

J.L. Granatstein

THE WEIGHT OF COMMAND

Voices of Canada's Second World War Generals
and Those Who Knew Them



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Abbreviations

ADC	Aide de Camp (junior officer who assisted general officers)
CCRA	Commander, Corps Royal Artillery (the senior artillery officer in a corps)
CGS	Chief of the General Staff (the head of the army in Canada)
CMHQ	Canadian Military Headquarters (the administrative headquarters of the Canadian Army in Britain)
CO	Commanding Officer (lieutenant-colonel leading a battalion or regiment)
CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery (the senior artillery officer in a division)
GOC	General Officer Commanding (commander of a division or corps)
GOC-in-C	General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (commander of an army or of home defences on the coasts)
GSO _{1, 2, 3}	General Staff Officer, Grade 1, 2, 3 (key staff officers)
HQ	Headquarters
NDHQ	National Defence Headquarters (the headquarters in Ottawa)
PF	Permanent Force (the regular full-time army)
RMC	Royal Military College, Kingston (Canada's military college)

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I had splendid aid in researching *The Generals* from a number of graduate assistants at York University, notably Dean Oliver and Penny Bryden; their work almost twenty-five years ago informed that book and this one. Norman Hillmer and Dean Oliver read the manuscript of this book most helpfully. Lieutenant-Colonel Dr. Doug Delaney at Royal Military College also assisted greatly.

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1993, I PUBLISHED *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War*, a study of the men who led the Canadian Army in the 1939-45 war.¹ This was a collective biography of the officers who held the rank of major-general or higher, and it was based on extensive archival research and more than seventy interviews in Canada and the United Kingdom. These interviews are collected here.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Canadian military history was in a parlous position, most especially in the universities. The academic historical profession had moved away from political, foreign policy, and military subjects, and relatively little had been or was being written on military topics. Canada was and always had been a peacekeeper, or so the myth had it. In consequence, the Second World War had faded from the public memory, so it seemed, not to return until the fiftieth anniversaries of D-Day and V-E Day in 1994 and 1995 received massive television coverage and sparked public and some academic interest. Thus, when I began this book in 1990, it seemed as if I were working in a vacuum. There were the fine army official histories, there was excellent work by Terry Copp, Desmond Morton, Lieutenant-Colonel Dr. John A. English, Stephen Harris, and a few other historians, but certainly no one had ever examined the senior leaders who mobilized, directed, and led Canadians in battle against the Wehrmacht and SS. There was one too-laudatory biography of General A.G.L. McNaughton, but there was no biography of Harry Crerar, none of Guy Simonds, Charles Foulkes, E.L.M. Burns, and Kenneth Stuart, key army commanders in the Second World War. No one had studied the General Officers Commanding the divisions in the First Canadian Army, and few historians could name even one General Officer Commanding.

1 J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993).

What I wanted to do was to examine the generals as a collectivity. I had written *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935-56*, in 1982, and the collective biography approach I used there could also, I hoped, be made to work with the generals.² First, I had to find out who the generals were (which turned out to be surprisingly difficult), which ones, if any, were still alive, and which ones had left papers. Second, I wrote letters, followed leads, searched through archival records and personnel files, and built up my database. Finally, then came the interviews, begun only after I thought I had read much of the surviving documentation.

I talked at length with the generals whom I could find, their key staff officers, the members of their families that I could track down, and officers who had fought under their command. I had no template that I followed in asking questions, but there were certain things that I was after. I wanted to know what kind of men the generals were and where they came from, their education, their own professional training (or lack thereof), and how they trained their troops. I was interested in how they survived the sharp, elbows-up politics of the military and in assessing their battlefield success or failure. Above all, I sought to understand why some officers rose in rank and others stagnated. I knew almost nothing when I began this project, but it quickly became the most engrossing subject I had ever written about.

I wanted to know about the generals' social class and family background. Why had so few francophones risen to become senior officers? How many of the generals had attended Royal Military College (RMC) in Kingston, the country's sole military college, which, during the interwar years, took its cadets from elite private schools and many sons of former (and still-) serving officers? How were RMC-educated officers perceived by Permanent Force (PF) army officers who had not attended the college? And by officers from the army's part-time soldiers, the Non-Permanent Active Militia? What happened to the Great War veterans in the officer corps? What were relations like between these "dugouts," as some called them, and the younger officers who joined the PF in the 1920s and 1930s? Between PF and Militia officers? Were the odds stacked in favour of the PF as the army struggled during the war to find younger men capable of commanding troops in the field? If not, why not? If they were, how can we explain how and why some Militia officers rose?

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 2 J.L. Granatstein, *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935-56* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982; Oakville, ON: Rock's Mills Press, 2015).

