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The Canadians in Sicily Sixty Years On

Geoffrey Hayes

Canadians know very little about the role played by their countrymen in Sicily sixty years ago. In their popular history of the Second World War, historians Brereton Greenhous and W.A.B. Douglas summed up our performance this way:

The Canadians were beset by problems of command and control. Some of their inexperienced regimental officers responded uncertainly to the concentrated pressure of battle, maps were read wrongly, and their radios too often failed them at vital moments. On the positive side, however, they had courage, tenacity, and the hard-driving energy of their commander to carry them through, plus an enormous weight of fire power...¹

Such an assessment resonates with the tone of the army's official historian, C.P. Stacey, whose judgments on the performance of Canadian army officers in Normandy were strikingly similar.² In both theatres, it seems that inexperienced regimental officers were saved by General Guy Simonds and lots of artillery.

The Sicilian campaign takes on a very different hue when viewed from those who actually did the fighting. Memoirs, after-action reports and regimental histories reveal a host of challenges faced by the Canadian army even before it landed on the beaches near Pachino. In the daunting terrain and climate of that Sicilian summer, it is equally clear that firepower was not enough. Leadership mattered and, despite their inexperience, Canadian officers demonstrated it.

In May 1943, after three and a half months fighting in North Africa with the British 8th Army, Captain Strome Galloway rejoined the Royal

Canadian Regiment, (RCR) then training in Ayrshire, Scotland. It was a far different unit than the one he had left: "New equipment was much in evidence, new weapons caught the eye." Galloway took command of the RCR's "B" Company. Captain Charles Lithgow was his Second-in-Command and a friend, but he knew none of his three subalterns, "two recent RMC products direct from Canada and a very unmilitary but comical chap who had been some sort of man-about-town before the war, and was also a new arrival."³

New battalion establishments only added to the confusion of the Canadian units overseas. In January 1943, the 31 (soon to be 33) infantry battalions lost their anti-aircraft platoon and one of the four rifle companies. The news in late January that "D" Company of the 48th Highlanders was to be disbanded "stunned" and outraged the men for whom their company was such a source of pride. Three months later came orders to reintroduce the fourth rifle company. This reversal increased the battalion establishment to 37 officers and 811 other ranks. The first parade of the 48th Highlanders' 'new' "D" Company came just hours before the unit's departure from Eastbourne for Scotland. A new company march, *Donald's Return from the War*, helped soften the impact of yet another change in establishment.⁴

The new battalion establishments came in April 1943 at the same time as Canada accepted an invitation to take part in Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. The 1st Division and 1st Armoured Brigade were soon to become part of the British 8th Army. Time was short. The units of 1st Division had been in England since late

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Canadian troops on their way to Sicily. The soldier in the foreground is holding a Thompson submachine gun, or Tommy gun.

Sherman tank took over from the Canadian-built Ram, which had in turn replaced the Churchill tank earlier in the year.⁶

Even in an ideal world, a well-trained soldier needed some time to learn the eccentricities of the 'Tommy gun', the 17-pounder or the Sherman. (Everyone likely needed much more practice with the PIAT.) It also took time to learn how these new weapons would work together. The division had no time. In July an amphibious assault loomed on a beach some 2,000 miles and two weeks distant. Of all the units that would make up the assault force in Husky, only the Canadians would arrive from so far afield.

More than any other unit in First Canadian Army, 1st Division's senior leadership mirrored the Canadian Army's roots in both the permanent force and the militia. After the divisional commander, Major-General Harry Salmon, was killed in an aircraft accident enroute to Egypt in April 1943, 39-year-old Major-General Guy Granville Simonds took over. Simonds' reputation as an innovative commander began in Sicily, but so

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1939, and though its early training was often described as casual, the pace of what one unit called "the New Training" had since 1941 paid handsome dividends.⁵ But handling new weapons just weeks before the Canadians were to embark for Sicily must have been daunting. The Canadians were in Scotland for their final assault training when they were first issued the Thompson submachine gun in place of the Sten gun. The fickle PIAT (Projector, Infantry Anti-Tank) replaced the much-hated Boyes anti-tank rifle. While the infantry anti-tank platoons exchanged their 2-pounder guns for 6-pounders, the divisional 1st Anti-tank Regiment traded up half its 6-pounders for the 17-pounder gun. For the Ontario, Three Rivers and Calgary Tank Regiments of 1st Armoured Brigade, the

did his often-difficult relations with his subordinates. Howard Graham had fought in the First World War and risen through the pre-war militia before he took command of 1st Brigade in 1942. It included the Royal Canadian Regiment (Permanent Force), Graham's own Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment and Toronto's 48th Highlanders of Canada. Graham's militia background likely cooled his relationship with Simonds. By some accounts only the intervention of 8th Army Commander Bernard Law Montgomery prevented Simonds from sacking Graham early in the campaign.⁷ Simonds had better dealings with his other two brigade commanders. Chris Vokes of 2nd Brigade was a permanent force engineering officer. His 'Western' Brigade contained the

Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (Permanent Force), The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada from Vancouver, and The Edmonton Regiment. Howard Penhale was also a career soldier. His 3rd Brigade was raised in Eastern Canada and included the Royal 22e Régiment (Permanent Force), The Carleton and York Regiment (CYRs) from New Brunswick, and The West Nova Scotia Regiment.

