

Canadian Military History

Volume 21 | Issue 1

Article 8

4-16-2015

The Militia Gunners

J.L. Granatstein

Recommended Citation

J.L. Granatstein () "The Militia Gunners," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol21/iss1/8>

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.

The Militia Gunners

J.L. Granatstein

By general repute, two of the best senior artillery officers in the Canadian Army in the Second World War were William Ziegler (1911-1999) and Stanley Todd (1898-1996), both products of the militia. Ziegler had a dozen years of militia experience before the war, was a captain, and was in his third year studying engineering at the University of Alberta when his battery was mobilized in the first days of the war. Todd had attended the Royal Military College in a war-shortened course, leaving in 1916 for service with the Royal Artillery. He served in Britain and the Middle East and was invalided out of the service after contracting diphtheria. In business in Ottawa, he joined the NPAM artillery and was a lieutenant-colonel in 1939. Todd became Commander, Royal Artillery [CRA] in 3rd Canadian Division and Commander, Corps Royal Artillery [CCRA] in 2nd Canadian Corps. Ziegler was CRA in 1st Canadian Division. Both saw much action and had high – and deserved – reputations.

I interviewed Todd at his home in Ancaster, Ontario in May 1991; Ziegler in Edmonton in October of the same year. The conversations covered personalities and attitudes and were sometimes brutally frank, which pleased me and suited my purposes as I did the research for *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto, 1993). As was my usual practice, I made notes as we talked

Abstract: Two of the best senior artillery officers in the Canadian Army in the Second World War were products of the militia: William Ziegler (1911-1999) and Stanley Todd (1898-1996). Ziegler served as the senior artillery commander in 1st Canadian Infantry Division in Italy from February 1944 until the end of the war. Todd was the senior gunner in 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and the architect of the Canadian artillery fireplan on D-Day. He went on to serve as the senior gunner in 2nd Canadian Corps under Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds. Both men talked with J.L. Granatstein in 1991 and the transcript of those interviews offer their sometimes brutally frank appraisals of personalities and attitudes in the Second World War Canadian Army.

and then wrote up a memoranda of each conversation, both of which – with minor editing and some deletions – follow. Copies of these and all the interview memoranda that I prepared are in my papers at the York University Archives while another set is held by the Directorate of History and Heritage at National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa.

Brigadier William S. Ziegler, interviewed at Edmonton, 23 October 1991

Born in 1911, Ziegler had wanted to attend RMC but couldn't get in. He joined the 61st Field Battery of the Non-Permanent Active Militia

in 1926 in Edmonton as a boy soldier, got his commission in 1932, and in the summer of 1938 was attached to the Permanent Force [PF] as an instructor and captain. There he mastered technical gunnery and became an expert, well-positioned to rise when the war started. He went overseas in early 1940 with the 8th Field Regiment and was sent back to Canada to be brigade major (Artillery) with the 3rd Canadian Division. He attended Camberley Staff College where he was told he should try to stand first of the ten Canadians there and not to worry about the 190 others. He placed second, Dan Spry [later a division commander] beating him out. He then became GSO1 Artillery at First Canadian Army, commanding officer of 13th Field Regiment, a colonel at Canadian Military Headquarters, and in February 1944 a brigadier and Commander, Royal Artillery [CRA] of 1st Canadian Division in Italy in which post he stayed to the end of the war. In 1946 he went to work for the Allied Control Commission and was governor of a province in northern Germany for five years.

I asked about his impressions of the PF. He was not overly impressed by PF quality. There were princes (Major-General H.O.N. Brownfield), terrific soldiers (Major-General Chris Vokes), and others who had to be sacked. Still, when he was president of a corporation he had to sack people too. The army was a cross-section. Bert Hoffmeister would have been



Brigadier W.S. Ziegler, the acting commander of 1st Canadian Infantry Division, follows behind General Harry Crerar during an inspection. The officers on the left are Majors P. Potvin and Y. Dubé of the Royal 22e Régiment, Utrecht, Netherlands, 10 July 1945.

a leader even if there had not been a war. Guy Simonds was a man of such quality as to be unusual in any army – even when he first met him at a Royal School in 1931-2 you knew he wasn't to be trifled with. So was Bernard Montgomery, though he was a little SOB. The PF's problem was slow promotion: at the end of the war he was offered a regular army commission as a brigadier but he refused because he thought he could look forward to one promotion only, so he got out....

