

David Campbell. *It Can't Last Forever: The 19th Battalion and the Canadian Corps in the First World War*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017. Pp. 680.

David Campbell contributes to Canada's military historiography with his latest book, *It Can't Last Forever: The 19th Battalion and the Canadian Corps in the First World War*, published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press. The book covers the history of the 19th Battalion and is the latest offering in the press's Canadian Unit, Formation and Command Histories series. Campbell, who teaches history at Mount Saint Vincent University and Saint Mary's University, consults a wide variety of archives, including the 19th Battalion's extensive war diaries, to bring us this thorough battalion history. Because of the abundant source material, he decides to eschew a straightforward account of modest length and instead writes a richer and lengthier account to serve as "a memorial to the history of the 19th Battalion and the experiences of the individuals who served in it" (p. xix). Campbell presents no arguments in this work; his goal, rather, is to present a straightforward, detailed history of this battalion. In so doing, he adds to our knowledge of Canadian fighting forces by his careful integration of the sources.

Campbell covers the history of the battalion chronologically, beginning with its recruitment and training in 1914 and 1915. After arriving in France, the 19th Battalion participated in most of the major engagements of the Canadian Corps from September 1916 to November 1918, such as the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Passchendaele, Amiens and Arras. Through it all, the battalion performed well and suffered heavy losses at times. Campbell writes in a clear and concise style; he weaves together diverse sources—such as official records, memoirs, letters, diaries, reports and orders—to present an integrated and complete unit history. The text is laced with personal recollections drawn from the memoirs of soldiers of all ranks. These give the reader a firsthand idea of what the soldiers experienced and contribute to a more complete picture of each engagement in which the battalion fought. In addition, Campbell addresses such non-combat activities as training and recreation. The result is a well-rounded account of the battalion.

Campbell meticulously describes the preparation for each assault the battalion participated in; he covers allotted objectives, assault formations and duties down to individual platoons. This, coupled

with the detailed maps and minute descriptions of the engagements, will be sure to please those who enjoy reading about how small units fought and functioned as part of battalions and divisions during the war. While it is proper in a battalion level history to focus on the tactical level of warfare, it is also important to examine the strategic and operational context so the tactical narrative is situated in the proper perspective. Campbell provides the correct balance of strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare and this helps the reader to more fully understand the battalion's place in the war. For example, he discusses the wisdom of attacking at Arras in August 1918 less than two weeks after the losses suffered at Amiens. He places the battalion in the proper milieu by looking at the Allies' strategic situation in August, coupled with the state of the battalion and its many vastly undertrained replacements. Given the necessity for the Allies to continue pressure on the Germans, Campbell concludes "there were more than enough veterans among the ranks [in the 19th Battalion] to provide the necessary skills and leadership to see the majority through" (p. 423).

When dealing with the larger allied war strategy, Campbell offers reasoned and fair assessment. For example, while conceding that the British Army should have halted attacks at Passchendaele when it became apparent that worsening weather conditions resulted in correspondingly worsening battlefield conditions, Campbell notes that British commanders legitimately felt they were on the "threshold of a major victory in Flanders. To have halted the offensive while progress was being made would have seemed, at the time, utter folly" (p. 320). Campbell correctly recognises the difficulties of coalition warfare and the demands made upon senior leaders. This view is in agreement with some recent historiography that presents a nuanced and sympathetic understanding of the problems of command in the First World War.<sup>1</sup>

At the operational level, Campbell assesses the performance of the Canadian Corps throughout the narrative. For example, the Allied victory at Amiens in August 1918 has been touted as

<sup>1</sup> Some recent works that recognise the need for commanders to take risks that sometimes proved costly include Peter Hart, *The Last Battle: Victory, Defeat, and the End of World War I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Nick Lloyd, *Passchendaele: The Lost Victory of World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

a triumph of combined arms,<sup>2</sup> but Campbell, commenting on the Canadian Corps' relatively mixed performance of tanks there, notes: "Overall, the victory at Amiens was, at least on the Canadian front, won mainly by the more traditional fighting arms—the artillery and the infantry" (p. 402).

Campbell is objective in his assessments of the men. Writing of Lieutenant-Colonel John I. McLaren, the battalion's first commander, he states, "Perhaps McLaren was brave to the point of foolhardiness—an undesirable trait in a commanding officer" (p. 133). Still, he makes the point that the battalion was well led by competent officers. An honest appraisal of the officers and men and the detailed descriptions of battle at lower levels of command are the best strengths of the book. From the platoon and company level to higher levels of command, Campbell is able to incorporate sources well, making a cohesive narrative that helps him achieve his goal of an objective memorial to the battalion. Campbell's work lines up well with recent scholarship that examines battalion-level history, such as Timothy J. Stewart's *Toronto's Fighting 75th in the Great War, 1915-1919* and the host of works that look at "pals battalions" and other geographically recruited units.<sup>3</sup> These books examine the war as fought by small units by placing the battalion in its strategic and operational context to describe its performance in combat.

In this thoroughly researched, well-written book, Campbell 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 of the battalion's members makes it a fine tribute to the unit. Campbell's endnotes are helpful and deserving of scrutiny as they contain additional information on many of the men mentioned in the text. Supporting materials include helpful maps and dozens of photographs. Appendices cover casualty rates, discipline problems in the battalion, commanding officers of the battalion and honours and awards. This book is a complete battalion

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Michael A. Hunzeker, *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 113.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, David Carter, *The Stockbrokers' Battalion in the Great War: A History of the 10th (Service) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers* (Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2014); Timothy J. Stewart, *Toronto's Fighting 75th in the Great War 1915-1919* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017); and Ian S. Johnson, *The Newcastle Commercial 16th (S) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers in the Great War* (Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2021).

history and a fine tribute to the men who served in that battalion. It is recommended for anyone studying Canada's contribution to the First World War and, more broadly, to those who want to learn about the British Empire's forces on the Western Front.

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