All those questions arose in the interviews. There were more. How were the officers trained in the PF and the Militia? The interwar army was tiny – in early 1939, there were only 4,300 in the PF, of whom some 450 were officers, many too old or ill for active service, and at most 50,000 officers and men in the largely untrained Militia. Almost none of the Militia officers were initially competent to command even a thirty-man platoon in action or to train it for war. The PF, where promotion had been glacial, was little better: in early 1939, the three PF infantry regiments – the Royal Canadian Regiment, the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, and the Royal 22e Régiment – had only eight captains and nineteen lieutenants under the age of forty. In other words, most regular officers in the infantry were probably too old to handle the strain of modern mechanized war.³ There were no great commanders ready to lead, no field marshals’ batons stowed in officers’ kit bags.

Making matters worse, there was and continued to be tension between the Militia and the PF, discord that is amply revealed in the interviews collected here. The PF officers were the professionals, the experts at making war and preparing for it, or so they believed. In fact, Canada’s interwar regular army was almost a joke, its officers too old, as indicated above, too untrained, too ill-equipped. Many of the senior Militia officers, the “Saturday night soldiers” who trained in their local armouries until they went to summer camp for a few days of outdoor training, were also too old, veterans of the Great War trenches who believed in their regiments and the need for Canada to be prepared. Their Militia units had less equipment than the PF, which, of course, had almost none. But there was competition for what little money and equipment existed, and resentment among many Militia officers and men at the ill-treatment they believed they received from the PF officers and sergeants who were assigned to train them and with whom they regularly dealt. In essence, the PF viewed the Militia as amateurs, and the Militia largely believed that PFers were know-it-all layabouts who drank too much. Drink was the curse of the PF, they said.

This antagonism lasted throughout the war (and after, up to the present day), as competition for command billets intensified. The PF had seen Militia minister Sam Hughes relegate the PF officers to very few positions in the first contingent in August-September 1914, and the General Staff in Ottawa was

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 3 Brian Reid, *No Holding Back: Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2005), 22.

determined that this would not happen again in September 1939. The important posts in the 1st Division initially went to the PF, and the key posts thereafter – the army GOCs-in-C, the corps GOCs, most of the division GOCs, and the Chiefs of the General Staff in Ottawa – stayed in PF hands throughout the war. But because it drew on a broader base, the Militia produced its stars who could not be denied. By 1945, Generals Bert Hoffmeister, Bruce Matthews, and Holley Keebler were commanding divisions in action and doing so with skill. The mutual antagonism faded as the meritorious rose – and there were fine officers in both the PF and the Militia. Faded, but did not disappear: one Militia officer who spoke bluntly about the shortcomings of PF officers was Major-General Bert Hoffmeister (see pages 28-32).

What must be remembered was that Canada began the war in 1939 with nothing. There had been no defence budget to speak of for the twenty years from 1919 to 1939, no modern equipment, nothing to hold things together but regimental pride and a conviction that another great war was on the horizon. Once the army began to mobilize after the outbreak of war in September 1939, how was it to be trained and equipped? There were far too few trained staff officers, graduates of the British Army Staff Colleges at Camberley in England and Quetta in India and the Imperial Defence College, for even a division of troops, let alone a corps or a field army. Where were such potential officers to be found, and how were they to be trained? And how capable would they prove to be in the field?⁴

Almost thirty years ago, historian Stephen Harris wrote that “it took more than a keen mind, a scientific education, and attendance at British army staff courses to make good generals out of majors and colonels who may have commanded a platoon or company in the Great War, but who had not been in the field since.”⁵ That was certainly correct. To succeed in battle, recent field experience, a willingness to learn and adapt, and the ability to lead and inspire were essential. No Canadian officers had all those qualities at the beginning of the Second World War, and there were few keen military minds among them. Harris, again rightly, noted that it was unsurprising “that eight

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4 John A. Macdonald’s very good 1992 RMC master’s thesis, “In Search of Veritable: Training the Canadian Army Staff Officer, 1899 to 1945,” is the best treatment of staff training.

5 Stephen Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 210-11.

of the twenty-two major-generals and above who commanded divisions, corps, or the army overseas were fired for incompetence before they saw action; that two more were relieved after their first battle; and that another survived only nine months.”⁶ Other national armies had similar problems, of course, notably the British and American, but the Canadian record was far from stellar. In *The Generals*, which was based on archival research and my interviews, I tried to determine what caused these failures – and, as important, how and why successful commanders emerged.

There were highly placed senior officers in both the Permanent Force and the Militia at the outbreak of war and in the first few years. Andrew McNaughton, George Pearkes, E.W. Sansom, F.F. Worthington, and Harry Crerar were the PF commanders who played key roles in raising, training, and beginning to prepare the troops to fight. C.B. Price, Victor Odium, A.E. Potts, Price Montague, and others were the initial well-connected Militia officers in the spotlight, but as Harris pointed out, most of them – and most of the senior PF leaders too – did not last through the increasingly critical process of hard training and evaluation after 1941. The interviews collected here make clear why such officers, mostly from the “old brigade” of Great War veterans, had to be replaced. They were, as General McNaughton told a journalist in an unguarded moment, the “cover crop, to help the younger men through the wilting strains of the first responsibilities, in the same way that older trees are used to shelter saplings through the heat of the day.”⁷ Sadly, Andy McNaughton himself would prove to be part of the cover crop.

