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Review of "The River Battles: Canada's Final Campaign in World War II Italy" by Mark Zuehlke

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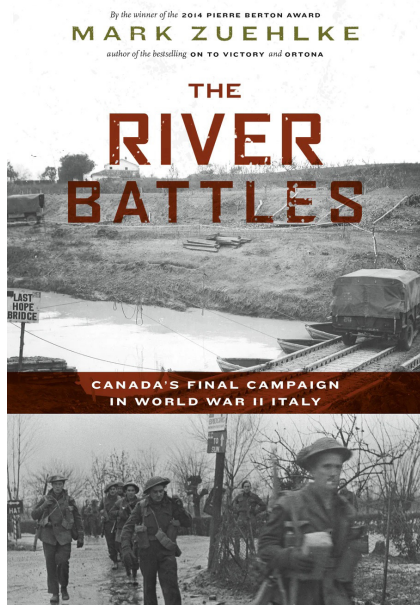
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Mark Zuehlke. *The River Battles: Canada's Final Campaign in World War II Italy*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021. Pp. 470.

It has been said that journalists write the first draft of history.¹ Such a remark is pleasant enough, but I do not think that it is helpful because only historians can write history. In order to produce copy for their news outlet a journalist visits the scene, gathers information from sources and interviews eyewitnesses. Much of this activity is familiar to historians. However, writing history requires analysis. In a news report there are only facts but a history book predominately comprises analysis of facts and conjecture at the gaps in the available facts. It is the treatment of facts which marks the difference between a news article and a history book. A journalist cannot report more than what is stated in the sources because that may result in libel cases being brought against the news outlet. A historian meanwhile should see the source material as a foundation only. It takes imagination to suggest what human story occurred beyond the words in the archive.

Instead of journalists, it is historians of the Mark Zuehlke type who I believe are writing the first draft of history. In the books which Zuehlke has written for "The Canadian Battle Series," of which *The River Battles* is the latest, the onus is on war diaries, medal citations and other military reports. It is the material that shines through the text and almost every line refers to a contemporary document. The reason I say that this is the first draft of history is because this book does not concern itself with anything outside of the military history. Without explaining the broader situation of the Second World War at the time these events in Italy took place, Zuehlke confuses the reader. There is, for instance, repeated occasions throughout the book where fighting formations are described as understrength. It is not adequately explained that there were other theatres calling for Allied manpower. However, as a result of these omissions this book is one dimensional. As I wrote in the introduction to this review, historians must recreate a past experience by using their imagination. Instead, in this series of books Zuehlke is simply pulling the data out of the archives and arranging it. This approach is useful but has its limitations.

¹ Richard Cohen, *Making History: The Storytellers who Shaped the Past* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023), 610.



Reading Zuehlke's book, the reader might imagine that no other scholarly work on this subject exists. Certainly, the bibliography does not contain any of the works by Terry Copp or Robert Engen.² Nor is the excellent work of Jonathan Fennell or Robert Citino cited.³ Canada's military efforts in the Second World War must be recorded in this meticulous way; but it is only the first draft. Contrast this with historian James Holland, who released the first of a two book study of the Italian Campaign in 2023.⁴ Holland's book will not contain meticulous detail of every unit, location or event in the period under examination. Such detail is not necessary for a historian like Holland who is attempting to write general

history which encompasses many aspects.

This metaphor is strained now but the point can be explained differently. In a work entitled, *The Idea of History*, R. G. Collingwood argued that there were at least two approaches to studying history.⁵ Whilst published back in 1946 I think the argument can still be beneficial in explaining how different historians write at different levels. The first was those historians who study periods of time. Collingwood called these the scissors and paste historians; concerned with mining data from the archives and then arranging it. Contrast this group to what Collingwood called the scientific historians. They pose a question and then attempt to solve it. By Collingwood's definition, Zuehlke belongs to the first group and Holland to the

² Terry Copp, *A Nation at War: 1939-1945: Essays from Legion Magazine* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004); and Robert Engen, *Canadians Under Fire: Infantry Effectiveness in the Second World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

³ Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Robert Citino, *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017)

⁴ James Holland, *The Savage Storm: The Battle for Italy 1943* (London: Bantam, 2023).

