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Review of "The Hardest Battle: The Canadian Corps and the Arras 1918 Campaign" by William F. Stewart

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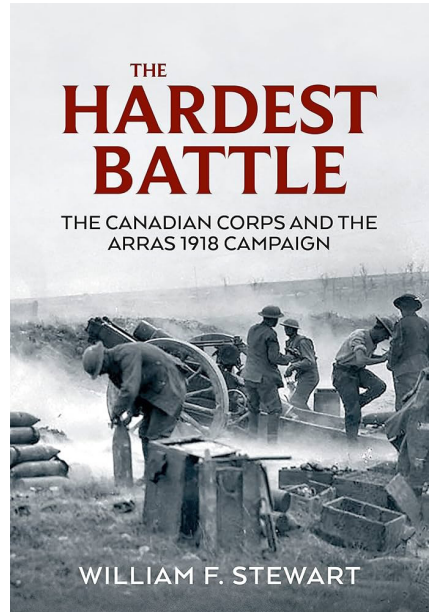
In his book, *The Hardest Battle: The Canadian Corps and the Arras 1918 Campaign*, William F. Stewart provides an in-depth examination of the Canadian actions at the Battle of Arras from 26 August to 3 September 1918. At the core of his work is an attempt to understand why the Canadians were so successful in 1918 compared to their British counterparts who assaulted similar positions in 1917 with much more limited results. Stewart aptly identifies the reasons why the Canadians were so successful and also presents a very cohesive argument as to why this battle (which included the breaking of the heavily fortified Drocourt-Quéant Line) can be considered the hardest battle fought by the Canadian Corps during the Hundred Days Campaign.

Stewart covers the battle in painstaking detail. At times, admittedly, the book becomes a tad dense with its attention to detail though Stewart aptly supports his micro-examination with numerous excellent maps providing the reader a visual guide to his deep dive. Section One of his book provides much needed context to the battle which includes a detailed look at the structure of the Canadian Corps in 1918 and its inherent structural advantages over similar British corps. It then examines the German forces facing the Canadians at Arras. He provides an overview of the Canadian Corps' fighting doctrine on the eve of battle and finishes with the events leading up to the battle of Arras with specific focus on the operations since 8 August (the commencement of the Hundred Days Campaign). Sections Two through Four then take the reader through a day-by-day account of the battle (down to the battalion level) assessing the conduct of the operations, including the British formations that fought alongside the Canadians, while also evaluating German command decisions in response to the Canadian attack. Section Five then breaks down the results of the battle identifying the cost in casualties as well as evaluating the leadership of the various commanders and highlighting the specific consequences because of the Canadian victory.

What stands out in Stewart's work is that he identifies several factors that played a significant role in the Canadian success. Effective cooperation between infantry and artillery was key to the Canadian battle but in particular the widespread use of smoke on

the battlefield played a critical role and Stewart shows clearly how much the use of smoke made a difference in Canadian attacks. However, the common First World War issue of limited artillery mobility was still very much a reality and when Canadian soldiers were deep within the German defensive network, they often found themselves out of range of their artillery and thus far more vulnerable. Canadian training in small unit tactics and open warfare prior to the battle did however play a significant role in allowing the corps to advance and overcome very well defended German positions. It's clear from Stewart's account that the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division (which received the least amount of open warfare, small unit training prior to the battle) struggled at certain points where the other divisions did not, and thus highlighting clearly how important training in the emerging style of open warfare was during the Hundred Days Campaign. Stewart also highlights the fact that the Canadian Corps enjoyed very real structural advantages in terms of material and manpower and this, while not the sole deciding factor on the battlefield, was certainly an important component of Canadian success. Stewart does not pull punches when it comes to the commanders overseeing the battle. He identifies some serious German command errors in the face of the Canadian attack and is also not shy in critiquing Canadian and British commanders. In particular, Commander in Chief Douglas Haig comes off poorly, showing a lack of understanding of the realities of the battlefield his forces faced and much of Haig's naivety regarding the objectives he set forth for the attack further affected decisions being made from Arthur Currie on down.

Stewart's book is an important contribution to the historiography of the Canadian Corps and its fighting doctrine. No book that this reviewer can think of goes into as much detail exploring the course of a single Canadian battle of the First World War and does so in a



way that clearly shows a deep understanding of the Canadian Corps fighting doctrine and why the Canadian Corps was so successful during the Hundred Days Campaign. While this book lends itself to a very specific aspect of the Canadian war experience it is nonetheless valuable for any academic seeking to better understand how the Canadians fought in 1918, why they were successful while also understanding the changing nature of warfare that characterised the final months of the First World War.

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