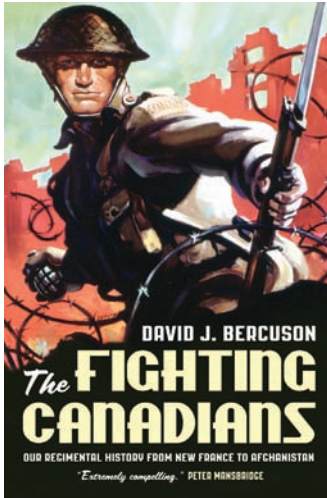


THE FIGHTING CANADIANS: OUR REGIMENTAL HISTORY FROM NEW FRANCE TO AFGHANISTAN

BERCUSON, David J. Toronto: Harper Collins, 2008, hardcover, 386 pages, \$34.95, ISBN-13: 978-0002007344

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Few elements within the Canadian military experience are as likely to raise the passions of soldiers, or academics, as much as the deceptively simple question as to the continued relevance of the regimental system in the 21st Century. Proponents and detractors abound, with arguments as diverse as their creator's backgrounds and experience.¹ Recently, noted historian and scholar David Bercuson entered this arena, with the publication of his latest work *The Fighting Canadians: Our Regimental History from New France to Afghanistan*. Bercuson is no stranger to the Canadian Army, or indeed to this subject matter; his previous books on World War Two, the Korean Conflict, the Patricias, and the experiences of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, form a foundation of credibility that few other scholars can match concerning the Canadian Army.

His stated intent is "to portray regimental cohesion under the very trying circumstances of war in order to demonstrate why Canada's soldiers still place so much value on the regimental tradition." In this, he succeeds. The book is a series of comprehensive illustrations of unit-level combat from across the breadth of Canadian military history. The chapters he devotes to the British and French experiences prior to the Twentieth Century alone commend this book to the reader. They are territory that is often forgotten by contemporary soldiers, and they clearly show the roots of the regimental system within Canada. Relying on secondary sources, which he clearly details for those who wish to gain further insight into a particular event or battle, this is well-written popular history which takes the myriad events of our Army's history and makes them accessible to a wide audience.

However, by Bercuson's own admission it is a work that is light on the theory of what makes our own particular version of the regimental system work. Readers who want to understand precisely what the regimental system is, why it is accorded such importance, or even how it functions in anything other than combat may be disappointed. To be fair, this was never part of the author's intent, although critical readers will find that he raises many unanswered questions.

Neither the American army nor their Marine Corps use the regimental system, yet they are arguably among the most combat-effective forces on the planet. If they do not need a system based on regiments, why do we? Similarly, although we preach the regimental system to all and sundry, we seem to take a perverse pleasure in bastardising it as it suits us. One only need examine the current practice of mixing sub-units from different regiments on operations, or incorporating members of numerous different regiments as individual augmentees, to see that the Canadian Army is hardly loyal to the system which it claims has historically given it a success-enabling degree of strength and cohesion. Separately, there is the fact that for the vast majority of time regiments are not actually in combat, and yet it is in these periods that the regiments work to build the cohesion that will see them through the trials of warfare. These periods are not covered at all. Readers interested in seeing

how the Canadian Airborne Regiment carried out its last military duties, or understanding the effects of the rebadging of the Black Watch and the Queen's Own Rifles (respectively to the Royal Canadian Regiment and the PPCLI) will have to look elsewhere.

That being the case, however, this book does offer some valuable perspectives which many other omnibuses of battlefield experiences tend to overlook (arguably because the book benefits from being the work of one author with a common theme throughout). First, it ably shows that rather than comprising one regimental system, there are at least three different systems at work within the Canadian Army. Each corps (artillery, engineers, armoured and infantry) has a slightly different take on the system and its application. Though the book has a definite infantry focus, Bercuson does discuss this issue with at least two of the vignettes focussing on armoured actions.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, *The Fighting Canadians* demonstrates that Canada's application of the regimental system has been extremely flexible and completely dynamic. Regiments may have traditions, but any reader will quickly see that our use of the system has varied so much over time that to call it a tradition is to border on misuse of the term. As Bercuson shows, we have re-roled regiments, amalgamated them, re-named them and completely disposed of them as the need arose; whether for political expediency or military efficacy, our use of the regimental system has been anything but consistent. Whether this is a perversion of the intent of the regimental system, or an aspect of its inherent flexibility, may be the single biggest question demanding an answer.

The only real negative critique that can be made regarding this work is that the author's intent may have been too limiting. A book detailing both the theory and the application of the regimental system within Canada would be incredibly valuable as our army experiments with the "optimized battle group," and forces the system to evolve yet again. However, such a book would likely be very complex and would probably have far less broad appeal than that which Bercuson has produced.

Any member of a regiment named in the book will likely be quite interested in Bercuson's accounts of the actions of his or her unit. They will also benefit from seeing that their regiment's experience in combat is but one thread in the tapestry of our military history. It is too easy to fall into the trap of believing that it is only the history of one's particular regiment which matters. This book showcases the actions of a broad swath of Canadian regiments and should help widen perspectives in this regard.

Those that would argue either for or against the continuance of the system should also find this book to be valuable. Although it may be more evidence than argument, it provides a firm grounding in many of the actions where Canadian men and women fought and died. Whether you subscribe to the idea of regiments as an entity, or feel that they are an outdated system that no longer has a place in the contemporary environment, *The Fighting Canadians* clearly shows the path we have taken to get where we are.

Endnote

1. See for example, Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Banks, "A Comment on 'The New Regimental System,'" *Canadian Army Journal*, Volume 7.1 (Spring 2004), 86-90.