Richard Malone was the Brigade Major for Vokes's 2nd Brigade before he was wounded near Assoro. Malone maintains that each battalion looked "down its nose slightly at its sister formations." The Patricias, being a Permanent Force [PF] unit, "stood very much on its dignity, quite convinced as P.F. soldiers they were much smarter and more professional than the Militia men or part time soldiers in the Seaforths or Edmontons." The Seaforths "were rather the gay social boys. In their kilts and with their peacetime status, one seemed always to

detect a slight disdain of the queer P.F. bunch in the Patricias and the rough lads with foreign names in the Edmontons, many of whom had been recruited from the mines and bush country of the north and the wide farms of the prairies." Malone felt the Edmontons considered themselves "tougher than the other two regiments...felt they could outmarch them and do a better job when it actually came to a scrap." After several weeks in action, however, Malone felt that such 'weird notions' gave way to a pride in the division.⁸

Regimental rivalries never disappeared completely. While the Permanent Force and Highland battalions coveted their traditions, the rest of the division's militia units – the Edmontons, the Hastings and Prince Edwards Regiment (Hasty P's), the Carleton and York Regiment, and the West Nova Scotia Regiment – exuded a fierce, almost disdainful pride drawn from their rural, regional background. The Hasty

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Some of the 'tough' soldiers from the Edmonton Regiment. The photo shows men from the unit's carrier section, ca. July 1943.

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Men from the 1st Canadian Infantry Division walk along a road during the advance to Ispica, 12 July 1943. They display the liberal interpretation of uniform regulations adopted by Canadian troops in Sicily. Note the donkey carts on the right. These were generally commandeered to haul heavy weapons and other equipment and supplies.

P's, for example, relished their nickname the 'plough jockeys' and the tough-guy attitude it conveyed. Regimental funds were limited in rural or small town militia units, so, like the CYRs, each "learned to make the best of what it had, an attitude frequently put into words by one of the wartime COs, Lt Col Walter Lawson: 'Improvise, damn it.'"⁹

Certainly these attitudes helped determine how the division's junior officers would lead their men. Permanent Force officers like Simonds worried that militia officers like Graham were too used to a democratic form of decision-making. In the view of Simonds' biographer, such a "communal approach [to planning]...was discouraged for it admitted amateur rather than orthodox solutions and sometimes, when troops were tired, served to gentle them and even setup a tacit live-and-let-live arrangement with the enemy." Some militia officers, on the other hand, believed that too many PF officers were promoted simply because they were from the Permanent Force.¹⁰ Others were considered martinets. Galloway recalled Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Crowe of the RCRs and his Second-in-Command, Major J.H.W.T. Pope as "intense people and perfectionists...." Galloway recalled years later that "They treated the junior officers

as though they were pupils in a boys' school and they instituted numerous madcap schemes to keep everyone on tiptoe. Actually, they were good for the battalion. They got our fighting spirit up to the point where we longed for the day of battle so we could get away from all the criticism we incurred for not meeting their standards."¹¹

In April 1943, Lieutenant Sydney Frost arrived in England and was posted with four others to the Patricias. He took command of 17 Platoon, 3 Company. (Infantry battalions had not yet reorganized to their final establishment of four rifle companies.) Frost received a brief welcome from Lieutenant-Colonel Bob Lindsay, but he remembers being "a small cog in a very active Regiment, just off a gruelling exercise. Everyone was busy with his own duties and had no time to nurse a newly joined subaltern, particularly one just arrived from Canada." Frost's fellow officers were cool initially, though he recognized the small group of majors and captains who already formed the core of the regiment. The army had long told its young officers to observe their seniors and imitate their leadership style. The Patricia's officers offered several models. Ron Watterman was formerly an NCO in the permanent force. Frost remembers that he had developed "a reputation as a very

tough customer, particularly on junior officers. Everyone was scared of him, including some of the senior officers, not only because of his abrupt and intimidating manner but because he knew his stuff and was a highly professional soldier.”¹² Watterman would later take command of the West Nova Scotia Regiment.

Major Cameron Ware followed a different route to a commission and practiced a different leadership style. An RMC graduate who had joined the Patricias in 1935, Ware had had a stint with the British army before he rejoined the Patricias in 1940 and became its Second-in-Command the next year. Ware was one of those self-assured, charismatic leaders who “inspired confidence in his men.”¹³ He would become the Patricias’ Commanding Officer in August 1943.

As products of the pre-war permanent force, Crowe, Pope and Watterman represented a leadership style that few wartime officers had the confidence and skill to copy. Trained outside of a fiercely competitive regimental system, new officers nevertheless had to lead within it. Until they could prove themselves, outsiders were best to tread warily for the consequences could be severe. Most new officers had likely heard of the ‘sit-down’ strike the men of the Cape Breton

Highlanders had staged to protest the arrival of new officers from ‘away’. As Cederberg relates, the other ranks had ways to take revenge on “specific officers they wouldn’t or couldn’t accept”:

One way was to go to mess in long lines, precisely when a ‘target’ officer was returning to his quarters. Every soldier would salute him, making him return each one separately until his arm was ready to fall off. Another was to steal his revolver and throw it into a nearby pond. It was kind of comical to see one of them, out on the pond late in the afternoon, dragging and probing for a service.¹⁴

A strenuous route march finally won over the other ranks to the strength and character of their officers:

Colonel Weir and 2/I-C [Second-in-Command] Major Sommerville walked with the men, striding out, singing along, tirelessly. In fact, Sommerville, whose battle-dress trousers were slightly too large for his ass, was tagged Pete the Tramp for the way he walked despite blisters. But it was Majors Laird Nesbitt and Bill Ogilvy who extinguished the last embers of resentment. They provided barrels of good mild and bitters for the marching men at the end of the sixth day.

