

Canadian Infantry: Besting the Best

Gil Drolet

Terry Copp. *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade 1939-1945*. Stoney Creek, Ontario: Fortress Publications, 1992. 208 pages. \$34.95.

For this study of soldiers at war, it would have been difficult to pick a more representative Canadian group than the Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, part of what insiders were to call the "Hard-Luck Div," the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. Because of his extensive work on the *Maple Leaf Route* series (with Robert Vogel) and his pioneering analysis (with Bill McAndrew) of the devastating effects of combat stress (*Battle Exhaustion*), Copp is on familiar terrain in trying, quite successfully as it turns out, to restore respectability to narrative history as an acceptable and legitimate method of reexamining certain contentious aspects of the struggles of the Canadian army in North-West Europe from mid-1944 to late spring 1945. With respect to leadership, motivation and performance, Copp, impervious to controversy, makes effective use of source materials (though limited in breadth) to fly in the face of convention and advance theories and uncover truths that may not be well received in certain circles which for too long have been content to allow the sleeping dogs of myth to lie undisturbed. (The word "lie" may be construed in either of its two principal senses.)

Copp is part of what is rapidly becoming a tradition in competent history circles. He does not set out deliberately to sculpt clay feet onto idols made so in the blind heat of patriotic fervour but using sound research he and others (too numerous to mention) have reduced these epic figures to human

proportions rightly ascribing to them more faults than qualities when such is the case and measuring the effects of these shortcomings in the bloodied columns of casualties.

Like Britain in 1914-18, Canada had its rich crop of mediocrities in the later war. Some were put into positions of power through the "old boys" network which often proved to be incestuously nefarious and only rarely and fortuitously beneficial. Fortunately, for every Foulkes there was a Matthews but frequently not until too high a price had been paid. Contrary to the tendentious contentions of TV personalities who dabble in hysteria, Canada is blessed with some historians who seldom flinch from criticizing when it is warranted.

However, this does not preclude their being queried when they proffer weakly supported beliefs. Copp, for instance, has long believed in the mass patriotic fervour animating the first volunteers in 1939. In *The Brigade*, he questions the belief that the men of St. Henri (*Bonheur d'occasion; The Tin Flute*) all enlist for jobs after years on unemployment. Roy bluntly states that many of her people had found "*le salut dans la guerre*." Admittedly, her Emmanuel Letourneau is an idealist concerned for the fate of Poland, and Azarius, crestfallen at the fall of France, wants a piece of Hitler's mustache, but for many, the rifle was the first instrument of work they had had in their hands for years. One of Roy's denizens cynically dismisses an indifferent democracy now crying for help from those it had previously abandoned. This passage is paralleled almost exactly in Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* where the central character speaks in much the same way about the country that has no use for him and those who like him at the moment but which will soon call on him (and them) to dispel the gathering clouds of war. Hugh MacLennan puts these final words to the tune of "The Old Grey mare" — "there are no bums in the Jarvis

Street Station; They're all in the Army now." (*The Watch that Ends the Night*). Perhaps the best description of the range of reasons for enlisting (outside Private Xavier Gagnon's diatribe in Jean Vaillancourt's unjustly neglected *Les Canadiens errants*) is found in Lemelin's *Les Plouffe* when he refers to the countless young men watching a religious procession in Quebec City who "would soon join the ranks of the 22nd or of the Chaudieres either out of a sense of adventure or to revive muscles atrophied through unemployment or out of a strange need to give of themselves." (author's translation)

But in another area Copp has made a significant contribution to righting a wrong that has persisted for far too long. Because one of the units in the Fifth Brigade was *Le Regiment de Maisonneuve*, he has taken a step that should have been taken by others long ago. Largely because of its lukewarm attitude towards the war, French-Canada's considerable contribution has been falsified, neglected, or ignored by historians and others. The reasons vary from ignorance, through inability or unwillingness to communicate, to mean-spiritedness. Legless and blind in one eye, the recently deceased Major Fred Tilston, probably one of the worthiest Victoria Cross winners in all of history, was hurt and angered at ceremonies in a Canadian military cemetery when some of the veterans began to boo when they were addressed in French. Tilston pointed to some of the graves amongst which these men stood to prove theirs was not the only language spoken by those they were there to honour. But we have seen books dealing with Dieppe which relegate Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal (FMR) to footnotes or ignore them completely (as in the caption on page 74 in the first issue of this journal!) Atkin's *Dieppe 1942* and Mellor's *Forgotten Heroes* refer to all the units liberating Dieppe in 1944 which had taken

