

11-24-2017

“Combat Mission Kandahar: The Canadian Experience in Afghanistan (Book Review)” by T. Robert Fowler

Craig Leslie Mantle

Recommended Citation

Mantle, Craig Leslie (2017) "“Combat Mission Kandahar: The Canadian Experience in Afghanistan (Book Review)” by T. Robert Fowler," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol26/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

T. Robert Fowler. *Combat Mission Kandahar: The Canadian Experience in Afghanistan*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2016. Pp. 271.

Few professional historians immediately following the First World War paid very much attention to the experiences of the common soldier.¹ That, in their august and learned opinion, was not *real* history. The hard-drinking, chain-smoking, foul-mouthed and slightly-concussed Tommy (or *poiliu* or *frontsoldat*) was just a little too pedestrian for their taste. The historiographical tradition at the time, which persisted for some decades, emphasised “great men” who performed “great deeds.” Military history with either a sociological or anthropological inclination was still in the offing. Although primary documentation was certainly available—soldiers’ memoirs and collections of letters had been published both during the war and for some time thereafter—the “man in the trenches” was essentially ignored in preference to his generals and politicians, their campaigns and battles.²

Interestingly, jumping ahead one century, the exact opposite situation now seems to prevail in Canada as concerns the country’s recent involvement in Afghanistan. Because the conflict is a little too raw, fresh and recent, there exists relatively few examinations of generalship and operations, whereas the individual soldier, of both sexes it might be added, has been the focus of professional and amateur attention. With Robert Fowler’s most recent book, another volume of “soldier experiences” has been added to the growing Canadian literature on Afghanistan. At this stage, we perhaps know more about the soldiers themselves than the generals who commanded them or the many operations, both large and small, in which they

¹ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 4, 82-108.

² For the extant Canadian canon, see Brian Douglas Tennyson, *The Canadian Experience of the Great War: A Guide to Memoirs* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

were involved, although to be fair there are a few works that prove this statement false.³

Combat Mission Kandahar offers a third-person telling of the stories, gleaned from personal interviews, of seven Canadian soldiers who served in Afghanistan during the combat phase of the mission, that is, from 2006 to 2011. Fowler is to be complimented on his choice of subjects. The breadth of Canadian military experience in Afghanistan is sometimes lost in accounts that are mostly combat arms-centric; Canadian soldiers did more than just root out insurgents, to be sure. Rather than focus exclusively on, say, the infantry, as some earlier works have done, the author has included individuals who, for instance, participated in psychological operations, rendered improvised explosive devices (IEDs) safe and oversaw local reconstruction projects. Indeed, the soldiers profiled in the book were selected for no other reason than the diversity of their overseas experiences. Taken together, other works and his, a more complete picture is now emerging of the scope of activity undertaken by Canadian military personnel in South-West Asia. The seven individuals whom Fowler has profiled ranged in rank from corporal to captain and all are male; judging by their names only, he seems to have included both English and French Canadians.

The book begins with two contextual chapters. The first lays out the salient history of Canadian military participation in Afghanistan from 2001. In it, Fowler moves quickly but effectively over the first couple of years; he understandably places his emphasis on the combat mission itself. Mention is made of most of the major events of this ten-year period, including JTF-2's early entry into Afghanistan, Operation MEDUSA and its aftermath, the Manley Report, and even Route Hyena (of Paul Gross connection).

Although this chapter ensures that the individual stories that follow are situated in their proper time and place, he unfortunately does not continue the description of Canadian involvement to its natural conclusion. The brief, narrative history that he provides here ends abruptly with the end of the combat mission in 2011, and

³ For example, Colonel Bernd Horn, *No Lack of Courage: Operation Medusa, Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010); Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope, *Dancing with the Dushman: Command Imperatives for the Counter-Insurgency Fight in Afghanistan* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press 2008); and Chris Wattie, *Contact Charlie: The Canadian Army, the Taliban and the Battle that Saved Afghanistan* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2008).

while this is logical enough for his purposes, it ignores the fact that Canadian soldiers remained in Afghanistan until 2014 in a training capacity. The combat mission may have ended, but the military's mission did not. In this sense, the chapter is somewhat incomplete and leaves an erroneous impression that Canada withdrew from Afghanistan once its soldiers stopped fighting. A few more words along these lines would have closed the loop and made his discussion more robust.

