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The Top 10 War Films

Tim Cook

I saw Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981) when I was ten years old. I've watched it several times since, so my memories have no doubt blurred into one another, but the final sequence of the film has imprinted itself upon me. While the film meanders through the Australian outback and the brothels of Cairo, it is the 1915 Gallipoli campaign where the shattering climax is reached. The fighting is intense, bewildering, and ugly. Flies cover the food; the rocky terrain seems impassable; death comes to swimmers frolicking in the water, seemingly safe from the enemy. Yet the focus of the film is on the hopeless attack by the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at the Nek on 7 August 1915. As a 10-year-old, I remember watching with body-straightening tension as the Australians charged into the mouth of the waiting Turkish guns, and as new waves lined up to follow their doomed comrades. The light horsemen of subsequent waves know their likely fate, and so they write last letters, remove personal effects, share cigarettes, and say goodbye. Even as I write this thirty years later, I can feel my pre-teen self, squirming in his seat. Surely the attack would be called off. Surely the runner, played by Mel Gibson, will beat the clock and convince the high command of the futility of ordering another wave over the top. He of course does not. His best mate and all his friends go over the sandbags and are shot down. I

remember leaving the theatre, asking my parents how the attack could be carried out and why the soldiers had followed the suicidal orders? I don't remember their answers, although I suspect they too were at a loss for explaining such actions. It would be a rewriting of my own personal history to suggest that I became interested in the Great War at that moment, but it certainly lodged in my head. Film has the power to do that to us. It can shake us to the core.

And war films can be even more powerful, as life and death, heroism and horror, courage and carnage are projected at us. But what is a war film? Is a war film different than a combat film, and how do these compare to films set on the home front or those that deal with the veterans' experience in the aftermath of conflict? How important are character, plot, and accuracy in a war film, or are these films simply entertainment? *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930 or 1979), usually classified as antiwar, have much to tell us about war. These films are usually shaped by an ideological or moral predisposition or orientation, but so too are the hyper-patriotic films. Can either genre be ignored? Are there dispassionate glimpses of war? War is serious, deadly business. Men and women are killed and maimed, driven mad and dislocated from their societies. Can a

war film be humorous? Do films like *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *Oh, What a Lovely War* (1969), or *Private Benjamin* (1980) have something to tell us about the human condition in war?

From epics to indies, and everything in between, there are thousands of war films. Most are forgettable, clichéd, lamentable, but some touch us deeply, opening up new insights, shaking our convictions, stunning us with their brutality. The ten historians were asked to cast the net widely and include any film from any time period and any language that elucidates the experience of war and its myriad effects upon societies and individuals. The only caveat was that they do not include science-fiction movies that might touch on war – for example, the *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* series or, one of my favourites, *Starship Troopers*. The historians were encouraged to select films that mattered to them. These lists are deeply personal, but each historian has offered some justification as to why a film was selected. The selected films are arbitrarily listed to some degree, yet there is a first choice and perhaps the close second, the middle films, and that last film that edged its way on to the list, even as other powerful films were left off.

Most of us will never be in a war. Yet we live it vicariously through the writings and memoirs of the participants; we view or study

art, photographs, and documentary footage; we talk to veterans and hear their stories; we pick through the archives of the nation. But we also turn readily to fiction, in the form of novels, plays, and of course films. The latter reaches the largest audience, throws images and stories at us, even as we are entertained and engrossed. The best films shed light on the hidden history of war. The spectacle of battle is revealed in all its gruesome glory. The human

element in war: fear, love, exhaustion, fury, brutality, and sacrifice are presented in their rawest form. But in the end, I am left wondering if war films tell it like it is, like it was, or how we imagine it.

Dr. Tim Cook is the author of several books, including *The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie* (Allen Lane, 2010).



Mike Bechthold

Mike Bechthold is the managing editor of *Canadian Military History* and the communications director of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies. He teaches military history at Wilfrid Laurier University and has published many articles on the First and Second World War. He is the co-editor of a collection of essays on the Battle of Vimy Ridge entitled, *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian*

Reassessment (WLU Press, 2007).

