

The Suicide Battalion

James L. McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion*, St. Catherines: Vanwell Publishing, 1993, 228 pages \$14.95.

This is a fascinating and frustrating account of the 46th Canadian Battalion during the First World War. The fascination derives from the depiction of the life of ordinary soldiers in this hard-luck battalion from the Canadian prairies. Initially recruited from Moose Jaw and Regina, the regiment was also known as the South Saskatchewan Regiment — the "suicide" nickname apparently was added later by battalion members. In May 1915, the men of the 46th moved to Camp Sewell, shortly afterwards renamed Camp Hughes in honour of the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes. Five months later, in October 1915, the 46th sailed to England and became part of the 10th Brigade commanded by the Militia Minister's younger brother St. Pierre Hughes. Al-

most immediately the battalion was broken up and some 800 men were sent to France as replacement drafts for other Canadian battalions already in action.

The great fear of those remaining with the battalion was that they would not rebuild with sufficient speed to go with the rest of the 10th Brigade to France. However, the South Saskatchewan had the bad luck to make the deadline at the expense of its prairie background. Replacements for the 46th were "partially trained men from every corner of the Dominion." When the battalion arrived in France there was little time for additional training. Almost immediately, the South Saskatchewan moved to the Somme battlefield arriving in time for the melancholy attack on Regina Trench.

Initially the attack was a complete failure. But the insufficiently trained and inexperienced 46th Battalion was thrown into the attack. After taking Regina Trench and almost immediately attacking Desire Trench, the battalion was left depleted and exhausted. But the description of this action, using the soldiers' accounts, is fascinating. Mac McDonald's wounding, Jim Butterworth's search for his brother Dick, John Copp sending to the mother of his friend her dead son's signet ring, all of these and other stories — each a wonderful anecdote, convincingly told — make this part of the book completely believable.

Following Regina Trench, indeed for the remainder of the war, the 46th never missed a major action which involved the Canadian Corps. Casualties were usually high, luck was frequently bad, and the men almost beyond words. The publishers "Fact

Sheet" indicates that the "narrative includes many personal accounts, some written seventy or so years ago and others recalled more than half a century later." While these accounts are convincingly quoted, it is impossible to tell where or when they were originally made. For a historian anxious to distinguish contemporary observations from distantly recalled events this is very frustrating. Equally annoying is the fact that the book was written without benefit of recent scholarship on the war. The work on tactics by Bidwell and Graham, Bill Rawling or Tim Travers would have been useful to the authors as would Desmond Morton's accounts of the daily life of soldiers and the "peculiar politics" of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada. The most recent book cited in the bibliography was a 1987 book by Daniel Dancocks; in the notes the most recent title is Sixsmith's 1970 volume on *British Generalship in the Twentieth Century*. Casualty figures often differ from the official history, but no sources for them are cited. Long disproved myths are repeated in the book, and the general context of the war is sometimes unclear. Such frustrations aside, the book is a good read. An interesting and useful appendix provides thumbnail sketches and post war stories of the men and officers mentioned by name in the text.

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