

2009

To the Last Canadian?: Casualties in the 21st Army Group

Terry Copp

Wilfrid Laurier University, tcopp@wlu.ca

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



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Copp, Terry "To the Last Canadian?: Casualties in the 21st Army Group." *Canadian Military History* 18, 1 (2009)

This Article 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.

To the Last Canadian?

Casualties in 21st Army Group

Terry Copp

When *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* was assessed before publication the commentators were particularly unhappy with the historiographical summary which challenged the received version of combat effectiveness in Normandy. No one offered serious criticism of the evidence; it was the tone that concerned them. My autobiographical comment about Clausewitz that as “a social historian escaping a world dominated by Marxists I was entitled to be suspicious of yet another 19th century authority figure” was not well received. To follow this with pointed criticism of C.P. Stacey and John A. English not to mention Carlo D’Este and Max Hastings was considered ill-mannered and presumptuous. After publication the book received a number of favourable reviews as well as some sharply critical ones. The focus of these critiques was my rejection of the notions that the German army in Normandy had demonstrated consistent “tactical superiority” and the last paragraph of my conclusion which read:

The Canadian citizen army that fought in the Battle of Normandy played a role all out of proportion to its relative strength among the Allied armies. This was especially true within 21st Army Group where, due to a mixture of Canadian pride, and the British desire to limit their own casualties, Canadian divisions were required to fight more often than their British counterparts.

ABSTRACT: In Normandy, Canadian infantry divisions suffered a higher rate of casualties than British divisions engaged in similar operations. These figures have been used by some historians to prove Canadian failure on the battlefield. However, by using statistics gathered by operational research scientists during the war, this article shows that the “considerably heavier casualties” suffered by the Canadians in Normandy and beyond were the product of a greater number of days in close combat with the enemy, not evidence of operational inexperience or tactical failure.

The oft-quoted statistics, which show that the Canadians suffered considerably heavier casualties than other divisions in 21 Army Group, are the product of a greater number of days in close combat with the enemy, not evidence of operational or tactical failure. Perhaps it is time to recognize the extraordinary achievements that marked the progress of the Canadians across Normandy’s fields of fire.¹

I wish to provide in this paper a detailed analysis of casualties in 21st Army Group which will substantiate the argument made in *Fields of Fire*. Before I take you through the hard evidence I want to offer a brief history of the formation of both the combat effectiveness and casualty rate hypotheses.

A number of years ago my longtime friend Jack Granatstein provided readers of the *Toronto Star* with an account of what he called the left-wing takeover of social

labour history in Canada. The article, title “No Hostages taken in war between historians” noted that Terry Copp “left the field in disgust after full-fledged assaults from Marxist historians.” All of this came as a surprise to me. I was unaware of any full-fledged assaults though I did recall that two of the leading leftists, Greg Kealey and Brian Palmer, had called me a “corporate liberal.” At the time I had taken this as evidence that they had actually read and understood *The Anatomy of Poverty* and recognized my centrist, income-redistribution bias.

While work on industrial unionism in the 1940s was interesting to me, the truth is that the purpose had been to lay the foundation for a sequel to *The Anatomy of Poverty* examining the prosperity of the 1940s and 1950s. Success stories about capitalism were not a popular subject among academics in the 1970s so I was open to the suggestion that with a sabbatical coming up I should consider a project with my friend and mentor Robert Vogel, a military historian at McGill University. One attraction was exchanging time in labour archives in places like Hull, Detroit and New Jersey, for France, Belgium and Holland. In the spring of 1981 my wife and I made our first visit to the Second World War battlefields. Experience as an officer cadet in the Canadian Officers’ Training Corps during my undergraduate years had given me an unfashionable but very real respect

for the Canadian army but I had not read much military history. I decided to go and see the battlefields before I began to write about them. At the time, Bob Vogel and I were focused on the battle for the approaches to Antwerp and despite constant rain my wife and I spent a week walking the ground. I defy anyone with an open mind who visits the Leopold Canal or Woensdrecht ridge to come away without developing a profound respect for the men who fought to overcome their enemy in such terrain. The ground, as my students have heard me say so often, must be the military historians' basic primary source. When I learned from military historians that the attacker was supposed to have at least 3:1 odds to overcome the defender and calculated that in the Scheldt, the ratio was seldom better than 1.5:1 my skepticism about German combat effectiveness versus Canadian inexperience became the

basis of a research question which I have argued in a number of books and articles. A second research question, the one we are focusing on today, also developed out of my interest in the battles in the Scheldt Estuary.

My uncle Douglas "Paddy" Copp, who had served as a company sergeant-major in the British 52nd Lowland Division, had a number of stories about his wartime experience including strong views about the Canadians he had met in Holland. He thought they were undisciplined, dirty, tough, accomplished soldiers who were, by late October 1944, in very rough shape. He could not understand why his full-strength, highly trained division had sat out the war in Scotland and was even at this late date used so sparingly in the struggle to open Antwerp. In *Cinderella Army* I sketched the tension between the Canadians and Scots which my uncle described and

archival sources confirmed. I was able to establish that after 52nd Division's role in the deception operation "Fortitude North," an attack on Norway, ended, and its second role as an air transportable division was discarded with the failure at Arnhem, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke wanted to save the division for the Far East. In fact, in October 1944 Brooke also asked Montgomery to return 3rd British Infantry Division, a regular division, to the UK for use in Burma. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery persuaded him to leave 3rd Division and send 52nd to the continent, but the Far East, the Mediterranean and post-war occupation issues loomed large in Churchill and Brooke's calculations.²

When I read this exchange in the Alanbrooke Papers some of my innocence about British war-time goals disappeared but it was not until much later when I was trying to get background on Operation

Canadian casualties in Normandy along the road to Bretteville-sur-Laize, 9 August 1944.