Nothing starts a conversation among military historians like asking the question, "So, what's your favourite war film?" In short order, the discussion turns into a critique about how bad, or how unrealistic the history/weapons/tactics are portrayed! For that reason, my list is not based on anything other than movies that I enjoy watching. They are war movies with good plots, great action and perhaps most important, movies that I watch again and again.

As far as I am concerned, it doesn't get any better than *Kelly's Heroes*. How can you not like a movie about a bank heist behind German lines using Sherman tanks with a cast that includes Clint Eastwood, Donald Sutherland (as a hippie tank commander), Telly Savalas and Don Rickles. *Zulu* is another of my favourites. This "against all odds" movie brings the story of Rorke's Drift alive. I first saw this movie during my summer as a guardsman at Fort Henry and watching the movie reminds me of one of my best summer jobs. Other notable mentions are *The Big Red One* (with Lee Marvin and Luke Skywalker, sorry, Mark Hamill) which follows the story of a snake-bit grizzled old sergeant through North Africa, Sicily and Normandy; *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* (*Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* also fit into the category, but they are not movies, per se) for the sense of realism that the latest generation of Hollywood films depict; and classics like *Platoon*, *The Longest Day* and *A Bridge Too Far*. *Memphis Belle* (*Top Gun* was close) makes the list because I am an air power historian at heart and have to have an aviation movie in my list!

10. *Memphis Belle* (1990)
9. *The Longest Day* (1962)
8. *A Bridge Too Far* (1977)
7. *Das Boot* (1981)
6. *Platoon* (1986)
5. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)
4. *Black Hawk Down* (2001)
3. *The Big Red One* (1980)
2. *Zulu* (1964)
1. *Kelly's Heroes* (1970)



Aleksandra Bennett

Dr. Aleksandra Bennett is an associate professor in the Department of History at Carleton University. She recently edited a collection of letters entitled *Kiss the kids for dad, Don't forget to write: the Wartime Letters of George Timmins, 1916-18*, (UBC Press, 2009). Timmins, a lance-corporal, served with the CEF at Vimy, Lens, Passchendaele and Amiens.

Growing up in post-war Britain, I was exposed to many fine war films made during the Second World War or shortly thereafter. These I often watched with my family on a small black and white TV, on Sunday afternoons. Grandad lived with us at the end of his life. He had served in "German East," as he called it, during the First World War, hence my selection of *The African Queen*. George Formby, the Lancashire comedian, was a favourite of Grandad's; in *Let George Do It*, Formby famously "clocks" Hitler. Although Dad served in the Royal Berkshire Regiment, he was avidly "airminded": we didn't miss a film featuring aircraft, including *First of the Few*, *Dam Busters* and *Reach for the Sky*. *Mrs. Miniver* and the *Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* were also well loved. *Went the Day Well?* featuring "Fifth Columnists" and a German invasion of an English village, chilled. But my top films are two that I have only seen in recent years. Andrzej Wajda's *Katyn* depicts Stalin's wartime

massacre of thousands of Polish officers, which my Polish grandfather miraculously avoided. Wajda's *Kanal* (Sewer), a classic of the Polish cinema, is about the Warsaw Rising which began on 1 August 1944 and lasted for sixty three days. My mother, aunt and uncle all took part. Responsible for aiding the wounded, Mum (eighteen at the time and a member of Battalion "Gustaw") was among the last to withdraw through the sewers from Warsaw's Old Town. No one left after them.

10. **Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943)**
9. **Mrs. Miniver (1942)**
8. **Let George Do It (1940)**
7. **Went the Day Well? (1942)**
6. **African Queen (1951)**
5. **Reach for the Sky (1956)**
4. **Dam Busters (1955)**
3. **First of the Few (1942)**
2. **Katyn (2007)**
1. **Kanal (1956)**



Jane Boulden

Dr. Jane Boulden is associate chair of war studies and Canada Research Chair in international relations and security studies at the Royal Military College of Canada.

A number of the films on this list would not qualify as war films in the traditional sense. As an international relations scholar and someone whose political consciousness developed in the shadow of the Cold War and Vietnam, my own sense of "war" is wide ranging. For many, for example, the inclusion of Costa Gravas' film *Missing* will seem an aberration. Set in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 coup in Chile it offers an evocative depiction of how quickly and effectively the state can become the enemy, both for local Chileans and for the two Americans whose eventual realization of their own government's involvement forms the central theme.

