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# Why Did First Canadian Army Not Get the Acclaim of the Canadian Corps?

J. L. GRANATSTEIN

*Abstract: Canada's soldiers in the Second World War did not receive the same acclaim from historians as the Canadian Corps in the Great War. Some of the blame for this rests on official historian C.P. Stacey, but some also rests on the loss of leadership material to the Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Canadian Air Force and on General Harry Crerar who was less of a commander than Sir Arthur Currie. But much also lies with historians who did not look beyond the Normandy fighting to the superb performance of the Canadians in the last nine months of the war.*

THE CANADIAN CORPS of the First World War earned a sterling reputation as one of the very best Allied formations on the Western Front. At Ypres in April 1915, the Canadian Division fought well despite the horrors of the German gas attack. On the Somme the next year the Corps again did well in a grueling, costly battle, securing one of the few significant victories at Courcellette. In 1917 there was Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele, and in 1918 the Canadian Corps' four divisions played an extraordinary role in the Hundred Days that ended the war, a role so distinguished that the name "Canada's Hundred Days" does not seem unjustified. Historians here and abroad are generally agreed on the Canadians' stellar performance, the only carping being that some British and the Australian corps were as good.

But in the Second World War, Canada's soldiers did not receive similar kudos at the time or subsequently from most British and American historians. The Canadian army had only the disasters of Hong Kong and Dieppe to mark the first three years of war, and it was not until the invasion of Sicily in July 1943 that a division and an armoured brigade saw sustained action. Later in the Italian campaign,

the 5th Canadian Armoured Division arrived, and the I Canadian Corps fought very well, but in a theatre that was generally viewed as secondary, certainly so after D-Day and the invasion of France.

From June-July 1944 to V-E Day, the First Canadian Army consisted of the II Canadian Corps made up of the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions, the 4th Armoured Division, and 2nd Armoured Brigade. The Canadians fought their way across Juno beach, through the Norman hedgerows, along the Channel coast, at the terrible fighting for the Scheldt estuary, in the Rhineland, across the Rhine, and in the liberation of the Netherlands.

The record was a proud one, but it has sadly not received its due from non-Canadian scholars. None pay much attention to the Canadian performance from September 1944 to V-E Day, but the historians have faulted the Canadians for their alleged hesitancy in Normandy, in particular their slowness in closing the Falaise Gap in August 1944. British historians labeled the Canadian advance “frustratingly sluggish,” and the American Carlo D’Este regretted “the inability of the Canadians to develop their actions more quickly” and for “failing to make the most of their opportunities.” D’Este even repeated Colonel Charles Stacey’s devastating comment that an early closing of the Gap “might even, conceivably, have enabled us to end the war some months sooner than actually was the case.”<sup>1</sup> And British journalist and historian Max Hastings lamented “the feeble performance of First Canadian Army” in the Norman battles.<sup>2</sup>

Stacey, the Canadian Army’s official historian of the Second World War, acknowledged the problems, blaming the Canadians lack of battle experience and “a proportion of regimental officers whose attitude towards training was casual and haphazard rather than urgent and scientific.” His analysis of the Normandy campaign, Stacey continued, supported this view: “Regimental officers of this type, where they existed, were probably the weakest element in the Army.” Not the generals—“Canadian generalship in Normandy does not suffer by comparison with that of the other Allies engaged.” Not

<sup>1</sup> C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe 1944-1945* Vol. III: *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1960), 276.