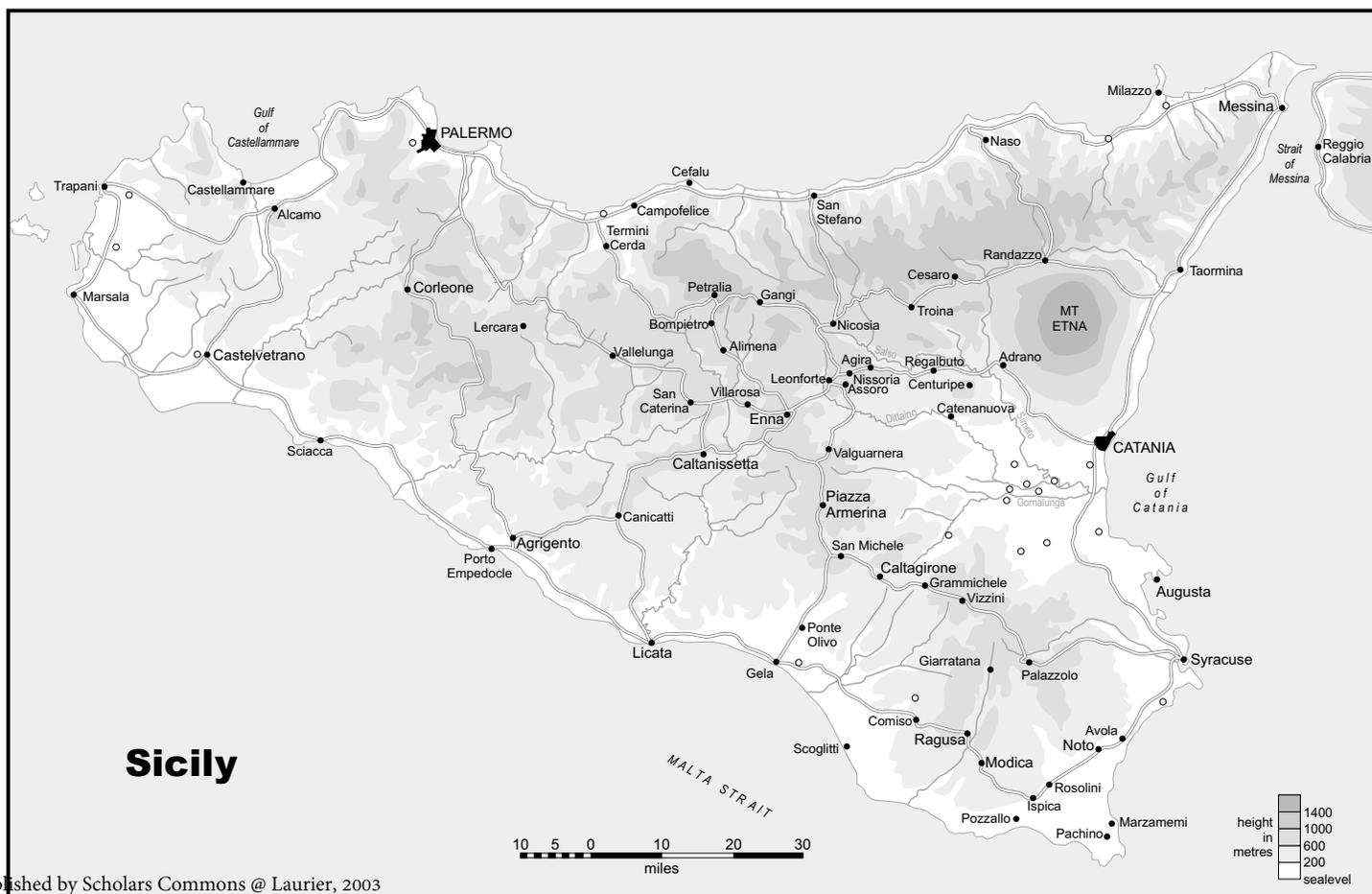


Photo by Frank Royal, NAC PA 163669

Later Cederberg recalled an informal visit from Major Sommerville. "‘Competition,’ snorted Pete the Tramp, one afternoon when he dropped around unannounced to inspect the platoon carriers, ‘that’s what does it. But you have to instill it on a company versus company level here, regiment against regiment, then division against division. Why? Well, we’re at war, even if we aren’t fighting.’ He grinned under his thick black moustache. ‘Looking back, I guess I tried too hard, too fast.’ The platoon laughed, easily. He’d scored a point while conceding another.”¹⁵

The informal relationship between officers and men that Cederberg describes was typical of the kind that evolved in the Canadian militia. But Frost’s platoon of soldiers in the Patricias demanded similar treatment. They “were a tough bunch. They knew all the tricks of the professional soldier and were not [at] all impressed with my two pips and neatly pressed service dress.” Platoon sergeant Carter offered wise council:

[Carter] told me, quite frankly, that the men were over-trained and would not brook any nonsense from a young officer just out of the Officer Training School; they would take their time to

assess me and until they were satisfied I knew what I was doing, I would have a pretty rough time. He suggested I avoid talking about how great things were in Canada, and the tremendous war effort the folks were making back home. On the subject of discipline, I was to interpret very liberally, and in the men’s favour, any regulations and rules restraining their extra-regimental activities, [sic] particularly during the evening hours.

