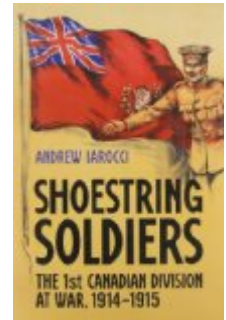


Andrew Iarocci. *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. viii + 362 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-9822-1.



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Canadian historians often have portrayed the Great War as a major step in the country's evolution from colony to nation. Andrew Iarocci contends that a similar pattern is evident in the literature on the Canadian Corps' training. This pattern is reflected in the words of official historian Arthur Fortescue Duguid, who noted in his *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919* (1938) the transformation of an "amateur colonial contingent" into "the most powerful self-contained striking force on any battle-front" (p. 6). Iarocci's *Shoestring Soldiers* is a break in the historiography concerning the training and performance of the 1st Canadian Division during its early deployment.

Earlier works, such as Bill Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps* (1992), argued that the Canadian Corps' later successes at Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, and Amiens stemmed from a learning process during 1915-16 that displayed the superiority of fire power and tactics over raw courage in ensuring com-

bat success. Other prominent Canadian historians, such as Desmond Morton in *When Your Number's Up* (1993), confirmed these general assertions. Later studies adopted this learning curve narrative, emphasizing the "sense of progress and increasing sophistication" (p. 7). Iarocci argues that the learning curve approach obscured several important factors concerning the training and skills that the 1st Canadian Division brought to the field in 1915. Rather than a group of raw colonial troops, Iarocci contends that Canadian soldiers entered the trenches with a degree of training or prior battle experience (in the case of Boer War or Imperial Army veterans), and hence that the 1st Canadian Division was "an effective combat organization" (p. 10). The author seeks to go beyond broad nationalistic or learning curve paradigms. Underlying the division's success (and providing the title for the work) was the material deficiencies the division faced. Many necessities, such as heavy guns and high explosive ammunition, were in short supply until the war's later stages, and

this had a significant impact on operational performance. In this sense, the division were “shoe-string soldiers.” This, however, is not the only factor determining their success on the field. Factors ranging from training to blind luck affected battle outcomes as well.

Much of the early writing on the 1st Division portrayed its formation as a combination of raw recruits with sparse numbers of trained individuals. Such was the tone of Max Aitken’s *Canada in Flanders* (1915) series and both official histories. While Duguid had to contend with writing about “his own colleagues, friends, enemies and former superiors,” many of whom were still living at the time of publication (1938), Nicholson’s *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (1962) used the battle of Second Ypres as the basis for his study, largely neglecting early preparations (p. 8). Iarocci’s work addresses other historians’ omission of any training discussion, on the one hand, or the overemphasis on the “learning curve,” on the other hand. In certain cases, the Canadians were as well, if not better, trained than their German adversaries. As it became apparent that the war would last beyond 1914, German High Command began to call up an ever-increasing number of men. A large number of soldiers at the Ypres Salient were “Ersatz” (replacement) reservists or teenagers without active service experience (p. 95).

Iarocci’s discussion of training methods also strongly supports his argument concerning the quality of the 1st Canadian Division. In the prewar years, the military not only secured the services of many experienced Canadian and British officers (the majority of whom served in the Boer War), but also enjoyed an increasing budget that allowed for the development of better equipment and training. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Canadian army established engineering, service, and ordnance capabilities. Many of the soldiers who formed the 1st Division under-

went training at the new camps and schools established across the country. With such a modestly sized professional force, these camps played a crucial role in training new recruits and militiamen. On arriving in England, training from the brigade to battalion level commenced despite often crippling material shortages. In several instances, the training went beyond requirements stated in training syllabi given to battalion commanders. For example, Lieutenant-Colonel G. S. Tuxford’s 5th Battalion trained for a total of forty-five hours per week in early November 1915, exceeding the proscribed time by nine hours. In another instance, Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Lipsett asked that his battalion train for battalion attacks and rear guard activities despite the fact no official provision was made in the training manuals.

The narrative logically flows from an examination of prewar military service before proceeding to early operations on the La Basse front ending with an examination of the Ploegsteert-Messines front in Autumn 1915. The reader will find well-researched and compelling arguments throughout. Among the strongest aspects of this work is Iarocci’s ability to reconstruct battles from the divisional to battalion levels in cases where “the reasons for particular decisions were buried with the decision maker” (p. 97). Such reconstructions are based on a thorough use of both military and private documents. Iarocci also provides some commentary on the war’s wider issues, such as the nature of coalition warfare, which highlights the subjects and does not overly burden the narrative.

Those unfamiliar with the operational aspects of the 1st Canadian Division’s early battles will certainly benefit from the rich detail Iarocci provides. However, this leads to the only significant criticism of this work. At times, the narrative strays from its central point, but toward the end of each section the author always tightens his focus and successfully distills voluminous detail

down to the core factors and effectively ties them to his thesis. Though the soldiers of the 1st Division were certainly brave, it was their training and professionalism that allowed for their success and survival on the Western Front.

Though the author admits the evidence can be framed in a manner supporting the learning curve argument, *Shoestring Soldiers* successfully argues its main thesis that the 1st Canadian Division was an effective fighting force when it arrived in England in 1915. No doubt the formation's effectiveness grew over time, but this was as much an issue of increased access to needed tools of war as issues concerning a learning process. Not only will this work appeal to specialists interested in the Canadian Corps, but it is also accessible enough to general readers interested in the First World War. It will be interesting to see how future historians of the Canadian Corps adapt and employ Iarocci's compelling argument.

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