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## **"Merry Hell: The Story of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Regiment) Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919 (Book Review)" by Captain Robert N. Clements, MC; Brian Douglas Tennyson Ed**

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Normandy. This is an aspect omitted for other topics. Indeed, there is little to no mention of types of lessons learned or identified from earlier operations and other campaigns. An engagement with the historiography is also not evident pertaining to the use of the PIAT (Projectile, Infantry Anti-Tank). The weapon is unfavourably reviewed in the text as having been unpopular and recounts an instance where a British Company Sergeant Major had difficulty in achieving success with the weapon. The first attempt the bomb bounced off the front and the second the bomb fell-off after coming into contact with a stalk from a hedge. The third effort “put paid to the Panther” (p. 34). Kite notes that the weapon was not popular, it accounted for six per cent of German tanks destroyed in Normandy compared to the RAF’s seven per cent. Furthermore, Robert Engen’s examination of 161 Canadian infantry officers’ battle experience questionnaires found that 141 officers’ units had used the PIAT and seventy-four of those found the weapon to be ‘outstandingly effective’ compared to three who viewed oppositely.<sup>2</sup> This is a particular instance where noted above that further examination of the topics discussed may yield different results, but the thesis as a whole of explaining how each element of 21st Army Group operated still stands while additional examples can highlight the difficulties in adhering to established doctrine and the reaction to opposition when tasks could not be performed as expected or practiced but still managed to pull through.

*Stout Hearts* is a mammoth undertaking in discussing how the military components of 21st Army Group and supporting naval and air elements were to fight the battle of Normandy. Kite highlights neither successes nor failures, but instead discusses the idea behind the machinations of 21st Army Group, compiled within a single volume. This work can be used as an educational tool and reference guide. Ultimately, *Stout Hearts* furthers our understanding of the complexities and intricacies of 21st Army Group during the Battle of Normandy.

MATTHEW DOUGLASS

*Merry Hell: The Story of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Regiment) Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914–1919.* Captain Robert N.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Engen, *Canadians Under Fire: Infantry Effectiveness in the Second World War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 166–169.

Clements, MC; Brian Douglas Tennyson Ed Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. 269.

As we enter the second year of the centenary of the First World War, academics, students, and the general public share in the celebrations and commemorations in various ways. For many, however, the war is distant, and those with no personal connection have little sense of just how life altering the Great War was. Many books on the subject ignore this disconnect, and instead address the larger-than-life Generals, the battles that decimated an entire generation of men, or one aspect of the conflict's multi-faceted and complex intricacies.

*Merry Hell*, written by Capt. Robert N. Clements, a three-year veteran of the conflict, is not one of these books. Clements' writing gives the war a personal feeling, allowing the reader to walk the battles and understand the experiences of the individual soldier. Many of Clements' sentiments are shared by the modern soldier: poor quality of clothing, terrible food, malfunctioning weapons, and misery of the weather.

Editor Bryan Douglas Tennyson's introduction provides the background of the 25th Battalion. He explains that an official record of the battalion's history in the war does not exist. He also states that this text by Clements was the only real historical record of the unit's actions from 1915–1919. Other than the introduction, according to Tennyson, Clements wrote the full text. However, he had “appalling spelling and eccentric grammar” that Tennyson corrected (p. xix).

Moving from the introduction, the book's main theme about the unit is introduced from the outset. Clements does not spend much time on the war's background. He instead integrates the war into the first few chapters. His primary focus is on the soldiers of the unit, the individual characters who were the 25th Battalion. He also describes the complexities of how this newly developing army from Canada was quickly transitioned from a militia based organization, into a professional force that helped develop Canada's sense of nationhood on the battlefields of Europe. One such difficulty that the Army faced was what Clements describes as the “one man, one shirt” game. This is where a man of five-foot-seven and 135 pounds receives a shirt of a six-foot-two, 200 pound man, and vice versa (p. 9).

