

The first duty of the historian, so it seems to me, is to establish what happened: the facts. After that, if he chooses, he can go on to the perhaps more important task of establishing *why* it happened, and philosophizing about its importance in the cosmic scheme of things. But his first job is to find out what actually took place.

"The sources he has available for the job come from people, and they fall into two great categories: what people *say*, and what people have *written*. (After all, even the most ponderous official document had an author, or authors; though these may remain severely anonymous.) In assessing the value of both these categories of evidence, the vital element is that of time: *when* did the witness say it, *when* did he write it? The human memory, one soon discovers, is a very frail instrument. Our American opposite numbers, the historians of the European Theatre for the U.S. army, with typical American scientific spirit set out to establish just how long it took a soldier's memory of a battle to fail. Their experiments led them to the conclusion that this happened in *six days*. I shouldn't care to commit myself to this precise formula, but of the general principle there can be no doubt. The validity of a written account of an event, or an interview concerning it, is directly related to

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## Battlefield Interviews

### The Channel Ports, September 1944

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the length of time that elapsed between the event and the moment when the account was written or the interview took place. I have no hesitation in saying that one scrap of paper written on the evening of the battle is worth reams of reminiscence written down or spoken into tape recorders after months or years have passed. The best historical evidence is evidence recorded *at the time*.

"It is true that it is often necessary to interview people long after the event in order to fill gaps in the story. I did a great deal of this myself. But it is something that should be done only when the contemporary written evidence fails you; and the oral evidence should be checked with care against such contemporary written records as are available. The interviewer, moreover, should prepare himself by reading the written evidence before the interview. In that way he will not only be able to assess the value of what he is being told, but he will be equipped to prompt the person he is interviewing and assist him in reviving his recollections of old times.

"On the course of a battle, one document is superior to all others as a source of information: the operations log which is maintained at every headquarters. Here the historian has before him the record of information received and sent out, of orders given and received. Every entry is timed. The record is strictly contemporary; it is almost wholly impersonal; and it is maintained, not for historical purposes, as the unit or formation war diary is, but as an instrument for fighting the battle. (The log, however, in the Second World War was preserved as an appendix to the diary, and was in practice the most important part of it.) If a division's log is available, you can write the history of that division's part in the fight with confidence; if it is missing, you are hamstrung."

C.P. Stacey, *A Date With History*  
(Ottawa, 1982)pp.229-30.

To ensure that the historical record was written down as close to the event as possible Colonel Stacey organized historical sections for both Italy and North-West Europe. A war artist and an historian were provided for each division. For Third Division, Orville Fisher provided the art and Jack Martin the carefully recorded interviews with participants in each battle. The "Accounts" which follow are classic examples of Martin's work. He interviewed key officers and NCOs from each battalion involved in the battle for the Channel Ports as soon as possible after the actions. The purpose was to "establish what happened." In the case of the Canadian Scottish, Martin had to wait until a lull in the battle of the Scheldt because immediately after Calais the Canscots had to prepare for their role in the crossing of the Leopold Canal. Stacey and other historians have used these interviews to supplement the message logs and war diaries as the basic sources for operational history. CMH will publish other examples of this type of source material in future issues.