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Review of "Toronto's Fighting 75th in the Great War, 1915-1919" by Timothy J. Stewart

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Book Reviews



Timothy J. Stewart. *Toronto's Fighting 75th in the Great War, 1915-1919*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017. Pp 552.

Canadian forces generally enjoy a good reputation among students of the Great War. That reputation is well deserved and owes its endurance to fine works written by thoughtful historians. Timothy J. Stewart's *Toronto's Fighting 75th in the Great War, 1915-1919*, is a fitting addition to that historiography. The 75th (Mississauga) Battalion was recruited in Toronto, and as part of the 11th Brigade, 4th Division. It served in combat in France and Belgium and afterward was re-designated the Toronto Scottish Regiment. While veterans and historians have written histories of many other Canadian Great War formations, a history of the 75th Battalion was lacking. In writing this book, Stewart seeks to tell "the story of a Great War fighting battalion, its major personalities, and the battles in which it fought, all in the context of the 11th Brigade, the 4th Division, and the Canadian Corps" (p. xvii).

The author is a high school history teacher and the curator of the Toronto Scottish Regiment's Museum. As curator of the museum, Stewart has access to the records and artifacts associated with the battalion. In addition to official records, Stewart's sources include memoirs, letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, and secondary historical works.

In the first part of his book Stewart covers the history of the militia units based in Toronto, from 1901 to 1915, which were the precursors of the 75th Battalion. These include the Toronto Mounted Rifles, the 9th Toronto Light Horse, and the 9th Mississauga Horse. The second and major section of the book covers the battalion's World War I service. A final section covers the 75th Battalion from

its return to Canada, demobilization, and then “resurrection” as the Toronto Scottish Regiment. The story is followed to the eve of World War II.

After recruitment and training in Canada in the last half of 1915, the 75th moved to England in April 1916. By late summer the battalion was engaged in combat. Stewart covers all of the battalion’s activity, from periods of relative quiet behind the lines or in reserve, to shorter stretches of bloody fighting. The author reminds us of the weariness of life behind the lines. The men tried to keep themselves, their uniforms and equipment, and their weapons clean in the midst of a sea of mud. They endured hours of rifle practice, drill, inspections, and instruction in stringing barbed wire. The 75th seems to have been blessed with a good variety of athletes in its ranks. Stewart recounts the many baseball games, track meets, and other competitions in which the battalion participated and often excelled.

Stewart gives us a detailed account of the battalion’s fighting. They saw hard service at the Somme, Lens, Passchendaele, and Vimy Ridge. The 75th’s actions in these battles and more are given in thorough detail. At Amiens in 1918 the Canadian Corps advanced without the detailed planning and rehearsal from which it had usually benefited. On 9 August, the 75th assaulted and took Le Quesnel at great cost: five officers killed and six wounded, and 122 other ranks killed, wounded, or missing. Amiens is rightly touted as a triumph of all arms warfare, but even so, as Stewart says, “The 75th had made a frontal assault on entrenched German positions in Le Quesnel without supporting airplanes, artillery, cavalry, motor machine guns, tanks, or other infantry formations on an exposed right flank, and it took more than eighty prisoners” (p. 275).

September 1918 was the bloodiest month for the battalion. They fought at Arras, Canal du Nord, Dury Ridge, and Bourlon Wood. The battalion fought in the closing battles in October and November, making their last assault at Valenciennes from 1 to 5 November. After the Armistice the battalion served in Belgium and France until its return to Toronto in June 1919. In 1921, the battalion received new life as the Toronto Scottish Regiment (TSR). Stewart concludes with a brief history of the TSR up to 1939.

In covering the foregoing, Stewart concentrates on the tactical level of warfare. There is not a lot of information about the strategic or even operational level of the war on the Western Front. This is not a drawback, however, because we are given enough information

to understand the battles in which the battalion was engaged. The book is brought down to a personal level in many ways. For example, Stewart mentions by name many of those who were killed, giving the circumstances of their death and often listing such personal information as their age, occupation, and next of kin. The many photographs of battalion members remind us of the youth of the men who fought.

Although Stewart obviously has great passion for the battalion he is fair in his assessment of their achievements and failures. For example, the 75th veered off course during an assault at the Somme in November 1916. This resulted in increased casualties for the brigade. While not overly concerned with higher commands, Stewart discusses some relationships between commanders such as British Field Marshal Douglas Haig, allied Commander in Chief Ferdinand Foch, Canadian Corps commander Arthur Currie, 4th Division commander Major-General David Watson, and 11th Brigade commander Brigadier-General Victor Odlum.

In this thoroughly researched, well-written book, Stewart succeeds in his goal of providing a history of the battalion, its battles, and its major personalities. His combat narrative is clear and concise, and the biographical information for some members of the battalion makes it a fine tribute to the unit. Those who are interested in material culture will appreciate the many color photographs of uniforms, insignia, memorabilia, and ephemera associated with the battalion. Stewart's endnotes are helpful and deserving of scrutiny as they contain additional information on many of the men mentioned in the text. The appendices extend to about eighty pages and cover a wide variety of additional material. Regimental battle honors and an honor roll of those who died in service are included. Stewart also gives us a thorough list of awards delineated by type of award, recipient, and location of the action in addition to full citations for most of the awards. To show that the battalion was comprised of mere mortals, after all, Stewart provides a list of military offenses and a court martial record for the battalion. It might be worth mentioning here that, from August 1916 through April 1917 the 75th Battalion had more than double the amount of offenses than any other battalion in the brigade (p. 461). The maps, photographs, and illustrations are interesting and helpful, and a nice folding map of a 4th Division trench raid at Vimy Ridge is also included. It's difficult to imagine a battalion history being any more thorough than this one. In addition

to the voluminous history presented, the book is a beautiful example of the bookmaker's art. It is recommended for anyone studying Canada's contribution to the Great War, and, more broadly, to those who want to learn about the British Empire's forces on the Western Front.

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