In the second, he discusses the theory and practice of counter-insurgency (COIN), drawing widely from history and various authors. From the outset, the challenges of fighting a war against insurgents that could so easily blend with the resident population, as opposed to a conventional and clearly identifiable enemy, are made clear. One cannot help but respect the difficulty inherent in fighting an enemy that with simple, and in some cases homemade, weapons could defeat mechanised and technology-heavy forces. Discussions of Taliban strategy and tactics, as well as Canadian equipment used in Afghanistan, complete the chapter.

What is perhaps missing from this discussion is mention of Canada's "whole of government" or "comprehensive" approach to the conflict. While the military provided security by reducing the threat posed by insurgents, state-building activities—holding elections, large-scale development, improving policing and prisons, microfinancing, capacity-building within the Afghan government, and so forth—were undertaken largely, but not exclusively, by other government departments and agencies. Such activities, it could be argued, contributed to the counter-insurgency campaign, as well. Being the largest and most expensive piece of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan, the military's contribution has often overshadowed that of others, but it must not be forgotten that this was a battle waged on many fronts, not just in dusty fields and villages. Without even a brief mention of the other key Canadian participants, one is again left with an erroneous impression, that the military undertook all of the activities intended to rebuild Afghanistan from both the top-down and bottom-up.

The remainder of the book focusses on the impressive and humbling experiences of the chosen seven; some chapters describe the actions of individuals for which they ultimately received either the Star or Medal of Military Valour, certainly no mean feat. Whatever the minor shortcomings of the contextual chapters, the remainder is

exceptionally engaging as Fowler is a consummate writer. There are many spots where the pages turn all too quickly and easily. Each chapter begins with some relevant historical background that provides individual context. In the chapter about Master Warrant Officer Richard Stacey who served as the sergeant-major of C Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse, for instance, a short discussion of the history of Canadian tanks in Afghanistan is provided. Likewise, a brief account of the psychological operations capability within the Canadian Armed Forces is offered as preamble in the chapter about Corporal François Dupéré who conducted influence activities during his rotation. (For the sake of interest, the other soldiers profiled in the book include Captains Jonathan Mineault and Robert Peel, Lieutenant Simon Mailloux, Master Corporal Sean Chard and "Sam," a pseudonym for a soldier who disposed of IEDs.) Rather than tell each soldier's entire story in chronological order from the time that he was deployed to the time that he was repatriated, Fowler describes a few key events from his service overseas and, much to his credit, illuminates how the soldier's individual experiences fit into the larger strategy, COIN or otherwise, then being pursued. The second contextual chapter is, therefore, far from superfluous.

The book is a form of oral history, in this case taking the first-person narratives of individuals and crafting a third-person account from them (as opposed to, for instance, presenting the narratives with only minor editing). Since Fowler's work is intended for a non-specialist audience, it is too much to expect a protracted discussion of the methodology employed in its creation, but a few words along these lines would have been helpful. Without informing the reader as to how interviewees were initially approached and selected (aside from the diversity of their experiences), whether or not they had the chance to vet and alter drafts of their respective chapters, under what circumstances the interviews were conducted, and so on, such important questions can only remain unanswered. A deftly-crafted paragraph or two could have briefly addressed these and similar methodological issues without detracting from the generality or appeal of the work, while at the same time satisfying the curiosity of those scholars interested in oral history as a research technique. Fowler's experience in collecting first-person accounts could surely have taught something to others.