As the war went on, younger officers came to the fore from both the PF and the Militia, men such as Guy Simonds, Charles Foulkes, E.L.M. Burns, Chris Vokes, Rod Keller, Harry Foster, Bert Hoffmeister, Dan Spry, George Kitching, and Bruce Matthews. Of these, only Burns had served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the Great War, and only he held a rank higher than major in September 1939, but the war gave them all the chance to rise with dazzling speed. For Permanent Force officers, as publisher and wartime soldier John Bassett said during his interview (page 156), the war was as if they’d died and gone to heaven. After years with the slowest of promotion and without troops or equipment, suddenly they were generals, and they had everything they wanted and needed – except battle experience.

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6 Ibid., 211.

7 C.J.V. Murphy, “The First Canadian Army,” *Fortune*, January 1944, 164.

Serving under the First Canadian Army's General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, the skilled military politician and survivor General Harry Crerar, these were the men who led the divisions and corps of the First Canadian Army in Italy and Northwest Europe. These were the generals whose careers and qualities, triumphs and failures, emerged from these interviews.

Then there were the areas where Canadian domestic politics intersected with the military. Conscription, a subject whose history dated back to the Great War's Military Service Act of 1917 and the huge controversies it created, was the central question. Historians generally agree that manpower was handled better by Prime Minister Mackenzie King in the Second World War than it had been by Sir Robert Borden in the Great War. Not all senior officers were of that view, however, and there were sharp divisions as a result. The Permanent Force officers, most of them having served in a tiny army where almost all the officers knew each other, split apart on this issue and on others as the ties that bound them together snapped and their willingness to bow to civilian control wobbled dangerously in the autumn of 1944.⁸ The struggle for power, higher rank, and bigger commands went on in wartime, exactly as in peacetime, but the casualties to friendships were heavier during wartime.

It must be remembered that all the men I interviewed – there were no female officers at the front, though the spouses and daughters of the generals sometimes lived in England during the war years – were very old when I saw them at the beginning of the 1990s. They had fought the war and survived into their eighties and nineties, whereas many of their friends had been killed or wounded or relegated to unimportant posts because they proved wanting in action, training, or administration. The officers to whom I spoke had been trained in a rigid system that believed in loyalty up to their superiors and loyalty down to their subordinates. During the war, several of the officers whom I interviewed had refused to be disparaging about the abilities of their leaders, despite probing questioning. They had no such qualms in disparaging politicians, but the passage of decades and the gaining of perspective relaxed such instinctive attitudes in many interviewees' remarks on their comrades. The comments by PF officers on their peers, as a result, are sometimes

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 8 See J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977; Oakville, ON: Rock's Mills Press, 2015).

very sharp; the remarks of Militia officers on the PF are also frequently very critical. Some of what I recorded was indiscreet, self-serving, and gossipy, no doubt, but almost all of it seemed to me to be the truth as interviewees saw it almost five decades after the war.

CANADIANS KNOW VERY LITTLE of their nation's role in the Second World War. This is a terrible shame, for the 1939-45 war in so many ways shaped modern Canada. A nation of 11 million people, trapped in the morass of the Great Depression, somehow doubled its gross national product between 1939 and 1945, while simultaneously putting 1.1 million men and women into uniform. As striking, 1 million of those in the military had volunteered to fight and serve anywhere, demonstrating that Canadians believed in the rightness of their cause. Those at home endured long separations – some soldiers went overseas in December 1939 and did not return until late 1945 or early 1946; some 42,000 servicemen never returned, and their graves lie around the world in Hong Kong and Japan, Britain, France, the Low Countries, Italy, and elsewhere.

While the war was being fought overseas, Canada mobilized the home front very successfully, and the government controlled the domestic economy well.⁹ Canadians ate better than they had in the bleak 1930s, and this despite rationing and controls. They had more work at good pay, and many families saw all their members working hard, getting as much overtime as they wanted, and saving money.¹⁰ The nation's workers on the farms and mines produced vast quantities of food, minerals, and metals, and the factories and shipyards turned out 16,400 aircraft ranging from tiny trainers to Lancaster bombers, ships of all kinds from lighters to big Tribal Class destroyers, and some 816,000 military vehicles. From a standing start, Canadian war production reached a value of \$9.5 billion in 1940s dollars, making Canada fourth in Allied war production behind only the great powers.¹¹ The war was a tragedy for many at home, those who lost sons, brothers, and fathers overseas, but it

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9 See J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-45* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990; Oakville, ON: Rock's Mills Press, 2015).

10 Graham Broad, *A Small Price to Pay: Consumer Culture on the Canadian Home Front, 1939-45* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).

11 J.L. Granatstein, *The Best Little Army in the World: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2015), Chap. 1.

was simultaneously very good for Canada and most Canadians, and the long postwar boom had its basis in the wartime economy.

