

1995

Fantassin: pour mon pays, la gloire et... des prunes by Charly Forbes [Review]

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Recommended Citation

Drolet, Gil "*Fantassin: pour mon pays, la gloire et... des prunes* by Charly Forbes [Review]." *Canadian Military History* 4, 1 (1995)

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sources. His prose is workmanlike, though the super-simplistic way he tells his story will be jarring to all but the completely uninitiated. Nor is he expert on British, Canadian and Newfoundland realities, putting the Argentia meeting of August 1941 in Canada and calling brigadiers “generals.”

Still, this is a good, fair treatment of a pair of controversial military personalities that fifty years later has had more partisans than analysts. In this account, if Ike comes out just a bit ahead, he probably deserves to do so. Eisenhower was no great strategist, but he built an Anglo-American team (why were there no Canadians on it?) and made it function. Montgomery, grudgingly part of that team, a tiresome, tireless goad of his designated master, nonetheless had to obey orders or in the final analysis face dismissal. He chose to go along to get ahead, and he ended the war a field marshal and the Empire’s hero. He was a “nasty little shit” to many of those who had to serve under him, while no one would ever speak in such harsh, almost dismissive terms of Eisenhower, a man who won and held the personal affection and admiration of almost all who worked for him. It was difficult to be anti-American under Ike, but all too easy to curse the bloody Brits around Monty. That Gelb makes this clear is his accomplishment.

J.L. Granatstein
York University

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Fantassin

Charly Forbes. *Fantassin: pour mon pays, la gloire et...des prunes*. Sillyery: Les Editions du Septentrion, 1994, 451 pages.

Les Editions du Septentrion merit commendation for undertaking the publication of war-related material by or about French-Canadians. They have also taken to translating books from English to French so that some Desmond Morton is now available to those whose workaday language is French. Léon Balcer’s memoirs, including reminiscences of service in the Battle of the Atlantic, appeared in 1988. More recently there came a title dealing with the Cold War and, in quick succession, Gabriel Taschereau’s anecdotes of service with 425 Squadron in Bomber Command and, more significantly, the posthumously published diary of Georges Verreault’s time with the Royal Rifles of Canada including his years as a prisoner-of-war following the Hong Kong debacle. Now the French-reading public can share in the reminiscences of a well-known character who has left impressive imprints from Gaspé, through Norman fields, Dutch polders, Korean hills and countless points between. He is Joseph Jean-Charles Bertrand Forbes, popularly known as Charly.

Charly, unfortunately, is the victim of poor editing especially concerning the transcription of English in the French text. There are far too many mistakes which should have been spotted prior to publication by an attentive proofreader with a solid background in English. I have had to make similar comments in the past when it came to the use of French in English texts. Why such an anomaly should persist only in Canada is an area perhaps worth investigating. It is not a problem in the United States nor in the U.K. or in France or, even, in Australia. These countries seem to take pride in reproducing any other language in the proper grammatical manner out of a sense of pride, accuracy and respect. Forbes is not to blame in this area but his editors are. His

memory, however, lets him down so that song lyrics, titles and popular sayings are often misquoted.

Another problem concerns historical accuracy. Forbes is no historian. Moreover, he was obviously in something of a hurry to publish so that his recollections of the past are often erroneous. Careful verification by experts would have prevented the making of statements that are plainly false either because they proceed from hearsay or from an occasionally confused and faulty memory. His claim that HMCS *Matane* sank a German U-boat off Halifax in 1944 is groundless. Though losses were terrible, there were not 4,000 Canadian casualties at Dieppe nor did the raid (19 August 1942) precede Barbarossa (22 June 1941). There were no amphibious tanks in the raid. Georges Vanier, the subject of two hilarious and verifiable anecdotes, did not lose his leg at Courcellette but at Chérisy in August 1918.

Such shortcomings would normally seriously undermine the quality of a book. Two factors militate against this: the narrator’s personality and his extraordinary abilities as a storyteller. Putting it on paper required help from a friend and former subaltern of Forbes’ in the Royal 22e Régiment who is finishing a teaching career at CMR in 1995. With the help of Professor Guy Provost, Charly’s “memoires” are so eminently readable that the reader becomes completely engrossed in the adventures of this extraordinary man.