Aside from the research being uneven in places and the occasional factual error, the near total lack of quotations from the men themselves

is exceptionally troubling. Each chapter is about a particular soldier, yet the soldier's voice is rarely, if ever, heard. These men do not, in other words, have the chance to speak for themselves as Fowler does all of the storytelling; all of it. Each of these individuals must surely have provided some excellent descriptions, turns of phrase or exquisite vulgarity in their respective interviews that could have been included to add variety and colour to their chapter. Soldiers speak with a distinct lexicon and occasionally syntax, but one would never know it from this book. The absence of first-person narrative (the major exception being a quotation that extends over two pages, pp. 132-33) limits the usefulness of the work as a primary source. The public will find the book interesting and engaging, for it definitely is, but academic historians in search of participants' voices will be bitterly disappointed.

In *Combat Mission Kandahar*, Robert Fowler has preserved the stories of another handful of soldiers that, had they not been presented here, might otherwise be lost to history. That in itself is a commendable and worthy pursuit. Although some 40,000 individuals served in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014, we now know a bit more about the service of a further seven. Now indeed is the time to capture such experiences, when memories are raw, fresh and recent, not years later when they have degraded or unconsciously changed. By presenting seven very different vignettes, he clearly shows the intellectual and physical difficulties inherent in fighting in Afghanistan, as well as the commitment, dedication and endurance of Canadian soldiers; their perseverance in the face of considerable adversity shines through as well. In its own particular way, *Combat Mission Kandahar* is a good general introduction to the conflict and its participants, both friend and foe alike.

CRAIG LESLIE MANTLE, *ADJUNCT FACULTY ASSOCIATE, LCMSDS*
ℳ RESEARCH FELLOW, CDA INSTITUTE

Charles Forrester. *Monty's Functional Doctrine: Combined Arms Doctrine in British 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45*. Solihul, UK: Helion & Company, 2015. Pp. 226.

The Foreword to the British Army's 2011 doctrine primer suggested that doctrine was still viewed by many officers as a topic they would rather avoid.¹ Indeed, for many people the mere notion of the conceptual component of fighting power, the thinking element of fighting doctrine, is both remote and difficult to comprehend.² With that in mind, this book is likely to appeal to those who *are* fascinated by the interplay between conceptual doctrine and physical practice in the latter stages of the Second World War.

Monty's Functional Doctrine attempts to reconcile historiographical interpretations of the British Army's methods and performance in the Anglo-Canadian 21 Army Group by means of an examination and an explanation of the way Montgomery incorporated best practice techniques, devised by lower and middle level commanders to produce a functional, workable and adaptive doctrine for integrated armour and infantry cooperation. The book, which builds on Forrester's doctoral thesis,³ clearly articulates his enthusiasm for the intricacies of the subject as indicated in his writing style, which is encyclopaedically detailed. The benefit of Forrester's methodical and rigorous approach is that the conclusions he draws are supported by the extensive use of references, many of which are primary sources.

Forrester contends that agile, capable and adaptable mid-level commanders, under the mostly benign eye of an omniscient and supportive Montgomery, were empowered to think conceptually in order to create doctrine suitable for the terrain and environment facing them in Europe. I particularly liked the clear explanation of the evolution of the British Army's thinking with regard to tanks and infantry in the 1930s, which led to the separate development of Infantry support tanks, Cruiser tanks and the motorised infantry. This background contextualises the problems encountered in integrating the infantry and the armoured

¹ *Army Doctrine Publication: Army Doctrine Primer* (AC7194). (MOD: 2011), i.

² Air Vice-Marshal (Ret'd) Mike Harwood, "The Conceptual Component," *Air Power 2014/2015 Engaging in a Changing World* (2014): 16-18.