<sup>2</sup> E. Belfield and H. Essame, *The Battle for Normandy* (London: Pan, 1983), 283; Carlo D’Este, *Decision in Normandy: The Unwritten Story of Montgomery and the Allied Campaign* (London: Pan, 1984), 457; and Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy, 1944* (London: Pan, 1984), 358.

the ordinary soldiers who, Stacey agreed, fought well. No, the blame lay with “that proportion of officers who were not fully competent for their appointments, and whose inadequacy appeared in action and sometimes had serious consequences.”<sup>3</sup> We do not need to agree with these assessments, but we do need to consider them seriously. Lieutenant-Colonel Jack English was likely the first to argue with Stacey, if not the foreign historians, by blaming the failings of Canadian generals rather than regimental officers for the weaknesses both in training their men and in leading them into battle.<sup>4</sup> Terry Copp came out swinging some years later, pointing to the time in action of the Canadian divisions as being responsible for higher casualties than suffered by British divisions and, by implication, seeing this as an explanation for such failings as occurred.<sup>5</sup> A volume I wrote, *The Best Little Army in the World: The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945*, in retrospect perhaps ought to have been titled *The Best Little Army in the World?* with the question mark very much in bold type.<sup>6</sup> Again, we do not need to agree with the criticisms of First Canadian Army, but we should try to understand why they were made.

So too should we try to assess the differences, such as they were, between the performance of Canadians in the two world wars. In the Great War, Canada put some 620,000 men into uniform, a number that included 100,000 conscripts. There was no Canadian navy to speak of, with a fleet of small ships and at most 9,000 officers and ratings. There was no Canadian Air Force until the very end of the war, some 22,000 men serving in the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps, the precursors to the Royal Air Force. In other words, with the exception of some 30,000 who served outside the Canadian Corps, more than a half million men wore khaki. Those

<sup>3</sup> Stacey, 274-75. See the analysis of these comments in Tim Cook, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 193ff.

<sup>4</sup> John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). The review of this book by Brian Holden Reid tartly observed that Copp “comes perilously close to bringing a charge that the British were prepared to fight to the last Canadian.” Brian Holden Reid, *The Army Training and Doctrine Bulletin* 6 (Fall/Winter, 2003), 67.

<sup>6</sup> Granatstein, J.L. *The Best Little Army in the World: The Canadians In Northwest Europe, 1944-1945*. (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2015).

with leadership capabilities found their way to the divisions in France and Flanders, and the fighting from April 1915 to the Armistice in November 1918 offered ample opportunity for those leaders to rise through the ranks.

Matters were different in the Second World War. The Royal Canadian Navy for its part increased its pre-war numbers fifty-fold, enlisting 100,000 in all on a base of roughly 2,000 regulars. These men too—and their leaders—served at sea, not in the field with the army. The Royal Canadian Air Force, tiny at the outbreak of war, increased some eighty times to number 250,000 all told. The war in the air attracted the most adventurous and in many cases the best educated, the most intelligent, and the fittest. The army itself hived off some of its best men into commando, airborne, and specialist corps. In a very real sense, the cream of the crop, a huge number of potential leaders, did not join the infantry.<sup>7</sup> While the impact of this cannot be quantified, there can be little doubt that some of the (alleged) deficiencies of the army should be attributed to the way the air force, navy, and army units outside the infantry battalions scooped up much of the best human material. It is also likely that many of those who avoided the army did so because of the stories their fathers had told them of the horrors of trench warfare. Again this cannot be quantified, but it certainly had its effects—and these same effects were felt in the British and American armies.

There is another important explanation for the Canadian Corps' superb record. The 1st Canadian Division went into action in early 1915 and passed what it had learned to the 2nd Division at the end of that year; the 1st and 2nd Divisions duly contributed to the 3rd Division; and the first three gave their accumulated expertise and some of their experienced commanders to the 4th Division which went into the line in late 1916. By August 1918 when the Canadian Corps began the triumphant Hundred Days that smashed the German army in the field, both the leaders and soldiers had learned how to fight and manoeuvre on the battlefield, and their organization and equipment were first class. The experience gained by each division

<sup>7</sup> Allan D. English utilized this phrase for the RCAF. Allan D. English, *The Cream of the Crop: Canadian Air Crew, 1939-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1966). Christopher Pugsley made the comparison between the infantry of the two world wars: Christopher Pugsley, "Learning from the Canadian Corps on the Western Front," *Canadian Military History*, Vol. XV, 1(2006), 6.



