Canadian Military History

Volume 12 | Issue 2 Article 8

2003

Operation “Spring”: An Historian’s View

Terry Copp
Wilfrid Laurier University, tcopp@wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh

Recommended Citation
Copp, Terry "Operation “Spring”: An Historian’s View." Canadian Military History 12, 2 (2003)

This Feature 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.

Operation "Spring"
An Historian's View

Terry Copp

Brian McKenna, the author of the infamous *Valour and the Horror* television series, is determined to sell his story of the Black Watch at Verrieres Ridge to anyone who will buy it. His recent article in *Macleans* echoes previous attempts to convince readers that "Canada's military establishment, abetted by its official historians.. .lied to protect reputations and keep smooth careers." McKenna is equally critical of non-official professional historians who have studied the battle. He believes that he is the only one who has the knowledge and insight to interpret what happened that day. Why is McKenna so committed to his mythic version of events? Part of it is wounded pride over the negative reaction to his television series but McKenna is an idealist not a cynic and he genuinely believes that Major Phillip Griffin deserves a Victoria Cross for his actions on 25 July 1944.

If McKenna would take the trouble to make his argument from evidence and avoid personal attacks he might make a contribution to our understanding of the battle and the way in which awards for valour are made. Instead he constructs a story out of half-truths and hyperbole. McKenna is not alone in his passionate defence of Griffin. The Black Watch Veterans Association has always nurtured a regimental memory which assigns blame to the generals. When the exact wording for the 2001 memorial plaque for the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation site at Point 67 in Normandy was under discussion veterans insisted that Griffin had been ordered to advance directly over the ridge.

Let us assume the question of responsibility is still open and examine Brian McKenna's version of events. McKenna begins with the statement that the entire Canadian Corps, some 30,000 men, were involved in an offensive that has "echoes of Vimy Ridge." Operation "Spring" was a limited, carefully phased attack with three battalions, less that 1,200 combat troops, advancing in the first phase and three more battalions, including the Black Watch, carrying out a second phase to secure villages on the reverse slope of the ridge. The second phase attacks, planned for first light, were to be directly supported by Canadian armour while two regiments of the 7th Armoured Division attempted to advance across the centre of the ridge. All of this is clearly laid out in the plans for "Spring" and the message logs demonstrate that the armoured regiments did their best to assist the infantry in Phase 2. They were unsuccessful and suffered heavy losses but McKenna will not even admit they were involved.

According to McKenna, Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, commander of 2nd Canadian Corps, who was "awkward at deploying tanks and infantry," held back "the masses of tanks" he commanded and decreed that "the Black Watch and 17 other infantry regiments must lead the breakout."

The Black Watch, McKenna tells us, were given "a particularly daunting task. The regiment must scale the ridge and capture the strategic hamlet of Fontenay-le-Marmion." How exactly anyone would "scale" the gentle slope of the ridge which rises just 37 metres over a distance of 1,000 metres is not clear but the original plan called for the Black Watch to avoid the slope and attack from a start line on the outskirts of May-sur-Orne.

McKenna's penchant for exaggeration reaches absurdity in his description of the enemy. The ridge, which in the television series was held by the 12th SS Hitler Youth Division,

Published by Scholars Commons @ Laurier, 2003

Major Philip Griffin

is now defended by "four of Hitler's elite SS Panzer Divisions." The part of the ridge attacked by the North Novas and Royal Hamilton Light Infantry was held by 1 SS Panzer Division but the enemy facing the Black Watch was the 272nd Infantry Division. Panzer battlegroups were in reserve to counterattack, but Simonds' intention was to have his battalions on the their objectives and dug-in before such attacks could be mounted.

The dramatization of events presented in the *Valour and the Horror* showed German soldiers racing through concrete-lined tunnels to do battle with the Canadians. McKenna the journalist knew the mine tunnels under the ridge did not remotely resemble what he pictured on television but to a film-maker a picture can be worth a thousand words whether it is true or false. McKenna now tells us that in St. Martin the Black Watch were "hit from every direction...the Germans are infiltrating from a labyrinth of mining tunnels under the ridge."

The Black Watch casualties in St. Martin occurred when a single machine gun, bypassed by the Calgary Highlanders in their night advance to May-sur-Orne, killed Lieutenant-Colonel Stuart Cantlie, the Black Watch commanding officer, and wounded his most experienced senior officer. This had nothing to do with the tunnels which were not used for infiltration or anything else. Though they do make a hell of a good story.