³ A summary of the key conclusions of Forrester's thesis can also be found in his article: Charles Forrester, "Field Marshal Montgomery's Role in the Creation of the British 21st Army Group's Combined Arms Doctrine for the Final Assault on Germany," *Journal of Military History* 78, no. 4 (October 2014).

forces in the later years of the war. I also enjoyed the explanation of the thinking necessary to overcome the initial inferiority of British tanks, guns and anti-tank guns in the wide expanses of the Western Desert: an environment which offered the opportunity to conduct tank battles in manoeuvre. Nevertheless, it was a surprise to find the author's definition of doctrine (p. 192), fundamental to the understanding of the book, in the Appendix, which also articulates Forrester's desire to debunk the perception of Montgomery as an authoritarian 'top-down' commander, unwilling to listen to, or incorporate, the experiences and ideas of those lower down the command chain.

The description of the interplay necessary, between the commanders of the infantry and armoured divisions and brigades, to adapt infantry and armour tactics in order to overcome the enemy is well handled, as is Forrester's explanation of the way the lessons from the fighting in North Africa were misread during the early stages of the campaign in Normandy. Forrester also shows how Montgomery dealt with flamboyant and impudent commanders who failed to follow his direction or embrace a culture where hierarchical centralised command and control also allowed and encouraged subordinates to improvise (p. 59). That said, in concentrating mostly on the interaction between infantry and armour, Forrester's coverage of the doctrinal development and integration of artillery and air power is noticeably thin.

One of the ideas to emerge from the growing body of literature, which seeks to rehabilitate the reputation of the British 21st Army Group, is that air power's influence has been greatly overestimated. Some historians have claimed that the air interdiction plan did not significantly delay German reinforcements getting to Normandy; that the moral effect of air power was temporary and largely intangible and could even have been used by the defeated Germans as an excuse to assuage their humiliation at defeat; that the threat from Typhoon aircraft was 'more myth than reality' and that Gooderson's belief in the 'moral effect'⁴ of airpower to carry the day is grossly overstated.⁵ This argument is far from won. While Jonathan Fennell acknowledges

⁴ Ian Gooderson, *Air Power at the Battlefield: Allied Close Air Support in Europe, 1943-1945* (London, UK: Routledge, 1998).

⁵ Robert Vogel, "Tactical Air Power in Normandy: Some Thoughts on the Interdiction Plan," *Canadian Military History* 3, no. 1 (1994): 37-8, 42, 45; Christopher Evans, "The Fighter Bomber in the Normandy Campaign: The Role of 83 Group," *Canadian Military History* 8, no. 1: 21, 31; Terry Copp, "21st Army Group in Normandy Towards a New Balance Sheet," *Canadian Military History* 16, no. 1 (2007): 65-67.

the revisionist arguments, he draws on work by King, to supplement his analysis to suggest that success or failure *was* dependent on morale.⁶ Certainly, in 1940 and 1941 British and Dominion soldiers viewed the loss of air superiority as a fundamental constituent of their defeats.⁷ Moreover, Fennell has shown, air power *did* induce feelings of vulnerability, which resulted in tangible morale effects out of all proportion to the physical effects.⁸

Monty's Functional Doctrine investigates the development of doctrine and tactical practices of the 21st Army Group in a way that will interest both academics and those interested in the interplay between infantry, armour, artillery and air power during the latter stages of the Second World War. It is a worthy addition to the historiography that seeks to rehabilitate the reputation of the British Army in Normandy and beyond. One of the biggest things I took away after reading the book was that the story is only part told: that only when the moral effect of artillery and air power on the German defenders is fully incorporated into the narrative will we garner a truer picture of the performance of the 21st Army Group. After all fighting power, as British doctrine currently tells us, is a composite of the conceptual, physical and moral components.⁹

DAVID STUBBS, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

⁶ Jonathan Fennell, "Reevaluating Combat Cohesion: The British Second Army in the Northwest Europe Campaign of the Second World War," in *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in the Twenty-First Century*, A. King (ed.), 134-166; Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36.