When he went overseas, his regiment was billeted with the 11th from Toronto (with Bruce Matthews [later a division commander]). There was initially no mixing between the officers, and the westerners thought the Toronto officers were snobs. But after a large party where all got

hammered together, their training was comparable. He added that his regiment had no guns initially (this was before Dunkirk) so he devised mock-ups out of timber and they practised on those.

He had high regard for General McNaughton and told a story of training at Larkhill where they were using a new artillery board for plotting. He was leaning over a board when he heard a voice from behind: "What's the trouble?" "I don't know, but if I ever get hold of the SOB that designed this board...." It was, of course, McNaughton, and it was his board. McNaughton just laughed. Still, Andy's problem was that he couldn't deal with the Brits. He was OK as a trainer, though perhaps he had been weak in preparing senior officers. After all, he was green

like all the Canadians. And, yes, he was, while good technically, weaker in higher command skills. He wasn't a presence and saw troops infrequently.

Basil Price who commanded 3rd Division was a grand old fellow, lovable, a person you'd like as a grandfather. It was hard for him to bawl out anyone. These were not compliments, said Ziegler. Price was one of the "old dugouts" and it wasn't until the fighting began that they disappeared. Still, there was no option until 1942 or so, and the blame is not the "dugouts" but Canada's for stripping its military after 1919. He said the result would have been chaos if McNaughton, Price, and [2nd Division GOC Major-General Victor] Odlum had had to lead the army into action, though the sprinkling of good

staff officers under them might have helped. If they'd been smart, they would have left the fighting to their GSO1s. They did their best but they were no good.

When he arrived at 1st Cdn Div as CRA, he thought the artillery was stuck in the mud – literally. He knew Bruce Matthews, his predecessor, was a Simonds and Vokes favourite, but it was inevitable that artillery was suffering through a hard post-Ortona winter dug into gun pits and a bit slack on shaving, etc. He hauled COs over the coals, ordered the guns cleaned and, he says, restored morale.

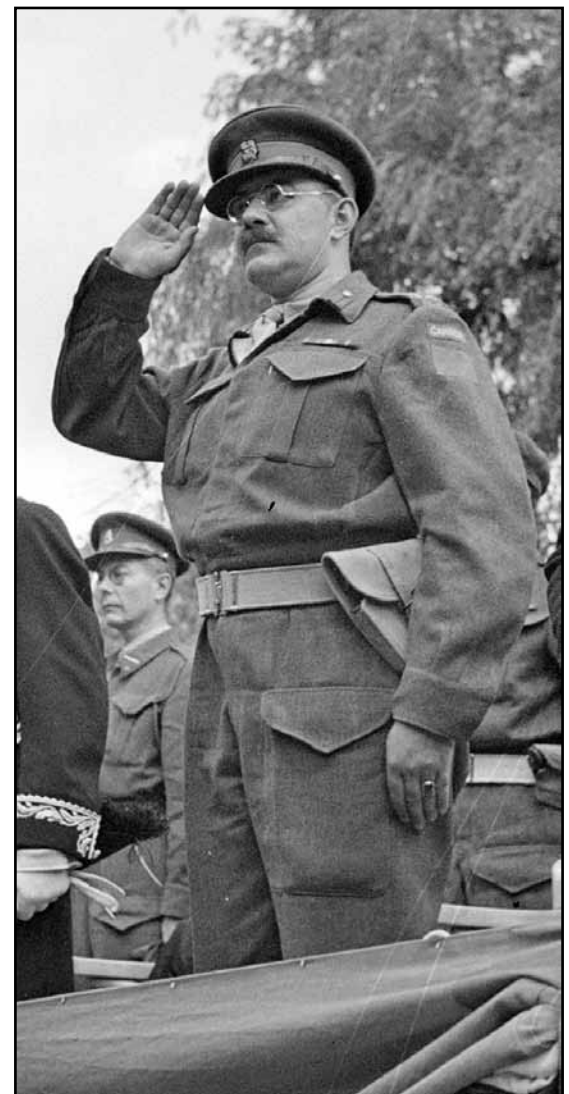
Vokes initially was pretty unhappy with him, thinking that Ziegler's new broom was a criticism of Matthews. He had only met Vokes briefly before, and Vokes hadn't wanted Matthews to leave. If he had to go, Vokes had wanted Jack Ross, a PF CO in 1st Cdn Div, to get the job. Instead, as Brownfield, Brigadier Royal Artillery of First Cdn Army, made the appointment (and Ziegler clearly was a Brownfield favourite), he got the nod – and worse, came from the UK. Moreover, Ziegler wore glasses so, to Vokes, he couldn't be a soldier. He was in the doghouse for a miserable period of weeks that lasted until the Hitler Line attacks in May 1944. Ziegler had had a month to train his regiments and he drove them hard. His artillery fire plan was massive, double the El Alamein scale, and he'd worked it out over a 72-hour straight stretch. Then Vokes wanted it changed in mid-battle and gruffly said he supposed it couldn't be done. But with only a 3-hour pause Ziegler switched direction. Vokes then called Ziegler into his dugout and insisted he have a full tumbler of whiskey. "Goddammit, Ziegler, don't you understand English, a real drink." Ziegler passed out and later realized that Vokes knew he was out on his feet with fatigue. From that moment, he worshipped Vokes and became to Vokes "the best goddam CRA in the Canadian Army."