Those who directed the nation's remarkable war effort deserve much more credit than they have yet received. The civil service mandarins provided the brainpower that controlled inflation and directed the economy, and the Canadian wartime economic record was superb.¹² The war years also saw the establishment of unemployment insurance, family allowances, the Veterans Charter, and a huge pot of money for postwar reconstruction.¹³ Canada began its move into the welfare state during the war.¹⁴

The mandarins, led by a strong Cabinet and the "Minister of Everything" C.D. Howe, and greatly aided by dollar-a-year men from industry and commerce, also directed the nation's stringent financial regime, which raised taxes, imposed controls, and battled waste. So efficient were these processes that the government was able to lend or give billions of dollars in aid to Britain and other allies, and to keep economic and military relations with the United States close and integrated but not subordinated to the emerging superpower next door.¹⁵ And the fractious tendencies between French- and English-speaking Canadians over compulsory military service overseas largely stayed in check, thanks to the political leadership of Mackenzie King and his Cabinet.

Mackenzie King was not the most attractive politician in our history, but he was surely one of the most successful, and the Second World War was the capstone of his career. He never inspired his 11 million countrymen, and he scarcely made any effort to win a place at the table with Prime Minister

12 Michael Stevenson's *Canada's Greatest Wartime Muddle* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) argues that military and domestic manpower mobilization was a shambles.

13 James Struthers, "No Fault of Their Own": *Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Raymond Blake, *From Rights to Needs: A History of Family Allowances in Canada, 1929-92* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); the best book on veterans is Peter Neary, *On to Civvy Street: Canada's Rehabilitation Program for Veterans of the Second World War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

14 See Granatstein, *The Ottawa Men*.

15 R.D. Cuff and J.L. Granatstein, *Ties That Bind: Canadian-American Relations from the Great War to the Cold War* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert, 1977); R.D. Cuff and J.L. Granatstein, *American Dollars – Canadian Prosperity: Canadian-American Economic Relations, 1945-50* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, 1978).

Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt, who led the Western Allies' war effort. He did host the Quebec Conferences of 1943 and 1944, but though he was present for some of the photo opportunities, his role was merely to provide the food and drink for Churchill, Roosevelt, and their entourages. The inescapable reality was that Mackenzie King and Canada were relatively minor players, effectively shut out from the big decisions.

Nonetheless, Mackenzie King was a leader who directed a remarkable overall war effort that ranked Canada fourth among the Allies, behind only those of the great powers, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. He struggled to manage sharp disputes over the conscription of manpower by hedging, trimming, moving forward, and then back; but he was generally successful, keeping the situation in French Canada under control while not completely losing his standing in the rest of the country. That he won the election of 1945, narrowly to be sure, was the best indicator of his success. Winston Churchill, the leader who many believed had saved the world, could not match that feat.

But the military probably did not share even the public's "hold its nose" view of Mackenzie King. He cut a pudgy unmilitary figure and was thought to be antipathetic to the armed forces. He was no soldier's idea of a wartime leader. From the army's point of view, the government mistakenly created a home defence army, the conscripts recruited under the National Resources Mobilization Act who had to be cajoled into volunteering for service overseas. Another mistake in the eyes of some senior army officers was the establishment of a large air force and navy that took away the best-educated junior leaders and men,¹⁶ who, many generals believed, might have been better employed in khaki, leading platoons of infantry. Still, with a total enlistment of some 700,000, the Canadian Army was almost three times the strength of the Royal Canadian Air Force and seven times that of the Royal Canadian Navy. The army's peak strength in the early months of 1945 was just under a half million volunteers for service anywhere, a substantial force by any measure.

Once the men were mobilized, equipped, and trained, the real question was how the army was to be employed. Mackenzie King's primary political aim was to avoid conscription for overseas service, and he had promised this

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 16 See, for example, Alan English, *The Cream of the Crop: Canadian Aircrew, 1939-45* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

for the first time in March 1939 (interestingly, his pledge had been preceded two days earlier by one from Conservative leader Dr. R.J. Manion) and repeated it in September 1939 and during the election campaign in early 1940. In the first days of the war, the Prime Minister had even hoped that Canada might avoid sending a single infantry division to Britain, but his ministers and the English Canadian public, their memories of the battlefield victories won by the Canadian Corps in the Great War still fresh, forced his hand.¹⁷ He then selected Major-General A.G.L. McNaughton to be the 1st Division's General Officer Commanding. Andy McNaughton had been a hugely successful and innovative artillery officer in the Great War and Chief of the General Staff in the 1930s. He picked Brigadiers George Pearkes, Armand Smith, and C.B. Price to lead his brigades, the first a Victoria Cross-winning PF officer, the latter two from the Militia, one a jam maker from the Niagara peninsula, the other the manager of a Montreal dairy. From England, McNaughton would oversee the expansion of his 1st Canadian Division into, first, one corps, then a second, and finally by 1942 into the First Canadian Army with its two corps, three infantry and two armoured divisions, plus two additional armoured brigades. This force, raised in Canada between 1940 and 1942 under the direction of the Chief of the General Staff, Major-General (Lieutenant-General from November 1941) H.D.G. Crerar, was potentially a very powerful army, provided that it could be well trained, well equipped, well led, and reinforced once it went into battle. These were not simple challenges, and the nation struggled to deal with them for the rest of the war.