⁷ TNA CAB 106/220, Final report of the Bartholomew Committee on lessons to be learnt from the operations in Flanders. Martin Francis, *The Flyer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19-20; Air Historical Branch, RAF Campaign in Crete, May 1941, First Draft, 71-74; D.M. Davin, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945: Crete* (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1953), 458; Henry Probert, *Bomber Harris: His Life and Times* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), 120; David Stubbs, "Politics and Military Advice: Lessons from the Campaign in Greece 1941," *Air Power Review* 17, no. 3 (2014): 117-118.

⁸ Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 55, 60-63, 76-78.

⁹ Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01, *UK Defence Doctrine* (November 2014): 25.

Lesley J. Wood. *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2014. Pp. 205.

Crisis and Control makes a significant contribution to our understanding of police responses to public protests. Wood challenges the reader to set aside personal politics and examine the broader roles and functions of police, and how these are often at odds with the goal of free speech manifested through peaceful protests. It is a fascinating book, particularly interesting for its analysis of the diffusion of ideas and tactics within and among police forces and the broader evolution of police use of less than lethal weapons. However, readers of *Canadian Military History*, presumably interested in military subjects, might find the book unsatisfying because it has very little to do with diffusion of ideas, tactics, or equipment from militaries to the police.

The author, Lesley J. Wood, is a professor of sociology at York University. Her online teaching profile states that she is “interested in how ideas travel, how power operates, how institutions change, how conversations influence practices, how people resist and how conflict starts, transforms and ends.”¹ She has a PhD in sociology from Columbia University and has extensive writing credentials regarding transnational social movements and networks. She has written a number of articles and her book *Social Movements, 1768-2008*,² co-authored with the late Charles Tilley, is essential reading on the subject. Wood comfortably crosses international borders in her writing, providing apt comparisons and distinctions among her case studies. In addition to her academic credentials, Wood has been an active participant in the global justice and the anti-poverty movement. Among other protests, she was personally involved with activists at the 2010 G20 Summit.

Wood’s book focuses on protest policing in North America over the past twenty years. Her work makes a valuable contribution to the literature, because there are few book-length treatments of the subject. Although there are volumes written about specific protest events and the police reactions (an excellent Canadian addition being *Putting the State on Trial: The Policing of Protest during the*

¹ “Lesley Wood, Department of Sociology,” York University, <http://people.laps.yorku.ca/people.nsf/researcherprofile?readform&shortname=ljwood>, accessed 15 August 2016.

² Charles Tilley and Lesley J. Wood, *Social Movements, 1768-2008*, 3rd Edition (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

*G20 Summit*³), few take a broader approach and look for trends in different jurisdictions. Even fewer make use of Canadian case studies. Wood, however, makes skillful use of four principal case studies: Toronto, Montréal, Washington DC, and New York City.

Crisis and Control has a strong theoretical grounding. Wood provides ample discussion of the role of police and their relationship with the society they serve. Not everyone will agree with the interpretation. Wood describes police as tools of economic elites and political powerholders. Whatever your opinion of this characterisation, it is skillfully explained and provides the foundation for Wood's analysis. Wood sets out how police forces learn and adapt in the modern environment of protest policing, assimilating lessons learned from major protest events, and the diffusion of "lessons learned" among police forces, spread by global forums for policing professionals, consultants, and manufacturers of such equipment. She skillfully moves from Canada to the United States and back again to illustrate her points, showing how information and ideas spread and are adapted. Wood's description of the evolution of less than lethal weapons (particularly the chapter on pepper spray) and proactive responses to public protests are especially engaging.

The author describes a process whereby police have increasingly focused on preventing protests from occurring in the first place and how this erodes the individual and collective freedom of speech. Police forces are increasingly held to measurable standards for performance; the incentives are given to preventing a protest from happening, not in allowing it to happen and then mitigating the risk. Police tactics, techniques and procedures consequently have evolved to support this goal and globalisation has increasingly homogenised their methods. Police respond to protests proactively and seek to disperse or contain crowds quickly, a trend which leads to infringements on freedom of speech. But the book is descriptive; not proscriptive. Wood describes the processes, the mechanisms by which police forces are moving down this road, but makes no claim as to how citizens or decisions makers can change it.

