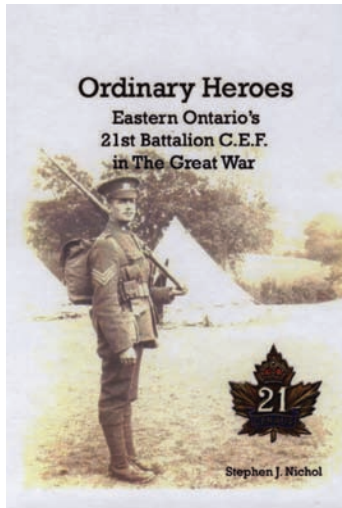


## ORDINARY HEROES: EASTERN ONTARIO'S 21<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION C.E.F. IN THE GREAT WAR

NICHOL, Stephen J. Privately Published, 2008, hardcover, 350 pages, \$50.00, ISBN: 978-0978415303

Major Andrew B. Godefroy, CD, PhD



During the First World War the Canadian Army raised 260 infantry battalions for overseas service. Of these, 46 infantry battalions (plus four mounted rifle battalions) served with the Canadian Corps on the western front, and by the end of the war each of these “fighting” units had carved out a tremendous legacy for themselves. Sadly, only some had their stories told following the Great War, as the official history project failed and units were left much to their own devices to preserve their legacies. Though many units did manage to write and publish histories in the decades following the war, many others still did not, and to this day, these forgotten battalions wait silently for someone to fill the void.

Stephen J. Nichol's *Ordinary Heroes: Eastern Ontario's 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion C.E.F. in the Great War* represents a vital step towards filling the gap in Canadian Great War battalion histories. The author's interest in the subject began with his own service in the battalion's

perpetuating unit, the Princess of Wales' Own Regiment (PWOR), and over the years that followed he collected a wealth of information concerning the battalion from a wide variety of sources. Though the book is crafted in the narrative chronological format typical of this genre, Nichol's vast knowledge of this subject has enabled him to adapt his work to much wider audience, providing a level of readability and detail to satisfy both general audiences as well as the more focused researcher. At approximately 350 pages, the book contains everything one could desire to know about this infantry battalion, from its mobilization through to all its battles, to the details of all the officers and the men who served in its ranks.

Though a self-admitted “amateur” historian, Nichol has risen to the occasion and produced a first rate examination of an infantry battalion at war. His attention to historical detail is evident throughout the text; Nichol has made extensive use of both primary and secondary sources, has properly identified and included details of the many German units the battalion faced in battle, and has included the most complete honour and nominal rolls of the battalion published to date. Most important, his inclusion of many personal accounts from the battalion newsletter, *21<sup>st</sup> Battalion Communiqué*, serves to bond the entire story together, as well as put a very human face on the terrible business of warfare.

Being a self-published work the book is understandably less polished than professionally produced volumes, consequently, there are some aspects of this history the reader will miss. Maps of the many places mentioned in the book are too few and far between, and those offered are simply reprints of older (and sometimes inaccurate) official maps. As well, the book has no index, making it extremely difficult to track down the names of individuals described throughout the text or appendices. Still, these oversights do not detract from what is otherwise a very readable and well-researched effort.

These days, battalion histories may seem passé to some. Yet, just as with politics, all history is local and these narratives capture the core of the social fabric that bound the Canadian Army together during the First World War. Stephen Nichol is to be commended for lifting the history of a fighting battalion out of the shadows, and for continuing the tradition of battalion histories nine decades after it began.