“This was all very good advice,” Frost recalled, “but obviously not what I had been taught and practised since RMC.”¹⁶

Throughout the Canadian army the route march posed an important symbolic measure of new officers. A former commander of the Carleton and York Regiment recalled with disdain how the officers of another unit (a permanent force one no less) once rode in vehicles on route marches. *His* officers marched with the men.¹⁷ The men of the Patricias demanded no less. Frost was well conditioned and had little trouble with his first route march: “I walked up and down the line giving encouragement to my troops and tried to make them understand I was concerned for their welfare.”¹⁸ But his first platoon exercise went

badly: “I had difficulty finding the FUP (Forming Up Place), was late for the start line and overloaded an assault boat, which promptly swamped. It was a snafu.” Fully expecting to receive ‘rockets’ for his performance, Frost was “impressed with the calm and professional way in which everybody accepted the mistakes of officers and men alike.” Even more important was the way his platoon viewed his exercise. “Again there was nothing but silence, except for Sgt Carter who indicated my

Photo by Frank Royal, NAC PA 169997

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The command group from the Carleton and York Regiment during the attack on Enna, 18 July 1943. From left to right: Major C.W. Abell, Lieutenant-Colonel L.D. Tweedie, Captain J.D. Aughterton and Lieutenant W.W. Wilson. Pte. V.W. Richard is seated.

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Members of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment take time out for a little music. Left to right: Lieutenant Farley Mowat, Pte. J. Dalton, Pte. A.R. Beaton and Captain J.A. Baird.

performance was about par for the course.”¹⁹

On 28 June 1943, a fast convoy of 12 vessels carrying most of the Canadian fighting troops raised anchor on the Clyde in Scotland. A series of slower convoys were already sailing with the equipment needed by the more than 26,000 Canadians who would take part in the Sicilian campaign.²⁰ As the landing beaches loomed, previously small details magnified Canadian inexperience. Officers had long been told that one way to gain an authority over their men was to look different from their men. As the convoys approached ‘Bark West’ on Sicily’s southeast coast, McDougall of the Seaforths recalled one of his colleagues:

Mr. McLean joined us in the dark hole of the Mess Deck just before our serial was called up, and I remember thinking when I saw him against the dim blue light of the companionway that he looked like a Christmas tree. Most of it was from the waist up: web belt, water-bottle, compass, entrenching tool, rolled gas-cape, Verrey pistol, map-case, binoculars, Tommy gun, ammunition clips, small pack on the back, radio set strapped on the front of his shoulder, then the whole thing tapering through the steel helmet to the tip of the radio aerial above his head. A German wouldn’t need to shoot him; he’d just have to walk up to him, snick him on the nose, and he’d fall over and not be able to get up.²¹

The Canadians were issued tropical kit enroute to Sicily. The shorts and loose-fitting shirts took some getting used to, but “it wasn’t long before we got the ‘hang’ of how to look smart and soldierly in the new garb.”²² That was a matter of perspective, as the Canadians soon gained a reputation for interpreting dress requirements rather liberally. Ben Malkin of 3rd

Field Regiment, RCA recalled that within a week of landing in Sicily “we displayed a variety of clothing that would have done credit to a church rummage sale. In the Sicilian heat, some men wore only shorts and gym shoes. Others wore shorts and boots. Still others wore bush shirts with shorts, while others, whose skins had proved especially attractive to the savage Sicilian mosquitoes, wore long pants with shirts. Finally, some wore their sleeves rolled up, some buttoned down.”²³

A summer gale and an unreconnoitred sand bar complicated the Canadian landings on D-Day, 10 July 1943. Lieutenant Farley Mowat’s platoon of the Hasty P’s was one of the first onto the beaches:

Revolver in hand, Tommy gun slung over my shoulder, web equipment bulging with grenades and ammo, tin hat pulled firmly down around my ears, I sprinted to the edge of the rampart shouting, “Follow me, men!”...and leapt off into eight feet of water.

Weighted as I was I went down like a stone, striking the bottom feet-first. So astounded was I by this unexpected descent into the depths that I made no attempt to thrash my way back to the

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surface. I simply walked straight on until my head emerged. Then I turned with some faint thought of shouting warning to my men, and was in time to see Sgt.-Major Nuttley go off the end of the ramp with rifle held at arm's length and the fingers of his free hand firmly clutching his nose.²⁴

The beach was largely uncontested, but delays in the landings put pressure on the junior officers to get their platoons off the beaches and onto their initial objectives. Robert McDougall of the Seaforths later wrote: "The poor bloody lieutenants run back and forth most of the time looking worried. So does our company commander. It's nice to be a private."²⁵

After two weeks in the cramped troop ships, the Canadians began their march north towards the mountainous centre of the island. Some 500 vehicles and 40 guns had been lost enroute, leaving the Canadians undergunned and short of mechanized transport.²⁶ One regimental history noted that the pressures to push on created "an intense form of driving leadership, with experience lacking to keep it always in perspective."²⁷ On 11 July, the Edmontons ended a long, dusty march at Ispica, where naval guns helped force the town's surrender. (For the next month, Ispica came under the control of a twenty-one-year old Town Major, Sydney Frost).²⁸ The RCR's occupied Ragusa the next day, but the divisional march continued through the searing heat and dust. Correspondent Peter Stursberg wrote of the "powdery white dust... [that] made the sunburned soldiers look deathly pale, like ghosts."²⁹ Having loaned vehicles to their sister regiments, the Commanding Officer of the 48th Highlanders admitted that his men suffered heat casualties and were among "a very large number of stragglers."³⁰

On 13 July, 8th Army Commander Bernard Law Montgomery ordered a 36-hour rest north for the Canadians at Giarratana. Monty's visit to the Canadians helped forge his reputation; Wallace recalled the general asking if they had enough beer.³¹ McDougall thought the general was "lean and hard, has gimlet eyes, and gives off confidence like Lana Turner gives off sex."³² The general had sharper words for the Canadians in his diary: "The Canadian Div had definitely to be rested; the men were not fit and they suffered severely from the hot sun and many got badly burnt; generally, officers and men are

too fat and they want to get some flesh off and to harden themselves." He later confided in his diary: "They are a grand Division and when we get them tough and hard and some of the fat off them, they will be absolutely first class."³³ Montgomery likely knew little of the long sea journey or the loss of transport. Both the 51st Highland Division on the Canadian right and the 45th US 'Thunderbird' Division on the left were highly mobile – "to the Canadians it looked as though every American soldier had his own jeep."³⁴

