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Regimental History: The State of the Art

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BOOK REVIEWS

Regimental History The State of the Art

David Bercuson, *Battalion of Heroes: The Calgary Highlanders in World War II* (Calgary: The Calgary Highlanders Regimental Fund Association, 1994) 297 pages, \$29.95, (ISBN 0-96944616-1-5)

Alex Morrison and Ted Slaney, *The Breed of Manly Men: The History of the Cape Breton Highlanders* (Sydney, Cape Breton: The Cape Breton Highlanders Association and the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1994) 410 pages, \$35.00, (ISBN 0-919769-80-2)

Robert Tooley, *Invicta: The Carleton and York Regiment in the Second World War* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: New Ireland Press, 1989) 471 pages, (ISBN 0-920483-29-1)

More than any other unit or formation, the regiment represented the best and worst traditions of the Canadian/British army. The storied history of imperial expansion, the *esprit de corps* of the forces, even the social and demographic organization of the countries was reflected in the regiment and the regimental system. They are not strictly military institutions. Indeed, a regiment is not itself an operational unit; it has no tactical function. Rather they are parent organizations, recruiting, training and fielding battalions for service as well as, in theory, supplying them with reinforcements. Regiments are also a bridge with the past, the embodiment of particular geographical or cultural contributions to military service. As such, they are considered the focus of the *esprit de corps* and loyalty essential to bond men together and maintain them in combat. This was their traditional goal: to promote the morale and discipline required

to sustain an individual as he undertakes two acts that go against the core of human nature - killing and placing oneself in situations where one might be killed.

If these three books are any indication, during the Second World War, at least among Canadian permanent force personnel, the function of the regiment was clear and unambiguous; the virtue of the regimental system was ostensibly that it fostered the strength of the tribe by trying to replicate its characteristics in the regimental family through its emphasis on distinctiveness and the competition and loyalty that spring from that concept: individual unit traditions, histories, local affinities, rituals, distinctive names and dress, all contributed something important if intangible to the units studied - the Cape Breton Highlanders, the Calgary Highlanders and the Carleton and York Regiments - and thus to the men.

From the historian's perspective the function of regimental history is not quite so clear. The old style regimental history was held up as an example of the worst excesses of the "drum and trumpet" approach to military history: overly descriptive "battle pieces" which generally provided the framework for relating the exploits of individuals members of a particular unit.¹ Rather than analytical narrative histories of the units, regimental studies easily became simply another means of transmitting regimental lore. A part of the system, such studies were unable to rise above the limits imposed on the genre by the dual imperatives of audience and funding. The changing expectations of military history in general shaped by an emphasis on social history - and of operational studies in particular have raised the stakes

for historians approaching the genre.² Jean Pierre Gagnon's *The 22nd (French-Canadian) Battalion, 1914-1918: A Socio-Military History* has established the importance of using the regiment as an instrument to examine both the experience and background of the common soldier. Similarly, recent operational histories have moved beyond the battle-piece to incorporate into the narrative aspects of training, operational doctrine and tactics, producing a "new" combat history.³

War and fighting have regained their primacy within military history but the best regimental histories now combine the analytical narrative, socio-military study with a strong operational account while maintaining the emotional punch of first person accounts. Their purpose then becomes two-fold: first, to examine the regiment itself, both as a unit and as a distinct group of individuals; second, to use the regiment as a case study through which to assess the impact of training, operations and tactics at the sharp end. Implicit in the latter approach is the requirement that the author rise above the limitations imposed by the genre and examine the regimental system as one element of the army's approach to creating a combat-ready force.

All of the books reviewed have benefitted - albeit in varying degrees - from the advances made in the historiography of and approach to military history in the last decade. They all focus on the wartime experience of their units, and make use of the material available on training and operational doctrine. There is, however, a disparity in the application of those changes, a disparity most evident in the nature of the questions asked and stemming from their willingness to step back from the regiment itself.

