

Canadian Military History

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 21

1-23-2012

Canadian Prisoners of War in the Great War

William H. Wiley
York University

Recommended Citation

Wiley, William H. (1994) "Canadian Prisoners of War in the Great War," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol3/iss1/21>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Canadian Prisoners of War in the Great War

William H. Wiley

Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany, 1914-1919*. Toronto: Lester Publications, 1992, 218 pages, \$26.95.

The Montreal lawyer Errol M. McDougall, Canada's reparations commissioner and the man primarily responsible for handling the claims of former Canadian prisoners of war against the German government, was largely unsympathetic to the men who appeared before him, and made awards in less than a quarter of the 862 cases of alleged maltreatment he received. Some of the claims were palpably spurious and, as Desmond Morton sympathetically concludes, clearly motivated by the deleterious effects of the Great Depression on the by then middle-aged veterans. Whether financial hardship motivated one claimant to argue that he had been tortured by the "Red Baron" remains to be seen, but there can be little doubt that naked lies of this sort only undermined the ex-prisoners' cause. Similarly, as Professor Morton makes clear at the outset of *Silent Battle*, the veterans would hardly have been better served by appealing over the head of McDougall to a general public which by then had come to dismiss wartime accounts of German barbarity as mere histrionics and succumbed to the "almost quintessential Canadian" tendency to laud one's former foes as new-found friends. What was more, according to the author, it was the view of both McDougall and others that former prisoners had no reason to be especially proud of what they had endured and that those who had been singled out for often brutal punishment by German guards were for the most part the authors of their own misfortune.

That some 3,842 Canadian officers and men were made prisoner during the course of

the Great War would seem reason enough to tell their story, given the absence of any scholarly consideration of their imprisonment. For his part, Professor Morton offers several additional rationales for a study such as *Silent Battle*, citing the "legitimate fascination with the stubborn endurance in the face of terrible adversity" shown by Canadian POWs, and his view that the treatment afforded to Canada's prisoners during the First World War foreshadowed "the vast slave army that underpinned the Third Reich."

Insofar as the first aim is concerned, Professor Morton succeeds most admirably, touching on those facets of the POW experience which the more extensive scholarly literature dealing with the Anglo-American prisoners of the Second World War has made almost obligatory: the phenomenon of capture; the confusion and uncertainty in the minds of those newly-made prisoners; the difficulties of settling into camp routine and the numbing boredom which invariably set in; the often very serious lack of sustenance provided by the Germans and the resultant reliance upon parcels from the Red Cross and home, conflicts among the prisoners themselves; the very different experiences of officers and other ranks; the frequent abuse and at times inhumane labour to which the men were subject; and finally, liberation and repatriation. Of course, no study of this sort would be complete without an account of escapes, and the author does not disappoint. One hundred men made good on their escape attempts, although only one of this number was an officer. Given that commissioned ranks were incarcerated separately from their

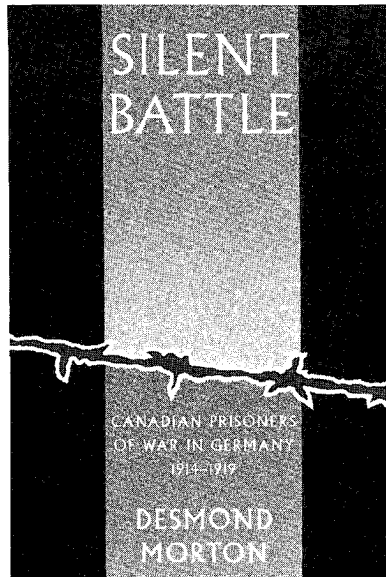
men and generally free to wander beyond the gates of their camps as long as they promised to return, a single successful escape by an officer might strike the reader — with some justification — as a rather poor record. Evidently, the officers were lacking somewhat in motivation and a more rigorous German policy where they were concerned would certainly have helped matters.

Other ranks were, however, often subject to the most appalling treatment, and the story of the travails of the rank and file takes up the bulk of *Silent Battle*. Compelled by international law and inter-belligerent agreements reached during the War itself to perform labour unrelated to military operations, Canadian troops and, often enough, their non-commissioned officers, found themselves cutting peat on wind-swept moors, digging for coal or, worst of all, condemned to mining salt. These and other forms of back-breaking and soul-destroying labour were all too often carried out under the supervision of short-tempered guards ordered to see that their charges met quotas which were invariably unrealistic considering the prisoners' limited diet and the inadequate materials which they were given to perform the tasks at hand. While some of the overseers were outright sadists, Professor Morton implies through the inclusion of an excerpt from a prisoner's memoir of his captivity that cultural differences were very much a part of the problem: "Our men were not used to being shouted at," the ex-prisoner recalled,

and when they were, they usually responded with spirit, and that together with an ignorance of the language, was largely responsible for the punishments that followed - punishments that were designed to break a man's spirit and which were fairly successful in their results . . .