Montgomery's faith in the Canadians would play out in the coming weeks. Frustrated by the failure of his 8th Army to capture Catania on Sicily's east coast, (and eager that his army would play the central role in the capture of Sicily) Montgomery shifted efforts to the centre of the island, towards the town of Enna which formed the hub of the Sicilian road system. While the Canadians were marching north, the 45th US Division had driven inland to the British-American boundary, pushing the Germans onto the Canadian front. Rather than allow the Americans to press on, Montgomery ordered his XXX Corps, including the Canadians, to drive west and north into the strength of the German defences. Despite shortages of transport, armour and artillery, the Canadians were to try to outflank the Germans through the dust, mountains and dry river beds of central Sicily. North of the Canadians lay the spectacular hilltops on which stood the villages and towns of Caltagirone, Piazza Armerina, Valguarnera, Enna, Assoro and Leonforte. In each, units of the Herman Goring Division established rearguards, using the heights to deny the Canadians the roads heading east towards the Catania plain.³⁵

Caltagirone "was a gift" to the 48th Highlanders, falling with little fighting.³⁶ But the push towards Valguarnera found the infantry in a series of isolated actions often unable to deploy supporting arms. At Piazza Armerina for example, the guns of the Three Rivers tanks could not be raised high enough to engage the German positions in support of the Edmontons. A number of the division's anti-tank guns were lost enroute; those that made it were often difficult to deploy. Tooley noted, for example, that the anti-tank platoon of the CYR did not fire throughout the Sicilian campaign. And when

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Photo by Harold G. Aikman, NAC PA 163410

Brigadier J.C. Jefferson (right), shown here in Normandy while commanding 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade, was the commander of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment in Sicily.

1st Brigade was repelled on its push towards Valguarnera on 17 July, the infantry found that the tank of the artillery Forward Observation Artillery [FOO] could not cross the harsh terrain. Neither could the tracked carriers with the 3-inch mortars and those notoriously unreliable wireless sets.³⁷

In spite of these challenges, there were spectacular successes. On 18 July, the Canadians turned away from Enna to launch attacks eastward towards the imposing heights that held the towns of Leonforte and Assoro. The story of the Hasty P's battle for Assoro is the stuff of legend. While scouting the operation, the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce Sutcliffe, was killed. The battalion's Intelligence officer, Captain Battle Cockin died later. As the son of a former Governor-General, Major John Buchan, The Lord Tweedsmuir, seemed an unlikely choice as Second-in-Command of the Plough Jockeys from the north shore of Lake Ontario. But Tweedsmuir was up to the challenge, leading a daring night attack on the Assoro feature from the east with an 'assault company' led by "A" Company commander Alex Campbell. Aided by diversions from the southwest, the men quietly twisted across the valley beneath the Assoro peak. They then discovered a narrow goat path along the cliff face to the heights above. In the dark, surprise was complete. A meagre No. 56 set that had gone up the cliff on a soldier's back allowed Tweedsmuir to direct the guns of the 7th Medium Regiment to knock out an enemy battery and prevent any further attempts by the Germans to retake the village. Low on food and ammunition, the Hasty Ps were finally relieved by the RCRs. With support from the 48th Highlanders (whose men also scaled cliffs west of Assoro) and a squadron of the Three Rivers Regiment, Assoro fell on 22 July 1943.³⁸

Even our official historians gush in their praise of the battle for Assoro. William McAndrew has concluded: "The Hastings' achievement was remarkable, accomplished once more with intelligent, imaginative and bold manoeuvre." Major G.W.L. Nicholson, the author of Canada's official history of the Canadian army

in Italy noted firmly: "The seizure of the Assoro pinnacle...was as significant to the Canadian Division's advance as it was dramatic, for it upset the whole German plan of defence on that front, and thus hastened the fall of Leonforte."³⁹

Perhaps, but Canadian intelligence officers concluded at the time that the Germans were resolved to put up a 'resolute defence' at Leonforte.⁴⁰ Brigadier Vokes first gave the Seaforth Highlanders the job of attacking up the only, winding road to the town. When short rounds fell into the Seaforth's headquarters, Vokes delayed the action and gave the lead to the Edmontons under Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Jefferson. All four of Jefferson's rifle companies went forward under the crunch of mortars, machine guns and a heavy artillery barrage that forced the Germans to the rear of the town. But until the engineers could repair a blown bridge on the approaching road, the Edmontons had only their personal weapons to withstand the German counterattacks. Even the PIATs were useless for as Bill Cromb, one of the company commanders remembered, "the soldier who had the fuses was either wounded or dead."⁴¹ The wireless operators tried to extend antennae from the rooftops, but their signals could not reach Vokes' brigade headquarters. The Edmontons were cut off. Colonel Jefferson had to entrust a note addressed "to any British or Canadian officer" to an Italian boy who made it through the lines. The next morning Captain Rowan Coleman of the Patricias led a "flying column" to relieve the Eddies, followed closely by four Three Rivers tanks and a troop of anti-tank guns. The fighting in Leonforte's narrow streets continued throughout the day, costing 2nd

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Brigade over 161 casualties, including 56 fatalities.⁴²

Intelligence, imagination and boldness easily describe the battles for both Assoro and Leonforte. But as historian Shaun Brown has noted, an infantry advance with little support from the other arms was to become a familiar pattern in the coming months. "The result was heavy casualties and effective enemy counterattacks, which slowed the progress of battle."⁴³

For this reason it is likely that General Simonds decided on a very different approach for the Canadians' next battle some 12 kilometres east of Leonforte at Agira. This time Simonds outlined an elaborate artillery programme, "all the trimmings" according to the war diarist of the RCR, the first of Howard Graham's three infantry battalions who advanced beyond the village of Nissoria, but no further. Agira remained in German hands.

