

The Canloan Story

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Wilfred Smith. *Code Word Canloan*. Toronto:
Dundurn Press, 1993.

In the Second World War, infantrymen had a short lifespan in combat, the risk of death, wounds or battle exhaustion appallingly high. As might be expected, it was the leaders, NCOs and platoon and company officers, those who had to expose themselves to fire to motivate their troops, who suffered disproportionately. After four years of war the British army was desperately short of junior officers and Canada, with only one division in sustained action by July 1943, had an apparent surplus. That was the genesis of Canloan, a plan to secure up to two thousand volunteers from the army in Canada for service with the British.

In fact, as Wilfred Smith makes clear in *Code Word Canloan*, the reality fell far short of the expectations. Only 673 volunteers could be secured (a group that included fifty Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps officers needed for the Royal Army Ordnance Corps), for many junior officers in Canada showed no greater eagerness to volunteer for the fighting than did home defence conscripts. But those who did step forward were highly motivated—they wanted to get overseas as soon as possible and they wanted to fight the Nazis. While most probably would have preferred to serve with their own countrymen, there was a mystique about the British army that attracted many; others had come from Britain or had close family ties; still others had served with militia regiments that had bonds of affection and allegiance with sister regiments in the U.K.

The material was good and National Defence Headquarters, its eye firmly fixed on the public relations aspects of the scheme, was desperately anxious to ensure that the Canloans would reflect only credit on Canada.

The Canloan officers arrived in England between April and July 1944 and ended up scattered across 63 regiments although an astonishing 23 Canadians served in the 7th King's Own Scottish Borderers, an airborne regiment. Smith, the Dominion Archivist from 1968 to 1984 and himself a Canloan officer, thus had the extremely trying task of producing a coherent narrative out of a host of disparate experiences. He has done the job very well indeed, focussing first on the Canadians' reception in their regiments and then on the battles and, while giving enough context to keep his readers moving forward, highlighting the services of individuals.

Clearly the initial shock of joining their units was severe. The British regiments sometimes treated the Canadians like "Colonials" and that rankled, but no "us" and "them" situations seemed to develop. Some of the Canadians were troubled by the gap between officers and men which was much wider than in Canada. Others worried that they might fail to pass the port in the proper direction at mess dinners for regimental traditions, even in wartime, were still maintained. Although the Canadians had been given crash courses in

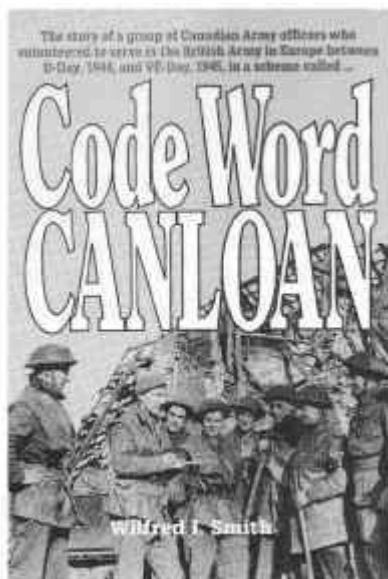
mess etiquette so they could use their knives and forks like good Brits, there were minor problems. Another difficulty was language. As every Canadian knows, the British speak a variety of languages with only the most modest connection to English. In one instance, a Canloan officer found himself with one of his Cockney soldiers at a disciplinary hearing and, when asked to corroborate the man's story, the Canadian had to confess that he had not understood a word the man had just said.

The immediate difficulties overcome, the Canloans performed superbly in action. Their regiments grew to appreciate Canadian informality and adventurousness, the COs seemed to believe that all Canadians were innately masters of fieldcraft and patrolling—the *coureur de bois* heritage presumably—and they sought all the Canadians they could get. Only twelve Canloans drew adverse reports from their COs and only two were dismissed outright, an astonishingly small percentage. Those who served suffered terrible casualties: a 75 per cent casualty rate which included 128 dead. Canloans garnered a host of decorations, almost a hundred in all. Most important for readers without a personal connection to the Canloan story, Smith offers useful insight into the experiences of leading men in action, speaking frankly about fear and courage and offering some useful thoughts on what used to be called (in the days before political correctness) man management. He also writes tellingly about how limited the knowledge of a platoon commander was in action. A lieutenant knew his front and his flanks and little else, and so isolating was battle that some Canloans were not even aware that others were in the same battalion.

A few Canloans will be known to historians. The late Harry Crowe, a giant bull of a man, won a Military Cross with the Welch Regiment, his citation lauding his courage, disregard for danger, and devotion to duty, all traits that his

colleagues at York University would come to appreciate. Wilf Smith, who served with the Wiltshire Regiment and was wounded in action, didn't get a gong, but he undoubtedly developed the sang-froid and imperturbability that characterized his direction of the Public Archives of Canada. Others made their mark in every field of endeavour from the regular army, to the public service, to law, to business, and to farming.

What Smith does not do is tell us who the Canloan officers were in the mass. The nominal role suggests impressionistically that they were much like Canadian officers generally—largely Anglo-Saxon in origin but with substantial numbers of francophones and ethnic Canadians (who seemed, on Smith's recounting, to have done just as well with their platoons as those of Anglo heritage). We learn nothing of their collective educational attainments or of their places of origin and such data could have made the book more useful. Nor does he make clear that within a few months of the Normandy invasion the First Canadian Army could have used those Canloans in its own ranks—Canadian junior officers were killed in action after 6 June 1944 just as fast as the British.



But this is carping. Wilf Smith has produced a very good book about a group of Canadian officers who served their country well as military ambassadors (military high commissioners simply doesn't have the proper ring) to the British army. The high esprit that the Canloans had and still have (of which this book is only the most recent sign) demonstrates their proud awareness of this.

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