The Deerhunter is representative of a group of Vietnam films that include *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, which together are symbolic of a gradual re-conceptualization of the Vietnam War. Brutally honest, violent, dark, they are also an attempt to bring to light the realities of a war that was cloaked in what we now call "spin" and secrecy. Similarly, *The Killing Fields* is important both for the story it tells – virtually unnoticed in the "West" while it was

occurring – and for its link to the Vietnam experience. We are now seeing films increasingly taking on the Iraq experience. I include *In the Valley of Elah* because I think it demonstrates that war is not just about the act itself and those who die but also the aftermath for those who come home.

Dr. Strangelove wins for me on every count. Brilliantly wrought, the film is so satirically and stereotypically driven as to be almost over the top. And yet, it isn't. The characters and plot hone in so effectively on the human and technological dilemmas of the nuclear age that it verges on tragic. As with all good comedy and tragedy, the division between the two is a very fine line. The Cold War has come and gone, but we are far from adequately addressing the underlying dilemmas of the nuclear age.

10. **In the Valley of Elah (2007)**
9. **Bloody Sunday (2002)**
8. **La chambre des officiers (2001)**
7. **The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957)**
6. **Missing (1982)**
5. **The Killing Fields (1984)**
4. **The Longest Day (1962)**
3. **Deerhunter (1978)**
2. **Gallipoli (1981)**
1. **Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)**



Pat Brennan

Dr. Pat Brennan is an associate professor in the University of Calgary's Department of History as well as a fellow of the University's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, where he directs the graduate program. Brennan is the author of various articles and chapters dealing with the operations and leadership of the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the Great War. He is currently working on histories of the King's Own Calgary Regiment and 44th Overseas Battalion as well as a comprehensive study of the senior officers of the Canadian Corps who served under Byng and Currie.

As a military historian judging war movies, it's easy to get frustrated with the historical inaccuracies or lament the "needless" love interest, while losing sight of what film can actually say about war. One way I judge a war movie is by how effectively it gets inside the head and heart of the warrior, of how individuals shape and are shaped by war. Another is assessing how the movie frames – and hopefully challenges – the audience's perceptions of war. And sometimes "good" war movies tell us as much about the era of their making as the "history" they purport

to describe. Hollywood's original version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* profoundly shaped contemporary attitudes about war, most crucially in the United States, and the characterizations and battle scenes still pass muster. An unvarnished study of the burdens of command, *The Cruel Sea* is a superb character study. Both *Paths of Glory* and *Breaker Morant* speak to injustice and moral ambiguity, while *Die Brücke* probes the power of ideology to corrupt the spirit. For those who remember when the Cold War was frigid, *Fail-Safe* is a chilling account. Where *Platoon* evokes the universal story of the ordinary "grunt," *The Train* reminds us civilians also fight wars and that the individual can matter. The delightful *Hope and Glory* offers us a children's perspective on how life goes on - even in war - not to mention a superb cameo of a Canadian soldier "over there." And *Passchendaele*, despite its lapses, is the best Canadian war movie we're likely to see.

10. **Passchendaele (2008)**
9. **Hope and Glory (1987)**
8. **The Train (1964)**
7. **Breaker Morant (1980)**
6. **Die Brücke (1959)**
5. **Platoon (1986)**
4. **Fail-Safe (1964)**
3. **Paths of Glory (1957)**
2. **The Cruel Sea (1953)**
1. **All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)**



Geoff Hayes

Dr. Geoff Hayes is an associate professor of history at the University of Waterloo. His publications include *The Lincs: A History of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment*; *Waterloo County: An Illustrated History*. He is also the co-editor of *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* and *Afghanistan: Transition Under Threat*. He is a board member of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation and a

veteran of many battlefield tours of Northwest Europe.

