, the revelations of the third wave of Canadian military history prove that, when properly integrated with the full range of research and methodological tools available, narrative history still has utility.

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