He thought it was natural for Vokes to favour the PF. But even so, under his veneer he was not a tough guy. He was a real human being. He wasn't gunshy and he always went forward, taking Ziegler along in his jeep. Often they had to hide in ditches together under fire. He was a good planner, left Ziegler alone to do his work and his Commander, Royal Engineers too (which, as Vokes was RCE must have been hard). He could decentralize command. While he was no brilliant tactician, he was certainly adequate. Moreover, the troops worshipped him. He recalled one morning coming across some Hasty Pees [Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment] looking at dead comrades. Vokes stopped the jeep. "Don't bloody look at them. Get out your spades and bury the stiff." They did. The soldiers had been ready to vomit, but Vokes got them moving and raised their morale. He could also crack jokes with troops, unlike Simonds. But in the [1st Cdn Div] "A" Mess, it was always "Sir" and "Ziegler" or once in a while "Bill."

He recalled that when Vokes left as commander of the Occupation Force in Germany, he told Ziegler, staying with the Allied Control Commission in Lower Saxony that he could have his alcohol. Ziegler expected a case or two; instead a 3-ton truckload arrived....

He had little regard for Foulkes and no respect for him. Ziegler's heart bled for Vokes when he didn't get the 1 Cdn Corps, and Vokes was livid. There was no way he could serve under Foulkes so he and [4th Cdn Armd Div's Major-General Harry] Foster switched. If Ziegler could

have he would have left with Vokes. Ziegler had known Foulkes since 1941 when, as a lieutenant-colonel he had been on ship with Ziegler. Even then he was unapproachable. Was he able? A corps commander in Italy had to leave most things to division commanders, and at his first major fight on the Lamone River the Corps had a setback. Foulkes was angry and sacked Brigadier [J.A.] Calder [commanding 1st Brigade in 1st Cdn Div], making him, Ziegler said, the scapegoat. That cemented feeling against Foulkes in the Corps and Ziegler never heard a good word about him from anyone. He also drank too much, once turning up drunk to open a recreation club. He thought [General Harry] Crerar had a lot to do with Foulkes' rise.



Brigadier Ziegler takes a salute during a parade in Dordrecht, Netherlands, 7 June 1945.



Major-General Chris Vokes (left), the commander of 1st Canadian Infantry Division, was not happy when Ziegler was appointed as his artillery commander. Ziegler had three strikes against him: Vokes had wanted a different PF man for the job, he was militia, and he was being posted from England. They were able to work out their differences to the point where Ziegler worshipped Vokes and Vokes considered Ziegler "the best goddam CRA in the Canadian Army."

