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Per Ardua Ad Astra: A Concise Guide to Canadian Personnel Records and RCAF Service Information of the Second World War

Timothy Dubé

CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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Canadian War Museum

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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

Canada's military history is vastly more complex and more interesting than the one I studied in school. When I entered university, now some 25 years ago, military history was limited to operational narratives and campaign studies - the siege of Louisbourg, the taking of Quebec, the capture of Detroit, and Vimy Ridge - and to the stories of those people who had done great military things - Boscawen, Montcalm, Tecumseh, and Currie. While texts were often a pleasure to read, they were just as commonly short on analysis. Also absent from these histories were any references to the soldiers, sailors, and airmen, to their equipment, and to their conditions of service.

Canadian military history has evolved, embracing subjects and methodologies akin to social, cultural, labour, and intellectual histories. The result is a fuller, richer representation which reaches beyond the specific events. Military historians have not abandoned the operational narratives and campaign studies or memoirs and biographies, what they have abandoned is a military history that excludes soldiers, sailors and airmen. To achieve this, the official military record is interweaved with the private personal account.

Today as an archivist, I play two pivotal roles in the re-writing of Canadian military history: the traditionally recognized one of "guardian of the record," preserving the archival record and making it available to others; and a broader, less obvious one, as a "creator of the record," through decisions that are made about what is kept and what is discarded. Those actions to seek out certain records and to destroy others, will result in "silences" - gaps in our history. It is my desire that these "silences" are minimal.

This editorial, and the articles selected for the journal, are about filling the "gaps" in Canadian military history.

One of the greatest challenges for the Canadian military historian wishing to incorporate the "little man" is the difficulty in locating references to him, for here the official

record has many "silences." Tim Cook has produced a masterful analysis of one element in the life of the Canadian trench soldier of the First World War - rum. He shows that it was rum and other comforts that most affected the individual soldier; grand operational plans mattered far less. Moreover, Tim reveals that it is in the documentation created by the "lowly rankers" themselves - their letters, diaries and memoirs - that the important role of rum is revealed. Historians who fail to make use of such records should take note.

I had first suggested to the staff at *CMH* reprinting a *Canadian Defence Quarterly* article on tumplines, written by F.R. Phelan in 1928, to complement Tim Cook's article. *CDQ* was the military's one journal from 1923 until the outbreak of the Second World War. Within its pages important officers, such as Tommy Burns, Harry Crerar, Maurice Pope, Kenneui Stuart, Guy Simonds, and C.P. Stacey, contributed learned articles or argumentative think pieces on military and foreign policy questions and on military history, providing real insights to the mind of the Canadian military officer of the 1920s and 1930s. So you might imagine my reaction to learn that this journal had to be retrieved from the University's 'dormant storage' because it had not been consulted in years! (In case you can't, it was first shock, followed by anger, and finally pity and sadness that students had been denied access to this record.) Phelan's article, with the addition of several illustrations, appears as an example of what students are missing.

At a recent presentation to the Canadian Aviation Artists Association, Laura Brandon, Curator of War Art at the Canadian War Museum, asked the question, "Can you have an aviation painting without an aeroplane?" In the audience was Bill McRae, a wartime fighter pilot, who went one further, "Can a pilot write an aviation memoir without aeroplanes?" The answer to both questions is "Yes" and the results are seen in Bill's article "Bed and Breakfast." This is not a typical wartime fighter pilot's memoir, yet it is probably very typical of the experiences of those Canadian airmen of the Second World War. Perhaps it will

also spur other veterans - soldiers, sailors and airmen - to write of their experiences?

My recently-retired archival colleagues Owen Cooke and Peter Robertson contribute a joint piece on the Canadian military photographer James Peters. The article reveals how a record - in this case the photograph - can have multiple uses, for Peters' photographs not only tell us a great deal about the Northwest campaign of 1885 but, when used with other records, they serve to document the evolution of the battlefield.