There is no lack of finger-pointing over the battle for Agira. Simonds agreed with divisional intelligence who echoed German prisoners' judgments that the infantry did not advance quickly enough under the artillery fire. Howard Graham disputed Simonds' assessment, writing years later: "I still resent the effort to justify a bad plan by putting blame for its failure on the backs of the troops." Though Graham can also take responsibility for what happened to his brigade, most commentators agree that the plan

Award winners from the PPCLI. From left to right: Pte. Wilfred Reilly, Major R.C. Coleman, Lieutenant Rex Carey and Cpl. Bob Middleton.

was overly ambitious. Even Simonds' sympathetic biographer, Dominick Graham, concedes that the plan "...seemed excessive when the advance was led by a single battalion, the RCR, and the location of the enemy was not precisely known."⁴⁴

William McAndrew is also critical of Simonds. McAndrew argues that the general tried to impose a rigid fire plan on an enemy and terrain that would not oblige him: "Little was known of the German dispositions, and no amount of fire support could neutralize an area several miles long and a few wide. The result, an uneasy compromise between a formal set piece attack, and an advance to contact on a one-battalion front, left the division punching in air." But McAndrew goes further, arguing that such an inflexible fire plan "seemed to induce a tactical outlook which restrained the initiative on which battlefield manoeuvre depends." He asks "Could the butcher's bill, at Agira or elsewhere, have been reduced with another, less mechanistic, less predictable approach to battle? It is impossible to say for sure, of course,..."⁴⁵

It is possible to speculate. Galloway led "B" Company of the RCR at Agira. His company faced "intense mortar and MG fire" just east of Nissoria. The unit did not turn or find shelter, though he admits rather sheepishly "we had no other choice. We had to keep going, though I remember cowering momentarily in successive gullies which ran across our line of advance."⁴⁶ Galloway had good reason to feel exposed, for a breeze thinned much of the smoke fired to obscure the battlefield on that hot July day. From his perch back in Assoro, Simonds called for more smoke but under the conditions the Canadians met at Nissoria it is understandable that the infantry lost their timed artillery concentrations. The 18-sets again proved faulty and communication broke down throughout the day. Lieutenant-Colonel Crowe went forward in the late afternoon to find his companies and urge them on. He was killed, leaving three of his company commanders who had fought on past Nissoria (possibly within two miles of Agira) to decide their next action.⁴⁷

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Advanced Air Support Vehicle near Agira, Sicily by William Abernathy Ogilvie

The three companies of the RCRs spent the night in their forward positions before receiving orders to pull back. In McAndrew's view, the company commanders "reacted as their doctrine, training, and orders instructed them. Unfortunately, these erred on the side of caution, control, and the dictates of an orderly battlefield, rather than boldness, initiative, and chance. What soldiers do when control and communication fail is surely the test of any tactical doctrine."⁴⁸ This was by no means an orderly battlefield. The RCR's orders to withdraw came after the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment had failed to push on to Agira through heavy machine gun and mortar fire, and with no artillery support. Lord Tweedsmuir was just one of his unit's 80 casualties. The 48th Highlanders would also go forward under artillery cover, but would be unable to take the crest against the weight of German weaponry. Historians are free to interpret this first battle for Agira as a failure of tactical doctrine, but the men on the ground had few choices.

By any measure, the Canadians' second battle for Agira showed the strength of a tactical doctrine that hinged on the boldness of young officers on the ground. Drawing lessons from 1st Brigade's attack, this operation by Vokes' 2nd Brigade afforded a much better balance of

firepower and manoeuvre warfare. It began on the night of 26 July behind a 28-stage barrage that more than doubled the rounds per gun laid down two days before. Further supported by anti-tank guns and tanks, two companies of Patricias captured their first objective ('Lion') that night with little difficulty. The guns then stopped for twenty minutes to allow two other companies of Patricias to push onto the next ridge further east ('Tiger'). In the darkness, the men of "A" and "B" Companies lost their way and could only listen as the timed barrage passed them by.⁴⁹

Tiger ridge was still in doubt at midnight on the 26th when Vokes ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Hoffmeister's Seaforths forward. With a troop of Shermans and anti-tank guns, the Seaforths' "A" and "C" companies climbed onto the ridge and with the Patricias won the objective. Already learning to react to German tactics, the Canadians rushed anti-tank guns forward to hold the position against counterattack.⁵⁰

The task to capture the next ridgeline, codenamed Grizzly, fell to the Seaforths' "A" Company under Major Henry 'Budge' Bell-Irving. Supported by the Seaforths' "C" Company, a troop of tanks and the invaluable artillery FOO, Bell-Irving's 8 Platoon fired at the enemy on the

no crop**bleed to left and top****87%**

Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Crowe and Major J.H.W. Pope of the Royal Canadian Regiment checking a map outside of Piazza Armerina, 17 July 1943. Both men suffered heroic but unnecessary deaths during the campaign.