The best evidence for what happened next is from an interview with Major Edwin Bennett conducted by an historical officer on 1 August 1944. Bennett, who was himself killed-in-action shortly afterward, reported:

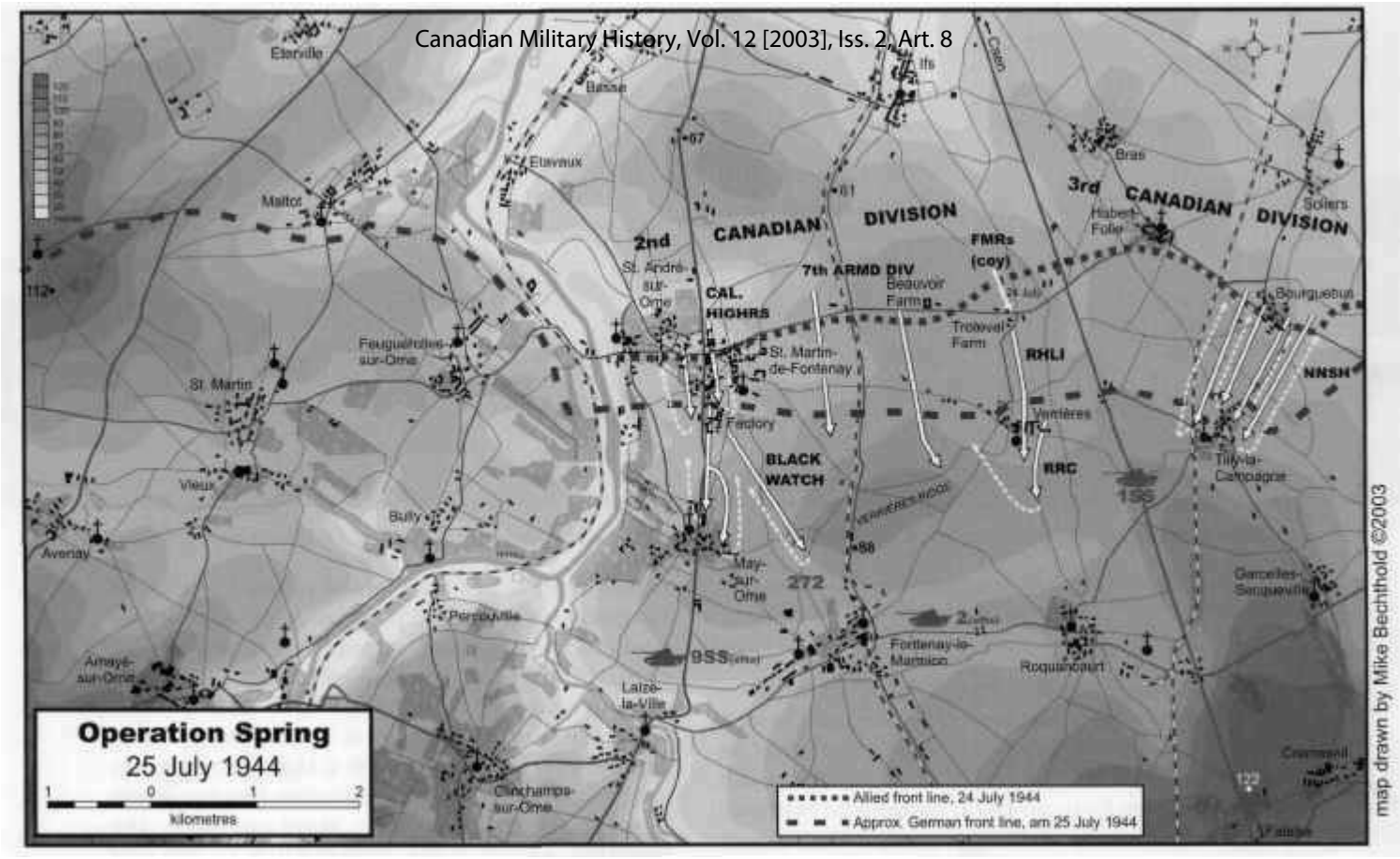
> Major Griffin's problem was that the battalion was rather extended. The companies were intact and under good control but the threat of dispersion and of possible confusion was near. Light was breaking and we were under fire from the ridge. We had just made contact with the tanks in St. Andre-sur-Orne. They had moved into the orchard as a harbour and had lost two tanks coming through the town. Furthermore it was getting close to H hour for the attack and the battalion was far from the start line. Soon the artillery fire would begin and would be of no value. Major Griffin had to make time to liaise with the artillery and, if possible, retime their shoot. He had to get the tank commander into the picture and make use of his force in any new plans. Before this could be done, he had to find out the situation in St. Andre-sur-Orne from die Camerons of Canada and obtain what reports he could on the Calgaries and the situation at May-sur-Orne.
>
> Major Griffin is a brilliant officer of absolutely outstanding courage and ability. His take-over in this strained and ticklish situation was superb. There was no uncertainty whatever in his actions. He foresaw only a delay, which would at die outside be two hours, while he rearranged timings and obtained essential information. The plan for the attack would be the same as had been previously set. In the meantime the battalion was to move to St. Andre-sur-Orne and occupy the X rds there on Verrieres rd so that the men would be less obvious targets for the fire from the left flank and so that a firm base for ops would be available. So complete was his control and so well trained the battalion that this was done at once and in incredibly good order. All the companies were in their new positions within 20 minutes of the conclusion of the "O" Group. Up to this time our casualties,