Finally, I have "called my own number" by contributing a piece on the variety of records available for documenting the Canadian airman and airwoman of the Second World War. Initially presented at the joint Air Force Historical Conference / Canadian Aviation Historical Society Convention in 1999, it has already proven useful to several veterans producing memoirs. It appears here to expand these possibilities.

As the study of military history progresses away from the central viewpoint of the tactician

or the constructor of memoirs and biographies, more will doubtless be revealed, if the archival sources allow, about the lives, conditions and equipment of Canada's soldiers, sailors and airmen. Canadian military history will be richer for this.

Finally, I wish to leave you with this thought. The personal archives of the Second World War - the diaries, letters, and photo albums - are largely found today in the attics and basements of this country, and like the veterans of that war, are daily disappearing. What histories could be written with these records?

Timothy Dubé
February 2000

[Note from Editor-in-Chief: Wilfrid Laurier University together with the University of Waterloo and the University of Guelph operate a combined library storage facility. Journals such as the *Canadian Defence Quarterly* can be retrieved within twenty-four hours.]

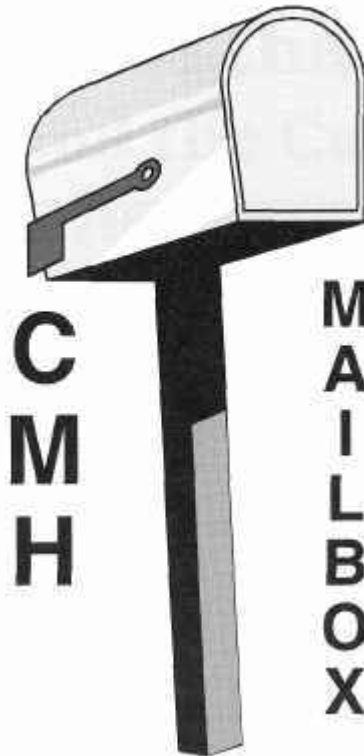
Dear Sir,

As a follow-up to my article which appeared in the last issue of your journal ("1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in the Ardennes," pp.59-68) I would like to make one observation that is constantly on my mind, and is seldom, if ever, mentioned in all the histories of World War II. It is the simple fact that our Canadian forces in the field of battle were for all time out-gunned, and out-equipped by the German military. It has become legendary that in Normandy our troops came to fear the German 88 mm gun as well as the incredible accuracy of their mortars. During one period it was so nerve wracking that our troops were afraid to rattle a mess tin for fear of getting a mortar shell for dinner.

Throughout all the action in Northwest Europe, from Normandy to the Baltic, it was an accepted fact that our forces were never able to match the Germans in any of the weapons of war - from tanks to uniforms and clothing, as well as all small arms.

It is an amusing fact that by the time our Battalion reached Wismar on the Baltic, and linked with the Russians, many of the men in my platoon and in the company, were equipped with German weapons, including side arms. Many of us managed to get hold of the German tanker jacket, which was lined, and many others were using the fur vests that German troops used. (Rabbit fur jackets and vests came from a German supply depot we captured in the town of Graven near the Weser River. We found enough of these to equip half of "B" Company). This was done for comfort, as well as a replacement for our Jump Smocks, which by this time were torn and soiled.

My photo (shown on page 64 with the wrong initials) shows me wearing a German tanker jacket with no insignia, (my original jacket had been shredded in a mortar explosion). The German jacket had the advantage of being quilted and warm, plus it was waterproof. Standing beside me is Doc Warnock, one of my section sergeants. He is wearing the normal "Dennison" smock which we all used. Our normal Dennison smock was an excellent cover for parachuting, it had 10 pockets to carry gear, including a



sleeve for ampules of morphine and first aid. The smock was made of heavy denim, un-lined, camouflage, and ideal for fighting in moderate weather, but totally inadequate in winter. I had to get rid of the German jacket soon after this photo was taken when the Colonel and Brigadier ordered us to get rid of all our foreign equipment.

