

2007

## Table of Contents

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# CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

Volume 16, Number 4

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## Articles

5



**The Guns of Bretteville:** 13th Field Regiment, RCA, and the defence of Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, 7-10 June 1944

Marc Milner

25



**“Bloody Provost”:** Discipline during the War of 1812

John R. Grodzinski

33



**The Road to Transformation:** Ascending from the Decade of Darkness

Bernd Horn and Bill Bentley

## Canadian War Museum

45



**Close Fire Support:** Sexton Self-Propelled Guns of the 23rd Field Regiment, 1942-1945

Andrew Iarocci

61



**A War Artist’s Legacy:** Patrick G. Cowley-Brown (1918-2007)

Laura Brandon

## Features

65



**First Deployment of the 14th Field Regiment, RCA:** D-Day – Bernières-sur-Mer – 6 June 1944

Wesley M. Alkenbrack

73



**Fighting the Mujahideen:** Lessons from the Soviet Counter-Insurgency Experience in Afghanistan

Tony Balasevicius and Greg Smith

### Other Matters

From the Editor-in-Chief .....	3
CMH Mailbox .....	4
Electronic Resources by Ken Reynolds .....	83

# CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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### Canadian War Museum

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Ottawa, ON, K1R 1C2

The Canadian War Museum, the national military history museum, is a living memorial to those men and women who served in Canada's armed forces. It is also a centre for research and dissemination of information and expertise on all aspects of the country's military past from pre-contact era to the present. It preserves the artifacts of Canadian military experience, interprets them for present and future generations, and advances the professional study of Canadian military history, including the effects of war and conflict on the nation and all its citizens.

### The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies

The purpose of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS) is to foster research, teaching, and public discussion of military and strategic issues of national and international significance. The Centre is intentionally multi-disciplinary; it has strong commitments in military history, with emphasis on the Canadian experience, and in strategic and operational studies, with emphasis on disarmament. LCMSDS supports both basic and applied research as well as teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition, the extensive program of LCMSDS workshops, conferences, public lectures, and publications encourages informed discussion of international security and of Canada's national interests in military and strategic issues - past, present and future.

The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies was founded in 1991 as a Research Centre affiliated with Wilfrid Laurier University. Its primary support has come from the Department of National Defence and from Wilfrid Laurier University. The Director of the Centre is Professor Terry Copp, Professor of History.

## *From the Editor-in-Chief*

Marc Milner of the University of New Brunswick, although best known for his work on the navy, has for many years also been a leader in battlefield study tours, particularly the Canadian battlefields in Europe. His many treks through Normandy, stimulated by the questions and insights of generations of young and not-so-young students, inspired his current research on the role of the Royal Canadian Artillery. Marc was also prompted to write this article as his father served in 13th Field Regiment during these early bridgehead battles. The “Guns of Bretteville” is a substantial addition to our knowledge of this period of the Normandy campaign.

Andrew Iarocci provides another view of the Royal Canadian Artillery in Northwest Europe with a paper on the Canadian designed and produced Sexton self-propelled gun and its employment by the 23rd Field Regiment. Andrew recently joined the Canadian War Museum history team on a fellowship to carry out research on vehicles in the museum’s collection; the present article grew directly from this assignment.

Continuing with the theme of self-propelled artillery is an account by Wesley M. Alkenbrack, a D-Day veteran of 14th Field Regiment, who writes of the destruction three SP guns of his unit on 6 June.

Laura Brandon, the art historian at the museum, has continued her important, if sad, mission, of noting the passing of each artist of the Canadian forces’ official art program of the Second World War. Patrick G. Cowley-Brown recorded the far-flung home stations of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Aside from capturing the vast but often little-known home operations of the air force, he also vividly portrayed dramatic landscapes at the very fringes of the country.

Part of the journal’s present mission is to strengthen coverage of early Canadian military history and of current missions and issues as well. John Grodzinski of the Royal Military College of Canada questions the British Army’s reputation for savage discipline during the era of the War of 1812, while showing that the ostensibly more democratic and humane US Army of that same period more readily inflicted the death penalty on its members.