Although the author concedes that police forces face challenging circumstances and restrained budgets, I do not believe that she gives

³ Margaret E. Beare, Nathalie Des Rosier, Abigail C. Deshman, eds., *Putting the State on Trial: The Policing of Protest during the G20 Summit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015).

due notice of the dangerous circumstances police officers can face. For instance, the author dedicates a chapter to the subject of “urine filled supersoakers,” the idea that protestors are routinely accused of using urine and faeces at protests despite a dearth of evidence that they use such tactics. These accusations, Wood argues, associate protestors with social taboos that discredit them and build barriers to understanding. One example, however, takes this premise a bit far.

At a rally in Toronto in 2000, Sergeant Brian Smith was knocked off his feet and pulled into a crowd. Smith recalled, “I received numerous assaults. I was covered head to toe in paint, urine, faeces. My whole gun belt was destroyed. Parts inside my gun had to be replaced. I even had some... I had a smell of gasoline on my uniform too.” When pulled into the crowd, he said that he did not retaliate, “the only thing on my mind is to get free. I mean it’s ... one of the worst things that can happen is for an officer to be dragged into a crowd because the crowd only has one intent and that’s to kill the officer” (p 155). The author claims that these statements were grounded in the officer’s fear and preconceived notions of the protestors that, “had set the stage for confrontation, fear, and even distortion of the truth”(p 155). But we are not given a different version of events to displace the officer’s statement given under oath in court. Wood merely implies that the officer was lying, consciously or otherwise. Furthermore, I do not think the officer’s fears were anything but reasonable. Being pulled into a crowd, isolated, disarmed, and having fluid of *any kind* poured on top of you sounds terrifying and highlighted the challenges faced by police officers in dealing with both peaceful and raucous crowds. A fair analysis of the subject, I believe, must duly acknowledge the risks faced by police officers and the public in preserving the peaceful right to protest.

Another shortcoming of Wood’s analysis is the lack of discussion on the subject of militarisation, a curious absence given the prominence of the term in the book’s title. While this element is probably not critical to most readers, I presume that the readership of *Canadian Military History* would be particularly interested in this aspect of the book. Unfortunately, the author does not explain *how* the processes described constitute militarisation, or even *what* militarisation is. The author’s substantive discussion of the connection between the police and the military is limited. She uses some examples, such as United States Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni’s desire to develop less than lethal weapons for crowd confrontation operations in Somalia.

She also mentions North American police forces making use of “lessons learned” by the British Army in Northern Ireland, a process that followed the British Army adopting tactics more reminiscent of community policing than conventional combat operations. But these examples are only mentioned in passing and, in my opinion, do not illustrate the militarisation of police. They are illustrations of militaries becoming more like police.

Reading the title, one might expect that a book about the militarisation of police forces would examine the adoption of military tactics, culture and equipment by domestic police forces: diffusion from the military to the police. Plenty of possibilities spring to mind: perhaps a growing relationship between military and police forces through combined training, the use of the British Army for security at the 2012 London Summer Olympics, a cultural shift brought about by military veterans joining police forces, the adoption of semiautomatic carbines to increase police firepower, or the use of decommissioned armored vehicles from Iraq and Afghanistan. But these subjects are not explored. The police are “militarizing” in that they are adopting a “proactive versus reactive” approach towards increasingly “intelligence driven” operations. This characterisation may be adequate for most readers, but I suspect it will leave many readers of *Canadian Military History* slightly disappointed.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, *Crisis and Control* is a fascinating book that makes a significant contribution to the subject of protest policing. It is a valuable read for anyone interested in protest policing in general, less than lethal weapons, or just how ideas about security are spread and adopted in a globalised society. Furthermore, there have been dramatic events in the area of protest policing since the publication of *Crisis and Control*, and the book holds up. The book predates such events as the civil unrest following the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri; or the July 2016 shooting of five police officers at an otherwise peaceful protest in Dallas, Texas. But these events have not undermined Wood’s research, rendering it out of date. On the contrary, these events have withstood such developments and merely illustrate the quality of Woods’ methodology and the pressing nature of the subject matter.