General Sir Julian Byng talking to General Sir Arthur Currie. February, 1918. [Library and Archives Ca PA-002448]

had been shared in a Canadian Corps that saw itself as, and was, a learning institution. While it produced terrible casualties, time in action also guaranteed that expertise was gained and that leaders sprang forward from the ranks.

Matters were very different in the Second World War. The entire Hong Kong force was lost in December 1941, and much of the leadership and potential leadership of the 2nd Canadian Division was slaughtered or taken prisoner at Dieppe in August 1942. The officers and men of I Canadian Corps learned on the job in Italy from mid-1943 until early 1945, but the extent to which the lessons learned—and the leaders who had mastered them—were transferred to First Canadian Army before and after D-Day is uncertain. Yes, General Guy Simonds and some of his key staff officers did return to England early in 1944 to take over II Canadian Corps, but it was nonetheless a long learning experience before the Canadians in France became first class fighters. The 3rd Division had eleven months in action (and more time in “intense combat” with more casualties in Normandy than any British division); the 2nd Division (second in time in action and in casualties in Normandy) had ten months in action; and the

4th Armoured Division had nine months combat experience. This was vastly different than the First World War when even the 4th Canadian Division fought for two years; moreover the Canadian senior commanders in Northwest Europe had far less combat experience than their predecessors of the Great War. In other words, time in action and the expertise gained mattered greatly. Canada's Second World War experience was very different than the First.

There is one additional factor. Sir Arthur Currie is generally considered to have been Canada's greatest soldier. No one accords that designation to Harry Crerar, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) of First Canadian Army in 1944-45. Currie went overseas in 1914 as a brigade commander, fought at Ypres in April 1915, took over the 1st Division later that year, and led it successfully through the Somme fighting and at Vimy. He was mentored by Sir Julian Byng and he took over command of the Corps in mid-1917 and directed its operations brilliantly through the remainder of the war. Like his soldiers and his leadership cadre, Currie mastered his craft in the field and in action.

General H.D.G. Crerar did not have the same opportunity or similar ability. Like Currie, Crerar had no charisma, but unlike Currie he was more of a military bureaucrat than a great commander. He had fought well in the artillery in the Great War, and he remained in the tiny Permanent Force through the 1920s and 1930s, only reaching brigadier rank just before the outbreak of war in 1939. His interwar service made Crerar into the perfect staff officer, a master of detailed planning and memoranda, and a skilled bureaucratic warrior. This did not sit well with his subordinates in France in 1944. Major-General George Kitching called him "a good schoolteacher who rehearsed every word he offered to two or more people....a ham actor with alliterative prepared spiels." Crerar had a first class brain, Major-General W.J. Megill recalled, "but a difficult personality. He couldn't raise any more enthusiasm than a turnip, was completely cold and almost useless in a discussion." But, Megill said, "he could write a beautifully organized paper on that discussion."<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, Crerar's role in creating the army of the Second World War at Canadian Military Headquarters in Britain and as Vice-

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Granatstein, *The Weight of Command: Voices of Canada's Second World War Generals and Those Who Knew Them* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 36-37, 74.

Chief and then Chief of the General Staff (CGS) in Ottawa cannot be understated. He became CGS in 1940 and won the government's agreement to create the five division First Canadian Army, no mean achievement. But Crerar was also the officer who had pressed to send troops to Hong Kong, and later in England he lobbied hard to have Canada provide the force for the Dieppe raid. His bureaucratic skills let him escape unscathed from these two debacles, and nothing interrupted his rise to the top of the heap. He had been a protégé of Andrew McNaughton in the Great War and after, but he had no hesitation in England in 1943 in going behind McNaughton's back and pointing out his weaknesses as an army commander to Canadian politicians and British generals. There can be little doubt that Crerar was correct in his criticisms, but he had acted in a most underhanded fashion. His efforts had much to do with McNaughton's sacking in late 1943 and his own succession as GOC-in-C of First Canadian Army in early 1944. Similarly, when he was in Italy briefly as commander of I Canadian Corps in late 1943, Crerar had tried hard to sideline Major-General Guy Simonds, a favourite of Eighth Army commander General Bernard Montgomery. Simonds, then commanding a division, was without question the ablest Canadian senior officer of the war, and perhaps Crerar's only rival for command of the First Canadian Army.<sup>9</sup> Such actions did him no credit.