Brigadier P.A.S. Todd, interviewed at Ancaster, ON, 8 May 1991

The prewar Militia, Todd said, was very tiny. His artillery regiment in Ottawa had just enough for four gun crews, but there was a lot of education going on in the training of officers and NCOs. He spoke about the Militia Staff Course which was an 8 month commitment of evenings and a month off work in the summer for full time. He spoke too of meeting many of those who became the wartime senior officers at Petawawa....

We then talked about Harry Crerar who Todd knew in Ottawa and with whom he was then on first name basis. He found him a well-trained, slow, serious man who, he doubts, ever laughed. He did a military appreciation on everything he had to think about, took his time and came up with the right answers....He was an excellent officer, 100 percent sound and very real, but one problem was that it took too long for people to get to know him.

We then talked about Foster and Hoffmeister. 1st Cdn Div suffered under Foster. Not that he was evil: he just wasn't Vokes. Nothing he did stuck in Ziegler's memory. They got on well, there were no problems,

and he handled his battles well. But it wasn't the same. Hoffmeister he thought the most brilliant division commander to emerge from the NPAM. As good as any PFER, a natural leader, a helluva soldier, skillful, bold and well thought of by his CRAs. Why? He knew the capacity of the infantry and knew how they could operate with the other arms. He thought circumstance had put him in position to show his ability. If the Seaforths had not been in 1st Cdn Div, if 1st Div hadn't gone to Sicily, etc., etc., Hoffmeister might have remained untried....

Brigadier P.A.S. Todd (second from left), CCRA 2nd Canadian Corps, inspects captured German artillery at Meppen, Germany, 31 May 1945. Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, the commander of 2nd Canadian Corps sits in the passenger seat of the jeep.



Certainly Crerar fought with Bernard Montgomery who greatly favoured Guy Simonds....He got Montgomery's back up, like General McNaughton, by trying to get into Sicily which was Monty's show. When Crerar finally got into action, Simonds was already there and favoured. What this meant, he said, was that Monty bypassed First Canadian Army to give orders directly to Simonds' 2nd Canadian Corps in Northwest Europe. He recalled phone calls for Simonds that were "yes sir, right away," followed by stalling and obfuscation when Crerar tried to find out what was up.

The root of the Crerar-Simonds problem was that they were both artillery. Simonds from his 6' 2" looked down on Crerar as a stuffy old man, while Crerar saw him as an upstart to be put in his place. Crerar's stability led him to take a dim view of Simonds....

He knew McNaughton socially in Ottawa and had his sons in his Militia unit. He also served on his staff as BRA [Brigadier, Royal Artillery] briefly. He was a good man in the wrong place. For a start, training under him was elementary.... McNaughton had been a good officer in World War I but he doubted he'd ever spent much time on tactics.... There was no question of his brains or dedication, but he would do things himself rather than sending his staff. His weaknesses weren't seen then, however, and he was considered a great man from whom great things were expected. Todd was BRA when Andy was sacked in 1943. He remembered that the six brigadiers [of First Canadian Army HQ] sat in "A Mess" while Colonel Ralston [the Minister of National Defence] was doing the deed upstairs in a bedroom. He had no doubt that Crerar made a better Army commander than McNaughton.

Simonds, of course, would have been better yet. He knew him before the war from Petawawa and disliked

him intensely – snooty, snobbish, etc. And this continued with the war....He felt strongly enough about this that when he and Bruce Matthews were made brigadiers on the same day he took 3rd Div CRA and Matthews 1st Div just so Todd wouldn't have to work with him. But he couldn't avoid him in late 1944 when Simonds summoned him to Corps HQ and announced that Matthews was promoted to major-general and Todd was the new CCRA....He grew to admire him enormously as a commander. He and Brian Horrocks were the best. He could be ruthless in getting where he wanted to go; if something held him up he'd sack people until someone was there to do what he wanted. The tactical ideas he produced were almost certainly his own, the product of long nights thinking in his caravan. He went to sleep about 0100 and was up at about 0600 to go off in his armoured car. Simonds also was at the start line for big attacks to make sure things went well, and he was not beyond pushing and pulling the infantry to make sure they got moving. But Todd said this caused him problems, for Simonds wanted his CCRA with him rather than at HQ where all his communications were....