This sort of explanation, though, hardly supports the suggestion made elsewhere that the experience of the First War prisoners foreshadowed that of the Second War's slave labourers. In fact, Professor Morton's argument may remind the reader of a scene in the Hong Kong episode of the otherwise forgettable documentary, *The Valour and the Horror*. In the scene in question, a former Japanese POW camp guard, brought face-to-face with a Canadian captured at Hong Kong fifty years before, explained away the Canadian veteran's complaint of having been systematically starved as something which he himself did not recall but, in the spirit of reconciliation, was willing to concede might be explained in terms of the wide gulf which had existed at that time between the Japanese and Anglo-American cultures. The Canadian veteran, showing remarkable restraint under the circumstances, replied rather incredulously that he did not see anything cultural about being starved. The point is, of course, that there is a difference between a prisoner economy predicated on slave labour, such as characterized the German treatment of non-

western POWs in the Second World War, and a given Prussian soldier's resort to corporal punishment when faced with a recalcitrant prisoner during the Great War. The horrid fate of millions of Soviet POWs from 1941, juxtaposed against the generally decent treatment afforded to Anglo-American and other western prisoners during the same period, stemmed directly from the racial biases of the National Socialist regime and its military auxiliaries, particularly the OKW. That a different sort of prejudice underpinned the (mis)treatment of British and Canadian prisoners during the First World War is recognized by Professor Morton himself when he shows some sympathy with the argument that when British and Canadian soldiers shared a camp with their French and Russian counterparts — as they frequently did — the British and Canadians were given the dirtiest



tasks and cut the least slack. Similarly, the reader is told that the guards showed special resentment toward the Canadian prisoners on the grounds that they were so-called *Geldsoldaten* (literally, “money soldiers”); that is, men who had volunteered to fight and were thus regarded as little more than mercenaries by captors who did not understand the Canadians’ feelings for the Old Country.

On the whole, then, Professor Morton’s comparisons between his subjects’ experiences in German hands and the National Socialist regime’s resort to slave labour is unhelpful, and points to a wider problem in Anglo-American scholarly literature on the subject of POWs: that is, the failure to adequately examine the problem from the enemy’s perspective. While German source material is not entirely absent from *Silent Battle*, a stronger focus in this area would arguably have altered the book’s interpretive framework. Specifically, had the opening discussion of the laws of war as they had evolved through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century gone into more detail, it would have become apparent that Prussian and later German officials and jurists embodied a tradition which showed a marked preference for the prevalence of military

necessity over codified law and western custom, especially where reprisals and an occupier’s right to the labour of enemy subjects were concerned. The often appalling behaviour of German troops in both France in 1870-71 and Belgium from 1914 — a problem which is deserving of a dispassionate re-examination — revealed this tradition at work. As well, the arguments advanced by defence lawyers during the course of the Leipzig trials — a number of which were concerned with the treatment of Allied POWs — pointed to the divergent German interpretation of the laws and customs of war. Had *Silent Battle* examined this phenomenon, a much more effective contextualization of an otherwise admirable account of a forgotten episode in Canadian history might have been achieved, and the mistreatment of Canadian prisoners during the Great War seen not as a foretaste of the National Socialist regime’s *Ostpolitik*, but rather of the often complete indifference to the laws of war shown by the German army proper in both east and west from 1939.

William H. Wiley is currently completing his Ph.D. at York University.

The D-Day Encyclopedia

David G. Chandler and James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The D-Day Encyclopedia*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, 665 pgs, \$85 US.

D-Day, the sixth of June 1944, was a day of momentous proportions. Churchill referred to it as “the greatest amphibious operation in history,” and “the most difficult and com-

plicated operation that has ever taken place.” By the end of the day, 130,000 men along with their vehicles, equipment and supplies had been landed. On the choppy waters of the Channel, nearly 200,000 sailors in 1,200 ships comprised the armada that conveyed this force to France. In the sky overhead, the Allied Air Forces flew over 14,000 sorties in support of the invasion.

Unfortunately, amidst the catalogue of numbers used to express the operation’s size, the true scale of effort tends to get

lost. One of the greatest contributions made by *The D-Day Encyclopedia* is to bring back into sharp focus the enormous endeavour that was Overlord. The editors, David Chandler and James Lawton Collins, Jr., have assembled a comprehensive 665-page reference book composed of 437 articles related to D-Day. In perusing this collection one becomes truly aware of the sheer scale of planning and effort that went into the mounting and execution of Overlord.

This book is sure to become the standard reference book on