Currie in comparison had to fend off only General R.E.W. Turner who was nominally his senior, but he did this by establishing a battlefield record much more than by stabbing his Britain-based rival in the back, and his relationships with his staff and his subordinates in the Corps were harmonious.<sup>10</sup> Currie could never inspire his troops

<sup>9</sup> See J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), Chapters 3, 4, and 6 on McNaughton, Crerar, and Simonds. See also Paul Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); on Crerar, John A. English, *Patton's Peers: The Forgotten Allied Field Commanders of the Western Front 1944-45* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2009), Chapter 1; and John Nelson Rickard, *The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army 1939-1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) for a strong defence of McNaughton. On Simonds, see Douglas Delaney, *Corps Commanders: Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-45* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> For a vigorous defence of Turner, see William Stewart, *The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015). Stewart's account adds much but its force is weakened by a too-strong dislike of Currie.





Lt. Gen. Guy Simonds, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and General H. D. G. Crerar.  
[Library and Archives Canada MIKAN 4002428]

with fiery phrases or by his soldierly appearance, but he did earn and keep the loyalty and high regard of those who worked with and for him. Crerar, on the other hand, inspired no one, neither the soldiers in the line nor his senior leaders and staff, and this undoubtedly had its effect on the way the Canadians were perceived by the British and Americans—and by the historians. The most we can say of Crerar is that he strove to keep Canadian national interests to the fore in the face of Montgomery's unwillingness to concede that Canada might have had priorities of its own, made few battlefield gaffes, and led the largest force ever commanded by a Canadian. Those are all important, but they pale beside Currie's fighting record.

Yet, the same Colonel English who had been so critical of the Canadian performance in Normandy in 1998 wrote that “By the end of the war, having paid a steep price in blood for the peacetime neglect of military professionalism, it was probably the best little army in the world. Certainly in the performance of the Canadian Army overseas the government of Canada got much more than it deserved.” So why did the Canadian record receive such cold critical appraisals?

English was absolutely correct that Canadian training was sadly flawed for the first two years and more of the war. McNaughton and the senior commanders he selected had little interest in training or, more likely, did not know how to do it well. The Vancouver militiaman Bert Hoffmeister, commanding a company in the Seaforth Highlanders in 1940, recalled “I didn’t have anything by way of a training manual. I went down to Aldershot and into a store where they sold these things, and bought pamphlets.” Then, when he was ordered to prepare an operation order for an exercise, “I hadn’t a clue as to what an operation order looked like or how to write one...”<sup>11</sup> The Canadians began the war as amateurs. Hoffmeister learned his job in three years of training, but some others regrettably did not. It took a British officer, the then Lieutenant-General Montgomery commanding Southeastern Army in England, to inspect the Canadian formations and units, discover their weaknesses, and shake them up. Monty got rid of most of the ineffective leaders, sending them home to Canada or to retirement. In all, eight of twenty-two major-generals and above who commanded divisions, corps, or the First Canadian Army overseas were fired before they saw action, and two more were relieved soon after their first battle.

McNaughton himself was one of those replaced in 1943. By then, over his objections at the breaking up of First Canadian Army, two Canadian divisions and an armoured brigade were in Italy, and good commanders and battle-tested soldiers had begun to emerge. Simonds learned to lead in action in Sicily and Italy. Chris Vokes was an effective if unimaginative brigade and division commander, and Bert Hoffmeister, who rose from company to division command very quickly, was superb. There were also many unit and company commanders who demonstrated all the traits of battlefield leadership.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 22.

