



2007.06.02

Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944–1945*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp. xi, 407. ISBN 978-0-8020-3925-5.

Review by Matthew Trudgen, Queen's University—Kingston, ON (pc matt_2000@yahoo.ca)

In 2003, Terry Copp, a Professor Emeritus of history at Wilfrid Laurier University¹ and one of the Canada's leading military historians, argued in his *Fields of Fire*² that the Canadian contribution to the Battle of Normandy had not been a failure. He also contended that historians have greatly underestimated the performance of First Canadian Army in that campaign. Now, in *Cinderella Army*, he seeks to extend this argument to the Canadian experience in Northwest Europe from the conclusion of the Normandy campaign to the end of the war in May 1945.

Copp begins his work at the end the battle of the Falaise Gap. At this point, after a brief summary of the state of the various formations of First Canadian Army, he moves on to chronicle its operations at the divisional and the regimental levels. These operations included the freeing of the channel ports of Calais and Boulogne, the clearing of the Scheldt around the vital port of Antwerp, the capture of Walcheren, the launching of Operation Veritable in Germany in winter 1945, and the liberation of the Netherlands to close out the war.

Through an examination of these engagements and offenses, Professor Copp makes his case that, while the operations of First Canadian Army were often problematic,³ they were still generally well executed. He demonstrates that the Canadian forces in France and the Low Countries were an effective instrument of war and, as the smallest army group in the armies of the Western Allies, played a disproportionate role in the victory over Nazi Germany. Copp also contends that historians have generally overrated the German Army's performance against the Canadians. For example, he observes that elite German units, including parachute regiments, often suffered heavy losses in their engagements with Canadian forces.⁴ Moreover, he is critical of the German doctrine of immediate counterattacks to regain lost territory, since these attacks often exhausted the only operational reserves available to the Germans, reserves they would have done better to use in a defensive role. He adds that these counterattacks became so predictable that the Western Allies, including the Canadians, deliberately launched operations to provoke them as opportunities to wear down German forces.⁵

¹ Professor Copp is also the director of the Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and Disarmament Studies in Waterloo, ON.

² Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: U Toronto Pr, 2003).

³ It should be noted that Professor Copp finds little evidence to support the idea that a "learning curve" was at work in First Canadian Army in 1944–1945.

⁴ E.g., on 10 October at the village of Hoogerhiede, the 6th Parachute Regiment sustained over 500 casualties in an attempted counterattack against Canadian units.

⁵ Canadian General Guy Simmons called this approach the "battle of the counter-attacks."

Throughout this book, Copp stresses the difficulties that First Canadian Army faced from late summer 1944 to May 1945. These included a lack of reinforcements for the rifle battalions to replace losses suffered during the Normandy campaign. He blames the Canadian high command, which, despite evidence from the battles of Sicily and Italy, had seriously underestimated the casualties that First Canadian Army would suffer once it had landed in France. As a result, the system of providing replacements had not been improved, and this, combined with the inability of the Canadians to break up existing formations to meet their manpower needs, meant that most of their rifle companies were under strength.⁶ Other problems discussed include the issue of battle exhaustion and how the Canadian Medical Corps addressed it. In addition, Copp argues that the Canadians were not given enough resources to complete many of their tasks, most notably the clearing of the Scheldt in order to open the Belgian port of Antwerp to Allied shipping. Despite the importance of this port for the supply of the Allied armies, the commander of 21st Army Group, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, did not give the Canadian operations around Antwerp a high enough priority, owing to his focus on the drive for the Ruhr, even after the failure of Operation Market Garden in September 1944. As part of this argument, Copp discusses the deteriorating relations between Montgomery and Admiral Bertram Ramsey, who was critical of Montgomery's lack of attention to Antwerp. As well, Copp criticizes General Dwight Eisenhower for his unwillingness to be more forceful in his relations with Montgomery,⁷ and Field Marshal Alan Brooke for his intrigues behind the scenes on behalf of Montgomery.

With this work, Copp has produced an excellent history of the operations of First Canadian Army. The book's best feature is its detailed descriptions of the Canadian operations at the tactical level, the fruit of Copp's extensive examination of regimental war dairies and other historical documents, along with his many research trips to the battlefields of 1944–1945. The result is that the reader gains a thorough understanding of the Canadian operations in this period. Indeed, Copp's description of the capture of Boulogne and Calais is particularly good in conveying how skilled the Canadians were in overcoming various problems to achieve their objectives. In addition, his detailed analysis shows how offensives were designed to wear down the German divisions rather than achieve the rapid and dynamic breakthroughs one almost expects for the Allies in 1944–1945.