It was good advice, and it could have been strengthened by numerous episodes throughout the campaign. The official history describes the actions of Lieutenant Guy of the West Nova Scotia Regiment during 3rd Brigade's fighting on the Catenanuova bridgehead in late July. With his company commander wounded by short fire, Lieutenant Guy led the company onto the objective, but it was forced off by a German counterattack. Guy had no FOO with him, and he had little experience

Photo by Frank Royal, NAC PA 132777

top of Grizzly while his 7 and 9 Platoons worked through the orchards and terraced vineyards to outflank the hill from the south. In a move reminiscent of the Hasty P's climb at Assoro, a small party of "A" Company men climbed the 300 foot heights and took the position by surprise. Low on ammunition and eventually without wireless, Bell-Irving's men held their position through the night of the 27th.⁵¹ Said McDougall of the Seaforths: "It was an uneasy night for a handful of weary men."⁵²

The following spring Major Bell-Irving presented his account of the battle for Agira to young officers then preparing for the invasion of Northern Europe. He gave this advice:

This short history of "A" Company does, at a low level, illustrate something of what infantry can do in infantry country such as our battalion faced in front of Agira. The performance of the company depended entirely on freedom of manoeuvre, freedom of time, and the delegation of initiative to subordinate commanders. It seems clear that Western Europe will provide at least some country more like Sicily than North Africa. If that is so, I suggest that you give the infantryman his head, make some F.O.O.s walk, and let the guns support the infantry's need of the moment.⁵³

observing and directing artillery fire. But with some "quick instructions" over the wireless from Lieutenant-Colonel Bogert, Guy "began giving the artillery targets well away from his positions and correcting these as he observed the fall of the shells." In that self-deprecating way that was so much a style of leadership back then, Guy later commented, "By some good fortune, fire was brought down on the enemy and forced them to retreat."⁵⁴

Too often that kind of leadership came at a price. The Sicilian campaign was not yet over when General Montgomery reviewed the Sicilian campaign for "My dear Brookie," General Alan Brooke. Officer casualties were of particular interest. Montgomery noted that "A marked feature is the high proportion of officers killed to other ranks killed – as high as 1 to 6 in some units; and averaging 1 to 9 in the whole army. It has never been more than 1 to 15 before."⁵⁵ Canadian infantry battalions in Sicily lost 40 Canadian officers and 522 other ranks killed during the Sicilian campaign, a ratio of 1 Canadian officer killed to every 13 Canadian other ranks.⁵⁶

Firm conclusions are hard to draw when these figures are weighed against the fate of individual battalions. Officer casualties fluctuated dramatically between units. The West Nova Scotia Regiment, for example, lost 1 officer and 26 other ranks killed. The Seaforth Highlanders were the hardest hit, with 21 of its 38 officers suffering casualties (including six who died).⁵⁷ In August 1943, Major Douglas Forin of the Seaforths wrote to his wife: "Jack Conway has just come in to BHQ, [Battalion Headquarters] where he is taking over Intelligence Officer duties; he is one of two surviving subalterns with whom we landed."⁵⁸

The Seaforth's grim toll prompted one of its survivors to consider that the unit's casualties were due in part to the "great conscientiousness (at times excessive in these early days) of officers and N.C.O.s."⁵⁹ The Seaforths' officers were not the only ones who may have shown 'excessive' gallantry. Galloway and the RCR's official historian agree that the deaths of Colonel Crowe at Nissoria and Major Pope, who died earlier near Valguarnera, were "heroic" but unnecessary.⁶⁰

If officer casualties are an imperfect measure of officer performance, officer removals are an equally uncertain gauge. In early August, the Patricias lost their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Lindsay after Brigadier Vokes thought he needlessly delayed an attack on Monte Seggio. For some, including Frost who was there, the episode reflected badly on Vokes, not Lindsay. Also in August, Brigadier Penhale relieved Lieutenant-Colonel Tweedie of his command of the Carleton and York Regiment. As a result, at least two other officers, including the Second-in-Command, requested that they be posted to other units.⁶¹ Were these ineffective officers?

We do know (but seldom acknowledge) that from 1st Division's Sicilian experience emerged a core of men who would play a substantial role leading the rest of the Canadian army. From the Patricias, Ron Watterman would take command of the West Nova Scotia Regiment, while Rowan Coleman (who won a Military Cross at Leonforte) would lead the Lincoln and Welland Regiment in Northwest Europe. He would succeed another veteran of that battle, Bill Cromb of the Edmontons. Cromb's Commanding Officer, J.C. Jefferson, would command 10th Infantry

Brigade, 4th Armoured Division for its entire time in battle. Ian Johnston, CO of the 48th Highlanders, went on to command 11th Brigade in 1944. J.P.E. Bernatchez, who led the Van Doos through Sicily and Italy in 1943 would also command a brigade. His successor, Jean Allard, would lead the Van Doos for all of 1944 before he too became a brigadier in 1945.

From Sicily emerged three men who would lead Canadian divisions in battle. One was 2nd Brigade commander Chris Vokes. Another was Bruce Matthews, who rose from divisional artillery commander to lead the 2nd Division in late 1944. And then there was Bertram Meryl Hoffmeister, like Matthews another pre-war militiaman who rose from the cadet corps to command the Seaforth Highlanders during the Sicilian campaign. Described as a "classic leader, someone men wanted to follow," Hoffmeister replaced Vokes as 2nd Brigade commander in November 1943. Months after the grim battle for Ortona where his brigade played a crucial role, Hoffmeister became a Major-General and took command of 5th Armoured Division in March 1944, or as it would soon be known, 'Hoffy's Mighty Maroon Machine.'⁶²

Canada's military historians have for too long argued that Guy Simonds and lots of firepower were central to the success of Canadian operations. Neither was enough. Leadership mattered. In the face of new weapons, new organizations, a long and dangerous sea voyage and unfamiliar terrain that too often made wireless sets useless and coordination difficult, an enormous burden fell on the army's junior leadership (both commissioned and non-commissioned) to see the battle through. Sixty years on we should remember that.