Clements' story of the 25th develops over the four year period of the battalions European foray, and includes various stories, either about individuals who ventured off to cause trouble, or to the foolish mistakes of commanders and the senior leadership. He even includes

some of his own poems. Many of these poems naturally are in response to something that occurred, usually told in a previous story. It is within this context that the reader develops a deeper understanding of what life was like as a soldier from training in 1915 through the occupation of Germany in 1919. The war's history becomes understood to the reader, even for someone living one hundred years after the Great War. Better yet, for the reader who has served in the Armed Forces of their respective nation, they will certainly empathize with the author and his compatriots' trials.

Throughout the book, Tennyson inserts footnotes that guide the reader to develop a deeper understanding of the individual persons and places that Clements refers to. The footnotes are rather in depth, which will help the novice of the war's history. Tennyson covers key, well-known figures, as well as lesser known individuals and events. All are instrumental to the overall story, and allow the reader to connect with the war in a non-academic manner.

While the book appears not to be academic, in terms of a primary source for professional research, *Merry Hell* certainly qualifies as source academics could reference. Clements in-depth description of the various battles, the experiences of individual soldiers, not to mention the constant movement of troops to and from the front, certainly contributes to the academic study of the war. In Chapter 10, for example, he titles it as a "diary" allowing the reader to take in an eleven-day extravaganza of a soldier's leave in England (pp. 97–102). This allows the reader to gain an insight into just a sample of a soldier's life, even away from the front. There are multiple examples of life of a soldier from a first person perspective, all of which develop a general overview of what life was like for a common soldier from a city such as Halifax or a small town from Alberta.

To further expound on the idea of this book being a strong resource for academic study, Clements emphasizes certain aspects of the war. He discusses how a series of numbers were applied to individuals throughout the unit. This numbering system indicated whether a member of the battalion was one of the originals who left Halifax, where the battalion originated, or joined later, after the unit's arrival in Europe (p. 39). Clements also points out the tensions that existed between Canadians and their British counterparts (p. 159). In Chapter 8, one of the most important afflictions to impact the war effort, regardless of side, was 'Trench Foot.' Clements devotes an entire sub-chapter dedicated to foot care. He gives careful details

as to how soldiers took care of their feet and dealt with the constant soaking they received while holding the line. One solution he describes was the huddling of troops together in a dugout, using their natural heat to dry out wet clothes (p. 81). He addressed these types of issues and their solutions throughout the book, especially when it comes to benefiting soldier care. One aspect he discusses that is overlooked in other histories of the Western Front is the Chinese Labor Corps. Though it is not in-depth, it is addressed, a rather out-of-place topic, especially within the context of the subject.

Near the end of the book, Clements rushes his conclusion. Whereas he was in depth and thorough with the battalion's first few years in Europe, he begins to push through the final years of the campaign like a high school student attempting to finish his paper at the last minute. He address the last one hundred days of the war, and the battalions near year long occupation of German territory, concluding with their return home to Nova Scotia, in less than thirty pages. The reader is directed to feel rushed, leaving a somewhat disappointing sensation. What is a positive for a researcher is after the conclusion of the main text, a list of every member of the 25th appears. Each has the city the soldier indicated when he enlisted. Also shown is whether they were killed in action or died as a result of combat wounds, indicated by a small cross.

Overall, *Merry Hell* is a well written book that can be used for casual reading or academic study. It allows the reader to connect with the war that most other texts related to the subject do not. It is rare to come across such a book, especially in the study of history. *Merry Hell* has the most value as a source written by an individual who experienced the war first hand, which allows for academic referencing. In addition, the book offers an opportunity for a reader one hundred years later to understand just how important the conflict was. Tennyson does a great job first introducing the background to the text, and then filling in the blanks with footnotes. Clements offers the reader a chance to understand the life of the common soldier, something otherwise ignored by books on the subject of the First World War. In addition, he gives a rather in-depth history of an otherwise forgotten battalion, helping to keep alive a unit that was instrumental in some of the biggest battles of the Great War.

ERICH N. LENZ