Anyone who has known Forbes can attest to the fact that he is not your run-of-the-mill fellow. He is multi-talented: intelligent, physically impressive. He paints and sings well, plays the violin, is quick-witted and fiercely proud. His courage has been proven time and time again in the most trying circumstances. Like so many others like him, he is quick to judge incompetence,

candid and, at times, caustic. Tact has not always been his strong suit with the inevitable result that advancement was slow. If there are a few words that might best describe Forbes they would be "thoroughly dependable" or "natural leader."

The reader is given early glimpses of these qualities from the author's childhood days in the Gaspé. There begins a tumultuous and adventurous life that shows no signs of slowing down except for the occasional pause to cope with tragedy or to catch much-needed breath before resuming a sometimes hyperactive pace. The result is a book that bristles with action, indignation, Rabelaisian humour, warmth, contempt...all marks of a man at once blessed and damned with perhaps an overabundance of talent and energy.

How many men are honest enough to admit that theirs has been a life plagued by alcoholism? Charly is candid enough in this regard and the mark of the man is that he was able, despite this problem, to accomplish the many things he did. But he is honest enough to hint at how much more could have been done without the bottle and the reader is made to feel that a large part of his problem is pride. This pride coupled with fierce independence made enemies for Charly which probably accounts for his having ended his active military career as a major. His one-time nemesis, Jacques Dextraze, cared enough for him to try to get Forbes to stop drinking. He pointed out the vast potential of the man but the touchy relationship between the two is worth the read in itself and Forbes is honest enough to swallow his pride and admit the considerable leadership qualities of the man many of us called "Kid 28."

It would be safe to say that for every enemy Charly made in the service, there were many more friends. Naturally they were

similar types...men who had proven themselves in battle such as Louis Rend Drapeau with his two well deserved DCMs or Harry Pope or Guy de Merlis, men who had little or no use for the "niceties" aptly called chicken shit. But the most significant mark of the man as leader is the way he is seen by those he leads. Charly Forbes very simply was venerated by his men. His total concern in the field was their welfare and this he demonstrated from the very beginning of his soldier's life to the point where promotion, family and everything else became secondary.

Charly's marital difficulties are diplomatically handled and nowhere does he indulge in recrimination. There is also regret at his not having managed such matters with more tact but the call to duty and the need to serve played an inordinate role in his life. The price he paid was high. The strongest element in the book remains Forbes' total and accurate recall of the fierceness and confusion of battle whether it was in Normandy, at Walcheren or in those hectic four days in Korea in November 1951. Here is a very close approximation to the descriptions of combat and its effects as depicted by Mowat in *And No Birds Sang*. In some ways, Forbes outdoes Mowat for he avoids inventiveness of any kind for effect...the price Mowat admits he pays for being a writer.

From the shaky start as a cadet at RMC when he first displayed his independence by refusing to sing "God Save the King" while insistently repeating the words of "O Canada" as his national anthem in the company of another recalcitrant, Philippe Rousseau (later killed with his brother in the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion) through to the day he is declared redundant by a budget conscious government, Forbes has been his own man and hundreds have shaken their heads in amazement and admiration at his skills as a

leader and his joie de vivre as a man.

The photos in this book excellently illustrate the closeness that existed between Charly and his comrades-in-arms. But the book's saving grace is its candour. Whether Charly is reflecting upon conscription, the criminality of the Dieppe raid, battle exhaustion, the death of a platoon sergeant, the devoted Maisie padre, Marchand, the incompetence of some officers, the Yank bug-out on 355 or his own shortcomings...what the reader comes away with is a lasting impression of having met an extraordinary man.

The book ends with anecdotes ranging from the comic to the tragic and the last notes are a humble tribute to his comrades, especially the junior officers with whom he served. As I close, one word keeps buzzing insistently in my head: compassion. It is this quality that permeates Charly Forbes' life—compassion for those who have had to put up with the arrogance, stupidity and incompetence too frequently the companions of power.

A translation of this re-edited book would be a very good thing.

Gil Drolet

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The Battle of the Generals

Martin Blumenson. *The Battle of the Generals: The Untold Story of the Falaise Pocket - The Campaign that Should have won World War II*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993. pp.288. \$29.95.

Martin Blumenson writes that the Allies' failure to close the "Falaise pocket" was the result of three basic conditions of the Allied campaign: the undue weight of the invasion plan, the