My choices of Second World War films divide evenly between those made in various decades after the war and contemporary "propaganda" films. My post-war films may be a rough gauge of how film-goers came to terms with the experience of the war. The dramatic fictional stories of *Bridge on the River Kwai* and *The Guns of Navarone* (the second is my father's favourite) gave way in the 1960s to several different genres. *Tora, Tora, Tora* was a great example of a semi-documentary style that depicted the war from both American and Japanese

perspectives. A friend thinks *A Bridge Too Far* should be called *A Movie Too Long*, but I like its ensemble cast, its eye for detail and the fact that those paratroopers are not computer generated. Yes, the story of *Saving Private Ryan* has something to be desired, but who cannot be shaken after watching those battle sequences? And who wouldn't follow Tom Hanks as Captain John Miller into battle?

Too often wartime films are dismissed out of hand, but they often address important issues that historians should consider more. *Corvette K-225*, *Captains of the Clouds*, and *The 49th Parallel* were treatments of Canada's wartime role that were intended to get the Americans into the war. So was *Mrs. Miniver*, which is a cheesy, but still emotional story of the war's impact on a middle-class English family. It won the Oscar for Best Picture. But my favourite film, *The Way Ahead*, details how a quiet, young lieutenant played by David Niven forms a motley assortment of British conscripts (including Stanley Holloway) into a keen fighting formation. Like Hanks' Captain Miller, Niven's portrayal of Lieutenant Jim Perry is a great leadership study.

10. **Bridge on the River Kwai (1957)**
9. **The Guns of Navarone (1961)**
8. **Tora, Tora, Tora (1970)**
7. **Mrs. Miniver (1942)**
6. **A Bridge Too Far (1977)**
5. **Corvette K-225 (1943)**
4. **Captains of the Clouds (1942)**
3. **The 49th Parallel (1941)**
2. **Saving Private Ryan (1998)**
1. **The Way Ahead (1944)**



Andrew Iarocci

Andrew Iarocci (PhD, Wilfrid Laurier 2005) recently completed a research fellowship at the Canadian War Museum, where he also worked as collections manager, transportation & artillery. He is the author of *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War* (UTP, 2008) and co-editor of *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (WLU, 2007). Iarocci is currently writing a new monograph on mechanization

and logistics in the First World War. He is an instructor in the War Studies program at the Royal Military College of Canada.

This exercise was much more difficult than the top ten book feature in the Autumn 2009 issue of *CMH*, since there are many more war films (on all periods and subjects) than books on Canadian military history. My number one choice, however, was easy. Since first

seeing Terence Malick's adaptation of James Jones' 1962 novel *The Thin Red Line* a dozen years ago, I remain captivated by the portrayal of common soldiers at war, not to mention Hans Zimmer's deeply moving soundtrack. The voice-overs from the various characters and the philosophical exchanges between Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) and First Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn) shed light on the preoccupations of ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances. The film's disjointed narrative suits the drawn-out, agonizing Solomons campaign that is the backdrop for the story.

I will admit that the ranking of my other nine selections is more or less arbitrary – I see great points in each of these films. *A Bridge Too Far* does a fair job of sketching out a highly complex series of operations in a mere 175 minutes, without seriously overplaying the usual stereotypes of Operation Market Garden. *Kelly's Heroes* is simply a classic piece of satire, with one-liners that are popular to this day. ("Sixty feet of bridge I can pick up almost anywhere...") Compelling satire and cynicism of different hues are found in more recent pictures such as *Buffalo Soldiers* (Ed Harris' portrayal of Colonel "Iron Boar" Berman is first-rate) and *Jarhead*.

A few of these selections run high on raw emotion, bridging a wide gulf between futility and moral corruption on one hand (*Downfall* and *Intimate Enemies*) and hope and redemption on the other (*Glory*). Finally, where else can a war film connoisseur find an English-language depiction of an Irishman serving in the Prussian and the Franco-Austrian forces during the Third Silesian (Seven Years') War, other than Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*?

10. **In the Valley of Elah (2007)**
9. **Downfall (*Der Untergang*) (2004)**
8. **Barry Lyndon (1975)**
7. **Intimate Enemies (*L'ennemi intime*) (2007)**
6. **Glory (1989)**
5. **A Bridge Too Far (1977)**
4. **Jarhead (2005)**
3. **Kelly's Heroes (1970)**
2. **Buffalo Soldiers (2001)**
1. **The Thin Red Line (1998)**



Craig Leslie Mantle

Craig Leslie Mantle graduated from Queen's University with his M.A. in Canadian history in 2002 and has been employed by the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute as an historical research officer ever since. He is also a Ph.D. candidate under the supervision of Dr. David Bercuson at the University of

Calgary where he is currently studying officer-man relations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War. He has authored, edited or co-edited seven Canadian Defence Academy Press books dealing with such diverse topics as disobedience in the military, small-unit leadership during the South African War, trust, and the participation of Aboriginal peoples in both Canadian and international military forces.