The Canadian War Cemetery at Beny-sur-Mer, France. This cemetery contains the bodies of over 2,000 Canadians who were killed in on D-Day and in the battles which lead to the capture of Caen in early July 1944.

“Wallstreet,” the plan to cross the Rhine at Arnhem in February 1945 that I began to wonder if a pattern was emerging.³ General G.H. Macmillan, the commander of 49th West Riding Division, had developed “Wallstreet,” and convinced Simonds of its merits but Montgomery was not interested. My interviews, especially with Brigadier Trevor Hart Dyke, a former battalion commander in 49th Division, suggested that the officers of 49th Division could not understand why they spent most of the war holding quieter sections of the line or conforming to the advance of other formations during offensive action.⁴

Further research in British sources indicated that in Normandy the 53rd Welsh Division played a holding role except for a very brief period in August. Other British divisions also experienced prolonged stretches of relative inactivity, at least in contrast to the Canadian experience. During the struggle to close the Falaise and Trun-Chambois gap, British divisions, in a position to intervene decisively, were ordered to keep out of the messy business of trapping a German army so that they could concentrate on preparation for the advance to the Seine and the Rhine.⁵

This kind of evidence is what led me to argue that the “considerably heavier casualties” suffered by the

Canadians in Normandy and beyond were the product of a greater number of days in close combat with the enemy, not evidence of operational inexperience or tactical failure. Now thanks to Army Operational Research Group Report 21/54 “Battle Wastage Rates of Personnel in War,” I am able to fully document this contention. The report, from the Ronnie Shephard Operational Research Archives at the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, will be published in full in the near future with an appropriate introduction.⁶

The Army Operational Research Group produced their study in 1946 to provide “a reliable means of forecasting battle and non-battle

Intense Combat Days and Casualties, by Infantry Division 6 June to 30 September 1944

wastage under varying military conditions." During the war both the British and Canadian armies had used tables of wastage rates developed by Major-General Evett who in turn had created wastage table based on Great War experience. These tables expressed "wastage as a percentage of strength lost per thirty days of activity at Intense, Normal, and Quiet levels." Intense rates were defined as "at least one battalion engaged in full scale defensive or offensive fighting."⁷ I have used these criteria to add the data on Canadian casualties suffered under "intense" conditions.

Our concern today is with the data on infantry division casualties in Northwest Europe which Field Marshal Montgomery had drawn attention to in his *Memoirs*. Montgomery's table of "Cumulative Casualties by Divisions, 6 June to 1 October 1944," revealed that "3rd Canadian Infantry Division had more casualties than any other division in the army group and the 2nd Canadian Division was next."⁸ C.P. Stacey who presented this information in the context of his criticism of the performance of Canadian formations did not consider evidence about the number of days divisions spent in intense combat and his views have continued to influence historians.⁹ Table 1 contains information that might be of interest.

The operational research group recognized that British divisions were not committed to many significant offensive or defensive operations between 1 October and 30 December 1944 so they combined the three month period into a single table. The 43rd Division with seven days of intense combat was the most heavily committed with 3rd British at five days second. Table 2 compares the British and Canadian experience for those three months.

The data presented today is incomplete, particularly with regard to casualty rates under "normal"

Division	Days in Intense Combat					Total Casualties	Casualties per Day
	June	July	Aug	Sept	Total		
3rd	7	8	6	1	22	7,342	333
15th	7	6	6	8	27	7,601	281
43rd	2	10	8	4	24	7,605	316
49th	5	0	1	2	8	5,894	736
50th	8	4	3	0	15	6,701	446
51st	5	3	8	2	18	4,799	266
53rd	0	0	5	5	10	4,984	498
3rd Cdn	6	7	8	10	31	9,263	298
2nd Cdn	0	8	15	7	30	8,211	273

Table 2
Intense Combat Days & Casualties
1 October to 31 December 1944

	Days	Casualties
Ten British Divisions	25	12,528
Three Canadian Divisions	54	10,097

conditions. In July and August 1944, especially during what I have termed the stalemate, casualties suffered while in "normal" contact with the enemy, without significant offensive or defensive actions, accounted for 30 percent of all casualties. There are other limitations including the exclusion of exhaustion casualties from the totals but I think there is enough evidence to substantiate my statement that casualties are closely related to the number of days spent in close combat and to explain why I continue to argue that the heavier casualties suffered by Canadian divisions in 1944 are the result of a greater number of days in close combat with the enemy, not evidence of operational or tactical failure.

Notes

This is a revised text of Terry Copp's presentation to the 19th Military History Colloquium at University of Waterloo, May 2008.

1. Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.267.

2. Lord Alanbrooke Papers, Liddell Hart Archives, correspondence with Montgomery, September-October 1945.
3. The background to Operation Wallstreet is sketched in Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadian Army in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp.213-214.
4. Interview notes, Terry Copp with Brigadier Trevor Hart Dyke, Sheffield, England, July 1986.
5. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p.265.
6. The report may also be found in the The National Archives (Public Record Office), WO 291/1482.
7. I have used the definition of intense combat employed by the OR team eliminating any days of combat which fell just short of the criteria.
8. Bernard Law Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery* (New York: Signet, 1959), p.277.
9. C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: National Defence, 1960), p.271.

Terry Copp is director of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies and professor emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University. He is the author or co-author of 14 books and many articles on the Canadian role in the Second World War including travel guides to the Canadian battlefields. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (University of Toronto Press), won the 2004 Distinguished Book Award for non-US history from the American Society for Military History.