Our battalion, like any Airborne unit, did not have the luxury of a supply column with us in rear, and once in combat, we had to scrounge for all we could get. In the Ardennes, it was not until we reached Holland that our QM Supply Train reached us and we got our first hot food, plus some socks, warm gloves and rubber boots or shoes. That is not a criticism of the supply system, it simply makes the case that Airborne troops are lightly equipped for fast, in and out roles, and no one knew at the time just how bad the situation was in the Ardennes, or what our mission would be.

Years ago, when I was in Holland, I visited the superb Museum at Arnhem in the Hartstein Hotel, near the famous bridge. The lower rooms of the museum had a comparative display of uniforms, weapons and equipment, German on one side and British/Canadian on the other side.

In going through the exhibit I came to realize that almost every piece of equipment used by the Germans, from mess tins to weapons, was in every way superior to anything we had.

I don't think that any Canadian who saw action from the foxhole would disagree that the German equipment and weapons were in every way superior to anything we had. In terms of small arms, the Sten Gun, which I was required to jump with, was largely a piece of Rube Goldberg, cheap plumbing and most of us discarded it for the German Schmeisser, or an American carbine or M-1. The PIAT was also a joke, compared to the German Panzerfaust.

Those veterans who saw frontline service in infantry regiments will recall with much frightening memory the terrible sounds made by German armour as it approached. The Tiger and Panther had tracks and bogies which made a unique sound of grinding metal and squeal of tracks over the roar of the engine. In fog and bad weather, with limited visibility, those sounds were enough to strike fear into the most hardened soldier.

Front line soldiers, who had to face the enemy, will tell you the kind of fear that was raised, when facing tanks with the terrible 88s, and the machine guns, firing at twice the rate of anything we had.

It seems to me that all this is a testament to the courage and stamina of the "dog face" in the trenches, to carry forward under long odds, to defeat an enemy who was better equipped and better prepared. I can only conclude that it is all a tribute to the Canadian soldier who managed to "stick it out."

My thanks for your magazine. "AIRBORNE."

R.F. Anderson
Toronto, Ontario

Dear Editor,

In your summer 1999 issue you published an unsigned article titled "A Case of Mistake Identity," about the identity of the man in the white shirt standing next to Major David Currie in the famous photograph taken at

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CMH Mailbox - continued from p.5

St. Lambert-sur-Dives in 1944. The article says that in the book *South Albertas: A Canadian Regiment at War*, published by this company, he is misidentified as Corporal G.L. "Pete" Woolf.

The man in the white shirt was identified as Corporal Woolf in the first printing of the book because many who served in the regiment with Woolf, including men who fought alongside him at St. Lambert-sur-Dives in August 1944, believed this to be the case, and continue to do so to this day.

It has been the established policy of the South Alberta Regimental History Committee, in cases of disagreement over the identification of persons in wartime photographs, not to provide any identification. For this reason no identification was given for the man in question in his second printing of the book and this policy will prevail in subsequent printings.

I would not wish it thought that the author and publisher of *South Albertas: A Canadian Regiment at War*, and the Regimental History Committee, had not given this matter much careful consideration.

Yours sincerely,
Robin Brass, Publisher,
Robin Brass Studio Inc.