As Chief of the General Staff, Harry Crerar was also responsible for the creation of the home defence army. The government had passed the National Resources Mobilization Act on 21 June 1940, immediately after the fall of France and the evacuation of what was left of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Mackenzie King had introduced the bill in Parliament on 18 June, stating that "this legislation will relate solely and exclusively to the defence of Canada on our own soil and in our own territorial waters." He added that a national service registration would be held in the near future: "Let me emphasize," he said, "that this registration will have nothing to do with recruiting citizens for overseas service."¹⁸ Initially, the term of enlistment for conscripts was thirty days, but this was extended to four months in

17 See the account in Granatstein, *Canada's War*, 9-11, 25.

18 Canada, *House of Commons Debates* (18 June 1940), 854.

February 1941, and then in April of that same year for the war's duration. General Crerar wrote privately that these progressive steps “represent[ed] several bites at the cherry – the cherry being conscription for service anywhere.”¹⁹ Many of the home defence conscripts decided that army life wasn't too bad and volunteered for general service, as service anywhere the army wished was called. Others joined the Royal Canadian Navy or the Royal Canadian Air Force. But many resisted “going active” and remained in Canada, hoarding grievances against the government and the military. These sixty thousand “Zombies,” so named by pro-conscription zealots after the soulless dead of Hollywood movies, would serve abroad, they maintained, only if the government had the courage to order them to do so. This did not occur until the end of 1944, after a political crisis that saw ministers resigning, the Prime Minister talking of a military “revolt,” and a political uproar that almost destroyed the government.²⁰

But this was all in the future. The original plan in the autumn of 1939 was that the 1st Canadian Division would train in Britain before moving into the Allied line in France, but events quickly made that impossible. The collapse of France in May and June 1940 before Hitler's panzers came with stunning speed, and the attempt to re-create a defence line in western France, a line to be manned in part by the 1st Canadian Division, went nowhere. The Canadians were lucky to get back to England with some of their recently issued equipment still in hand. Their mission now was the defence of Great Britain – even half-trained, the 1st Division was the best-equipped formation left for this task in the British Isles. The 2nd Division soon joined it in the Canadian Corps,²¹ but with Major-Generals George Pearkes and Victor Odlum in command of the two divisions, training went ahead slowly and, to some younger officers, seemed mired in the trenches of Great War thinking. Not until the British Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, commanding the area of southeast England in which the Canadians served,

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 19 Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters, H.D.G. Crerar Papers, file 958.009 (D12), Crerar to McNaughton, 19 May 1941.

20 The history of the National Resources Mobilization Act is detailed in Daniel Byers, *Zombie Army: Canada, the Canadian Army, and Conscription in the Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016). See also Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, Chap. 6.

21 The best account remains C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, vol. 1 of *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955).

began to push the troops hard and to force out older and laggard officers did training begin to become more realistic.²²

The debacles at Hong Kong and Dieppe, the first two major Canadian Army operations of the war, demonstrated the need for better training – and better military intelligence. Canada sent two infantry battalions and a brigade headquarters to the British Crown colony off the China coast in the autumn of 1941, and the entire force was lost when Japan captured Hong Kong by Christmas Day. Senior Canadian commanders in Britain also sought active participation in the Dieppe raid of August 1942, an attack planned by Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten's Combined Operations Headquarters. Fearing that the troops were bored with training and wanting action, General Crerar, acting in command of the corps while McNaughton was ill in Canada, persuaded the British that the 2nd Canadian Division, led by Major-General Hamilton Roberts, should get the job. But the raid was a disaster, the Canadians landing under high cliffs on the English Channel coast of France and in the face of deadly fire that left the dreadfully planned and miserably executed raid in ruins. The bloody casualties and the military lessons of Hong Kong and Dieppe made clear that much remained to be done, including the acquisition of battle experience, before the Canadian divisions could confidently face a first-class enemy. The generals, as the following interviews reveal, had much to learn about fighting a war. So too did their soldiers.

But where could battle experience against the Germans be gained? The British and Americans had landed in North Africa in November 1942, and within six months, they had linked up with General Montgomery's British Eighth Army and were in complete possession of the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Plans were under way to invade Sicily and mainland Italy. But General McNaughton insisted that his First Canadian Army not be tapped for troops for these invasions, preferring to keep his countrymen together

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22 See the account in Granatstein, *The Generals*, 30-32, 68-69, and passim. In 1942, Harry Crerar said of Pearkes that he was a forceful leader and able trainer but a man of limited scope who would be better as a battalion commander than a brigadier or better as a brigadier than a division commander. He felt that Pearkes was a man of narrow vision who could see only one thing at a time and who had no interest in long-term plans. A first-class fighting soldier, he would handle his men with determination but might produce negative results. Library and Archives Canada, L.B. Pearson Papers, vol. 3, Crerar to Pearson, 25 April 1942. Of Odium, McNaughton claimed in September 1941 that he was "showing signs of advancing years ... I will have to make a change in command." Quoted in Granatstein, *The Generals*, 37-38.