Notes

1. W.A.B. Douglas & Brereton Greenhous, *Out of the Shadows: Canada in the Second World War* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1995) (Revised Edition), p.138.
2. C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Vol. III: The Victory Campaign, The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), pp.271-275.
3. Strome Galloway, *Bravely Into Battle*, (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988), p.120.

4. Kim Beattie, *'Dileas': History of The 48th Highlanders of Canada, 1929-1956* (Toronto: The 48th Highlanders of Canada, 1957), p.182,187
5. G.R. Stevens, *The Royal Canadian Regiment, Volume Two, 1933-1966* (London: London Printing & Lithographing Co. Limited, 1967), p.49
6. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume II, The Canadians In Italy 1943-1945*. (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1957), pp.32, 35. Some units were reorganized more than others. The Saskatoon Light Infantry (MG) was quickly reorganized through this time into three Brigade support groups and re-equipped with 4.2-inch mortars and 20 mm anti-aircraft guns.
7. On the friction between Graham and Simonds, see Howard Graham, *Citizen Soldier: The Memoirs of Lieutenant General Howard Graham* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), pp.158ff; See also Dominick Graham, *The Price of Command: A Biography of General Guy Simonds* (Toronto: Stoddart/Royal Canadian Artillery Association, 1993), pp.89-92. See also Nigel Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p.341.
8. Colonel Dick Malone, *Missing from the Record* (Toronto: Wm. Collins & Co. Ltd., 1946), p.33
9. Robert Tooley, *Invicta: The Carleton and York Regiment in the Second World War* (Fredericton: New Ireland Press, 1989), p.12.
10. Dominick Graham, *Price of Command*, p.92; General Hoffmeister's views of the Permanent Force are made clear in J.L. Granatstein's, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), p.190.
11. Galloway, *Bravely into Battle*, p.122.
12. Colonel C. Sydney Frost, *Once a Patricia: Memoirs of a Junior Infantry Officer in World War II* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, nd.), p.85.
13. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, p.87; David Bercuson, *The Patricias: The Proud History of a Fighting Regiment* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd., 2001), p.194.
14. Fred Cederberg, *The Long Road Home: The Autobiography of a Canadian Soldier in Italy in World War II* (Toronto: General Publishing, 1984), p.30.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.30, 31.
16. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, p.88.
17. Tooley, *Invicta*, p.110.
18. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, p.87
19. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, p.88.
20. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, pp.38, 39.
21. McDougall, *Narrative of War*, p.12.
22. Galloway, *Bravely Into Battle*, p.123; Stevens, *RCR History*, p.66.
23. Ben Malkin, "Openings," *True Canadian War Stories*. (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1989), p.203.
24. Farley Mowat, *And No Birds Sang* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p.76.
25. Robert L. McDougall, *A Narrative of War: From the Beaches of Sicily to the Hitler Line with the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, 1943-1944* (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1996), p.11.
26. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.46.
27. Beattie, *Dileas*, p.239.
28. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, Chapter VII.
29. Peter Stursberg, *The Sound of War: Memoirs of a CBC Correspondent* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p.102.
30. National Archives of Canada, [NAC] Record Group [RG] 24, file 263C1.011 (D1) OPS-1, "Account Given by Lt.-Col. I.S. Johnston (CO, 48th Highlanders of Canada).
31. NAC, Manuscript Group [MG] 30, E 367, File 1-2, J.F. Wallace, "A Diary of the Sicilian Campaign (1943)", p.28.
32. McDougall, *Narrative of War*, p.13.
33. Diary entries cited in Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, pp.305, 309.
34. Stevens, *RCR History*, p.72.
35. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, pp.86, 92; Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, p.306.
36. Beattie, *Dileas*, p.243.
37. Tooley, *Invicta*, p.128; Nicholson *Canadians in Italy*, pp.93, 97, 98.
38. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, pp.104-105; Farley Mowat, *The Regiment*, Second Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p.90.
39. William McAndrew, "Fire or Movement? Canadian Tactical Doctrine, Sicily -1943," *Military Affairs*, 51:3 (July, 1987), p.142; Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*: 107.
40. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.112.
41. Cromb cited in Shaun R.G. Brown, "The Loyal Edmonton Regiment at War, 1943-1945," (Unpublished MA thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1984), p.27.
42. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, pp.108, 110.
43. Brown, "Loyal Edmonton Regiment", p.27.
44. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.122; Howard Graham, *Citizen Soldier*, p.175; Dominick Graham, *The Price of Command*, p.96.
45. McAndrew, "Fire or Movement?", pp.144, 145.
46. Galloway, *Bravely into Battle*, p.143.
47. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.123.
48. McAndrew, "Fire or Movement", p.144.
49. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, pp.129,130.
50. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.130.
51. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.131-133.
52. McDougall, *Narrative of War*, p.39,40.
53. McDougall, *Narrative of War*, p.56.
54. Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, pp.142, 143.
55. Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, pp.342-343..
56. Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield*, p.343, Nicholson, *Canadians in Italy*, p.74.
57. Casualty figures are from Tooley, *Invicta*, p.147.
58. McDougall, *Narrative of War*, p.58.
59. *Ibid.*, p.3.
60. Galloway, *Bravely into Battle*, p.143.
61. Frost, *Once a Patricia*, pp.534-535; Bercuson, *The Patricias*, pp.193-194; Tooley, *Invicta*, pp.141-143.
62. Granatstein, *The Generals*, pp.194, 199.

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