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CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3C5, CANADA

Phone: (519) 884-0710 ext.4594; Fax: (519) 886-5057

Email: mbechtho@wlu.ca

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Editor-in-Chief	Terry Copp
Editor, Winter 1999 issue	Jack Hyatt
Managing Editor	Mike Bechthold
Canadian War Museum Editor	Cameron Pulsifer
Book Review Supplement Editor	Jonathan F. Vance
Business Manager	Ev Jones
Layout & Design	Mike Bechthold

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Canadian War Museum

General Motors Court
330 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0M8

The mission statement of the Canadian War Museum is: "To share in the remembrance of, and serve as a memorial to those Canadians lost in, or as a result of war; to examine the war and war related history of Canada and its effects upon Canada and Canadians; and to document Canada's commitment to peacekeeping and the maintenance of international security." To this end the CWM maintains an exhibition facility with three floors of galleries, and a collections building housing close to half a million artifacts.

The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies

The purpose of the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS) is to foster research, teaching, and public discussion of military and strategic issues of national and international significance. The Centre is intentionally multi-disciplinary; it has strong commitments in military history, with emphasis on the Canadian experience, and in strategic and operational studies, with emphasis on disarmament. LCMSDS supports both basic and applied research as well as teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition, the extensive program of LCMSDS workshops, conferences, public lectures, and publications encourages informed discussion of international security and of Canada's national interests in military and strategic issues - past, present and future.

The Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies was founded in 1991 as a Research Centre affiliated with Wilfrid Laurier University. Its primary support has come from the Department of National Defence and from Wilfrid Laurier University. The Director of the Centre is Dr. Marc Kilgour, Professor of Mathematics, and the Co-Director is Professor Terry Copp, Professor of History.

From the Editor

In a recent editorial in this journal Professor Terry Copp issued a call for a new paradigm of military success "other than the fact that operations which do not accomplish all of their objectives 'fail.'" It was derived from the Goodman lecture series which Copp delivered at the University of Western Ontario. For me these were the best-delivered, and probably the most stimulating, lectures in a series which has been running since Charles Stacey gave the first lecture in 1976. Copp began his argument by drawing attention to Steven Spielberg's very popular movie and its "powerful rendering of life and death on Omaha beach." He suggested that the movie contained "a vision of the American soldier as a reluctant and effective warrior," and he linked this with some of the main themes of American military historiography. Copp then compared this with the approach which has "been dominant in Canadian universities and military colleges" since C.P. Stacey published *The Victory Campaign* in 1962. In the book overall success in Normandy was achieved in spite of "failure on the battlefield...[which] was the product of the inexperience, the inadequate training...and the poor quality of many regimental officers." Copp argues that Stacey's view was accepted by British, American and Canadian writers until John A. English published his study of Normandy in 1991. English's book attributed Canadian failure to close the gap at Falaise and the struggle at Verrières Ridge to the "shortcomings of the Canadian High Command" particularly its "failing to develop appropriate leadership, training or doctrine." English then replaced Stacey as the standard explanation of Falaise and Verrières, and Copp concludes that it is "long past time for a different paradigm."

In his lectures Professor Copp persuasively argued that fighting in the Anglo-Canadian sector of Normandy was a battle of attrition similar to much of the fighting in the First World War. Under those circumstances "there are no reasonable grounds" for believing that the battle's outcome could have been different than it was. *This argument not only provides the most satisfactory explanation for the Canadian*

Battle of Normandy so far produced, but it is the new paradigm that Copp calls for. This must be underlined because it both ties together the experience of Canadians in two world wars in a most plausible way, and it represents a new level of interpretation of Canadian military history. This said, much of the rest of this editorial is a rather niggling carp at assumptions and asides found in Copp's editorial which are not central to the main thesis.

