

# Obituary

## Sam Hughes, Historical Officer

Tim Cook

The Honourable Sam Hughes, who passed away in the summer of 2002 after a long and distinguished career as an Ontario Supreme Court Judge, had a little-known link to Canadian military history. In addition to being the grandson of Sam Hughes, the mercurial Minister of Militia and Defence from 1911 to 1916, and the son of Garnet Hughes, who had commanded the 1st Brigade and the 5th Infantry Division during the Great War, Sam Hughes was an historical officer with Colonel Charles P. Stacey's Army Historical Section during the Second World War.

Born in 1913 to one of the most recognisable military families in Canada, Sam Hughes was named after his famous grandfather and grew up in the United Kingdom. He returned to Canada in 1928 with his father, who, having put aside his military career, was now an engineer. After finishing his education at Upper Canada College, Sam Hughes enrolled at the University of Toronto, where he won a Massey Scholarship to Oxford. He studied history and developed a passion for it. But, like so many young scholars then and now, he emerged from university quite unsure about what he wished to do next. After a brief stint at teaching, he enrolled in the law program at Osgoode Hall in 1939. The Second World War interrupted his plans. He joined the officer training corps and thereafter enlisted as a lieutenant in the Queen's Own Rifles.

He was overseas by the winter of 1941-2, and was eventually posted to Canadian Military Headquarters in London, as a junior intelligence officer. As Hughes was an Oxford-trained historian, however, it was not long before C.P. Stacey, whose Army Historical Section shared



the same building, had set his eyes on him as a potential historical officer.<sup>1</sup>

Since his appointment as Army historical officer in early 1940, Stacey wrote dozens of narratives relating to mobilization, training and logistics. As well, Stacey encouraged war diarists to keep more accurate and inclusive records, which would someday be needed by future historians, soldiers, and civilians to fully understand the war. In short, the historical officer was required to ensure that records were created and that he understood the operations well enough to write accurate historical reports for the future official historian, who had not yet been named.

When the federal government demanded a written explanation of the disastrous Dieppe raid in August 1942, General Andrew McNaughton, the Army Commander, turned to Stacey to produce a report. Stacey did succeed in furnishing the High Command with an account, but he insisted and received confirmation that the historical section would be informed of and included in all forthcoming operations, and that historical officers would accompany fighting units in the field.<sup>2</sup>

To this end, Stacey began to build his team of historians. In October 1942, George Stanley, the prominent historian of Western Canada, was appointed as assistant historical officer. By the summer of 1943, Stacey had obtained the services of Hughes to act as a field historical officer to record the actions of the 1st Canadian Division and 1st Canadian Armoured Tank Brigade that were soon to be engaged in the Sicily campaign. However, this proposal to send an

*Captain S.H.S. Hughes*  
Watercolour by Charles F. Comfort

historical officer into the field to document the actions of various units took the 1st Division's senior officers by surprise. To some, this historian had the appearance of a headquarters spy. Despite Stacey's explanation of the precise role of the historical officer, George Kitching, the GSO 1 for the 1st Division, felt more comfortable appointing one of his own officers.<sup>3</sup> Major Guy Sesia, a Montrealer who spoke Italian, was given the post. Stacey, simply anxious to have an historical officer at the sharp end of war, acquiesced. Sesia rose to the occasion; he worked with headquarters staff to gather and ensure the creation of records, interviewed participants, and wrote a narrative of the operation.<sup>4</sup>

It became increasingly clear that more Canadians would be sent to the Italian theatre of war following the Allied invasion of Italy in September 1943. The commander of 1st Canadian Division, Guy Simonds, requested more historical officers to help document the Canadian war effort. Stacey ordered Sam Hughes and war artist Charles Comfort to go to Italy to capture the war in print and paint.<sup>5</sup> The two met at Aldershot where they were soon loaded on ships carrying troops to the Mediterranean. Comfort described Hughes as "a spirited companion, with a refreshing sense of humour and a staggering knowledge of history. He was of average size, with a spare athletic body, lean intelligent face, rather thick steel-rimmed glasses, thinning wispy brown hairs, thin for one so young."<sup>6</sup> Although Comfort recounted feeling out of place, Hughes, with his military experience, was appointed Provost Marshal of the ship. Still, few men about to embark for battle could understand what role an historical officer or war artist would play in defeating Hitler; Comfort mused that some must have wondered if the Army would next be sending over "ballet dancers!"<sup>7</sup> After disembarking, the two officers trekked north to join the Canadian forces, and both began working in November 1943 as part of the 1st Canadian Field Historical Section (1st CFHS).

Hughes mixed well with fellow officers, interviewing, messing and drinking with battalion, brigadiers and staff officers; he was

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an insider, not a war journalist or some scribe who did not understand soldiering. As Hughes gathered historical material and tried to form some sort of coherent narrative from the chaos of paper, senior officers began to rely on him for information. Several times Hughes's reports were sent up the chain of command and studied for tactical lessons.