part in the 1942 raid except for the FMRs. Were 119 killed (including 8 officers), 161 wounded and 233 prisoners not worthy of mention? Copp, mercifully, has begun to rectify this injustice by analyzing the not inconsiderable effort of the Maisies in helping to achieve ultimate victory in Europe. By using the unit's war diary, its padre's excellent reminiscences and the authority of several of the regiment's gallant officers, the Maisies can stand shoulder to shoulder with their mates from the Black Watch and Calgary Highlanders. Their most successful colonel, Bibeau, had led his unit longer than any other CO in the 2nd Division. Bibeau and men like



Cantlie of the Black Watch and Ellis of the Calgaries made it all bearable despite the stupidities and shortsightedness of higher authorities. This raises the subject of "Montgomery's Measurement," i.e. his evaluation of the capabilities of various Canadian units and their officers. His assessment of the FMRs in January 1942 was that most of the battalion's officers and its CO (Grenier) were very poor. Whether this judgement was accurate or not, Grenier himself was replaced on 1 April by Dollard Menard, who as an outsider had to prove himself to the unit, but who in a short period of time whipped the battalion into good shape which

may explain their being included in the Dieppe raid of that August. Menard, notwithstanding his recent pronouncements, was an inspirational leader and a worthy predecessor to Guy Gauvreau and Jacques Dextraze. There is no way those who knew or fought under P.P. Loranger, Guy Vandelac or Bob Hainault would accept Montgomery's verdict of "Poor." I am tempted to ask facetiously: "Who measured Monty?" (Jubilee? Market Garden?)

Because Copp's first intention was to write a regimental history of the Calgary Highlanders, it is only natural that *The Brigade* leans more towards them but there is a fairness and equilibrium in his treatment of all three units and throughout there is a solid thread of respect and admiration for the men in the ranks. Copp tries his diplomatic best to walk the tightrope created by tensions between Brigadier Megill and certain elements of the Black Watch which have never fully forgiven the fiasco of Verrieres Ridge and other costly actions. Copp remains fair to both sides yet can not avoid, as a good historian, referring to serious internal conflicts due to personality clashes and intransigence on the part of some in the unit whose clannishness denied merit when it was evident to all but them. Such close-mindedness was not particular property of the Black Watch. All units suffered from it at one time or another but in some where tradition was more rigid and steeped in a long past which spanned centuries and oceans, it could be and was sometimes counterproductive.

There are some errors in *The Brigade* which may seem innocuous to the general reader. On page 4, Lieutenant-Colonel Scott is pictured wearing a colonel's badges of rank and on the next page the soldiers in the top photo captioned as Calgaries are really Seaforths.

More seriously but not Copp's fault there is a major problem with the transcription of French names. Major Leon Brosseau, D Company commander, killed in action, is referred to as Lucien. Killed in the same action is the mortar platoon commander, Captain Orieux, referred to in the book as Oriens. A friend of this reviewer, Major Alex Angers, shot through the throat, is referred to as Alexander not as Alexandre, which is his real name. These may seem small errors but in work such as this, precision is most desirable if only out of respect. In a three-line quote requiring simple transcription (p.111) there are five mistakes. An alert and qualified proof reader could have spotted these errors.

Copp's conclusion that the Canadians proved the equals, indeed, the betters of their enemies is contrary to the impressions created by Canada's dean of military history, C.P. Stacey. The tendency in Stacey's time was to perpetuate the Canadian propensity to self-denigration: something which Copp and others are no longer willing to accept. The performance of the officers and men of 5 CIB bears witness to their forbearance in the face of the staggering odds stacked against them emanating paradoxically at times from the pettiness and incompetence of some of their own superiors. Had they been trained in the best way to meet the realities of the battlefield? At a very heavy cost, they bested those who had for too long been considered the best. The leadership, Copp correctly concludes, had been much too slow in realizing the absolute need for adequate force-ratios to overcome well-equipped and desperate defensive forces.

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