

2021

Review of “Morrison: The Long-Lost Memoir of Canada’s Artillery Commander in the Great War” by Major-General Sir Edward Morrison, edited by Susan Raby-Dunne

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Recommended Citation

Belmonte, Peter L. "Review of “Morrison: The Long-Lost Memoir of Canada’s Artillery Commander in the Great War” by Major-General Sir Edward Morrison, edited by Susan Raby-Dunne." *Canadian Military History* 30, 1 (2021)

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Book Reviews



Major-General Sir Edward Morrison. *Morrison: The Long-Lost Memoir of Canada's Artillery Commander in the Great War*. Edited by Susan Raby-Dunne. Victoria: Heritage House Publishing Company Limited, 2017. Pp. 259.

Artillery was truly the king of battle during the First World War. Pre-war improvements in artillery technology, including the development of the recoil mechanism and improvements in ammunition and gunpowder, meant that these pieces could deliver death and destruction far more effectively than ever before. During the war, scientific advances in targeting, such as using aircraft as spotters and using atmospheric and gun tube information to allow ranging without actually firing the piece, caused commanders to struggle to develop suitable infantry and artillery tactics to cope with these advances. Thus it is truly a treat to read the memoir of a man who commanded Canada's artillery during the war.

The editor of this volume is Susan Raby-Dunne, a historian, author, and music composer. While conducting research on officer and poet John McCrae, Raby-Dunne came across newspaper clippings from the 1928 *Ottawa Citizen* containing extracts from Morrison's memoir. Recognizing something good, she continued research on a man who "was relatively unknown by anyone other than some artillery personnel, a few war historians, and the most avid military history buffs" (p. 21). The happy result of her work is this fine book.

By profession, Morrison (1867-1925) was a journalist and editor. He joined the militia artillery in 1897 and rose through the ranks, eventually attaining command of Canadian artillery during the war. Morrison, like the artillery he commanded, was in the thick of the fighting wherever the Canadians were engaged. Contrary to popular portrayal and belief, not all British and Canadian generals were

bound to their desks miles behind the lines (and a case may be made that that is precisely where they belonged if they hoped to exercise effective command and control over their units), and Morrison is one who was frequently close to the fighting. Consider his description of the opening bombardment during an attack on the Somme on 15 September 1916:

We watched the hands of our watches while they almost imperceptibly neared the zero minute, and, exactly to the second, with one prolonged roar, about one thousand guns open fire, and in an instant a streak of bursting shells appeared across the scenery literally from one horizon to the other (p. 98).

On another occasion, in October 1917 near Passchendaele, Morrison and two aides moved forward to reconnoitre supply routes. While near an ammunition truck, German guns found the range and commenced shelling the area. Morrison describes what happened when the truck was hit:

About fifty cubic feet of flame flashed out in front of me, so close that it almost singed my eyebrows, and for a fraction of a second I could see and feel splinters and debris flying past my head, so near that I wondered how my face could squeeze in between them (p. 158).

Morrison is unstinting in his praise for the Canadian soldiers. On more than one occasion he praises their courage, ability, and cheerfulness, and, of course, their artillery. But Morrison does not shy away from criticism, most of it directed to British commanders. For example, after noting some of the limited British success at Passchendaele, Morrison commented upon the “lack of organization and efficient staff work,” and that “some of the commanders had suffered from an embarrassment of riches and had failed to use the enormous resources at their disposal to the best effect.” Furthermore, Morrison felt that “while the Guards Divisions, and the Australians, New Zealanders, and Scotch troops, had fought with great verve and local successes, they had not been adequately supported by what had commenced to be known as the Conscript Divisions [British conscripted troops]” (p. 147). His view of Canada’s position in the military alliance is summed up in his remark: “The truth is that, until the Canadian troops had made a world reputation, there was a

tendency to impose on them by influential British officers who never lost an opportunity of dealing with them as though they were green and inferior troops" (p. 86).

Throughout the book, Morrison covers the movements and actions of the Canadian artillery he commanded. He describes the different barrage and artillery support plans used during such actions as those at Ypres, Mount Sorrel, Somme, Vimy Ridge, Lens, Passchendaele, Amiens, Arras, Cambrai and more. In this regard it is interesting to note the changes in tactics based upon conditions; weather, troop and commander experience, and ammunition shortages all affected the use of artillery. Morrison explains how Canadian artillery often thwarted counterattacks, as at Hill 70 and Passchendaele. In other cases their barrages facilitated successful attacks by Canadian infantry.

Morrison understood the need to adapt, and he explains his thoughts about tactics and the use of artillery throughout the book. Perhaps a single sentence sums up the situation on the Western Front, a sentence that goes a long way to explain the bloodshed and difficulties encountered by troops and commanders on both sides during the war: "Advances in broad daylight against a desperate foe armed with machine guns are costly" (p. 198). This is a seemingly obvious assertion, but a reality that all commanders had to confront and to which all commanders had to adapt. Not all were successful. Morrison was one of the few who tried his best to adapt to this reality.

Numerous footnotes give the reader details about men, usually officers, mentioned in the text. Approximately forty photographs and illustrations, plus two of Morrison's own sketches, enhance the text. Map enthusiasts will love the eleven highly detailed battle maps that help orient the reader. Morrison's journalism background makes this an easy, entertaining read. This book is highly recommended for those who want to read more about Canada's artillery during the war. Furthermore, anyone interested in the views of senior leaders in the First World War will find this book enlightening.

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