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Canada

Articles

CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM MUSÉE CANADIEN DE LA GUERRE

Features

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From the Editor-in-Chief

Regular readers of this journal may be aware that our managing editor, Mike Bechthold, is an authority on Canadian operations in Normandy in 1944. In the present issue, Mike steps forward from his large "back of house" role to present new insights into the destruction of "Worthington Force," comprised of tanks of the British Columbia Regiment and infantry from the Algonquin Regiment, on 9 August 1944 during the Canadian offensive Operation Totalize. Mike's first breakthrough came from aerial reconnaissance photographs, preserved in the archives of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies. His analysis of the photographs, reproduced in the article, showed that they provided fresh information about how the force made a navigation error in a night movement, and became isolated from support.

Grant Barry, who recently finished his Master of Arts in History at the University of New Brunswick, also brings new information and analysis to bear on a well-known Canadian battle of the Second World War, in this case, the 1st Canadian Infantry Division's hard fought assault on Agira, in Sicily, on 24-8 July 1943, scarcely two weeks after the division landed in Operation Husky. Grant shows that the Axis forces were stronger than previously known, and, from the beginning, suffered heavier losses from the Canadian thrusts. This puts new light on earlier accounts that suggested the Canadians' inexperience was the main reason for their initially slow advance.

Inadequate coverage of the Canadian forces in published histories of the Second World War did much to inspire the fresh research that began in the early 1980s. Certainly there are other large lacunae in campaigns in which Canadians took a prominent part, notably including the suffering under massive Allied bombardments of French civilians in Normandy. Professor Stephen Bourque of the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, explored these tragic events in his moving keynote address for the 21st Military History Colloquium held at Wilfrid Laurier University 29 April-1 May this year. We are delighted that Professor Bourque has allowed us to publish his full text.

This issue features another contribution to the Laurier Centre's work by an international scholar. Hew Strachan, Chicele Professor of the History of War at the University of Oxford, provided the foreword to *Germany's Western Front: Translations from the German Official History of the Great War, 1915*, edited by Mark Humphries and John Maker, and published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press on behalf of the centre. Professor Strachan went well beyond the call of duty. This masterful survey of First World War historiography includes rich detail on the German official history program, and pointed comments about how this important work has been far too little used by English-speaking scholars. We are endeavouring to make these insights available to as wide a readership as possible by reprinting the foreword.

In the Canadian War Museum section, Suzanne Evans has provided another of the studies of Canadian women and war that she is undertaking as a research fellow. Her "History of the Silver Cross Medal" appeared in the previous issue. In the present number she explores the work of women as physiotherapists for the rehabilitation of wounded personnel in both world wars. This is a striking example of women practitioners responding to the haphazard (and not infrequently sexist) arrangements of the First World War by establishing professional education and standards, and a professional organization, the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, which played a key part in providing qualified practitioners to the armed forces medical services in the Second World War.

Andrew Burtch, the museum historian who specializes in the post-1945 era and a regular contributor to the journal, delivers the good news that work is now well underway on the section of the permanent galleries that commemorates Canada's longest peacekeeping mission, in Cyprus, 1964-1993. This is one of the mercifully few "experiential" features that could not be installed for the new museum building's opening in 2005 because of strains on the budget. One of the keys to the success of the Vimy Place building project was the very tight control of both money and human resources, and the establishment of long-term plans. This good news is evidence that these excellent management practices are still serving the museum, and its public, well indeed. Andrew provides a preview of the story line and artifacts of the new feature.

How much of a tale can a single button embody? Collections manager Arlene Doucette traces the provenance of a German uniform button taken as a trophy at the Canadian Expeditionary Forces' first major battle, Second Ypres in 1915. Evidently the troops presented it to David Watson, then commanding officer of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion; later he became the general officer commanding 4th Canadian Division. Through fascinating personal connections the button passed to Raymond Massey, a veteran of the CEF and subsequently a prominent actor in television, film and on Broadway, and brother of

Vincent Massey, the first Canadian born governor-general. Younger readers may not be aware of the burst of Canadian nationalist pride in the early 1960s when Raymond Massey played Dr. Leonard Gillespie, the boss and mentor of the young Dr. James Kildare (Richard Chamberlain) in the wildly popular US television series "Dr. Kildare." Raymond Massey always celebrated his Canadian roots, and it was fitting that his estate donated the button to the museum.

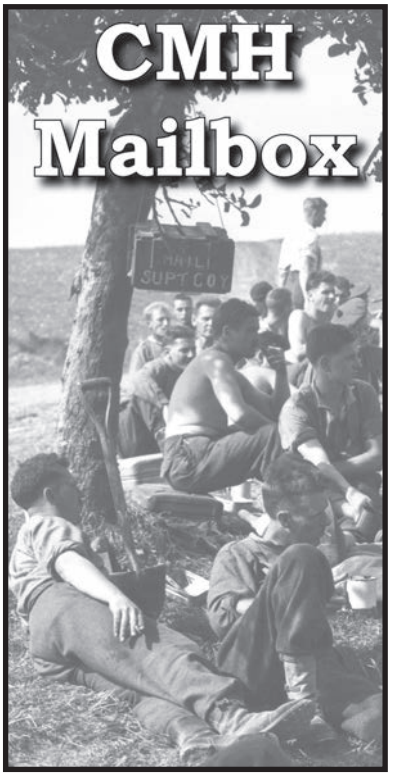
Roger Sarty
May 2010

Dear Sir,

I read with interest Matthew Walthert's article "Neglected Victory: The Canadian Corps at Hill 70" in Volume 19, Number 1, Winter 2010. I believe he defended his thesis convincingly, that this battle has tended to be overlooked by many First World War historians, who tend to jump from Vimy Ridge to Passchendaele as if nothing much happened in between. I looked almost in vain, however, for the part played by the 11th Brigade, 4th Division on 15 August 1917. Finally, on page 32 at the bottom of the second paragraph, I found, "Although the 4th Division had made a feint towards the city [Lens] on the 15th, the ultimate goal of the battle was still to drive the Germans out of the city. To do this, the 6th, 10th, and 11th Brigades planned a series of attacks into Lens from 21-25 August." I would like to tell your readers more about "the feint."

