

1998

Official History in the 1990s

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Recommended Citation

Copp, Terry "Official History in the 1990s." *Canadian Military History* 7, 3 (1998)

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Review Essay

Official History in the 1990's

Terry Copp

Bill McAndrew, Donald E. Graves, and Michael Whitby, *Normandy 1944: The Canadian Summer* (Montreal: Éditions Art Global Inc., 1994), 164 pages, \$39.95.

Bill McAndrew, Bill Rawling, Michael Whitby, *Liberation: The Canadians in Europe* ((Montreal: Éditions Art Global Inc., 1995), 170 pages, \$39.95.

Bill McAndrew, *Canadians and the Italian Campaign, 1943-1945* (Montreal: Éditions Art Global Inc., 1994), 167 pages, \$39.95.

[All books distributed by Vanwell Publishing, St. Catharines, ON]

When the Department of National Defence decided to publish a series of books to mark the anniversaries of Vimy, Dieppe and D-Day no expense was spared. Hardcover, 9x12, full colour editions were designed by Art Global and published in both official languages. Anyone with experience in publishing knew that really big bucks were involved in producing these titles yet initially little attention was paid to promotion or distribution. Historians outside the National Defence establishment were of course envious - the budget for one of these books would have financed a dozen scholarly books - but government decisions have never been easy to understand.

Vimy, the first title in the series and *Dieppe, Dieppe* were beautiful, expensive rehashes of a familiar material reflecting the point of view of the author, Ben Greenhous. When *Normandy 1944: The Canadian Summer*, published in 1994, appeared all eyes were focused on Normandy but the book had little impact presumably because the series was now viewed as an exercise in public relations for DND. Despite my own intense interest in the Normandy campaign and my respect for the senior author, Bill McAndrew, I gave it little

more than a glance when it came in for review and no one else expressed any interest in commenting on it.

In 1996 *Canadians and the Italian Campaign* was published. I read Bill McAndrew's account of the struggle in Italy with interest. No one knows more about this subject than McAndrew and an overview by a serious scholar was long overdue. The book is very well written and the illustrations, except for the maps recycled from the official history, are outstanding. The introduction offers a good discussion of Allied strategy and Canadian preparation. McAndrew draws upon his knowledge of battlefield psychiatry, 1st Division personalities and the work of Canadian war artists and historians to enliven the text. The use of diaries and letters to convey a first-hand impression adds to the feeling that we are coming into direct contact with the soldiers' experience of war.

McAndrew's account of the battle for Sicily is familiar in outline but exceptionally rich in new detail. His chapter on Ortona is simply the best account we have of that dramatic confrontation. We are first reminded of the paradox of offensive operations in Italy which

could only be justified as a means of holding German divisions away from France. As Sir David Hunt, Alexander's Chief Intelligence Officer put it "failure was the means by which the Allied Armies in Italy succeeded in fulfilling their strategic purpose."

"Ortona" is followed by equally powerful chapters on "The Liri Valley" and "The Gothic Line." In both essays McAndrew's sympathetic approach to the Canadian experience provides new insight. Especially noteworthy is his explanation of the dismissal of Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns. McAndrew notes, "His misfortune was ironic considering that the Gothic Line operation was one of the most notable if unheralded Canadian Corps actions of the war. "

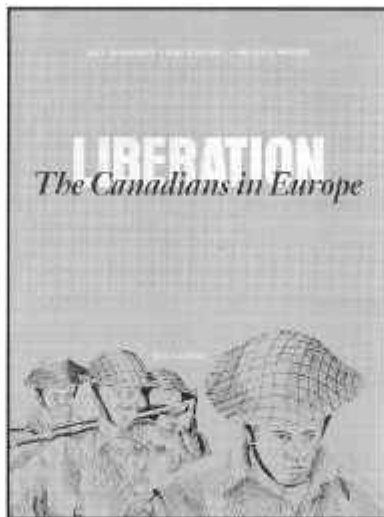
Having profited from reading one book I decided to revisit *Normandy 1944* which McAndrew wrote with Donald Graves and Michael Whitby. The format, a well written narrative of events spiced with first person accounts is similar but the navy also gets its share of space. Michael Whitby, a brilliant young naval historian lost to the Directorate in the recent downsizing, contributes a marvellous chapter on "Canada's War at Sea" and adds new material on aspects of "Neptune." McAndrew's interest in the impact of war upon soldiers is evident throughout but especially in his chapter "Young Men in Combat."

Normandy 1944 contains solid accounts of the July battles with moving human interest stories. It also offers a sophisticated critique

of Canadian and British operational and tactical doctrine. No similar analysis of the way Germans fought the battle is offered so the reader is left with the picture of the Allies overcoming the clever and resilient enemy with "Brute Force."