Simonds almost never questioned Todd's artillery plans. He'd derive his appreciation and make his plan and then ask Todd to tell him how the artillery could help achieve it. He recalled an attack on Emmerich where the River Rhine makes a sharp turn west. Simonds had to attack on a Friday and Todd had to soften up the hill that was the heart of the enemy position. He worked out a system of dividing the hill into 100-yd squares and then put one gun on each square to fire four shells per hour at irregular intervals. Simonds

questioned this and ordered a Victor target – every gun in the Corps, despite Todd's protests. After a day, Todd's system went back on. The attack went in without opposition, the Germans putting up white flags. Why? The continuous shelling had stopped food, sleep, etc. Simonds then apologized to Todd and after that never altered his plans....

We talked about D-Day. Todd had been preparing for this for 17 months as CRA 3rd Cdn Div. He had to retrain his gunners on armoured 105s (scrapped after the invasion when the Canadians went back to 25-pounders; Simonds then used the "Priests" as armoured personnel carriers), had to design the run in to shore, and had to learn to fire from the sea, difficult because guns need aiming sticks, survey, etc. But he had time....

Then we got into Rod Keller [GOC 3rd Cdn Div]. He was a bluff, hearty man, a bully, someone who



Brigadier P.A.S. Todd

would always say he didn't care what X or Y thought. He had a difficult marriage, and he had a girlfriend in London, married to a Royal Marines officer. On occasion Todd had to ensure that the officer, apparently attached to the Canadians, was assigned to weekend duty so Keller had a free hand.

He was also yellow, ["Keller was yellor"]. Foolish too. During the D-Day planning, the planners were housed in row houses near Victoria Station [in London], under tight security. Keller managed to get out of the buildings, where all were supposed to stay 24 hours, and to a hotel... Within moments of reaching the hotel, Keller was out in civvies. Then on the Isle of Wight, Keller and Todd lived with the Royal Navy admiral who was to carry them in. After a short period, the Admiral's #2 came to see Todd privately to say they were disturbed by his general; Todd said he could say nothing without being disloyal and if the RN was unhappy it should go through channels. Then the three brigadiers in the division – Cunningham, Blackader, and Foster – came to see him with their complaints, mainly that Keller was never around and that his GSO1, J.D. Mingay, was running things. Again Keller gave then the loyalty argument and, to me, used the word mutiny. In fact, the complaints were true. Mingay was a brilliant staff officer who did run things; when he had a problem, he and Todd ("Uncle Stanley" – he was in his 40s and older than almost everyone else) worked them out. In effect, Mingay and Todd ran the division, Keller signing everything put in front of him.

Once ashore in France, the yellow showed. His caravan was dug in and he stayed in it. When he was wounded in the USAAF bombing, he whimpered and moaned from his two small wounds. There was apparently great relief for all when he was taken away.... Why did no one twig to this earlier? He had a long conversation



Library and Archives Canada PA 197184

Todd had strong opinions about his commanders. He respected Crerar and Simonds, thought McNaughton was a good man in the wrong place and considered Rod Keller, commander of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, yellow, foolish and a bully. He believed that Dan Spry, Keller's replacement, was a good commander, but young and inexperienced.

about this with Simonds before his death who said that when Brig. Cunningham was sacked, he had wanted to overturn it first because he was an RMC classmate and second because he had no confidence in Keller's judgment. Then why did he not move against Keller? Again no answer.

Spry succeeded Keller. He was very young indeed but he was an excellent GOC. Todd couldn't judge his tactical skills but he was a great change from Keller and wasn't frightened.... The next spring when

3rd Div put in a brigade attack, Simonds was at the start line and Spry wasn't. The attack was a mess, and Simonds went back to Spry's HQ where he and his CRA were asleep, after an all-night poker game. Simonds sacked him on the spot and the CRA too.... He attributed Spry's problem to inexperience. He was just a kid.....

J.L. Granatstein is the author of the second edition of *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (University of Toronto Press, 2011).