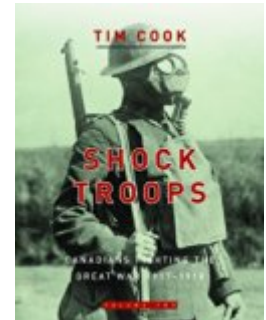


Tim Cook. *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918.* Volume 2. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008. viii + 727 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-670-06735-0.



Reviewed by Brandon Dimmel

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Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

In this follow-up to his acclaimed *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (2007), Tim Cook completes a masterful two-volume account of Canada's infantry during the "War to End All Wars." His story describes in wonderful detail the metamorphosis of the Canadian Corps into an elite fighting unit, known by friend and foe alike as "Shock" troops capable of breaching almost any defense. Much like volume 1, which Cook indicates "is meant to be read in conjunction with this one," *Shock Troops* combines soldiers' letters, diaries, and memoirs with the strategic and tactical account to provide an almost complete description of Canada's frontline contribution to the final two years of the Great War (p. 8).

Published in 2007 and winner of the J. W. Dafoe Prize, *At the Sharp End* was the story of a rag-tag colonial force desperately trying to adapt to the brutality of "total" twentieth-century warfare. Volume 1 closely followed the Canadian Corps' crash course in modern warfare and the book's structure reflected this "learning curve"

theme; comprised of forty short chapters, each section of the book effectively trained its reader in one part of the trench-fighting experience, from bloody battles to a soldier's diet to his life behind the lines on leave. That layout helped make *At the Sharp End* much more accessible than traditional military accounts and *Shock Troops* continues in that vein. Chapters in volume 2 cover such battles as Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele, as well as unexpected and refreshing topics, including soldier spirituality and the transition to civilian life, first in occupied Germany, in camps in Britain, and then back in Canada.

Of course, what really made *At the Sharp End* different than other descriptions of life at the front was Cook's extensive use of soldiers' ephemera. The primary strength of *Shock Troops* is again the way the author weaves anecdotes into his story of the corps' maturation over the final two years of the conflict. The way soldiers described the pockmarked battlefields crawling with the wounded and stinking of the dead is far more powerful than casualty lists. Few readers will for-

get the way Major D. E. Macintyre described a dead German soldier slumped against a captured trench wall, his head replaced by “a red pulp like a crushed strawberry” (p. 112). Herbert Burrell’s story is equally powerful; he watched helplessly as stretcher bearers passed over a dying friend for other wounded men deemed more likely to live (p. 121). These are the images that will resonate with readers long after the honor roll numbers have been erased from their memories.

The primary difference between Cook’s two volumes involves the evolution of the Canadian Corps from an idealistic and immature lot of adventurous men and boys into a cohesive, experienced, and intelligent fighting force capable of working in unison toward ending the war’s stalemate. In his examination of the war’s final two years, Cook captures in fine detail the progression of Canada’s fighting unit as it integrated effective tactical tools. Some of these included the “creeping barrage” used at Vimy Ridge and afterward, artillery support that, rather than let up right before an attack (providing the enemy with ample warning), blanketed the battlefield and enemy trenches in hellfire before an advancing infantry force that leapt on startled German defenders just as the shelling ended. The Canadian Corps also changed its tactical attack doctrine after 1916, pursuing a “bite and hold” strategy that called for frequent, short, and feasible advances rather than massive and unlikely breakthroughs that more often than not led to small gains and big casualty counts. Most important, the Canadian Corps became a whole unit; after Sir Arthur Currie’s appointment as corps commander, the Canadians fought together throughout the remainder of the war, building cohesion between divisions, brigades, and companies, a situation rather unique within the larger British Expeditionary Force. The cover photograph of *Shock Troops* brilliantly captures the transformation of the Canadian Corps with its image of a hardened soldier, his rifle slung over the shoulder like a broadsword, his face hidden beneath the gas mask’s inhuman,

menacing visage. This is no regular bright-eyed novice soldier anymore, but an experienced warrior to be feared by enemies and respected by allies.

Cook’s use of soldiers’ letters, diaries, and memoirs allows us to peer deeper into the minds of these men who bravely endured the rats, the lice, and the bully beef of the trenches. It was not a glorious job; as Lance Corporal Archie McWade remarked, “You live like pigs, and you kill like pigs” (p. 103). Few men recognized that their achievements would be remembered as the stuff of nation-building; “Everything [a soldier] does is automatic,” remarked one Vimy veteran. “He doesn’t actually know what is happening” (p. 103).

These accounts help Cook search for answers to some of the more difficult questions about the average infantryman, none more pressing than the way most of these men, having faced death and destruction at every turn and at best offered a week’s respite each year, managed to “soldier on” both mentally and physically. Although rare, leave was important and could be used as an incentive for daring night raids or a reward for valourous acts in No Man’s Land. Camaraderie too was vital; respect for fellow privates, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and officers was won on the battlefield as the war progressed and the Canadians began to rack up success after success through the final two years. The Great War’s brutal nature also began to wipe out class distinctions between these men, for as more and more names were added to the “Butcher’s Bill,” it became necessary to pull NCOs and officers from the rank and file, contributing to a belief in the trenches that courage would be rewarded.

Although this book will undoubtedly make a Canadian very proud, it may not sit quite so well with readers from those other belligerent nations. One wonders if Cook is too aggressive in assuring the Canadians’ prowess, repeatedly referring to the corps as a group of “elite,” “shock,” and

“storm” troops. It is hard to shake the feeling that Cook firmly believes the Canadians were far better fighters than their allies by war’s end, and that kind of patriotism, which largely ignores the fact that Canada played just one small but significant role in a much larger allied war effort, is not the book’s best quality. The soldiers’ letters and diaries say enough about the bravery of the Canadian infantry and their important contribution.

For most readers, this will not detract from what is a deserving winner of the 2009 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction. Cook is very good at weaving soldiers’ descriptions of the fighting into his narrative, the result being a work that is painfully difficult to put down. It will contribute to our understanding of the Great War for years to come, and in the time being should not be missed.

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