Simonds became the II Canadian Corps' commander a few months before D-Day and, however able and creative as a tactician he was, his senior commanders in the first months in Normandy were flawed indeed. Major-General Rod Keller of the 3rd Division was popular with the troops but weak, mistrusted by his staff—"Keller was yeller," his staff muttered—and rightly considered ineffective by British senior officers. For what he believed to be sound reasons (and the likelihood that he could see no ready successor in the 3rd Division's brigadiers), Simonds refused suggestions he be replaced, and Keller hung on until he was wounded in an errant air force bombing during Operation Totalize on 8 August.<sup>12</sup> Simonds fired George Kitching, his close friend and the commander of the 4th Armoured Division, in the midst of the Falaise Gap fighting. Charles Foulkes, the commander of the 2nd Division, was perhaps even more uninspiring and ineffective than Keller but, protected by his patron General Crerar, he survived long enough to be promoted to command of I Canadian Corps in Italy. Too many of his soldiers did not, and unfortunately the flaws of the three division commanders helped shape the Canadians' unsatisfactory record and reputation in Normandy.

But within the nine months remaining of the war in Europe, the Canadian commanders improved mightily. The division commanders at the end of the war—Vokes, Harry Foster, Bruce Matthews, Holly Keefer, and Hoffmeister—were very good, and Matthews and Hoffmeister were first-rate. Simonds was a fine corps commander—"a first-class commander with a most original brain and full of initiative," General Sir Brian Horrocks said—and his creation of armoured personnel carriers in August 1944 revolutionized armoured warfare. Charles Foulkes turned out to be much better as a corps commander than as a division GOC and this and his friendly relations with Crerar helped to ensure that he, rather than Simonds, became the most important Canadian military figure of the postwar years.

We ought not forget that Canada's Great Power partners also had to get the right leaders and battle experience as they learned how to fight the Germans. Both the British and Americans suffered their debacles and both replaced generals and colonels in action in wholesale lots. Allied combat effectiveness varied dramatically, just as much as the Canadians' proficiency sometimes did. All one can say

<sup>12</sup> See Granatstein, *The Generals*, 167-68.



Group portrait of Generals of 1st Canadian Army. L. to r.: (seated) H.S. Maczek, G. Simonds, H.D.G. Crerar, C. Faulkes, B.M. Hoffmeister; (standing) R.H. Keebler, A.B. Matthews, H.W. Foster, R.W. Moncel, S.B. Rawlings. [Library and Archives Ca PA-137473]

with confidence is that Allied commanders and soldiers learned that beating the Germans was never easy.

Charles Stacey, whose comments on Canadian deficiencies in training and in action, likely did much to shape British and American historians' critiques, came to regret his words. In a letter to John English almost three decades after *The Victory Campaign* appeared, he said "It is a pity perhaps that we focus our attention so much on Normandy, for in the nature of things our troops appear to better advantage...in the post-Normandy stages....I almost regret having written the rather severe comment on Canadian regimental officers," Stacey continued, because of "the use that UK and US writers" made of it. "They use my stuff as a basis for assuming the superiority of their training and work in the field to ours." That, he concluded, remained unproven.<sup>13</sup> So it did—and still does.

<sup>13</sup> Stacey's letter of 4 November 1987, quoted in Cook, *Clio's Warriors*, 195, and in Granatstein, *Best Little Army*, 278-79.

What we can say is that both Stacey and English were correct. There seems no doubt that some regimental officers were not up to the job. That Simonds fired two battalion commanders (and a brigade commander who sympathized too much with his battalion Commanding Officers) in late July in Normandy makes this clear. But at the same time, as English argued, there were also general officers who were not effective. The three division commanders in the Norman fighting all had to be replaced.

It takes time to create an effective army, especially one created out of almost nothing. The Canadians were less successful in Normandy than many had hoped, but as the war continued, as they learned their job, they did become the best little army in the world.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**J.L. Granatstein** served in the Canadian Army then taught Canadian history for thirty years. He was Director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum, and writes on Canadian military history, politics, foreign and defence policy, and public policy. Among his many publications are *The Generals*, *Canada's Army*, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History*, and *The Greatest Victory: Canada's Hundred Days, 1918*.