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Review of "Building the Army's Backbone: Canadian Non-Commissioned Officers in the Second World War" by Andrew L. Brown

Megan Hamilton

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Andrew L. Brown. *Building the Army's Backbone: Canadian Non-Commissioned Officers in the Second World War*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021. Pp. 300.

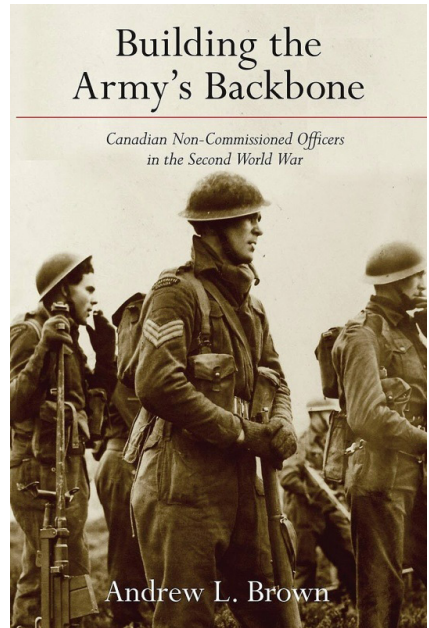
When Canada declared war on Nazi Germany on 10 September 1939, the Canadian Army was a skeleton force. Demobilisation after the First World War had been so thorough that, when coupled with low Depression-era military budgets, the Canadian Army had to be built from almost a standing start. The tiny professional force numbered at a mere 4,261 in 1939, while the Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM) had just over 51,000 men registered but lacked adequate equipment or training (p. 3). From these humble beginnings, Canada went on to raise an effective army of nearly half a million men in less than five years. This transition took an immense amount of effort, an important part of which is explained in Andrew L. Brown's *Building the Army's Backbone: Canadian Non-Commissioned Officers in the Second World War*.

With the Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) as his focus, Brown explains how the Canadian Army trained, developed and managed their corporals, sergeants and warrant officers, who numbered over 110,000 at its peak (p. 10). He convincingly argues that the Canadian Army developed its wartime NCO corps through a two-track training system. Brown's research on the centralised versus decentralised organisation provides important insight into the NCO training scheme as it was forced to grow exponentially across Canada, the United Kingdom, and after July 1943, in sustained theatres of war. Growing pains were experienced but ultimately he concludes that the system was a success.

Brown employs a thematic approach without neglecting chronology. Chapter 1 takes a demographic view of NCOs to understand who these men were; examining their hometowns, ages, previous work experience and educational achievements. He then surveys the speed of promotion through the ranks. The data shows that there was no standard path of professional development, a fact that speaks to the ad hoc nature of the army's rapid growth. Brown effectively chose to mine the service records of a sample group of 388 senior NCOs, information which he returns to throughout the book. Chapter 2 discusses NCO development in the interwar years. Low military spending was detrimental to the ability of the small permanent force to maintain its basic functions, but Brown focuses instead on the

little that was accomplished and how this core group would become pivotal to raising a much larger army when war came. NCOs continued to be trained and promoted through the ranks, while mobilisation plans were maintained. Chapter 3 offers insight into the wartime army's expectations of its NCO corps. At their core NCO duties remained relatively consistent; however, it was soon realised that increased physical fitness and tactical knowledge were mandatory for the modern battlefield. Brown describes how these domains were to be improved, going into particular detail on increased fitness standards, inter-arm cooperation and battle drill. Chapter 4 follows by outlining some of the challenges faced in building an NCO corps that was capable of meeting the demands examined in the previous chapter. Policies for accelerated promotion and development had to be put in place, which forced a decentralisation of responsibilities. In a break with previous procedure, unit commanders were now in charge of selecting, training and developing their NCOs. In this regard they faced constant pressure from higher command to increase both the quantity and quality of NCOs.

The second half of the book focuses on the various formats of NCO training and how they played out. Chapter 5 looks at the decentralised training that was done within units and formations, which is best described as ad hoc. NCO courses had to be run between other training, defence duties and eventually in rear areas of the battlefield. However, the decentralised programs could never meet the quotas on their own and thus were complemented by centralised training schools in Canada and the UK. Chapters 6 and 7 explore these centralised training programs, which were gradually created and overseen by National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ) in Canada and the Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in the UK. They served to train reinforcements, as well as to standardise and disseminate common doctrine. As Brown explained in Chapter 1, there was no standard path for professional development and NCOs



were often a product of both training systems. Chapter 8 follows by detailing the ways that trained NCOs were rotated through postings in Canada, the UK and the frontlines. This cross-pollination of NCO expertise was a vital method of informal knowledge dissemination and strengthened the Canadian Army's ability to remain up to date. Not only were they posted with their fellow countrymen, but Canadian NCOs were also attached to British units for periods of time, particularly in North Africa. Brown disappointingly does not extensively engage with this, which is a missed opportunity to acknowledge external influences on Canadian training practices. The Canadian Army actively participated in the Imperial training network, learning from the British and other Dominions through frontline attachments, widely disseminated printed material, reports and exchanges to various training schools. It would be a mistake to believe that the Canadian Army was created in a vacuum.

Brown writes that "except for Caroline D'Amours's work on infantry junior NCO reinforcements, the secondary literature says almost nothing about NCO training" (p. 12), which is true. However, this statement can go further. The literature on Second World War Canadian Army training is so sparse that this book is a valuable addition to the topic of training more broadly. This is one of the few monographs that is dedicated to the Canadian system of training of non-officers, another being Daniel Byers's *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscripted in the Second World War*, which includes the training of conscripted soldiers.¹ With the Canadian historiography currently lacking equivalents to the British heavyweights, such as Timothy Harrison Place's *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* and David French's *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War Against Germany, 1919-1945*, Brown's book has a significant role to play.² Such a study is an important stepping stone towards a wider take on Canadian Army training, which has yet to be done.

It is only due to the reviewer's own expertise on Camp Vernon that a small factual mistake was found. While Brown writes that

¹ Daniel Byers, *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscripted in the Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

² Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War Against Germany, 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

NDHQ set up Canada's first domestic battle drill school in Vernon, British Columbia (p. 74), the original location was actually Courtenay, on Vancouver Island. Lieutenant-Colonel J.F. Scott, who had been responsible for battle drill's diffusion into the Canadian Army in the UK, and his staff ran the first two courses of the A31 Battle Drill Training Centre in Courtenay before being relocated to Vernon, which then became the nucleus of Canadian battle drill from July 1942 onwards.³ Regardless, such an error on Brown's part does nothing to downgrade the overall quality of the book.

Anyone with a general interest in Canadian military history will find this book to be an enjoyable read, but it is relevant academics and professional military personnel who will make the greatest use of it. Lieutenant-Colonel Brown, as a "soldier-scholar" (p. xi) at the Royal Military College of Canada, writes with a level of detail that demonstrates his expertise and thorough mining of a wide range of sources, while never losing sight of the bigger picture. Many charts and tables are used effectively to illustrate his data. Overall, he presents a narrative of NCO development that is contextualised within the Canadian Army's wider wartime activities. It is a thoroughly valuable contribution to the historiography.

MEGAN HAMILTON, *KING'S COLLEGE LONDON & IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM*

³ War Diary, A31 Canadian Battle Drill Training Centre, June-July 1942, RG 24, vol. 16906, file 1275, Library and Archives Canada.