TYLER WENTZELL, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

Tim Cook. *The Necessary War: Canadians Fighting the Second World War 1939–1943, Volume One*. Toronto: Penguin Canada Books Inc., 2014. Pp. 520.

Tim Cook. *Fight to the Finish: Canadians in the Second World War 1944–1945, Volume Two*. Toronto: Penguin Canada Books Inc., 2015. Pp. 570.

Tim Cook needs no introduction. Officially, he is the Great War Historian at the Canadian War Museum, an adjunct professor at Carleton University, and a member of the Order of Canada. Unofficially, he is one of Canada's leading military historians and a sought-after commentator on the First and Second World Wars. His voluminous contribution to the field of war and society has resulted in a number of well-deserved literary awards, including the J.W. Dafoe Prize for his first volume on the Great War, *At the Sharp End*,¹ and the Charles Taylor Prize for his second volume, *Shock Troops*.² *The Necessary War*, the first volume of his impressive two-part series on the Second World War, reviewed here, earned Cook his second Charles P. Stacey Award for a distinguished contribution to the study of conflict and society in Canada.³ I could go on, but what of the review? How does Cook marshal his knowledge as a historian and ability as a writer to tackle the daunting task of synthesising Canada's Second World War into two books?

Do not expect to read a definitive or all-encompassing history of the Canadian experience in the Second World War. As Cook explains in the introduction to the first volume, he intended primarily to write about the Canadian combat experience. Both books provide a detailed and sobering history of Canadians fighting on the ground, at sea, and in the air. Cook combines narrative prose with the skills and purpose of a trained historian. He covers the politics of high-level decision-making and explains the many difficult but necessary choices made by the individuals who fought for Canada, including

¹ Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914–1916, Volume One* (Toronto: Penguin Canada Books Inc., 2009).

² Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917–1918, Volume Two* (Toronto: Penguin Canada Books Inc., 2009).

³ Cook first received the Charles P. Stacey Award for *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

government and military officials as well as the soldiers, sailors, and aviators who carried out their orders.

In *Volume One* Cook sets the scene with a discussion of the interwar years. He contextualises the origins of the Second World War by explaining the German position post-Great War and Hitler's rise to power. His analysis of Canada is attentive to cultural differences of the period. He does well to explain, for instance, popular attitudes among English- and French-speaking Canadians toward the possibility of supporting Britain in another major war. With the conscription issue and horrors of the Great War relatively fresh in the minds of many Canadians, including Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, the question of support for another large-scale European conflict represented a terrifying prospect, to say the least. Cook carefully navigates this history with a heightened awareness to perspective and detail, an approach worth emulating by other scholars in the field.

The circumstances of Canada's entry into the Second World War differed from those of twenty-five years prior when the Dominion entered the Great War under the guidance of Britain. The 1931 Statute of Westminster confirmed Canada as a self-governing nation in the British Commonwealth. With complete control over its own foreign policy, King's government called on Parliament to decide whether Canada should go to war. The prime minister skillfully urged his cabinet to support Britain while calming the Québec wing of his party, according to Cook (vol. 1, p. 24). For those Canadians who were uncommitted, King's government spoke of the war in voluntary terms and promised not to introduce conscription—a promise later rescinded, as Cook explains in *Volume Two*. Yet beyond Canada's deep ties to the British Empire, Canadians of all political stripes supported the war to defend Western values and liberal democracy. Hitler represented an evil force that threatened Britain and Europe, and Canadians galvanised around the multinational effort in support of a shared cause. As Cook suggests with his first title, the Second World War was a *necessary* call to arms. The author stays true to this mantra throughout both volumes, and there is certainly no mistaking his position.