⁵ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1946), 281.

second. You cannot denigrate either system because the second cannot exist without the first. But it is important to know which book you might be getting when you are looking to buy.

Zuehlke has written a military history of the Canadian troops in Italy from September 1944 until January 1945. By this point in the Italian Campaign, the Allied armies had advanced far up the Italian leg. This book commences with the warm, dry summer coming to an end with the Allies at the gates of Florence. This is the final book in the Canadian battle series to be based in Italy because after their terrible slog through the winter months the Canadians would be withdrawn and moved to North-West Europe where they would join their compatriots and take part in the final invasion of Germany.

With few references to the wider war in the book, the competition for resources from other theatres is not clearly explained. Troops, equipment and shipping was constantly demanded for North-West Europe and the Pacific leaving forces trying to achieve more with less. However, the direct consequences were and a major theme of the book is the manpower shortage which affected the Allied armies in Italy. As the weather worsened and German resistance refused to break, the Canadians had to continue fighting in order to keep the pressure on the Germans; holding more German troops in Italy instead of transferring to the Balkans, or the Soviet Union or France. However, the cost of continuing to assault these formidable defences resulted in the Canadian anti-aircraft units, clerks, drivers and other service troops being reallocated into the infantry. So at the outset, Canadian forces in Italy were shorthanded. There was a tough job to do and not as many troops as was ideal (p. 29). Casualties occur in war but Zuehlke gives the strongest impression of the constant losses which the Italian campaign inflicted. With each attack, formations had to amalgamate companies to keep up to strength or request replacements.

In placing *The River Battles* within the literature of the Second World War it is useful to return to James Holland. Zuehlke and Holland are both writing positively about the Allied way of war in their respective books. *The River Battles* may not state explicitly that man for man the Canadian troops were superior to the Germans but you get this impression from Zuehlke (p. 305). With great stoicism and professionalism the Canadian troops overcame German defences which must rank as some of the toughest of the war. The defensive positions enjoyed by the German defenders were ideal: slit trenches hidden in vineyards, machine gun nests in mountain caves

and snipers covering the crossing points of every waterway. When you consider again the terrible weather which limited air power and the terrain which limited the use of armoured fighting vehicles, one realises that these German defences were mostly overcome by the troops on the ground (p. 253). Those readers hoping to find an author enthralled to the kit, uniforms and *kampfgruppe* of the German and SS armed forces will be disappointed. Zuehlke is a sober and fair historian who repeats what is found in the archives. In war, troops are as likely to silently bypass dangerous opponents like Tiger tanks as they are to confront them (p. 19). And a dug in machine gun will hold up attacking infantry regardless of its quality.

It should be stressed that Zuehlke has not written this book for the general reader. In a book which solely focuses on Canadian soldiers there is no mention of the wider war on other fronts, the beleaguered Italian civilians or indeed the logistics required to run this war. We read of men of various ranks, doing their jobs in difficult circumstances. A reader wishing to research a relative who served for Canada or might be planning on touring the Canadian battlefields will require this book. However, any reader wishing to understand the campaign as a whole or its place within the literature will need to consult other books. There is the older, *Tug of War: The Battle for Italy 1943-45* by Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell, both soldiers who fought in the Second World War. Then there is Ian Gooderson's more recent study, *A Hard Way to Make a War: The Allied Campaign in Italy in the Second World War*. And in due course, James Holland's two books will be published also.⁶

Ultimately, Zuehlke has written a history of troops completing their missions. It could have been a dry list of who, what and where but instead *The River Battles* remains readable. Perhaps not for the general reader who may miss the broader picture but certainly for anyone needing this information or wishing to understand the details of how a military overcomes difficult terrain.

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⁶ Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell, *Tug of War: The Battle for Italy 1943-45* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), Ian Gooderson, *A Hard Way to Make a War: The Allied Campaign in Italy in the Second World War* (London: Conway, 2008); and James Holland, *The Savage Storm: The Battle for Italy 1943* (London: Bantam, 2023).