On 10 August 1917, the 11th Brigade, led by the 87th Battalion on the left and the 75th Battalion on the right occupied the front-line trenches in front of the area shown on the map on page 27 through which the 46th Battalion attacked on the 21st. As you can see the 46th did advance the line about 300 metres, but could get no further. It was into this area that the "feint" was made on 15 August by three companies of the 87th and a similar force of the 75th. As author of *Soldiers of the Queen: The Canadian Grenadier Guards of Montreal, 1859 -2009*, I can only relate with any detail what happened to the 87th Battalion (Canadian Grenadier Guards) on that fateful day.

On 2 August, the 87th had been withdrawn from the Vimy front and after a period of training moved to an area in front of Lens by 10 August. There it engaged in aggressive patrolling in preparation for the raid on 15 August, and finding the Germans to be holding it considerable strength. At 0825 hours, the three companies of the 87th went "over the top." After an initial advance, the attack slowed down due to uncut wire and stiff German resistance. On the right flank, the 75th had even more difficulty in moving forward, and left the leading companies of the 87th open to a German counterattack from the flank. Nearly 200 men were soon in danger of being cut-off and surrounded. Only the heroic actions of individuals and small groups allowed the Battalion to retire without losing a whole company. Even so, the toll was very heavy: 4 officers, 1 company sergeant-major, 9 sergeants, 8 corporals, and 78 privates were killed; and 3 officers (1 a POW) and 131 men were wounded.



Two amazing stories came out of the abortive raid. Lieutenant S.S. McLean and his batman, Private J.W. Ebbs, were imprisoned in a cellar of a house occupied by Germans for six days and nights. Ebbs had dragged McLean, who had been wounded, into the deepest part of the cellar and managed to keep him hidden. They were rescued by men of the 46th Battalion during its attack on 21 August. Their story was picked up by Lord Beaverbrook, who was in charge of publicity for the Canadian Corps, and published for all to read. A Private Black, who was wounded in the leg so severely he could not walk, lay in a shell hole for six days until he, too, was rescued by men of the 46th Battalion. He related to the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J.V.P. O'Donahoe, DSO, that German soldiers made no effort to help him or even to give him a drink of water, but robbed him of his valuables. Black eventually lost his leg, but survived the war.

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

Maggie Arbour-Doucette, Cheryl Beaupré, Robert Davison, Bill Diamond, Geoff Keelan, Kellen Kurschinski, Keith Maxwell, Vanessa McMackin, Kathryn Rose, Susan Ross, Matt Symes, Andrew Thomson, Jane Whalen.

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In an after-action report by Major I.S. Ralston [He joined his brother's 85th Battalion as second-in-command in June 1918 and was killed on 10 August. Lieutenant-Colonel J. S. Ralston became Canada's minister of national defence during part of the Second World War.] found a number of reasons for the heavy losses with no real gains during the raid on 15 August:

1. It was the first time the troops had fought in a built-up area and they found it difficult to locate snipers and machine gun nests in the rubble and remains of houses;
2. The barrage was too weak and moved too fast for the men trying to move through uncut wire and streets filled with debris;
3. The plan was based on low German resistance but the opposite was found;
4. The area attacked was too great for the artillery fire allocated;
5. There were insufficient troops to get supplies forward;
6. There was no good trench system to fall back on nor communication trenches below ground level.

Perhaps the senior officers at Corps thought that by delaying the raid on the 15th by four hours after the assault began on Hill 70, the Germans would keep troops in Lens rather than supporting their units on Hill 70. Within those four hours the Germans would know that the Canadians had attacked Hill 70 with only two divisions, and perhaps they wonder what the other two Canadian divisions were going to do. Would there be a full-scale attack on Lens? Keeping German troops in Lens helped the attack on Hill 70, but it ensured that the minor attack, "the "feint," by the 87th and 75th Battalions would be dealt with severely. For the 87th the number of casualties on 15 August was only exceeded on four occasions during its 27 months in France: Regina Trench, November 1916; Vimy, April 1917; Arras, September 1918; and Canal du Nord, September 1918. The "feint" was a very costly one for the 87th Battalion: 234 casualties for no gain.

Subsequent attacks by the 6th and 10th Brigades from 21 to 25 August proved the validity of Ralston's analysis. Fighting in built-up areas was difficult and required special training. Even then, it was very costly in men, as demonstrated at Monte Cassino and Ortona in Italy and at Stalingrad in Russia in the Second World War. Hill 70 was a brilliant victory, the fighting in Lens, which cost more in casualties, accomplished very little. The Germans continued to hold Lens until near the end of the war.

Sincerely,
BGen William J. Patterson, OMM, CD
Kingston, ON