As works of art, films have the potential (not always realized) to capture elements of the human condition, to provide commentary on human activity, and to illuminate aspects of the human psyche. In their own distinctive fashion, and through some very memorable scenes and characters, the vast majority of the selected titles delve into the complexity of war and, seemingly, consider entertainment a secondary purpose. Unlike one-dimensional films with a simple plot, minimal character development and lots of not-so-real battles, most of these pictures repeatedly offer insight into "the mind of the soldier," in the process explaining and contextualizing both actions and emotions. Whether entirely fictitious or inspired by historical events, the value of these films lies in their capacity to force the viewer to reflect on the issues that have been raised on screen. Most of the selected titles have leadership as their central premise. Timeless leadership dilemmas, such as the requirement to balance the lives of subordinates with the imperative of mission success, are often considered. As well, interpersonal power dynamics, like the ultimate result of various leadership styles, naturally find constant expression. The remaining titles are, more or less, "antiwar." Such films, interestingly, sometimes reveal more about the true nature of war and its effect on both willing and unwilling participants than pictures that are produced for that express purpose. Of course, "antiwar" films also tend to reveal much about leadership as well; the two themes are not always mutually exclusive. Like other genres, war films certainly span the gamut from good to bad, yet the selected titles all offer something more than a mere two hours of diversionary activity.

10. **Jarhead (1995)**
9. **The Trench (1999)**
8. **Masada (1981)**
7. **Paths of Glory (1957)**
6. **All Quiet on the Western Front (1979)**
5. **Schindler's List (1993)**
4. **Command Decision (1948)**
3. **Twelve O'Clock High (1949)**
2. **All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)**
1. **The Hill (1965)**



Jean Martin

Dr. Jean Martin is an historian at the Directorate of History and Heritage of the Department of National Defence. His main research project is the official history of the Canadian participation in UNEF 1 (1956-1967), but he is also interested, among other things, in the Canadian home front in the Second World War and Canadian military geography. He has also assembled in the past 30 years

quite an eclectic collection of several hundred films.

There are many good, and even more bad, war movies. I have waited some time to let my mind rest on the few dozen titles I had quickly identified, to see if others would come up and how I could possibly rank them from 1 to 10. I finally decided that it was objectively impossible to draw this list of only the ten best war movies. My list therefore contains a selection of the ten movies which I would readily recommend to anyone interested in a good war-related story. Some of them may not even be considered true war movies, one is not a big-screen movie but rather a television series (*Peacekeepers*), but they are all set in a context of war, and I would gladly watch them all again.

There are four Hollywood productions, three British films and one British television series, two French cinema and a Czech movie. The First (4) and Second World Wars (3) account for a total of seven titles, but the three other movies deal with the Hundred Years War (no.8), the 1990s war in the Balkans (no.6) and even with the Cold War (no.9). *Fail-Safe*, though a fictional story, might be the most vivid depiction of how we envisioned the Cold War.

Numbers 1 and 2 in my list contain some of the most spectacular scenes of aerial combat I have ever seen, involving First World War biplanes in the former and mostly Spitfires in the latter. War is much more than fighting, and there are very few, if any, combat scenes in some of the other movies. Yet they all dramatically demonstrate how war deeply affects the life of every military and civilian individual. Had I been allowed to extend this list to 20 titles, *The Longest Day* (1962) was next in line, with *Cross of Iron* (1977) and *49th Parallel* (1941) following closely. And I would have been seriously tempted to include a highly educational series like *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989).

10. **The Young Lions (1958)**
9. **Fail-Safe (1964)**
8. **Henry V (1989)**
7. **Paths of Glory (1957)**

6. **Peacekeepers (North American title; originally known as Warriors) (1999)**
5. **The Hill (1965)**
4. **Noirs et Blancs en couleur (1976)**
3. **Un long dimanche de fiançailles (2004)**
2. **A Dark Blue World (*Tmavomodrý svet*) (2001)**
1. **Wings (1927)**



Dean F. Oliver

Dr. Dean F. Oliver is director of research and exhibitions at the Canadian War Museum and co-author, with J.L. Granatstein, of the forthcoming *Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History*. In early 2010, the Queen of the Netherlands made him a knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau for his contributions to military history.

