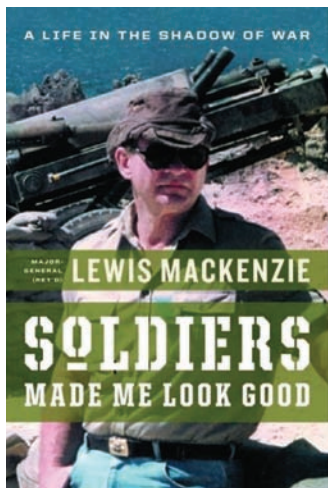


SOLDIERS MADE ME LOOK GOOD: A LIFE IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

MACKENZIE MGen (Ret) Lewis. Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. 2008, hardcover, 294 pages, \$32.95, ISBN: 978-1553653509

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It was said that Napoleon, when asked to promote an officer, would respond, “Yes, yes, he can win battles, but is he lucky?” Luck appears to have been General Mackenzie’s constant companion in this sequel to *Peacekeepers*. Whether it was a strong supportive family, athletic abilities, innate leadership skills or just being at the right place at the right time, Lewis Mackenzie has had his share of providence. *Soldiers Made Me Look Good* is both a rollicking good story, profound and poignant at times and, at other times, a strong indictment of modern military “management”. The author traces his career as a young officer cadet at Camp Borden (as a recent graduate of CAP in CTC Gagetown. I was especially interested in these chapters realizing now, how much the army had changed in its teaching methods), through his various postings and deployments as an infantry officer and ultimately his tenure as Commander, Land Forces Central Area. In each of his vignettes, General Mackenzie pays tribute to the ordinary soldier (the book is dedicated to “the Canadian soldier of today”) and the important relationship which must exist between any officer and the NCM’s of the unit she/he commands for each to achieve their objectives. In this regard, the chapter “Mutiny at Battle River” should be required reading for all junior commanders.

Soldiers Made Me Look Good is actually three books. Having chronicled his military life in the first part of his autobiography, General Mackenzie records events in his life since leaving the military in the middle third of his book. Whether as a federal candidate, hostage negotiator, public affairs commentator or author, he has not strayed from the public spotlight. What *Soldiers* does is add the author’s perspective to events perhaps known only superficially by the public. This is the great value of the book. It recounts dispassionately and objectively, criticizing when necessary the actions of those involved (including his own), in this “story behind the story”. Given the number and variety of the author’s experiences, it is not surprising that at times this portion of the narrative comes across somewhat disjointed and hurried in its telling. The author has had such an interesting life, it might have been preferable to go into more detail regarding these events by providing an overall context for them. At the risk of expanding the book (which is not a bad thing given the subject), more detail would assist the reader in understanding the background and significance of the events recounted.

In two separate chapters, General Mackenzie strays from his autobiographical theme to respond constructively and effectively to criticism levelled at him by Carol Off in her book, *The Lion, The Fox and The Eagle* and to articulate his professional disagreement with Lieutenant General (retired and now Senator) Roméo Dallaire’s assignment of military priorities—mission, men, self—rather than, according to the author, “in rare circumstances”, men, mission, self. This command dilemma, as the author candidly admits, will never be resolved, but the value of the argument is in the discussion it engenders. As General Mackenzie and history point out, orders which are given from afar or which have no connection to the reality faced by the local comments may, in certain circumstances be more dangerous to the mission and to the soldiers involved in their observance, than in their disobedience. The trick is knowing, if that is possible, when those rare circumstances arise and conveying to commanders, the mind set, aptitude and support to disobey when they do.

The last third of this book looks at the war in Afghanistan and the author's concept of the future of the Canadian Forces. In both areas, General Mackenzie offers insightful and persuasive arguments for a rapid-response, expeditionary military force rather than one dependant on the largesse of others. I found this portion of *Soldiers* to be the most interesting given the current debate on the subject.

Recent years have seen a virtual explosion of books about the Canadian military written either from a current or historical perspective. What has been lacking is a good, well-written modern autobiography. No more.