

**When Your  
Number's Up**  
The Canadian Soldier in  
the First World War

Desmond Morton. *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War*, (Toronto: Random House, 1993) 354 pages, \$32.50.

**W**hile the exploits of the Canadian Expeditionary Force at Vimy Ridge, St. Julien and elsewhere along the Western Front have been documented thoroughly, the individuals who made up the ranks of the CEF have not been considered in any great depth. With this intent in mind Desmond Morton has

written his latest book, *When Your Number's Up*, which examines these Canadian soldiers and "the factors that shaped their lives and hastened their deaths." [p.vii].

The study is informed by an impressive array of existing scholarship on the First World War, much of it Morton's own work. In addition, the author has examined a wide variety of primary material, including diaries, letters and correspondence of Canadian soldiers. He is thus able to capture, in an anecdotal fashion, the experiences of these men, thereby providing a uniquely personal perspective on Canada's role in the conflict.

Morton begins his study by assessing the nation's response to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, noting that for most Canadians, war seemed "a remote, romantic adventure." He illustrates the unbridled fervour which characterized the first weeks of the war in Canada, culminating with the departure of the First Contingent of the CEF in early October. As recruiting continued, however, it gradually became apparent that Canadian enthusiasm for military service had its limits. Sam Hughes' Department of Militia was soon forced to resort to increasingly imaginative recruiting schemes. By the fall of 1915, Morton suggests, somewhat charitably, "Anyone with a bright idea and access to the Minister" could organize a battalion for overseas service, [p.57] Judging by the turmoil that ensued in many parts of the country, it would seem that "bright" ideas were not always a necessity.

Despite spirited recruiting efforts, Morton maintains that by late 1916 the well of volunteers had largely run dry. He discusses the unrest that accompanied conscription, noting that while

compulsory service has since been condemned as a needless and oppressive, such charges are largely the product of hindsight. Indeed, had the war continued until 1920, as the Allies anticipated, the necessity of conscription would have been quite evident. Morton follows the soldiers of the CEF in their preparations for war, arguing that much of their training in the first years of the conflict was of limited value. He recounts the experience of one Canadian corporal on manouevres in England, who, after ordering his section to crawl forward to capture a machine-gun post, was informed by a reproachful staff officer that "No British soldier crawls into battle on his belly!" [p.90] Both in Canada and England, the training regimen proved woefully inadequate for the grim conditions that the soldiers would encounter at the front.

While insufficient training coupled with inexperience often led to disastrous losses early in the war, Morton argues that as the conflict progressed, the CEF was able to develop effective tactics. After the devastating experience of the Somme, a battle characterized by Canadian soldier Frank Maheux as "worse than hell," the author contends that a tactical "revolution" took place as the Canadian Corps regrouped in front of Vimy Ridge. With the refocussing of tactics at the platoon level, Morton suggests that "Canadian infantry would be organized and trained to fight their own battles and not be patriotic automata." [p.164] As the war progressed, Canadian success increased as the infantry improved upon its new tactics of fire and movement. At the same time, the artillery "mastered a practical science," with devastating effects.

In addition to tactics, Morton explores some of the bleaker realities facing Canadian soldiers. Perhaps the most graphic section of the book addresses the nature of wounds and diseases at the front. Relying on the accounts of soldiers, surgeons and nurses, complemented by several rather chilling photographs, Morton relates clearly the grisly assortment of fates that befell many men. Prisoners of war suffered under dreadful conditions as well. While in theory they were protected by the dictates of the Geneva Convention, the author demonstrates that captured Canadian soldiers were often mistreated and malnourished by their captors.

Morton concludes his study on a bitter note, with a discussion of the reintegration of the members of the CEF into Canadian society at the end of the war. The author is critical of the response to the needs of veterans, noting that while programs were devised for the rehabilitation of many soldiers, such plans soon fell by the wayside as Canadians found more pressing problems. With the depression of 1921, funds for disabled veterans' jobs all but disappeared. As Morton notes caustically: "Employing them had turned out to be more patriotic than profitable." [p.271]

In addition to providing a vivid portrayal of the experiences of the soldiers who comprised the CEF, Desmond Morton has captured the changing nature of the war in which they fought. Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the evolution in the conditions faced by soldiers at the front, in the tactics they employed in battle, and in the nature of the Canadian society from which they emerged. It should be noted that the study relies heavily on the author's previous work in this

area. Readers familiar with Morton's many studies of the CEF and Bill Rawling's recent book on tactics will find that *When Your Number's Up* contains few new revelations regarding the Canadian experience in the war. Nonetheless, the book provides intriguing glimpses of many aspects of the struggle through the eyes of Canadians who participated, at the same time helping to dispel the misleading image of the First World War as a static and meaningless conflict.

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