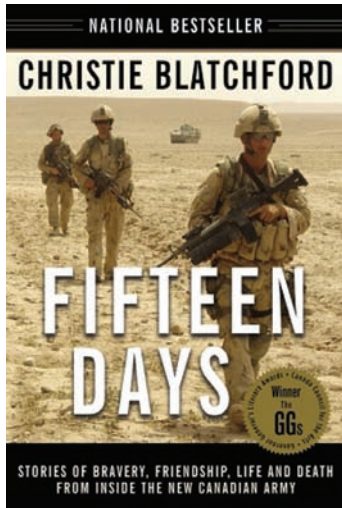


FIFTEEN DAYS: STORIES OF BRAVERY, FRIENDSHIP, LIFE AND DEATH FROM INSIDE THE NEW CANADIAN ARMY

BLATCHFORD, Christie. Scarborough: Doubleday Canada, October 2007, hardcover, 400 pages, \$34.95, ISBN-13: 978-0385664660

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If we are wise, we are told, we should not judge a book by its cover. In this case, we would be very foolish not to. Blatchford's *Fifteen Days* delivers exactly as advertised: it is chock full of stories of bravery, friendship, life and death. Covering two deployments of Task Force Orion, based on First Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and the Second Battalion, the Royal Canadian Regiment, to Afghanistan in 2006, *Fifteen Days* chronicles first-hand and vicarious accounts of short, often intense, encounters. The book has a singular subject: the Canadian soldier, and yet it covers that singularity in all its facets: from comedy—including fart jokes—to tragedy—including the grief of friends and survivors—to something in between—including drunken funerals in Newfoundland. What's more, it delivers these stories very well.

Indeed, that being said, it is perhaps more interesting to discuss what *Fifteen Days* is not. It is not Military History, it is anti-History. Absent is discussion of occupation, objectives, or operations. For those in search of context, look elsewhere. This book is, as advertised, a look at the events and results of fifteen days, not with omniscience or chronology, but with curiosity, admiration, and compassion. In doing so, Blatchford may be forgiven some mistakes (she describes Special Forces operatives as experts in counter-intelligence) and a few phrases that are jarring and out of place (she describes 1 PPCLI as a killing machine).

The book's effect is quite unsettling. Blatchford offers us a glimpse at true characters, (mostly) men and (some) women with simple perspectives, a love of life, and a deeper love of their friends. *Fifteen Days* provides a personal introduction to the contemporary Canadian Army, a subject largely unknown within Canada, made not by an expert, but a fan. Stripped of any pretence of detached objectivity, we enter a world where the observer's abiding love of her subject produces a closeness, an intimacy, that is truly disarming. "I can hardly bear to write about them sometimes, I find them so beautiful," Blatchford admits. The reader who finishes this book a-lachrymionously is a hard case indeed.

At the same time, though, the reader, though moved, will have almost no idea of what these soldiers are doing in Afghanistan. They are laughing, crying, smoking, and dying floating free against a dusty, foreign, frighteningly violent backdrop. Setbacks—outright catastrophes—outnumber successes by a wide-margin. There is no reason here, only acting; no becoming here, only being.

In this sense, *Fifteen Days* is a postmodern tale *par excellence*. The deaths of soldiers—and there are many—cannot be called sacrifice because we are not sure what they might be sacrificed for. There are no villains (except mild ones, perhaps, in the higher-ups who issue silly orders or refuse to permit Remembrance Day reunions) because it is not clear where right and wrong are drawn. Afghanistan as a *mission* does not exist. We are not asked to believe any justification—not *burka*, not school, not well, not Karzai—that might explain why the clay grew tall.

Fifteen Days, with its focus on death and the lives that surround it, is an extended eulogy, a tribute to Canadians that most Canadians never know. It contains elements of

a classic funeral oration: talk of soldiers' deeds and a mention of those, like parents, who are left to grieve. But here Blatchford plays foil to Pericles; her oration pays homage not to Athens, but to its soldiers. Where he speaks of principles and institutions at home, she conveys the lives of people who fight and die far away. Unlike Abraham Lincoln, who at Gettysburg entreats those who come after the fallen to ensure their deaths were not in vain, Blatchford asks nothing of us. Hers is not a lament. Unlike Rick Hillier, in his tribute to Sgt Short and Cpl Beerenfenger, Blatchford draws no lines between subject and object. Hers is not a lecture.

Blatchford's book is an introduction, an introduction to people remarkable in their ordinary aspect. An introduction to the recognized, like Major Bill Fletcher, recipient of the Star of Military Valour for his leadership under fire. An introduction to the agonized, like Lieutenant Colonel Ian Hope, who bears the weight of a dozen souls lost. An introduction to the idealized, like Captain Nichola Goddard, the haunting voice on a radio, a woman and a pioneer. An introduction to Everyman, soldiers and Canadians all, some dead, like and Regimental Sergeant Major Robert Girouard, Sergeant Vaughn Ingram, and Private Andrew "Boomer" Eykenboom. And some yet living, like Lieutenant Trevor Greene and Sergeant Willy MacDonald, and Corporal Keith Mooney. Its pages brim with their dusty smiles, their candid admissions, their fears, their blood.

In our current age where war touches the lucky majority of us lightly, our vestigial vow—Lest we Forget—is cheapened without this book. Because to remember, we must first know. With *Fifteen Days*, Christie Blatchford helps us to gain a small measure of that requisite knowledge.