

“World War II:
Army Operations on the Western Front”

For
Dr. D. Zimmerman
History 394

By
Heather Campbell

The Second World War is a large and complex even in history that is traditionally view on a broad scale. Often it is learned about and experienced by those who came after its time and on a larger political and strategic scale rather than through the experiences of those individuals, specifically soldiers, on the ground taking part in the fighting, planning and logistics of day to day life at war. To better understand this point of view oral history can provide an outlet by which to glean the realities of what it was like for men and women of all ranks on the ground in the action. The oral historical account of such experiences are a tool by which to understand, not the events that took place but, the effect those events had on those who participated in them.

Most historic accounts of the Second World War talk about strategy, tactics, operations and objectives, casualties by the hundreds and thousands and victory and defeat in terms of the larger scale of the success of the war. Rarely are the experiences of those on the ground actually participating in the action on a day to day basis understood in terms of their individual and emotional experiences and existence as soldiers and people. It is one of complex sensations and diversity “ranging from bitter enmity to intense affection, from paralyzing terror to serene heroism, and from stultifying boredom to frenetic activity.”¹ To understand war from this point of view it is important to examine the conditions and circumstances surrounding it.

The reasons why one joins the army vary according to the personal needs and desires of the individual which influences the regiment and army as a whole. Major Charles ‘Chic’ Goodman who was sixteen when the war broke out and who went on to

¹ John Keegan and Richard Holmes. *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle*. (United States: R. R. Donnelley & Sons, 1986) 259.

have a long and prosperous military career in the Canadian Army joined the army for several reasons:

When the war broke out in 1939 I was... thirteen years old and thought ... it would be a neat thing... if the war would last long enough for me to get into it. Plus, that we didn't have much money, my mother worked... so I thought it would be neat if I could earn my own living by being a soldier as well as the glamour of wearing a uniform and fighting in a war. I soon found out that, after I was overseas, there wasn't much glamour to it. So it was patriotism and financial.²

Another soldier, John Butler of the 6th Airborne Regiment, who went on to a 22 year military career stated his reasons for joining the military:

There was a war on. We were all intensely patriotic. I knew I was going to go. I was quite happy to go and join up sooner or later but being the youngest of a group my friends, my mates, had all gone and I was getting funny looks because they'd all gone and I was still there! People didn't know what age I was but they thought I was sort of chickening out, so that make me put my age up six month.... It looked a bit dodgy but nobody ever queried it. They were only too pleased to get you in.³

The main point to take away from these two accounts is that they volunteered. Goodman and Butler both willingly signed up and went to war. Men in the early years of the war were volunteers and this made for a very enthusiastic bunch of soldiers ready to participate in whatever action they could. Morale was only strengthened by the fact that

² Charles Goodman, Personal Interview, 7 November 2008.

³ John butler, Personal Interview, 12 November 2008.

those who were there wanted to be and were willing to give everything they had to the fight.

Though every soldier experienced something unique unto themselves there were similarities in aspects of battle and army life. There is a distinct difference between battle and combat. Combat is what concerns the soldier on the front, what is right in front of him. According to Donald E. Graves “Although the two terms are used interchangeably, it is important to note the difference between *combat* and battle. They occur simultaneously, but at different levels.”⁴ Combat is more intimate and personal opposed to battle which is far more removed though both are significant. After the invasion of D-Day and subsequent movement inland to Caen and surrounding areas the momentum slowed as the allies came under heavy artillery fire resulting in severe casualties. Peter Maule, of the South Saskatchewan Regiment, noted that during their fighting at Verriers:

It was just south of the city of Caen what we called a breakthrough.

The third division was ahead of us and they got through Caen and they were holding it there and then they took so many casualties then we had to break through them to make a five mile attack up to the top of the ridge and it was being held by the First and the Ninth Panzer divisions and the 12th Waffen S.S.... They wouldn't take prisoners. So that was our attack up the hill... just about wiped us out. I had only had seven out of the thirty-two men I went in with in four hours ... it was the worst experience.⁵

⁴ Donald E.Graves, ““Naked Truths for the Asking”: Twentieth-Century Military Historians and the Battlefield Narrative”. *Military History and the Military Profession*. Ed.s., David A. Charters, Marc Milner, and J.Brent Wilson. (Westport: Praeger, 1992) 50.

