SHOCK ARMY OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE: THE CANADIAN CORPS IN THE LAST 100 DAYS OF THE GREAT WAR

by Shane Schreiber

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In the days before e-mail, the Canadian Forces (CF) watchword descriptors of military writing were “clarity, brevity, relevance and accuracy.” In his book, Shane Schreiber has exemplified this old staff school adage by producing a highly readable, succinct, well-researched and pertinent study of the last six major battles of the Canadian Corps in 1918. It is a story that all too few Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen are familiar with; but fortunately, in this brief and engaging analysis, Schreiber has laid the groundwork to change this state of affairs.

Focused almost exclusively at the operational level of war, Schreiber’s book provides a study of the Canadian Corps in its hard-fought final six battles: the Battle of Amiens, the breaking of the Drocourt-Queant line, the Canal du Nord and Cambrai, the pursuit to Valenciennes, the storming of Mount Huoy and the return to Mons. Even for most professional officers, these names, regretfully, conjure up images of distant battle honours chiselled on war memorials or embroidered on regimental colours, rather than suggestions of tactical and operational innovation, organizational dexterity and original thinking. As a nation and an armed force, we have tended to regard the single triumphant seizure of Vimy Ridge as the crowning glory of Canadian arms. Schreiber’s portrayal of the final 100 days of battle persuasively challenges this assumption.

This book is an examination of the organizational and operational workings of the Canadian Corps, and, in this respect, it is specifically focused on a narrow range of issues. In doing this, Schreiber targets his book almost exclusively at the professional officer and a select, historically inclined readership. He does not purport to examine social attitudes, political influences, grand strategy or individual experiences. Schreiber’s perspective, although not stated as such, is principally viewed from the frame of reference of those officers who were tasked to fight the Canadian Corps. The evidence presented is restricted to the information and analysis available to the men on the ground. Schreiber does not indulge in speculative “what if” scenarios, and he is equally generous in ascribing success where it is deserved – to the British, the Australians and the Americans.

Given the success of Vimy Ridge, the state of exhaustion of all the long-term major combatant nations, and the tactical and operational impasse of the day, Schreiber depicts an army that not only had considerable fight left in it, but also one that was prepared to think about its circumstances – to innovate, to experiment, and to take measured risks. These are all themes that resonate in today’s Canadian Forces, an institution that finds itself not nearly as hard-pressed, but facing no less a challenging set of operational decisions.

One of the implied themes that runs throughout Schreiber’s book is that the seeds of modern manoeuvre warfare were sown by Canadians in the final three-and-a-half months of the Great War. This is a revolutionary re-interpretation of history, but Schreiber makes his case subtly and steadily. Perhaps we have too often accepted the popular wisdom that the Wehrmacht, drawing upon its experiences in the Kaiserschlacht, conceived
manoeuvre warfare in isolation in the inter-war years. Schreiber tacitly builds a different case. His description suggests that Canadians were amongst the first practitioners of manoeuvre warfare. He examines, in each of the final six battles, the operational, organizational, and tactical developments employed by the Canadian Corps during this phase of the war. And, in each case, he outlines the distinguishing planning elements that led to this unbroken succession of victories. In this manner, he illustrates how our forebears, without the mobility or the communications available to later generations on the battlefield, carefully crafted and implemented 'on the fly,' the continuous push that did so much to end the Great War.

One criticism of the book is that, with such a brief format, it inevitably tends to overlook much of the human element of this momentous period. With Schreiber focusing almost exclusively on the details of operations, organizations, and tactics, we are, for the most part, denied an examination of the crucial human dimensions of this phase of the war. Certainly one of the key contributory elements of the Canadian Corps’ effectiveness was to be found in its uniqueness. And that uniqueness was driven by the personalities who shaped the Corps’ culture. Moreover, some of the credit for this succession of victories must be attributed to the political leadership that insisted that the Canadian Corps was not to be broken up and incorporated on a divisional basis into the larger British Army. Instead, wiser heads prevailed, and the Canadian Corps, despite having in its organization the weight and punch of a numbered army, remained a coherent, dense and formidable formation.

Unfortunately, in this otherwise-exceptional little analysis, we do not get any real feel for the kinds of people who developed the Canadian Corps into the reliable fighting machine that it was. Schreiber makes reference on a number of occasions to the fact that the executive leadership of the Canadian Corps was cast from a different mould than those regular officers who commanded the British Army. Sir Arthur Currie was a provincial militia officer, and it was his mindset and leadership that unleashed the tactical and organizational creativity of his subordinates. Currie’s leadership enabled farsighted men, such as McNaughton, who devised innovative grouping systems and new tactics for the employment of artillery, as well as subordinate commanders like Macdonell and Griesbach, who worked out new concepts of tactical manoeuvre and battlefield administration. Schreiber gives us an excellent overview of the consequences of their thinking, but in a work of this length, we are left with little insight as to the personalities and characteristics of the men who led the corps during this period.

In that vein, a study of this size cannot be expected to address, in a meaningful way, the wider context in which the Canadian Corps fought during this critical period. And thus, those searching for the sounds, smells and emotions of combat will not find it here. Nonetheless, Shock Army of the British Empire is an excellent examination of one of the most important formative periods in the Canadian Forces. From a historical viewpoint, this is unquestionably an important period, but its greatest current value to members of the CF is probably as a springboard for assessing contemporary problems. Schreiber’s book has a judiciously clinical quality to it, and, in its examination of operational change, it is thought provoking, timely and pertinent. The book is both a fine piece of scholarship and a military analysis, but its contemporary significance qualifies it as a candidate to become required reading for any officer interested in studying historical parallels to the issues of transformation that currently face the Canadian Forces. This book, because of its size and quality, would be an excellent primer for unit officer and NCO training.

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