under his command for the inevitable landing in France. The difficulty was that senior British generals had begun to doubt McNaughton's command capabilities; so too did many of the Canadians, including Crerar, commanding a corps in England, Kenneth Stuart, the Chief of the General Staff in Ottawa, and J. Layton Ralston, the Minister of National Defence. The government forced the decision to send the 1st Division and the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade to be part of the Sicilian invasion. This was the first sign that McNaughton had lost his sway. Then, after a political and military struggle, McNaughton, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief who had been built up almost to demi-god status by government propaganda at home, was toppled, the hugely ambitious and politically astute Crerar picked to be his successor.²³ The most important result, however, was that Canadian troops saw action, beginning the process of becoming battle-ready as they fought in the British Eighth Army. Able commanders emerged, officers such as Guy Simonds, Christopher Vokes, and Bert Hoffmeister proving themselves in action. The cost in Sicily and Italy was heavy casualties and the daunting task of maintaining the long supply lines for men and materiel that proved very difficult for a small nation to sustain.

The Canadians were in Sicily and the Italian mainland from mid-1943 into February 1945, moving over the switchback roads of Sicily and up the Italian boot. At Ortona at Christmas 1943, they fought first-rate German paratroopers for the town and, at a terrible cost in lives, beat them. The 1st Division was nearly spent at the end of that battle. Its next major action, joined by the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, both serving under I Canadian Corps HQ, did not come until May 1944 on the Hitler Line south of Rome. Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns's first battle in command of the corps, the Hitler Line struggle was another costly success, leaving the dour and unsmiling Burns out of favour with the Eighth Army's commander. The corps moved north through Rome and Florence to the Adriatic coast and the Gothic Line by the end of August 1944. Here Bert Hoffmeister's 5th Canadian Armoured Division played the starring role in cracking the line and forcing

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23 There is a good account of McNaughton's removal in Paul Dickson's study of Harry Crerar, *A Thoroughly Canadian General* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). On McNaughton, see also John Swettenham, *McNaughton*, 3 vols. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968-69); and John Rickard, *The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army, 1939-1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

a major German withdrawal. Many historians consider this the most successful Canadian action of the war, and Hoffmeister, a Militia company commander in Vancouver's Seaforth Highlanders in 1939, arguably the best military leader Canada produced in the Second World War.²⁴

In Canada, General McNaughton became Minister of National Defence during the conscription crisis of October and November 1944. He soon arranged the move of the I Canadian Corps back to Northwest Europe, where Guy Simonds's II Canadian Corps had been heavily engaged since the Allied landings on the Normandy coast on D-Day, 6 June 1944. At last, the First Canadian Army had been reunited under command of Harry Crerar, five divisions and two armoured brigades strong. The II Canadian Corps had fought its way over the Normandy beaches, helped close the Falaise Gap, cleared the channel ports, and fought a gruelling battle to open the Scheldt estuary to shipping. The casualties had been horrific, and infantry reinforcements had been swallowed in wholesale. Brigade, division, and corps commanders did not always recognize that battalion effectiveness had changed because of casualties. Orders often failed to account for the cumulative losses of the campaign in killed, wounded, and psychological casualties, or the grinding fatigue of near-continuous action. Companies and platoons with fewer men could attack and hold less ground, mustering less firepower than they had in June. Ever greater numbers of killed and wounded were frequently the only result. The dispatch of sixteen thousand home defence conscripts overseas, that question being the primary cause of the autumn 1944 political crisis in Canada, and the transfer of I Canadian Corps from Italy to Northwest Europe had provided a respite, a period without much fighting for the Canadian divisions. But there were again heavy casualties in the last weeks of the European war from February through to V-E Day in May. The Canadians, the British, and the Poles serving under Crerar's command cleared the Rhineland, crossed the Rhine River, and liberated Holland, and the First Canadian Army, its reinforcement pools full again, finished the war with its ranks in relatively good shape, its performance first-rate. Having begun the war with almost nothing, Canada ended it with a powerful force

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24 On the Italian campaign, see G.W.L. Nicholson's *The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945*, vol. 2 of *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1957); and Douglas Delaney's fine biography of Hoffmeister, *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

of well-trained civilians in uniform. In the eyes of its commanders and soldiers, it had become the best little army in the world. In fact, with some 185,000 men in the field, it wasn't so little.²⁵ Significantly, by 1945 the only army, corps, division, or brigade commander in the First Canadian Army who had Great War experience was General Harry Crerar, the GOC-in-C. Canada's fighting generals were all young men.

All these commanders had learned their hard trade on the job as Canada's army played its genuinely important part in the war. While many of the generals made or lost their reputations during the Second World War, their officers and men paid a heavy price in lives during the learning process. In all, the army suffered 22,917 killed or died of wounds, 81,011 wounded or injured, and 6,433 officers and men taken prisoner.²⁶ There inevitably was a high cost when fighting the Germans, but some of the casualties were certainly the result of the interwar neglect under which the Permanent Force and Militia had laboured.