This photo shows the gentle slope of Verrieres Ridge, visible in the distance past the town of St. Martin-de-Fontenay.

> aside from the three serious losses in leadership, were slight, amounting to ten or fifteen altogether.'

McKenna might have used Bennett's interview, which makes no reference to any change in the approach to the start line, as evidence that the direct advance was the result of new orders from on high. Instead he relies on later recollections and suggests that Griffin only agreed to any attack because "the honour of the regiment was at stake."

The contemporary evidence suggests a very different picture, one that I outline in my 1992 book *The Brigade* Griffin's actions between 0600 hours and 0930 hours when the Black Watch attack began, cannot be fully reconstructed. What is known is that a new artillery fire plan was agreed upon and tank support arranged with Major Walter Harris, the commander of "B" Squadron the First Hussars.[2] The artillery plan was simply a repetition of the original scheme to lead the battalion from May to Fontenay but Griffin decided to move directly to the start line on a compass bearing rather than by the road to May. He now wanted the tanks to protect his right flank rather than the left as in the original plan, hoping that the advance of the 7th Armoured Division would fully occupy the enemy to the east. At about 0830 hours Griffin made contact with Lieutenant Michon, commanding "D" Company of the Calgaries and asked him to "clear out the factory area." Michon "went forward to recce to discover very heavy machine-gun fire coming from the factory area on the right and from the knocked out tanks on the high ground on our left." Michon told Griffin that, "this was too strong opposition for one company to clear without artillery support or smoke. He then asked me to go forward to see if the Start Line was secure and to send him word as he had no information concerning our forward companies."[3] The Black Watch start line was a road angling out of May-sur-Orne and Michon would not agree to recce it for Griffin. He was unable to contact the other Calgary companies and when he reported to battalion headquarters Lieutenant-Colonel D.G. MacLaughlan, the battalion commander, ordered him to "try and get forward to the objective." Captain Harrison and the missing part of "D" Company had arrived but their attempt to "get forward" to May was



stopped by an intense mortar barrage which caused "very heavy casualties."[4]

Griffin had sent a patrol consisting of his intelligence officer, Lieutenant L.R. Duffield, Sergeant Benson and one scout to May-sur-Orne. The patrol moved straight down route 162 "without using the ditches"[5] and walked into the centre of May-sur-Orne without seeing or hearing any Germans or Calgary Highlanders. At the crossroads in the centre of the village they turned left towards the road which marked the battalion start line. Fifty yards before reaching it they were fired on by a machine-gun and Duffield returned to tell Griffin that the Calgaries were not in May and that the machine-gun would be able to fire into the flank of the battalion. Griffin's response was to order Duffield to lead a reinforced patrol, six men, back to May to "take out" the machine-gun.[6]

Duffield's patrol was not the only force to visit May-sur-Orne that morning. Major Walter Harris, commanding the First Hussars squadron, had listened to divisional and brigade orders "to go ahead" with Phase II and had sent one of his four troops forward. This troop "located some of the Calgary Highlanders in a hollow north of May, badly cut up and in need of stretcher bearers, ammunition, etc." Leaving two tanks to assist the Calgaries, the troop proceeded to feel its way cautiously into the village. At the main crossroads the lead tank was holed by an anti-tank gun and the remaining tank withdrew to a hull-down position on the north edge of the village.[7]