To start with my least important reservation, I would have been happier if he had skipped Steven Spielberg and started with Stephen Ambrose. Spielberg was enormously popular, but it is hard to accept the tongue-in-cheek aside that Ambrose can now be dismissed as a "popularizer." (Surely, historian's take themselves too seriously for such levity?) My real complaint is that *Saving Private Ryan* is not a very interesting or accurate movie. It begins with an overwhelming 20 minutes of violence which is sufficiently realistic to upset many of the veterans who have watched it. But the message of the movie is hardly original - the 'war is hell' theme places it at the end of a long line of Hollywood flicks. The notion that General George C. Marshall could have condoned such a hair-brained scheme as Ryan's rescue is an insult to one of America's greatest military leaders. In the movie, moreover, Tom Hanks' platoon crosses the French countryside in a fashion more reminiscent of a Sunday picnic than an infantry platoon in enemy territory. The movie at best is mediocre and probably owes its popularity as much to Spielberg's use of, and the American public's lust for, violence as it does to any other factor.

More important is Copp's argument that many American and British historians "have portrayed the British, American and Canadian armies as deeply flawed organizations with serious morale problems." One can understand and accept Copp's dissatisfaction with these arguments. Copp's insistence that those who "imply that there were alternate operational and tactical methods of winning [in Normandy]...at

less cost should develop a reasoned case...instead of simply asserting that the decisions taken were wrong," is the cry of a historian watching ordinary soldiers, junior officers and other ranks, struggling to solve the problems of attrition. Stacey on the other hand was struggling to describe the big picture and to get the official history published. And he was trying to do so while dealing with bureaucrats and politicians who were eager to cancel the official history. Copp acknowledges that Stacey was "strongly influenced by his own wartime relations with senior army officers and the professional pre-occupations of the post-war Canadian Army," and sees this as a serious weakness.

Stacey's official history requires no defence. It has already been subjected to all the usual attacks leveled at such publications and still ranks among the best official histories produced after the war. It is, however, worth mentioning that before his death Charles Stacey came to believe and publicly said that some of his criticism of Canadian operations in Normandy was too harsh. Until I listened to Copp, I had not thought of Stacey, or John English for that matter, in the context of their backgrounds. English's emphasis on the failure of the Canadian High Command to develop "appropriate leadership, training or doctrine" surely reflects his background as a professional soldier as much as Stacey's writing reflects his "professional pre-occupations of the post war army." Training and doctrine are the professional soldier's tools for acting correctly in crisis situations. Is it so strange that English saw deficiencies in doctrine as debilitating?

There are some other things about Stacey and his generation of Canadian military historians - I would include George Stanley, Dick Preston, Gerald Graham and Richard Glover - on which one might reflect. They were the first generation of Canadian historians to accept the notion that armies reflect the societies which produce them. Today regarded as a truism which hardly needs to be repeated or recalled, it should remind us that military history is not just what occurs during war. Nor can the study of military history

be limited only to the military establishment. The success of this journal is abundant testimony to the appeal which the study and interpretation of Canadian battles continue to have. We should all be encouraged and stimulated by the call for new paradigms for study our war history. We should remember also to include the relationship between military history and the writers of that history. Sometimes it also includes the historical examination of our contemporary armed forces.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging recent events for students of the armed forces occurred when a Minister of Defence sought the opinions of historians and other scholars to solve a critical problem. Alas, before action on this excellent advice could be taken, the Minister was removed from office by the voters. The sorry state of the Canadian armed forces since the end of the Cold War fairly cries out for historical examination. In Canada, politicians mainly express concern about the armed forces only from the opposition benches. Governments are more likely to cut defence expenditures and armed forces while simultaneously sending those forces to participate in "peacekeeping" and "peacemaking," operations which to historians often seem very like war for which our soldiers are ill prepared. Forcing servicemen aloft in Sea King Helicopters in which there is little crew confidence could be compared to forcing the 1st Canadian Division to keep the Ross Rifle in 1915. The sorry story which preceded the Airborne Regiment's disgrace in Somalia remains largely uninvestigated thanks to the glacial slowness of investigating commissioners and the reluctance of the government to continue the investigation. Recognition of the need for greater emphasis on military education in Canada leads to the closing of two of our three military colleges. There seems to be no end to the subjects which might be investigated by writers for this journal. Perhaps it is time to call for a new set of paradigms for the Canadian armed forces. Meanwhile, for Canadian soldiers there seems to be "no life like it."

Jack Hyatt
University of Western Ontario
May 1999