The best war movies are neither pure propaganda nor rancid polemic. They aren't funny either, or cleverly satirical. Epics in scale (*Waterloo*), intensity (*Das Boot*), or creativity (*Henry V*), they set character against circumstance to entertain, inspire, or inform. They treat serious subjects seriously. They leave history plausibly intact. War itself has a starring role, not a cameo amidst love-struck barflies (think *Casablanca*) or angst-ridden philosophers. They tell stories that matter. They remind us of the better angels of our nature, and terrify us with the stark evidence of our ceaseless cruelty.

A compelling tale (Vietnam, Napoleon) is axiomatic, and a peerless writer (Shakespeare, Tolstoy) hardly hurts. But a director of vision and technical genius is the essential ingredient – to distil, shock, challenge, re-imagine. Such productions can be dangerously iconic, like Kubrick on military training or Milestone on the Western front. Good actors, well coached, are mesmerizing: George C. Scott *is* Patton; James Coburn (*Cross of Iron*), a grizzled German NCO. Size matters too, and cheap extras: computer-generated graphics will never surpass Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* or Borodino (*War and Peace*).

The best war movies are feasts for eye, mind, and heart alike. *Saving Private Ryan* is the archetype: sumptuous, riveting, unforgettable – a violent cornucopia of sight and sound as much spectacle as story. Its combat sequences are works of art. Its characters are credible, the sets lavish, the plot – pure treacle – deliciously addictive. It had social impact, connecting veterans to civilians, young to old.

Other films have done some things better; none have done so many so breathtakingly well.

10. **War and Peace (1965-1966)**
9. **A Bridge Too Far (1977)**
8. **Cross of Iron (1977)**
7. **Patton (1970)**
6. **All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)**
5. **Waterloo (1970)**
4. **Henry V (1944)**
3. **Das Boot (1981)**
2. **Full Metal Jacket (1987)**
1. **Saving Private Ryan (1998)**



Lee Windsor

Dr. Lee Windsor is deputy director of the Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society at the University of New Brunswick. He specializes in Canadian Army history from the Second World War up to current missions abroad. His prime research area is the 1943-45 Italian campaign and Canada's role in multi-national coalitions. On behalf of the Gregg Centre, he regularly guides groups of

students, soldiers, high school teachers and the general public on study tours to battlefields in Italy, France, Belgium and Holland. In 2007 he accompanied Canada's Task Force 1-07 for part of its time in Afghanistan and was then lead author of *Kandahar Tour: Turning Point in Canada's Afghan Mission*.

My list comes from a passion for all things related to the Second World War in Italy and therefore includes films that maybe considered class "B". Some are cheese-filled or take factual liberties but still cast the spotlight on how the Italian campaign shaped the final

victory. Allied Forces in the Mediterranean were more multi-national than any other theatre, fanning my interest in dual struggles against Nazism and home-grown racism fought by units like the US 442nd (Nisei Japanese) Infantry Regiment portrayed in *Go For Broke*. That explains my defence of Spike Lee's depiction of the 92nd (Negro) US Division and routine German massacres of Italian civilians that are largely unknown in the English-speaking world.

My top two require explanation. At first glance *Von Ryan's Express* is a Hollywood attempt to insert a Wild West train robbery into the Second World War. In fact, the plot runs through the complex period of Italy's 1943 surrender and outbreak of civil war that raged within the chaos of newly freed Allied POWs and the race between German and Allied forces to seize control of Italy. But, the best film available about the war in Italy was released months after it ended. *A Walk in the Sun* is a gritty portrayal of September 1943 where the 36th (Texas) US National Guard Division is strung out across rolling hills covering the flank of Allied landings near Salerno. Battle exhaustion, "mission tactics," and the difficulty of accepting Italy's surrender are all woven into an extraordinary story with fabulous characters.