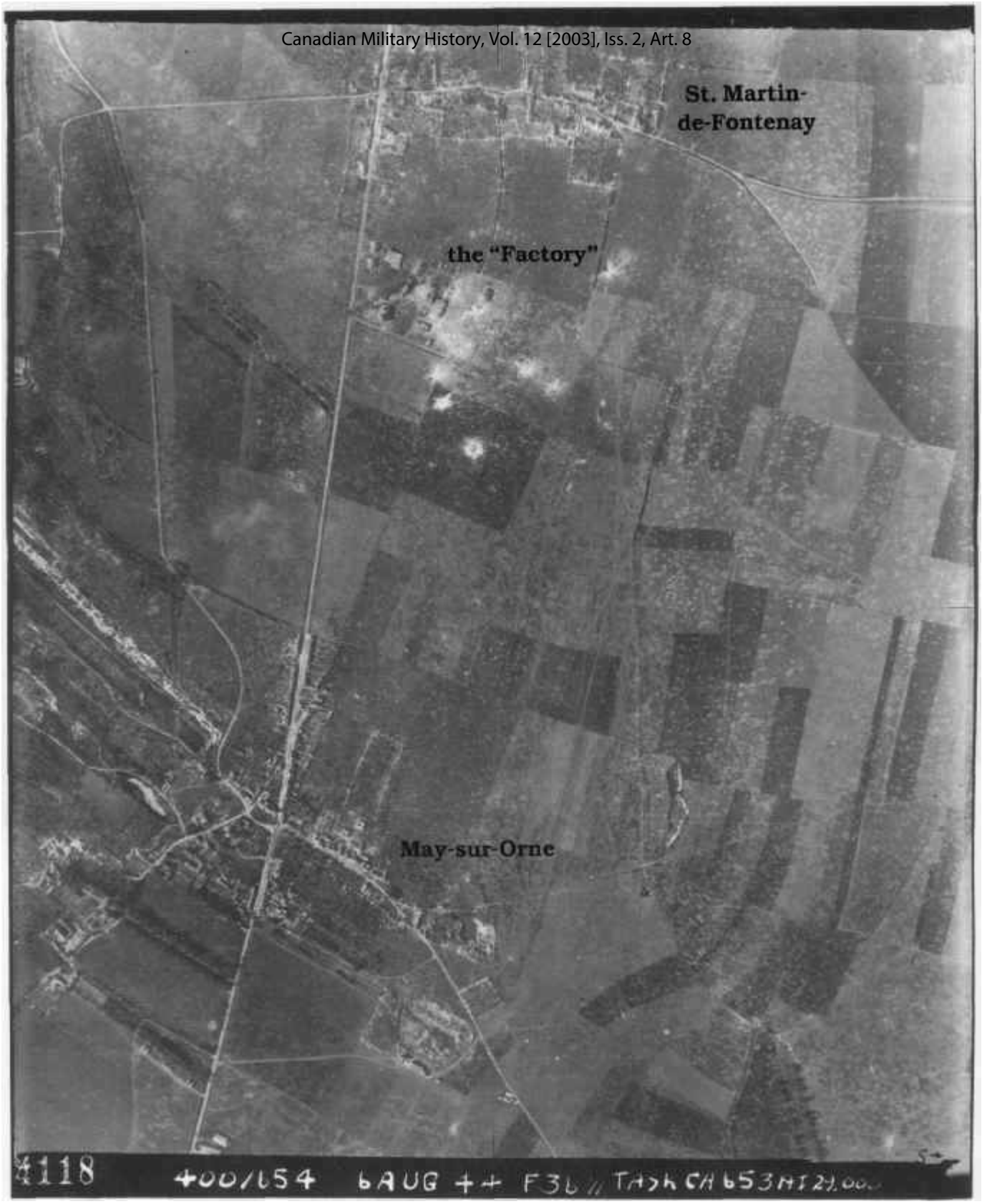
Meanwhile Major Griffin was conferring with Brigadier W.J. Megill, commander of 5 Brigade, who had learned through the gunner radio net that a fire plan, timed for 0930 hours, had been requested by the Black Watch. Megill recalls that Griffin was on the verandah of a building on the forward edge of St. Martin looking outwards towards May. There did not seem to be any shelling at that time and Major Griffin calmly explained his plan. Megill thought it looked like "a dicey proposition" and suggested that the Black Watch secure May-sur-Orne first. According to Megill, Griffin replied that they had "patrols in May" and he doubted that it was held on "a continuous basis." Griffin felt sure that if the Black Watch attack went in, then once it had passed its start line the Calgary Highlanders could "fill in behind, on into May-sur-Orne." Megill accepted this assessment and returned to his headquarters.[8]