Ottawa spent \$5.64 billion on the army over the six years of war, a huge sum in wartime dollars, and a vastly bigger sum in present-day money.²⁷ Some 700,000 men and women served in the army during the Second World War, all but a handful in the overseas units, fighting as volunteers. Of the major Allied armies that fought in Europe, only the Canadian Army could say that, and the fact that so many Canadians volunteered to serve in the struggle against Nazism – 1.1 million men and women, or one in ten of the entire population, if one counts the navy and air force – says something important about Canadians. It really was Canada's war.

ORAL HISTORY PRESENTS challenges for a researcher. Memory is fallible, interviewees may wish to protect themselves or settle scores with long-dead enemies, and others simply cannot remember events from a half-century ago with clarity. What most of the interviewees for this book did sharply recall, however, was their reaction to the personalities of those with whom they served. My task, the task of every interviewer, was to be well prepared and

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25 See C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, vol. 3 of *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960); and Granatstein, *The Best Little Army*.

26 Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 524-25.

27 *Ibid.*, 527.

able to help them with chronology and names, but not to lead them where they did not want to go or into expressing views that they genuinely did not hold. I decided not to use a tape recorder, because I believed that it inhibited conversation. Instead, I jotted notes and, as soon as the interview ended, wrote up a memorandum for myself with key comments in quotes. The collected interviews, edited here for coherence and to minimize irrelevant subjects, military jargon, and abbreviations, were a key part of my research for *The Generals*.

In what follows, there are four interviews with generals, all wartime officers of major-general rank, twelve with officers who fought under the generals, twenty-seven with senior and junior staff officers and men, and twenty-six with family members. The ranks given at the beginning of each interview are the highest attained. I have also included one interview with the Rt. Hon. J.W. Pickersgill, who worked with many of the senior officers in Ottawa when he was Mackenzie King's wartime advisor; this can be found in Chapter 3.

The interviews range widely over issues, personalities, and battles, and the categories used for the chapter organization are the generals, the fighters, the staff, and the families. Some of these categories are arbitrary: generals usually served on staff and as battalion or brigade battlefield commanders before reaching the rank of major-general; most staff officers also fought; and some fighters became brigadiers or staff officers. Within the chapters, I have grouped the interviews so that they focus primarily on the key military figures. But, again, staff officers, for example, moved between postings and frequently worked for more than one senior commander. Those who were interviewed are indicated in **boldface** when they are mentioned in others' interviews.

The interviews vary in length and quality, as might be expected, but many are superb in content and revealingly frank. There is naturally substantial repetition in the comments on some commanders such as Generals McNaughton, Crerar, Simonds, Burns, Foulkes, Keller, Matthews, and Hoffmeister, the key leaders of the First Canadian Army and the I and II Canadian Corps, but there are major differences too. Because old men do forget, some interviews do contain factual errors. I have corrected in footnotes the most egregious mistakes.

Readers can and will use these interviews to form their own assessments of men and events. Some will read through the entire book to create an overview of Canada's high command. Others will dip in for specific pieces of information. But for me, what emerged from the collected interviews, what

was and remains so striking, was that so many of the key Canadian military commanders lacked the leadership skills, the personality, and the capacity to inspire their men. Andy McNaughton had all of these in 1939 and 1940, but he gradually lost his appeal to his officers and soldiers by focusing too much on his own interests in the technical side of war and not enough on the training of his command for war. As Brigadier-General R.T. Bennett observed (page 196), McNaughton “could dissect any problem,” but he had to do it himself. When he was forced out as GOC-in-C in late 1943, the men of the First Canadian Army scarcely noticed. Careful and able as he was, McNaughton’s successor, Harry Crerar, had the charisma of a turnip, and Charles Foulkes, who was Harry Crerar writ small, completely turned off many of those whom he ineffectually led. Guy Simonds ranked with the very best Allied commanders in battlefield skill and tactical imagination, but he seemed locked into the role of the stern taskmaster who frightened many of his subordinates rather than making them eager to follow his lead. As his RMC classmate and friend Chris Vokes colourfully said after the war, Simonds was “the finest Canadian general we ever had,” but he was not worth “a pinch of coonshit” as “a leader of men.”²⁸ Vokes of the 1st and then the 4th Armoured Division and Rod Keller of the 3rd Division, on the other hand, were self-styled “tough guys” who were popular with their troops. But Keller lacked the tactical skills, self-discipline, moral and physical courage, and intelligence to command effectively in action, and the more able Vokes’s favourite word, it was said, was “frontal,” a reference to the assaults of his troops, which always seemed to be aimed into the teeth of the enemy’s defences.