David Bercuson's *Battalion of Heroes* best represents the possibilities of the new approach to regimental history. Well written and well-researched, Bercuson's examination of the Calgary Highlanders was shaped by his determination to base his story on primary sources and to be both fair and analytical.(p.x) In this approach he benefitted from the latitude allowed him by the Calgary Highlanders Regimental Fund Foundation and by the existence of a set of war diaries described as having the "most detailed account of the planning and execution of operations."⁴ He has also used first person accounts to good effect, retaining the human face of the regiment without destroying the narrative flow.

It shows in the result. Bercuson has not allowed his perspective to be shaped by the regimental system but rather examines it in the context of the Canadian army's system as a whole. This shapes his analysis. For example, one element of the obligation to support the regimental system of organization was the practice of promoting officers from within the regiment; this was a practice supported by the vast majority of the regulars - Bercuson quotes Crerar's draft memo of March 1942 which gave the practice qualified support (p.41) - as well as the men within the regiment. This created the paradox within the officer replacement system whereby some officers retained their positions for too long while ostensibly better qualified replacements from outside the regiment were unwelcome and treated with suspicion; neither situation promoted maximum combat effectiveness. Similar problems occurred as the reinforcement system broke down and many soldiers found themselves fighting in a regiment of whose identity they were barely aware; integration into such a tight-knit family took time. As Bercuson notes, even before the Calgary Highlanders were committed to action in Normandy the difficulties of maintaining the regional identity

of the regiment were making themselves felt. (p.49) By the fall of 1944, it had become impossible. That regimental identity was still important was perhaps signalled by the fact that morale remained high during the intense fighting for the Scheldt; conversely, Acting Army Commander Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds' exhortation to the units to make the reinforcements, "feel like part of the unit and no longer individuals" suggests that while he genuinely believed that joining such a unit was "one of the great moments of [the soldiers] life - comparable with birth, marriage or death," Simonds was also aware of the difficulties of placing into these units reinforcements "from away."

Bercuson's examination of training and operations using the Calgary Highlanders brings out the strengths and weaknesses of the Anglo-Canadian army system. He echoes John A. English's criticism of the senior command for its perceived failure to create a proper training regimen, observing that the Calgary Highlanders' dependence on battle drill and consequent minimization of small-unit tactics was one result.⁵ It would seem, however, that if true, and it is not entirely clear that it is, the regiments themselves must share some of the blame - all three books relate stories of how the "family" atmosphere sometimes limited the impact of attempts to improve training.

If the regimental system proved deficient for training troops in modern wars, it nevertheless remained an extremely effective tool for recruiting and must share some of the credit for the consistency of unit cohesion and high morale amongst the Calgary Highlanders and the other regiments. Indeed, all the books suggest that despite heavy casualties and turnover, morale was rarely a problem. Neither the Carleton and Yorks nor the Cape Breton Highlanders story differs in substance in this respect: in good regimental fashion, the distinctive qualities of each unit is credited for this phenomenon.

Like Bercuson, Robert Tooley's *Invicta* approaches the history of his regiment - the Carleton and York - as a unit rather than as a tool for detailing individual accounts of the war. *Invicta* is, however, a hybrid of the old and new approaches; the author is critical of regimental histories that are simply anecdotal collections and bemoans traditional histories that are based on "the regimental folklore, the endless string of anecdotes...which tell the reader little about the Regiment and too much about the individuals concerned." (p.2) Tooley is intent on telling the story of the battalion as an entity and this he does in excellent fashion. Firmly grounded in the documentary material, the author has fashioned a solid narrative of the unit's exploits without sacrificing the individuals story.

He nevertheless works within the framework of analysis that regimental histories produce; that is that the regimental system was the best one for producing effective combat discipline and maintaining morale. He reflects the consternation of the regiment's personnel when officers are replaced, focusing on the reaction of the regiment rather than the quality of the officer. The reaction of the regiment is, of course, important but again it begs the question of whether or not this was the most effective way to staff and organize an army. Indeed, he points to the fact that it wasn't by incorrectly attributing to the regiment all the ingredients necessary to create an effective army: "Many factors enter into the make-up of the regimental spirit: chief among them is sound morale based on confidence, confidence in the adequacy of training, confidence in weapons, confidence in the operational plan, and, above all, confidence in leaders and companions." (p.14) It is hard to characterize all of these factors as products of the regimental system; only the latter is a clear product of the regimental level and even