The Black Watch had to move quickly if its lead companies were to take full advantage of the timed artillery program. Unfortunately the Hussars were delayed owing to the narrowness of the sunken approach road and when the first tanks arrived at the forming-up place the Black Watch had already begun to move forward. The Hussars could still see the infantry moving in single file with the men close together[9] and the tanks quickly started across the open ground, aiming for the gap between May and the ridge east of the village. Accurate, large-calibre, anti-tank fire struck the lead tanks immediately and the others sought dead ground. By 1020 hours six tanks had been lost and Major Harris wounded. At least one troop reported reaching the start line but their tanks were then caught in enfilade fire from the eastern edge of May.[10]

The infantry moved in single file, with the men close together, until they emerged from the houses and hedgerows of St. Martin. Lieutenant W.B. Wood, who was wounded by machine-gun fire before the company started up the hill, suggests that the men would have been well-spaced out as they moved forward through the tall grain." Three hundred men, spread-out over a wide area, had little sense of what was happening around them and the battalion did not falter. Griffin's plan assumed that the Black Watch would be able to reach the start-line as the artillery barrage began. Instead the battalion was subjected to heavy mortar and machine-gun fire as it advanced to its start line. When the survivors reached the crest of the hill the barrage had passed and the enemy was able to react quickly.

Captain John Taylor described the advance in a letter to his father dated 15 August 1944:

> To begin with I might say that you never need be ashamed of having belonged to the Black Watch. We started across country at 0900 hours. By then the Jerries were thoroughly awake as to what was going on and from the start we had trouble from very heavy machine-gunning from the



flanks, mortars and artillery fire. The troops were steady as a rock and we kept going. I was the left forward company and on my right was B company, then commanded by Sergeant Foam, all the officers having been knocked out. We overran two strong points, then I got hit so I can't be accurate as to the rest of the story but I understand they got the objective.[12]

Taylor was wounded before Griffin and approximately 60 men crossed the crest of the ridge. One survivor, Private Montreuil, reported that Captain John Kemp, commanding "D" Company, urged Major Griffin to call off the attack but Griffin replied "that the orders were to attack and that the battalion would therefore

The mine tower in the "factory" area is visible in this photo taken from the north edge of May-sur-Orne looking north. The high ground in the background is Point 67. The low, square tower on the right is the church in St. Martin-de-Fontenay. This photo was taken in 1946.

carry on."[13] On top of the ridge the remnant of the battalion "ran directly into a strong and exceptionally well camouflaged enemy position."[14] Tanks and self-propelled guns were concealed in haystacks and intense close-range fire forced the men to ground. Griffin, who may have been the only officer left, ordered a withdrawal - "every man to make his way back as best he could." Not more than 15 soldiers were able to do so. Griffin's body was later found "lying among those of his men."[15]

The Black Watch suffered 307 casualties on 25 July. Five officers and 118 other ranks were killed or died of wounds, 101 were wounded and of the 83 taken prisoner, 21 were wounded. As the official historian noted, "Except for the Dieppe operation there is no other instance in the Second World War when a Canadian battalion had so many casualties in a single day."[16]

The battle did not end with the destruction of the Black Watch. The brigade message log portrays a scene of confused fighting on the northern edge of May lasting into the early afternoon. At 1615 hours a smokescreen was laid across the front and Brigadier Megill ordered the Calgaries to withdraw into St. Andre. Many of the wounded had to be left behind in the fields to the south and east of St. Martin. Lieutenant Leo Dallain, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, went forward into this area despite mortar and small arms fire. He located many of the casualties, "organized them into nests and returned with stretcher-bearers to evacuate them." The next day, 26 July, heavy German pressure led the evacuation of all of St. Martin and Dallain was ordered to cease attempts to locate further casualties. He was awarded the Military Cross for this extraordinary effort.[17]