All these commanders had emerged from the tiny prewar Permanent Force. None had a trace of the fire and charisma combined with competence that made Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, thoroughly detested by many senior officers as “a nasty little shit,” extremely popular with the confident British – and Canadian – troops that he led to victory.²⁹ On board ship heading for the invasion of Sicily, a Canadian NCO wrote home that

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28 Granatstein, *The Generals*, 159. See Roman Jarymowycz, “General Guy Simonds: The Commander as Tragic Hero,” in *Warrior Chiefs: Perspectives on Senior Canadian Military Leaders*, ed. B. Horn and S. Harris (Toronto: Dundurn, 2001), 107-41.

29 See the useful discussion on British Army leadership styles in Brian Bond, *Britain’s Two World Wars against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortion of Hindsight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 57ff.

“Monty say[s] we can do it and that is good enough for all of us.” After the landings, one officer noted to his family that “Monty visited us the other day, and told us what great fighters the Canadians were. He surely has the common touch – gets in amongst them,” the officer continued, “motions them to gather round, and then talks to them as if they were all planning together some operations and he needed their advice ... He has a touch of ‘genius’ all right.”³⁰ Canadians sometimes like to sneer at the British as overly class-conscious and hopelessly stuffy, but the best British commanders had a practised ease of manner that few wartime Canadian senior officers could ever hope to match.

Of the Canadian leaders in the field, only Bert Hoffmeister and Bruce Matthews, the GOCs of the 5th Armoured and 2nd Divisions, successfully practised a consensual style of leadership, and perhaps it was not coincidental that both men rose from the prewar Militia. In their Vancouver and Toronto Militia units, they had learned to stay close to their men, and they carried that instinct into their leadership roles. Their battlefield skills, honed in four years of training and two years in action, were at least on a par with those of their Permanent Force peers, but their soldiers admired them and wanted to win battles for them. Montgomery and US General George Patton could move men to attempt the impossible; sadly, almost none of the Canadian leaders had this facility, and only Hoffmeister seemed able to use his charismatic personality and his care for his troops to inspire his entire division. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division, with its maroon shoulder flash, was nicknamed Hoffs’s Mighty Maroon Machine, and it was Hoffmeister who had made it mighty. When I interviewed him (page 25), he was eighty-five years old and confined to a wheelchair after a stroke, but General Hoffmeister still radiated a powerful presence. I could understand why his soldiers had been proud to serve under his command.

Hoffmeister also spoke quite frankly about the difficulty of giving orders that sent men to kill or be killed. He was a commander who understood that even if his plans were perfect, even if his orders were carried out and the enemy was smashed, some of his men would be killed, wounded, or taken

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 30 Library and Archives Canada, Censorship reports, Microfilm reel T-17294, quoted in Robert Engen, “The Canadian Soldier: Combat Motivation in the Canadian Army, 1943-45,” mss., 142.

prisoner. This thought always weighed on him. As a company commander in England in 1941, he had suffered a nervous breakdown because he knew he had not been militarily schooled well enough to lead his men successfully against the Germans. In Sicily and Italy, after he had been to Staff College and was now well trained, he had proven his great competence in battle and led his regiment, his brigade, and his division with great courage and skill. And yet, the weight of command always bore down on him, the awful knowledge that his orders sent soldiers to their deaths. That, said Colonel Clement Dick (page 193), was why Hoffmeister went forward to the front so often. He felt the need to share his soldiers' risks. Tearing up during his own interview, Hoffmeister said that after making several visits to see his wounded men, he could no longer bear to go to the hospitals for fear that seeing such sights would weaken his resolve as a commander. Bruce Matthews, the other very successful Militia GOC, felt the same: he tried to avoid hospital visits, he said, something he managed to do because the wounded were evacuated so promptly. Matthews recalled that he was appalled by the casualties, tried to talk to the troops about this, and made every effort to assure them that he was attempting to minimize them. Hoffmeister and Matthews – and indeed all the Canadian generals – understood that the war had to be won and that casualties were the inevitable price of battle, and they carried on. That was leadership in action. But as Brigadier Stanley Todd, one of the great artillerymen of the First Canadian Army in the Second World War, said in his interview, it was a “frightening thing” to command thirty thousand men in action (page 186). It was pleasant to wear a general's red tabs in peacetime but not in action. The weight of command was a heavy burden to bear.

Mrs. Betty Spry, the wife of Major-General Dan Spry, who fought in Italy as a battalion and brigade commander and in Northwest Europe as a division GOC, recollected that he frequently woke up with nightmares long after the war. Spry drank heavily during the war, as did Generals Charles Foulkes, Rod Keller, and Harry Foster, their way of dealing with the high stress of command. Guy Simonds was sometimes wound tight as a drum, so much so that Harry Crerar once asked a military psychiatrist to determine whether he was fit for command in Italy.

These senior officers were not alone in experiencing stress. In the Great War, battlefield breakdown was known as shell shock; in the Second World War, the phrase was battle fatigue; now we call it post-traumatic stress disorder. Front-line infantrymen suffered when they saw their comrades killed

and as the manifold terrors of the front wore down their nerves and courage. Commanders at all levels bore heavy responsibilities, and they saw the results of their decisions every day in dead and maimed men, both enemy and their own. The toll that this took was enormous. Their PTSD may not have been diagnosed, but the weight of command was very real.