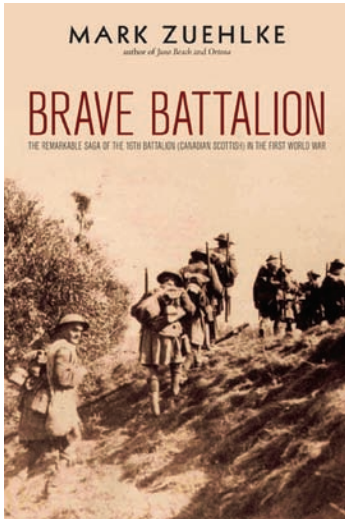


BRAVE BATTALION: THE REMARKABLE SAGA OF THE 16TH BATTALION (CANADIAN SCOTTISH) IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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There exists in Canada a rich tradition of writing regimental histories. Commencing after the Boer War and continuing during the inter bellum years through to the 1970's, many veterans sought to write about the experiences of the unit in which they served so that their sacrifice and the sacrifices of their comrades would never be forgotten. Regrettably, the number of regimental histories being published is steadily declining.¹ This is one reason why Mark Zuehlke's *Brave Battalion* is a welcome addition to the genre. Another is that it is simply a well written, well researched history. Building on his reputation as Canada's most popular military historian, Zuehlke moves away from his previous histories of armies, corps, divisions and brigades² to an examination of what arguably is the heart and soul of the Canadian army—the Regiment.

With Great Britain's declaration of war on August 4, 1914, Canada found itself at war. With a small permanent force, the Canadian military contribution would initially be made by more than two hundred militia units. Drawn from across the land, these diverse units were summoned by the "erratic and eccentric" Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, to travel to Valcartier for their training. Four of these militia units—the 72nd Scottish Highlanders of Canada from Vancouver, the 50th Gordon Highlanders of Canada from Victoria, Winnipeg's 79th Cameron Highlanders of Canada and the 91st Canadian Highlanders from Hamilton—were eventually amalgamated into the 16th Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 1st Canadian Division.

Brave Battalion recounts the history of the 16th Battalion from its birth on the Plains of Valcartier to its emergence, at the end of the war, as one of Canada's premier infantry units with twenty-one battle honours to its credit. Fighting in battles now well known to most Canadians—Ypres, St. Julien, the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Hill 70 and Passchendaele—the author constructs in vivid detail the horror and uncertainty of trench warfare.

If the reader is looking for an examination of grand strategy either allied or Canadian in the Great War, they will have to look elsewhere³. This history is the (at times) intimate story of individuals or small groups of soldiers and their leaders. In his usual style, reminiscent of that other great historian, Pierre Berton, Zuehlke creates memorable scenes and characters, which seem to literally leap off the pages. Pte (Piper) J. Richardson, recipient of the Victoria Cross (posthumously) who emboldened his company in its attack on the Regina Trench on Thiepval Ridge by marching back and forth in front of the enemy wire while a storm of fire engulfed him and his comrades, or Pte William Milne, another Victoria Cross recipient who crawled under fire through the mud to single-handedly destroy a gun emplacement which was holding up the battalion's assault on Vimy Ridge. The immediacy of death tugging, as it were, at the sleeve of every soldier, is evident in every page.

Because the author concentrates on the exploits of the battalion, he avoids the pitfalls of many authors who want, many years later, to second-guess the decisions of divisional, corps or army commanders on matters of strategy and tactics. Anglo-Canadian military

relationships, usually difficult during the war, are not emphasized except when necessary to put an event into context. Finally, the greater political issues of the day, conscription to name one example, are (mercifully) omitted so as to not detract from the narrative.

This history could also double as a practical guide for the successful commander. It powerfully demonstrates the benefits of reconnaissance, the absolute necessity of a commander being seen by his subordinates and sharing their hardships; and the premium placed on clear communications and expectations between the elements of a combined arms attack, in this case, infantry and artillery, to achieve the objective. During the breaking of the Drocourt-Quéant Line on September 2, 1918, the commanding officer of the 16th Cyrus Peck, (later awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions that day) led his battalion into battle, directing a troop of tanks during the battle and finally engaging and overcoming an enemy outpost himself. It cannot be gainsaid that respect is not given, it must be earned and the commanders of the 16th, the Leckie brothers—Robert and Jack, Peck, Scroggie and Urquhart earned that respect many times over for their unstinting devotion to duty and to their men.

There are a number of Canadian battalions whose stories remain untold even after so many years. This is an unfortunate situation, for it is at the battalion level that the traditions of the Canadian Army are to be found and preserved. Zuehlke has done a masterful job in *Brave Battalion*. Perhaps others will follow.

Endnotes

1. Farley Mowat, *The Regiment*, Toronto: McLelland & Stewart (1955); C.Sydney Frost, *Once A Patricia*, St. Catharines & Venwell Publishing Ltd. (1988); Simon Falconer, *Canada's Black Watch*, Fredrickton: Goose Lane Editions (2008); G.L. Cassidy, *Warpath: Story of the Algonquin Regiment*, Cobalt: Highway Book Shop (1990); G.W.L.Nicholson, *Seventy Years of Service*, Ottawa: Borealis Press (1977)
2. *Terrible Victory, First Canadian Army and the Scheldt Estuary Campaign: September 13—November 6, 1944*; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre (2007); *The Gothic Line: Canada's Month of Hell In World War II Italy*, Vancouver Douglas & McIntyre (2003); *The Liri Valley: World War II Breakthrough to Rome*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre (2001)
3. Tim Cook, *At The Sharp End: Canadian Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916*. Toronto: Viking, Canada (2007); Tim Cook, *Shock Troops*. Toronto: Penguin Group of Canada (2008); Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys (1992). Kenneth Radley, *We Lead, Others Follow: First Canadian Division (1914-1918)*. St. Catharines: Vancouver Publishing Ltd (2006)