Can anyone seriously argue that Griffin should have received a Victoria Cross for leading his men forward after it was evident that the enemy held the ridge in strength? Griffin was young, brave and inexperienced. On the basis and the information available to him in the early hours of 25 July he made, or agreed to, a decision to carry out an ill-considered attack. Griffin and Megill ought to have stuck to the original plan, and established a firm base in May-sur-Orne before mounting any attack on Fontenay. If the Watch had helped the Calgaries and consolidated in May-sur-Orne, Operation "Spring" would be remembered as a significant victory and Griffin would have been a near-certainty for a DSO but that is not what happened.

McKenna concludes his *Macleans* article with a gratuitous attack on the integrity of the late C.P. Stacey and S.F. Wise, two outstanding historians who have made important contributions to our knowledge of Canadian histoy. McKenna reports that in 1972 C.P. Stacey wrote to Syd Wise, his successor at the Directorate of History, suggesting that a report on "Spring," written by Guy Simonds, that was sharply critical of the Black Watch not be shown to Phil Griffin's brother who was seeking information about the circumstances of his brother's death.

The story behind the Simonds report is worth recalling. When news of the heavy losses suffered by the Black Watch reached Canada the regimental seniors and friends demanded accounting. The Minister of National Defence, J.L. Ralston asked Stacey to carry out an investigation of "Spring" and efforts were made to interview survivors and ensure the relevant documents were preserved. Stacey provided the Minister with information about what happened but offered no adverse comments on anyone. Simonds paid little attention to this detailed examination of the evidence contenting himself with generalizations about the need to clear the start line. He also offered his much-quoted statement about "Spring" as a "holding attack" which Stacey and many other historians since used in explaining the purpose of the operation.

The Simonds report tells us something about Guy Simonds but very little about "Spring." There was nothing new to be learned from it in 1972 and it was not unreasonable for Stacey, who had preserved the document despite orders to destroy it, to advise Wise to maintain the confidential designation which kept the document from the public until a policy decision was made to open most records well before the standard 50 years had passed. Criticizing Wise is particularly ironic as he and his successor at the Directorate of History, Dr. Alec Douglas, were responsible for providing public access to National Defence records at the earliest possible date. When I first visited the Directorate in 1981 the Simonds report as well as all the other documents on "Spring" were readily available thanks to the effort of these men. We all owe them an enormous debt and it is time McKenna apologized.

Are there any lessons to be learned from the debate between McKenna and the research historians? In a recent CBC program, aired on their digital channel, McKenna noted that while the military and academic establishments criticized his work the media establishment always supported him and still does. McKenna remains CBC's favourite film maker as is evident from his current project on the Korean War.

The CBC, the media establishment and Brian McKenna all believe that the story comes first, incidents that add drama second and the context a poor third. Information which contradicts or complicates the thrust of the narrative is to be ignored and words are used to convey emotion not precise meaning. In the face of such an approach all that historians can do is their job and that means challenging the myth-makers.

Notes

1. War Diary, 25 July 1944, Major E. Bennett, "Account..." 1 August 1944, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), p.l.
2. A Memorandum of an Interview with Major W.E. Harris, M.P., 24 January 1946, 4 pages, DHH.
3. Lieutenant E.A Michon, "D" Coy, "Account..." 29 July 1944, 2 pages, DHH.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sergeant Benson, Scout Platoon, RHC "Account..." 1 August 1944, DHH.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Harris, p.2.
8. W.J. Megill Interview. Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies.
9. Memorandum of Interview with Colonel J. W. Powell, 9 January 1946, DHH.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Interview, W.M. Wood with Terry Copp, July 1992.
12. Letter, Captain J.D. Taylor to Lieutenant-Colonel D.H. Taylor, 15 August 1944. Personnel File, Black Watch Archives, Montreal.
13. Pvt. Montreuil RHC "Account..." 1 Aug. 1944. DHH.
14. CMHQ Report No. 105, 10
15. *Ibid,* 11.
16. C.P. Stacey, The *Victory Campaign: The Operations in Northwest Europe. 1944-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), 192.
17. Honours and Awards, *Le Regiment de Maisonneuve,* Leo Dallain.

Terry Copp is Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University. His latest book, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* has just been published by the University of Toronto Press.