⁵ Peter Maule, Personal Interview, 10 November 2008.

Major Goodman also described the losses faced by the South Saskatchewan Regiment at Verriers:

Verriers was a real hot spot, we called it Hell's Fire Corner, under almost continuous shelling and direct fire of German tanks and I saw an incredible thing there. One of our anti-tank gunners knocked out three tanks with three rounds. One round per tank and that deterred the Germans from crossing that field of fire. ⁶

Despite the heavy fire and the casualties it is interesting to note that morale did not seem to waver. Of course it was hard to see friends and comrades fall but there were also hits taken by the Germans as Major Goodman pointed out.

The terrain the soldiers experienced along the Western Front altered depending where exactly one was. Weather and terrain were significant in determining success for those involved in various battles throughout the war. "Geography and terrain are vital subjects in military affairs. Although related, they are not the same. Military geography concerns the relationship of one place to another.... In contrast, the nature of the terrain lies at the heart of military tactics."⁷ The invasion of Sicily and Southern Italy during the summer of 1943 was the first action for many Canadian and British soldiers including those of the 1st Airborne Division. In many cases extreme heat or cold could be oppressive to those enduring them but for those soldiers who glided toward the coast of Italy the heat was a blessing. Major Geoffrey Costeloe of the British Army, at the time, recounts that he was "very glad it was warm because [he] spent ten hours in the sea and

⁶ Charles Goodman, Personal Interview, 7 November 2008.

⁷ Eric M. Bergerud, *Touched With Fire: the Land War in the South Pacific*, (New York: Penguin, 1997) 55.

the Mediterranean was lovely and warm, thank God.”⁸ He also goes on to describe the differences between the fighting terrain of Italy and Arnhem:

In Italy, the country was rather open and that sort of thing. It was rather different. In Arnhem we were in a city and it was all street fighting you know and very close quarter fighting. Different altogether ... In the open it's much easier because you can see where things are. In a built up area you never know who is in a house and who isn't and it's much more difficult.⁹

The Italian terrain did, however, provide its own unique challenges, much of it being open countryside filled with villages and mountains that reach five to six thousand feet and the valleys are covered with vegetation.¹⁰ This is rather significant because it shows the soldier's necessity for diversity and adaptability in terms of training and applications of that training. John Butler describes the Normandy hedgerow as “a terrible thing to fight around. It is a bank about six to eight foot wide and six to eight foot high heavily treed with bushes on top. Ideal ambush country.”¹¹ All front provided unique challenges that had to be overcome by those fighting on them.

Rationing was a key element of running a successful campaign. The soldiers needed to eat to remain capable in action. All of those interviewed agreed on the fact that they had nothing to complain about in terms of rations. There were a few instances when food was lacking but that was based more on logistical problems of not having

⁸ Geoffrey Costeloe, Personal Interview, 9 November 2008.

⁹ Geoffrey Costeloe, Personal Interview, 9 November 2008.

¹⁰ The Canadian Army at War: From Pachino to Ortona – The Canadian Campaign in Sicily and Italy, 1943, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1945 – 1946), 84.

¹¹ John Butler, Personal Interview, 12 November 2008.

established a hold on the ground that was being taken. For John Butler D-Day was one such occasion when because it took longer to secure their invasion objectives the soldiers went without food for a couple of days:

The idea was we dumped all our kit for the sake of speed to get down to the bridge and we'd sort it [the rations] out later. In actual fact Gerry sorted it out later ... so the whole of D-Day you had nothing to eat. The following day we had in our pockets a tin of emergency rations only to be opened on the instructions of an officer. Oh to hell with that we were hungry so we opened it and it was a square of very dense dark chocolate. It was good and it was nutritious.¹²

It was not until the third day after landing that John Butler had a real cooked meal. This problem was however quickly resolved and from then on Mr. Butler ate well during his time in France. Overall rations were sufficient and neither the soldiers of the British or Canadian armies went hungry.