I enjoyed *Normandy 1944* and learned from it. There is much in the book which is new though the interpretative framework is very traditional and the need to cover complex issues in a few paragraphs produces serious simplifications. The chapters on August 1944, while adding some neat detail to the store of published accounts ignores the strategic and operational context within which decisions were made reinforcing the image of a bumbling Canadian army.

Consider the treatment of the 89th and 85th infantry divisions which arrived in Normandy on 5 and 10 August respectively. Both were fresh, well equipped divisions with their own engineers, artillery and self-propelled assault guns backing six full strength infantry battalions. Just before "Totalize," 89th Division took over Verrières Ridge with one regiment occupying Tilly, Rocqancourt, Fontenay and May and the second in reserve south of the ridge. If the Canadians and 51st Highland Division destroyed an entire division on 8-9 August and then smashed 85th Division a week later does it say anything about their effectiveness in "Totalize" and "Tractable"? If the German infantry divisions were not totally destroyed does it help to explain where the battlegroups which blocked our advance to



Trim came from? Relying on the self-serving accounts of German officers to picture the other side of the hill is never a good idea. *Normandy 1944* should be read by specialists as well as beginners. It is a serious and challenging work.

Liberation: The Canadians in Europe is less successful. The decision to cover the entire post-Normandy campaign in Northwest Europe in 100 pages of text presented a real challenge and since Michael Whitby was joined by Bill Rawling to share the writing with McAndrew there is both tactical air and naval history to be included. The attempt to describe the strategic debate of September 1944 relies almost entirely on views expressed after the failure at Arnhem and leaves the reader with the impression that the authors know that alternate courses of action not followed would have been more successful. Someday someone will have to explain why sealing off the Beveland Isthmus in September, assuming it could have been done, would have led to an earlier opening of the port of Antwerp. If 15th Army was "trapped" would that not have made the capture of Beveland, Walchern and the Breskens pocket more difficult? Of course, 15th Army would probably have continued north to Schouwen and Tholen if Woensdrecht was occupied but either way the approaches to Antwerp would still be under German control.

The operational story, which is told with heavy reliance on first person accounts, is much more interesting and original but there are problems with the selection of "primary" sources. Charlie Forbes was a superb combat soldier but his memoirs, for all their colour, are not entirely free of dramatization and his account of the Walchern Causeway is a good example. Donald Pierce's *Journal of a War* provides insight into the mind of a one veteran writing a self-consciously literary memoir years after the events. Explorations of the construction of memory in the aftermath of the Second World War will make good use of such sources but they should not be confused with the events of 1944.

McAndrew's interest in battlefield psychiatry is evident in his account of the aftermath of the Scheldt battle and the discussion of the reinforcement problem which follows is worthy of a separate scholarly article. It is quite simply one of the most thoughtful, best

balanced discussions of the problem yet in print. The authors also found room for long neglected ancillary units including field engineers and the Ordnance Corps. Their account of the RCAF role includes Flight Lieutenant Richard Audet's journal for 29 December 1945 when he became the only pilot in Second Tactical Air Force to shoot down five enemy planes in one day.

Chapter IV "Seaward" is devoted to the navy and RCAF squadrons in Coastal Command. Whitby focuses his story on the 75 RCN vessels that served in European waters including 29th and 65th RCN Motor Torpedo Boat Flotillas which were actively involved in the battle to open the port of Antwerp. The account of the operations of HMCS *Sioux* described as a "capable ship that has never received the attention it deserves" will be of interest to everyone as will the description of the sinking of HMCS *Guysborough*. Let us hope Michael Whitby is able to continue to play his part in the writing of the RCN's official history.

Chapter five "Rhineland" and six "Finale" are brief overviews which work well as interpretive essays but once again the balanced and reasoned critique of Canadian generalship and doctrine is not paralleled by any commentary on the actions of their opponents. If German senior commanders knew the realities of battle better than their Canadian counterparts it did not stop them from ordering near suicidal counter attacks. The authors might have used Corps and Army Intelligence reports which provide contemporary documents, translated from the German, portraying the growing demoralization of the German army under the impact of the Allied offensives.

These three books, as well as the recently published volume on the battle of the Atlantic are distributed by Vanwell. Priced at \$39.95 they are not cheap but at a minimum you should buy *Canadians and the Italian Campaign* and *Normandy 1944*, you won't regret it.

Terry Copp is the Editor-in-Chief of *Canadian Military History* and the author of numerous books and articles on the Canadian army in the Second World War.