Kelly's Heroes made it on the list purely for fun. It is a cult favourite among Second World War aficionados and should be viewed with friends and much beer.

10. **The Devil's Brigade (1968)**
9. **Kelly's Heroes (1970)**
8. **Big Red One (1980)**
7. **Go for Broke (1951)**
6. **Miracle of Sant'Anna (2008)**
5. **Glory (1989)**
4. **Patton (1970)**
3. **A Bridge Too Far (1977)**
2. **Von Ryan's Express (1965)**
1. **A Walk in the Sun (1945)**

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CMH Mailbox

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ornithology, or a look through the CWM's holdings of Great War German uniforms and insignia, would have informed her that Imperial German eagles were unicephalous, and that Imperial German soldiers normally wore buttons emblazoned with a crown or, where applicable, the Bavarian lion.

To be sure, two other Empires of the time did use the double-headed eagle: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which while an ally of Germany's, had no troops engaged at 2nd Ypres, and the Russian Empire. As the button illustrated in the article has the symbol of St. George and the Dragon on its breast, it is clearly a Russian button.

I would suspect, therefore, that the button illustrated was acquired by Fellowes or Massey, while in Siberia, and that at some point in the past nine decades a mix-up occurred, where it became associated with the tag of paper saying it was taken at Ypres by David Watson. Could a mislabelled German button allegedly picked up in Siberia still be lurking out there somewhere?

Roger V. Lucy CM MA

Arlene Doucette reponds:

I accept full responsibility for incorrectly identifying the button that was the subject of the article "From Belgium to Broadway" as German, when in fact it is Russian. During the course of my research for this article I became perhaps too invested in researching the fascinating individuals and families involved, at the expense of the artifact itself. We will update the artifact record to reflect this new information.

* * * * *

Dear sir,

I have been reading through Mike Bechthold's thorough and fascinating account of "Lost in Normandy – The Odyssey of Worthington Force, 9 August, 1944" in the Spring 2010 edition of *CMH*. Looking at the photograph on page 14 of

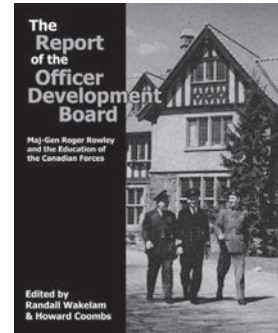
the rectangular wood and final position of Worthington Force I was excited to see that signal panel codes were being used. The use and description of the Signal Codes is covered in the 1944 edition of Field Service Pocket Book (FSPB) series of publications that was published in two parts and runs about 20 pamphlets, 13 in Part I and 6 in Part II. The FSPB series succinctly covers everything Senior Non-Commissioned and Commissioned Officers need to know from such diverse topics as a Glossary of Military Terms in Pamphlet No.1 to Discipline, Office Work, Pay and Burial Parties in Pamphlet No.13.

Pamphlet No.5 in Part I deals with Signal Codes with the contents covering: The Morse Code, The Semaphore Code, The Air Reconnaissance Code, The Ground Indicator Code, The Combined Panel Code and Flag Signals for Infantry Carriers. It is the Ground Indicator Code that is used to identify different formations and the manual states that, "They will be displayed as required, so that they can be read from the direction of the enemy." The code symbols are formed using multiple sets of the luminous reflective aircraft recognition panels that are part of the equipment held on all Allied armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs); and in this case the (white) open square symbols seen in the photograph are the indicators for an Armoured (or Cavalry) Regiment. According to the manual, the square symbol is to be 8 feet, 6 inches along each side and each panel is to be 1 foot, 4 inches wide. The long (white) line is not covered in the manual and it may be the start of another signal such as one of many types of essential battle messages that could be conveyed with this system.

The markers being used in the aerial photograph could be of either US or British origin. As I stated earlier, Allied AFVs carried marker sets in order to convey messages and troop locations to friendly aircraft. The US marker sets that would have been standard issue with the M4 Sherman and other US manufactured armoured vehicles used a diverse range of colours from white and black to luminous red and blue; where as the British tended to use Celonese markers in a greenish/

yellow shade. Potentially, either type of marker system could have been in use by the Canadians at the time Worthington Force was fighting for its existence in August 1944.

Ed Storey
Nepean, Ontario



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