To accept the necessity of the Second World War in the hearts and minds of Canadians is, Cook argues, essential to understanding and reconstructing the combat experience. His detailed analytical approach stresses a much more complicated history, however. The

history covered here belies simplicity. We learn about public and political reluctance toward Canada's involvement in the war, as well as questions concerning the actual deployment of Canadians overseas. The process of historicising war is perhaps most difficult when we consider human responses to war. In Cook's own words, "Body-immobilizing terror and even cowardice are part of the Canadian war effort, no less than jaw-dropping heroics and tear-inducing sacrifice" (vol. 1, p. 6). Cook handles this predicament with care, equally broaching the entire combat experience with precision, respect, and humility. He strives for objectivity in his work, and his impartial style makes for a compelling and educational read.

Cook is at odds with scholarship on the Second World War that suggests the Allied military forces merely overwhelmed the fighting formations and capabilities of the Axis Powers. While the material superiority of the Allied forces was central to the war effort, especially after the industrial and economic boost resulting from the entry of the United States into the conflict, victory against Germany and its co-belligerents was not a forgone conclusion. Nor did Canadians believe so, according to Cook. The author relies on a variety of sources to support his argument, weaving an intricate and captivating account of Canadians at war. He draws on archival documents, soldiers' letters, journal entries, oral history interviews, and a deep reading of the existing secondary literature to inform his reader about both the battlefield and the home front. *Volume One* covers the first two-thirds of the war up to the Italian campaign. Cook analyses the fall of France, the effort to save Hong Kong, the grueling Battle of the Atlantic, the perilous but necessary air war over Germany, and the "Day of Destruction" at Dieppe. By the July 1943 landings at Pachino on the southern tip of Sicily, Canadians had experienced a range of successes and failures. *Volume Two* picks up where the first left off, closely following the Canadians at Juno Beach on D-Day to their importance in the Battle of the Scheldt.

Cook's style is immersive. He uses his sources to recreate the combat experience for the reader, awakening the senses through first-hand accounts. We read about the isolated gunner in a Lancaster bomber, the nerve-racking life of the submariner during winter on the North Atlantic, and the soldier combatting excruciating heat and mountainous terrain in Italy with waterlogged gear and a Lee-Enfield rifle. While military tactics, operations, and weapons receive the bulk of examination, Cook's analysis also sheds light on soldier morale

and discipline, wartime medical practices, and the complicated issue of traumatisation. The result is an inclusive history, which, while focused on combat, provides a detailed picture of the war and its human impact.

Cook's mastery of his subject, oddly enough, opens his work to minor criticism. At times, he introduces interesting topics about the Canadian wartime experience that leave the reader wanting more information. Despite his introductory statement about equally exploring heroism and cowardice in the Canadian war effort, both volumes favour tenacity, strength, intelligence, and bravery on the part of the Canadians who served. Cook offers a wide appraisal of the combat experience, but his work seems slightly less balanced than he had intended. Indicative of the author's argument about the overall effectiveness of Canada's fighting forces, a subtle hint of national pride underpins this two-volume series. Readers most interested in the individual and collective social experience of war will find much to contemplate in the final two chapters of the second volume. Cook transitions from wartime to the postwar period with a chapter on veterans and reintegration, before appropriately ending his study with a perceptive reflection on memory and the Second World War. The author would be the first to admit that both topics require a scholar's full and independent attention elsewhere, but his work would be incomplete if not for an engagement with the social dimensions that underscore the human experience at war.

No work of history is definitive, but Cook has set the bar high. The accessibility of his prose stands out the most. Both volumes will appeal to first-time readers and well-seasoned scholars of the Second World War. Cook's ability to explore, explain, and question the past challenges the reader to engage with the war and its legacy. Whether political, economic, social, or cultural, the societal impact of war is undeniable. Read Cook and you will gain a deeper appreciation of the Canadian experience.

MATTHEW S. WISEMAN, *UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO*