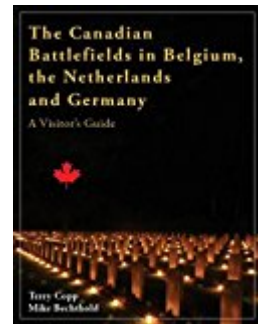


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Terry Copp, Michael Bechthold. *The Canadian Battlefields in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany: A Visitor's Guide*. Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2010. Illustrations, maps. 160 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-926804-02-6.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

At the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the D-Day invasion, in 1994, Terry Copp released for the first time *The Canadian Battlefields in Normandy* guidebook in collaboration with the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS) at Wilfrid Laurier University. For the enthusiastic about Canadian battles during the two world wars and for those keen to commemorate the sacrifice of the soldiers, Copp surrounded himself with an excellent team of collaborators to develop this series of battlefield guides, which, in addition to this book, has also published six other battlefield volumes. If the exploits of Canadian troops are better known on the beaches of Normandy and on French soil, costly fighting that led them to Germany are much less known. Hence this new edition of *The Canadian Battlefields in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany* (formerly published as *The Canadian Battlefields in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* [1995]) is quite relevant.

Military historians Copp and Mike Bechthold are experts in the field and long-time collaborators. Copp is director of the LCMSDS, a professor emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University, and a frequent visitor to the many battlefields that he has covered for the preparation of his monographs, including the well-known *Fields of Fire* (2003) and *Cinderella Army* (2006). Bechthold is the man-

aging editor of the journal *Canadian Military History* and also serves as the director of communications of the LCMSDS. As leaders of several Canadian battlefield tours, they have explored the ground in the company of many students and they explained to them the ins and outs of campaigns as well as their impact on the soldiers; this experience influenced in the most positive way this publication. Like any good battlefield guidebook, the goal of this work is to present the efforts of the Canadian soldiers and especially to commemorate them by creating a helping tool for visitors who want to plan their tour efficiently. *The Canadian Battlefields in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany* successfully completes its task.

Like other titles in this series, the book follows a chronological order of battles fought by the Canadian Army. For each phase, a historical overview engages the reader with descriptions of the main features of the studied period. The book follows the Battle of Normandy and focuses on the strategic issues of "how best to pursue a beaten enemy in a war which nearly everyone assumed would be over by Christmas" (p. 8). Unfortunately for the Allies, the battles, which lasted from September 1944 to May 1945, are known to have been particularly hard with the fighting resulting in more than twenty-six thousand Canadian casualties. Canadian troops were given the

task of freeing the Channel ports and, more specifically, securing the port of Antwerp in the Scheldt Estuary. This task was complicated by numerous factors: the geographic position of the port, the difficult ground where the fighting took place, shortages of infantrymen, and the subordination of these operations to those planned by British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery to quickly enter Germany. The Ardennes offensive launched by the German Army in December 1944 provided the necessary respite to Canadian troops, allowing them to rebuild and to solve the problem of infantrymen shortages before going back to clear the Rhineland, cross the Rhine, and finally enter into Germany in February 1945. Again, the slow progress of troops is explained by the difficult conditions. Mud and flooding intensified the task of winning against the fierce resistance of Germans now fighting on their national soil. In April 1945, the last month of the war, the First Canadian Army fought to free the northern part of the Netherlands. Again, the desperate fighting led by Nazi forces slowed these efforts. The men, nevertheless, also knew that the war was coming to an end and, as such, caution guided their action more and more. If it can be argued, as did historian John English, that at the end of the war the Canadian Army was the “best little army in the world,” then Copp and Bechthold do not seem to agree with his criticism of Canadian tactical effectiveness.[1] The authors return to the argument developed in Copp’s previous work, *Cinderella Army*, which questioned that historians of the Second World War greatly reduced the tactical value of Canadians while overestimating the Germans. “Much is made in the secondary literature of the prowess of the German infantry. Yet the battle for Hoogerheide demonstrated major deficiencies in German tactics, which was not uncommon in Northwest Europe.... The battle also indicates that both in their defensive positions and in their tactical counterattacks the Canadians were more than a match for the enemy” (p. 51).

Although this evaluation of the Canadian performance is not shared by all historians, this book provides a great introduction to the role played by the First Canadian Army in the road to victory in the northwestern European front after the fighting in France. The historical summaries are well written and insightful, and they

take into account recent studies published on the subject. Above all, the narrative employs a happy mixture of anecdotes and personal stories included in the description of operations without neglecting more tactical and strategic issues. In this way, even if the guidebook is primarily intended for the uninitiated, connoisseurs will not be left wanting as the guidebook is based on extensive research of the campaigns of northwest Europe. However, in this new edition, the authors have seen fit to retrench around twenty pages on the fighting between Normandy and the Operation Market Garden as well as the appendixes presented in the first edition. For the layman, this could complicate the matter, and the addition of a map on the “Pursuit from the Seine” operations may not be sufficient for the reader to understand the importance of this part of the puzzle. Yet the book is beautifully illustrated with period pictures—many in color—from the collections of Library and Archives Canada as well as some more recent photographs of the places and monuments to visit. Two iconographic elements stand out in particular. The first are the many aerial photographs drawn from the extensive Air Photo Collection (Second World War) preserved at the LCMSDS and originally used by the 1st Canadian Air Photo Interpretation Section. Added to these are great maps prepared by Bechthold to show the movements made by the field units. Bechthold also provides many detailed and current road maps at the end of each chapter. The addition of many overview maps as well as the work on the style and the layout of several others make this new edition a most welcome tool. The only hitch is that the three road maps focus only on the Scheldt Estuary, meaning the reader will need to obtain additional maps for visits to the Rhineland and northern Netherlands. Yet directions given by the authors in these sections will certainly facilitate the trip. To conclude, this guidebook provides the reader with a wealth of information to prepare for a visit to the battlefields and also guides the user to make the most of the visit, which makes this book a must-have for anyone interested in the path of the First Canadian Army to victory in 1945.

Note

[1]. John A. English, *Lament for an Army: The Decline of Canadian Military Professionalism* (Toronto: Irwin, 1988), 44.

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