It is easy to find information in history books about the types of weapons and training facilities that soldiers used in preparation for their time overseas in action. What was interesting to discover was that all the live fire training in the world could not really prepare a soldier for the experience of being in action for real, when it really counted. Even after several years in the service and seeing action overseas these soldiers did not get hardened to the situations. Peter Maule describes his feelings toward the war:

I would do one part again... I would join up but I wouldn't want to fight again. Some of it was really difficult to go into, take your men into especially if they didn't know, especially if they were a new

¹² John Butler, Personal Interview, 12 November 2008.

recruit you know? ... They were the ones I felt bad for because you couldn't explain to them, you couldn't explain to them at all. And you can't go watching everybody like that or otherwise you'll be asking for trouble for yourself. I know I had some young kids there one day, the next day they were dead. Some of them I didn't even really know their names.¹³

The pervading theme of morale which seemed to keep everyone going and make the experience bearable is found in all those interviewed. John Butler expressed his thoughts on the subject of camaraderie and how it related to morale:

This was one of the things that carry's you through when you're scared to death. You're not going to let yourself down in front of your comrades so you put up with it and get on with it. And this is a general feeling that pervades the whole group; you'll owe it to your comrades and supporting your comrades as they support you is paramount and this literally carries you forward when you're frightened to death.¹⁴

Geoffrey Costeloe had similar recollections when he described the realities of battle:

It was difficult if somebody you knew well, a very great friend got wounded or killed, of course it was. Yes, it was a bit of a shock but somehow or other one had to put up with it you know? I don't know what it is but you do, you put up with it and get on with the job.¹⁵

This is echoed by Donald A. Graves' article, "Military History and the Military Profession" when he emphasizes the definition of combat by Paul Fussell as being one of survival that takes over and is necessary for the soldier and his comrades to survive the

¹³ Peter Maule, Personal Interview. 10 November 2008.

¹⁴ John Butler, Personal Interview. 12 November 2008.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Costeloe, Personal Interview, 9 November 2008.

war.¹⁶ It was worth it to endure these hardships and traumas because in the end the cause was worth while and each and every one of the soldiers I interviewed believed that what they were doing was important and necessary. Major Geoffrey Costeloe expressed this with his words:

We all felt we were doing something good, you know, worth while. I think it was important you felt like this otherwise what would be the purpose in kind of throwing your life away if it wasn't going to be useful. I have a very strong feeling that what we did was right and maybe there were mistakes on the way but whatever we did they tried to get it right and they tried to do the best they could.¹⁷

One has to keep in mind that these accounts are based largely on memory and are more telling of the individual's emotional experience. The accounts are for that reason more valuable in trying to understand the war from the soldier's perspective on a ground level rather than as a chronological list of events.

As with many topics in history one of the problems is the legitimacy of its sources. There are endless books, articles, documentaries, newspaper clippings and the like pertaining to World War II. Sifting through these sources can be daunting and sometimes difficult to sort the good from the bad. There are several elements and methods that history can be studied through. The different facets provide different aspects, points of view and demographics. Oral history, for example, is from the perspective of the individual and that comes across in the literature written about it. But having said that Oral history does leave room for the insertion of collective memory in testimonies from literature and experiences the interviewee may have been exposed to. It

¹⁶ Graves, "Naked Truths for the Asking," 49-50.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Costeloe, Personal Interview. 9 November 2008.

is important to be familiar with these sources before engaging in Oral History so as to be more able to sort through and better define what is collective and individual memory.

When researching and studying such conflicts as the Second World War one must be aware and mindful of who the author is and their biases, especially in matters of war and conflict. Despite this, Oral History presents a perspective that is valuable and unique to the historical account of an event. It is perhaps what the individual remembers that is more important than the facts of the event because it shows how it affected them at the time, which is the perspective one is looking for as an historian of Oral History.

Bibliography

Bergerud, Eric M.. *Touched With Fire: the Land War in the South Pacific*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

Graves, Donald E. ““Naked Truths for the Asking””: Twentieth-Century Military Historians and the Battlefield Narrative”. *Military History and the Military Profession*. Eds., David A. Charters, Marc Milner, and J.Brent Wilson. Westport: Praeger, 1992.

Keegan, John and Richard Holmes. *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle*. United States: R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 1986.

The Canadian Army at War: From Pachino to Ortona – The Canadian Campaign in Sicily and Italy, 1943, Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1945 – 1946.

Works Consulted

By Air to Battle: The Official Account of the British First and Sixth Airborne Divisions, Great Britain: C. Nicholls & Co. Ltd., 1945.

D’Este, Carlo. *Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily July- August 1943*, London: Collins, 1988.

Stacey, C.P. *The Canadian Army at War: Canada’s Battle in Normandy*, Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1946.