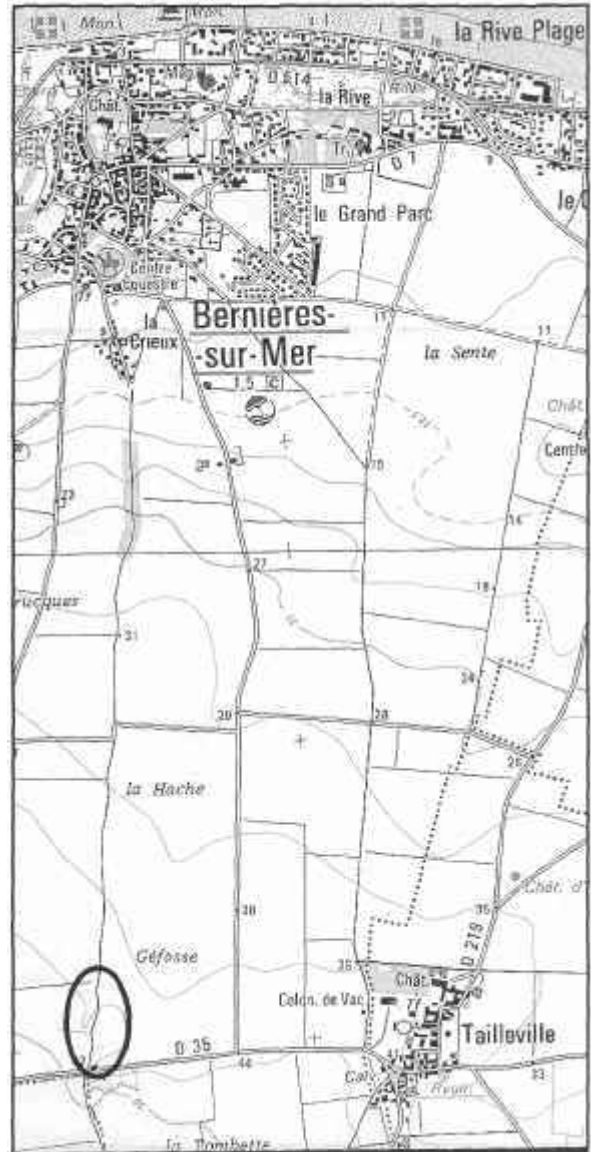
Dear Sir,

Ilecture in the Security Studies Institute, headed by Professor Richard Holmes, and am responsible for taking groups of British officers on staff rides and battlefield tours. After a staff ride to Normandy in August 1999, I accompanied a French military engineer to inspect and, if necessary clear, a short sunken lane, highlighted on the enclosed maps, 3 kilometres south from Nan Beach and Bernières-sur-Mer. No wider than a vehicles' width, its significance was that built into the banks for about 500 metres, and totally obscured from view, were eight small ammunition bunkers, long since empty. Each had walls and a roof of reinforced concrete, with entrances facing inwards towards the lane. We are not

sure what they were for - perhaps air defence ammunition, or possibly a connection with the nearby Douvres Radar site. It was suspected that some munitions might have been left lying about but none was found. We did find an unexploded German rifle grenade, about 250 metres north of the D35, half way down the lane at the foot of the eastern bank, which justified the clearance, and alerted us to perhaps a very minor footnote in military history, but one I found interesting.

For several metres around the grenade, my colleague found several score bullet heads, which we later deduced were 9 mm and 7.92 mm, all embedded in the eastern bank of the land. They ended near an unexploded mortar round, and suggested a firing position above the western bank. Sure enough along the woodland and in the field were 7.92 and 9 mm cartridges, with the odd live round. Also scattered around were many large fragments of shell, which suggested they had come under artillery fire/tank fire. Most poignant of all was the British-style military boot - almost intact - found at the base of a tree in the land.

Clearly what we have here is the site of an ambush, the Germans above the lane to the west, firing down onto a group of (presumably) dismounted Canadian soldiers advancing from the north. The presence of the boot suggests Canadian casualties, and the shell fragments a retaliatory bombardment. But all of this is



Scale 1:25,000
1 cm - 250 m

speculation. Without direct access to Canadian archives I can only guess, but I wonder if anyone was aware of such an ambush in this vicinity, presumably on D-Day itself? It appears to have been on the route of Le Régiment de la Chaudière.

With best wishes,
Peter Caddick-Adams TD, BA
Royal Military College of Science
Security Studies Institute
Cranfield University
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