Life in the field was exceedingly difficult. During the winter of 1943-44, Hughes was plagued by inadequate supplies, cold temperature and drizzling rain. Furthermore, the historical officer, like other soldiers, soon became sleep-deprived and exhausted. Despite these privations, Hughes carried on with his work. When W.E.C. Harrison, a Queen's professor and commander of the 1st CFHS, arrived to check on Hughes in the winter of 1943, he remarked of the awful weather and the heavy shelling from German artillery. "Sam Hughes remained outwardly unperturbed by the



Captain S.H.S. Hughes, Historical Officer  
Watercolour by Charles F. Comfort

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discomforts of the situation," he wrote, "although I have never seen anyone disappear more quickly than on the three occasions when Jerry's planes came over. I admit that I studied Sam's technique with interest and before I left I could disappear as quickly as he did."<sup>8</sup> With the Canadians engaged in vicious fighting to capture Ortona, Hughes recounted to Stacey that "at the present time it is difficult to find people in key positions with any leisure to talk and I am waiting until the situation becomes a little more stable before I make any further visits to units."<sup>9</sup> Hughes would not be deterred, though, and Harrison later noted that because of "his addiction to duty," Hughes was continually tracking down officers to interview, hounding war diarists to include important and significant information in their diary entries, and never took a moment to relax.<sup>10</sup> Hughes and his fellow historical officers carried out an important historical job under difficult conditions, and Stacey was always impressed by the trials that his officers overcame in the pursuit of history.<sup>11</sup>

After Hughes had spent nearly a year in the field, Stacey ordered him back to England to sift through the archival records that he had collected in order to craft a narrative. In 1945, Stacey and Hughes wrote a small historical booklet on the Italian campaign, *From Pachino*

*To Ortona* in December 1943. Lavishly illustrated with images of Canadian war art, the history was one of three that came out before the official historical sketch in 1948.<sup>12</sup> In addition, during the repatriation period, Hughes penned a pamphlet, *After Victory - What?*, for the service men.

Hughes was to be demobilized towards the end of 1945, but Stacey pleaded to keep him on as his special liaison officer in London. Although Hughes was anxious to see his wife, Helen, Stacey goaded him that "it would be a shame if Sir Sam Hughes' grandson were to be less than a lieutenant-colonel."<sup>13</sup> Hughes was promoted and remained in London until April 1946, helping to supervise the collection of key documents and the destruction of the mundane and administrative ones. He was also research assistant for Stacey, now Army official historian, in tracking down gaps in the historical record. Stacey wrote to Hughes in March 1946, for instance, that he was "anxious that we should now do our utmost to arrange for the interrogation of important German commanders who were engaged against us in Italy on the same lines as is already being done in connection with North-West Europe."<sup>14</sup> Hughes coordinated this project, as well as writing the narratives relating to the Italian campaign.


Another of Hughes' duties was to assist the small number of Canadian war trophy collectors that included Captain Farley Mowat, the future award-winning author, who travelled across Europe gathering material for the Canadian War Museum. Their list of artifacts and material history was impressive, with over nine hundred tons of small arms, signals and rocket equipment, numerous vehicles, and even several Panther tanks, a miniature submarine, and a V-2 rocket. In the end, Hughes was the conduit for many of the artifacts that were sent back for safe-keeping in Ottawa. Sadly, when this material history collection arrived in Canada, it was broken up, scattered across the country, and abandoned to rust in storage areas. Only a small portion seems to have been deposited with the war museum.<sup>15</sup> Although Stacey wished to keep Hughes on as an historian, and it seems likely that the official history for the Italian campaign would have been his to write, Sam Hughes returned to Osgoode hall to finish his studies. He went on to have a brilliant legal career.

Sam Hughes is best remembered as an Ontario Supreme Court Judge and chair of the difficult Royal Commission that investigated child abuse at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland. However, along with the rest of the historical officers in the Second World War, Hughes played an essential role in ensuring that the actions of Canadian soldiers were documented for future generations. His memoirs, which Hughes published in 2000, were entitled *Steering the Course*; it is clear that he helped to do that not only for the legal system in Ontario but also for generations of Canadian military historians.

## Notes

1. For the work of the Army Historical Section during the Second World War, see Tim Cook, "Clio's Soldiers: Charles Stacey and the Army Historical Officers in the Second World War," *Canadian Historical Review* (March 2002); and C.P. Stacey, "The Historical Program of the Canadian Army Overseas," *Canadian Historical Review* (September 1945).
2. RG 24, v. 12756, 24/OPERATIONS/ 1, Stacey to BGS, 28 September 1942; Montague to HQ, First Army, 26 September 1942; Brigadier C.R. Stein to Senior Officer, CMHQ, 1 October 1942.
3. C.P. Stacey, *A Date With History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1983), p. 118.
4. The best account of Sesia's time in Sicily is his diary in RG 24, v. 10878, file 233C1.Oil.
5. RG 24, v. 12756, 24/OPERATIONS/ 1, Rodger to DAG, 31 August 1943. It was agreed on 31 August that Hughes and Comfort would replace Sesia and the war artist Will Ogilvie.
6. Charles Comfort, *Artist At War* (Pender Island, BC: Remembrance Books, 1995 - original 1956), pp.3-6.
7. Comfort, p.6.
8. RG 24, v. 12756, 24/OPERATIONS/2, Harrison to Stacey, 14 January 1944.
9. Ibid, Hughes to Stacey, 21 December 1943.
10. Ibid, Harrison to Stacey, 19 February 1944.
11. RG 24, v. 17505, War diary, 25 December 1943. Also, see the correspondence by Stacey in RG 24, v. 12756, 24/OPERATIONS/1.
12. C.P. Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945: An Official Historical Summary* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1948). The other two historical booklets were *Canada's Battle In Normandy* and *The Canadians In Britain*.
13. Sam Hughes, *Steering the Course: A Memoir* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), p. 120.
14. RG 24, v. 12744, 24/AAI/ 1 /6, Stacey to Hughes, 12 March 1946.
15. Farley Mowat, *My Father's Son: Memories of War and Peace* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992), pp.280-335.

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## USED BOOK SALE

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