Copp's comprehensive research also yields some interesting side stories. One example is how it was left to the commander of the 1st Canadian Parachute Regiment to make sure that the German town of Wismar stayed out of Soviet hands in May 1945. Moreover, Copp includes a good discussion of the overall strategic situation as it affected the Canadians, and

⁶ E.g., the British Army was forced to break up a number of formations in 1944 to make up for losses during the Normandy campaign.

⁷ Not surprisingly, General Eisenhower noted the problems of coalition warfare: "History testifies to the ineptitude of coalitions in waging war. Allied failures have been so numerous and their inexcusable blunders so common that professional soldiers had long discounted the possibility of effective allied action unless available resources were so great as to assure victory by inundation. Even Napoleon's reputation as a brilliant military leader suffered when students ... came to realize that he always fought against coalitions—and therefore against divided counsels and diverse political, economic, and military interests"—Robert Scates, "Trust, Not Technology, Sustains Coalitions" *Parameters* (Winter 1998) 4–10.

well-argued criticisms of Montgomery and Alan Brooke for their neglect of First Canadian Army during the clearing of the Scheldt.

Despite the overall high quality of the work, it does have a few weaknesses. Ironically, one is the meticulous detail itself that Copp provides about the operations of First Canadian Army, which can be somewhat overwhelming. Furthermore, a short section describing the capabilities of the weapons used by the Canadians would have been most helpful, particularly for readers without an extensive background in the history of the Second World War. Likewise, a short glossary of the terms and abbreviations used in the book would have been useful. There are also some curious omissions: for example, Copp does not mention the close relationship between Canadian General Guy Simmons and Field Marshal Montgomery, which had developed when Simmons served under Montgomery in the Italian campaign in 1943.⁸

Furthermore, Copp is overly negative in his assessment of the performance of German Army. While he is certainly right to criticize the German doctrine of immediate counterattacks, he overlooks that the German Army was a shadow of its former self due to the pounding it had taken on the Eastern Front. In addition, tactically it was facing Western Allies enjoying both complete air supremacy and superior manpower and equipment. In light of these difficulties, compounded by the loss of tactical flexibility due to orders from Hitler and other commanders⁹ forbidding retreat, it was indeed a great accomplishment that the Germans fought as well as they did on the Western Front in 1944–1945.

A final point is that Copp does not examine in detail the political crisis that erupted in Canada over the decision by the government of Prime Minister Mackenzie King to send soldiers who had been conscripted for home defense to Western Europe in 1944.¹⁰ This is not a criticism so much an observation, since this work is very different from most histories of Canada's involvement in the Second World War, where the problems of conscription and the fears of a split between English and French Canada are of paramount importance.

Cinderella Army is an excellent work and a worthy sequel to *Fields of Fire*. It is a must read for anyone interested in Canadian military history and will set the standard for years to come for books on the history of the First Canadian Army from the end of the Normandy campaign to the liberation of the Netherlands.

⁸ One work that notes this relationship is C.P. Stacey, *A Date with History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Toronto: Deneau, 1982). Stacey was the former official historian of the Canadian Army during and after the Second World War, and later Professor of History at the University of Toronto.

⁹ Including Field Marshals Walter Model and Gerd von Rundstedt.

¹⁰ For those not familiar with Canadian history, the issue of conscription in both World Wars was extremely controversial due mainly to the opposition of French Canadians to being forced to fight for the British Empire. Nonetheless, in both conflicts, heavy battlefield losses and a shortage of volunteers meant that the governments of the day eventually introduced conscription. During the Second World War, it was done gradually. First in 1942, conscription was introduced for home defense. Then, in fall 1944, a lack of trained replacements forced the government of Prime Minister King to send 16,000 conscripts to Europe. For more information, see J.L. Granatstein, *Conscription in the Second World War, 1939–1945: A Study in Political Management* (Toronto: Ryerson Pr, 1969) and R. Douglas Francis, et al., *Destinies: Canadian History since Confederation* (Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000).