Bernd Horn and Bill Bentley, both members of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, have collaborated to produce a strongly argued piece on the historical context of their current work at the institute. Tony Balasevicius and Greg Smith, both serving infantry officers in the Canadian Forces (CF), have also thought deeply about the background to current challenges facing the CF, in this case lessons that can be learned from the experiences of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

An addition to this issue of *CMH* is the introduction of a column on web resources. Ken Reynolds, an historian with the Department of National Defence, writes about the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website. Ken will contribute future columns about websites of relevance to the readers of *CMH*.

This issue marks an important landmark. It is the last for which Cameron Pulsifer will serve as the CWM editor. He took up that role with our very first issue in 1992. Cam, as I have recently remarked on this page, has been a leader in the development of professional research standards for the museum’s collections and has brought that leadership in material history to our pages. Cam has now retired from the museum after a career of some 30 years at Queen’s University, Parks Canada, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization as well as CWM. We, of course, look forward to the future contributions Cam can make now that he has joined the leisured classes.

Roger Sarty  
Editor-in-Chief  
November 2007

The editors of *Canadian Military History* wish to thank the following people and organizations for their contributions to this issue:

Maggie Arbour-Doucette, Brandey Barton, Mark Humphries, Kellen Kurschinski, Lianne Leddy, Christine Leppard, Vanessa McMackin, Susan Ross, Matt Symes, Andrew Thomson, Jane Whalen.

Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre; Canadian War Museum; Directorate of History & Heritage, Department of National Defence; Security and Defence Forum, Department of National Defence; Library and Archives Canada; Wilfrid Laurier University.

Dear sir,

There is a tendency in the Canadian military history tradition - witnessed particularly in transcribers of regimental histories - to zero-in on low-level Canadian army attacks where casualties were high or the objective was not gained. "Slaughter" is a term often used by writers capturing the concerns of the veterans as to why an attack was not stopped. While understandable in the micro-world for which regimental histories are recorded, in the macro-world of global conflict, this is naive at best. When former company, battalion, brigade or divisional commanders are asked "Why?" the answer is often recorded as "I had my orders" or "One has to obey orders." Years after the events, the reader or listener is left with the impression that these commanders were simply "automatons" blindly following orders (this was after all the Nazi excuse). But is this the case? Or is it simply that the listener/reader does not comprehend what was meant? The former commander being interviewed either believes the regimental historian understands what he is saying, or that the radio/TV interviewer does not - never will - and there is no way that he is going to be able to explain "it" to this person, particularly years after the fact! Hence the response: "Well, I had my orders!"

Shades of this come across in "Trial by Fire" where Chris Case examines the leadership of Major-General Chris Vokes. Other writers have wondered why Vokes did not call a halt to the attacks around Ortona and Mr. Case does a good job of explaining this. On the other



hand, in a Canadian context, it is often asked: "Why did Major-General Roberts halt his 11th (BR) Armoured Division in Antwerpen on September 4th, 1944?" Had he carried on to Breda a great many Canadian lives would have been spared in late 1944 fighting to clear the Scheldt and open the port. Perhaps he too had his orders, and had gone as far as he could.

What does a commander really mean by: "I had my orders!" At any level - be it section, platoon, company, battalion, brigade, division, corps or army - a commander will know the objectives of all his "peer" commanders, is fully conscious of his immediate superiors "plan" (into which his part fits), and will have an understanding of how the higher level plan is expected to unfold. That the average "infanteer" (recorded in regimental histories) does

not know this should come as no surprise - a soldier's view is a very narrow one in terms of both time and space. Particularly at the Captain and higher level, a commander will have the opportunity to ask if something that bothers him has been considered or taken account of. He may even be able to offer an alternative approach to achieve his assigned task, but he implicitly understands that he can't change his objective, because "his objective" is only a small part of a larger objective. He also fully understands the consequences of his men not carrying out their task according to the plan - by not achieving their objective, others will die! Additionally, he appreciates that the staff have devoted their time, and have used their expertise and experience to ensure the plan is feasible well before the "Orders" are issued. Nevertheless, no plan is ever perfect! And things rarely, if ever, unfold according to plan for the reasons explained in the article.

Nevertheless, once the final decision is made and the "Order" given, a subordinate commander is faced with one of two options: carry out the Order, or refuse and suffer the consequences - one of which is that someone else will lead your men into battle (and probably get them killed). Because the mission will go ahead, due to the simple fact that it is a small part of something bigger - particularly in a Canadian context usually much bigger! Few, if any, writers or interviewers convey this "fact" of military operations, and military historians perhaps tend to take this understanding for

*continued on page 72...*