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Promotion Struck Him as Mysterious

Major-General A. Bruce Matthews Interviewed

J. L. GRANATSTEIN

Abstract: Bruce Matthews was a militia artilleryman who finished the Second World War in command of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. This transcript of a series of interviews conducted by J.L. Granatstein in 1991 contains Matthews' views on a wide range of issues related to the Canadian army in the Second World War including his candid comments on A.G.L. McNaughton, H.D.G. Crerar, G.G. Simonds, and H.L.N. Salmon, as well as various other senior commanders he worked with during the war.

Résumé : Bruce Matthews était un artilleur de la milice qui a terminé la Seconde Guerre mondiale au commandement de la 2e Division de l'infanterie canadienne. Cette transcription d'une série d'entrevues menées par J.L. Granatstein en 1991 contient le point de vue de Bruce Matthews sur un large éventail de questions liées à l'armée canadienne pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, notamment ses francs commentaires sur A.G.L. McNaughton, H.D.G. Crerar, G.G. Simonds et H.L.N. Salmon, ainsi que sur d'autres commandants supérieurs avec lesquels il a travaillé pendant la guerre.

BRUCE MATTHEWS WAS a militia artilleryman who finished the Second World War in command of the 2nd Canadian Division. He was born to money in 1909, went to private schools, and worked for his father's brokerage firm during the Depression. But his true interest was the Militia, and he was one of the very good artillerymen produced out of the pre-war force.

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I interviewed him in his Toronto condominium on 25 April and 10 June 1991, and I also had one telephone conversation with him. The three talks have been amalgamated here to make the text run roughly chronologically. Minor excisions and corrections have been made, but the original memoranda are in my papers at the York University Archives and at the Directorate of History and Heritage at National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa.

A robust man during the war, Matthews was very thin and clearly not well when he spoke to me, and he died in September 1991, three months after our last interview. The one truly striking point he made – one that brought home to me what the war did to the families of those that served – was that when he came back to Canada more than five years after he had last been with his wife, one of the twin sons he had never seen said, “Mommy, who is that man?” I remember weeping when I typed up my interview memorandum, and this utterly poignant remark makes me tear up still.



We met at his apartment, and Matthews began by talking of his early youth. He described himself as a dropout. He spent ten years at Upper Canada College then applied for the Royal Military College in 1926–7 but failed the entrance exams, though narrowly. He was urged to sit them again, but refused and went to Europe, taking French lessons in Switzerland and sitting in on lectures at Geneva. Then it was back to Canada and into business with his father’s brokerage firm. [His father became lieutenant-governor of Ontario in 1937 and held the post until 1946.] He worked in New York City in 1929–30 and was supposed to go to London, but came home because of the depression. Matthews then passed his time in the militia almost as a hobby; but he’d wanted to be in the service. He had, he said, wanted to join the naval reserve but when he was turned down for colour blindness, a neighbour, adjutant of an artillery regiment, hooked him instead. He found he could do reasonably well here, took the long course at Kingston...

He was in the artillery militia [30th Field Battery] in Toronto. The unit was terribly understrength and many men and all officers assigned their pay to the regiment. As it was, regimental funds had to be used to buy boots for the unit during the Depression when DND

couldn't provide them. Militia was time consuming – at least one night a week normally and an extra night or two if teaching a course or doing one. There was, he thought, good work done on theoretical training and at camp, though ammunition was short and one year there were literally no rounds to fire. Things began to change about 1938 when he commanded the 15th Field Battery, with Military District No.2 becoming more attentive to the unit. The practice camps in 1938 and 1939 were well conducted with good instructors who put them through their paces. He enjoyed Permanent Force [PF] officers' company after hours and there was a lot of talk about his unit's potential. There was, however, some tension between PF and militia, though less so in artillery than other corps. "They embraced us." Gunners stuck together, he said. There were a lot of gunner generals, so many that others complained of the "gunners' union."

He saw a lot of PF instructors: C.F. Constantine, Guy Simonds, H.O.N. Brownfield, Titus Evans, the Andersons. He did the long course at Kingston to qualify as a 1st Lieutenant and lived in quarters for a couple of months and thus got to know the artillery PFers there. He also did the militia staff course which he thought gave him a good sense of appreciations, orders, staff duties. The PF officers who taught this course, on 1 or 2 nights a week, were good, and he thinks were PSCs [i.e., had passed Staff College].

He did add that there was some grumbling in the Armoured Corps at PFers, perhaps because it was new. He himself served under Brownfield and R.J. Leach, both PF officers from the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery without problem. There was a problem in the PF itself about promotion.

He met his wife in Toronto, though she was an American. Her mother was Canadian, her sister had married a Canadian, and she was visiting her sister. They married in 1937. And she came to the UK in 1940 to be with him. As an American, she was forbidden to travel, but his father, the lieutenant-governor, arranged a passport for her in 48 hours, and she came over. She had left one child at home, and returned in August 1940 when London laid down rules. After her return in 1941 she had twins, and acquaintances gossiped and counted months, not knowing she had been in the UK. Matthews did not get back to Canada for the entire six years of war; every time he was scheduled to return he would be promoted or posted. And when he did get back in late 1945, one of his twins, then over four, said, "Mommy, who is that man?"

Promotion struck him as mysterious. The Military Secretary in Ottawa and Canadian Military Headquarters in London moved in strange ways, and other than seniority he didn't know how it worked. He spent some time with Brownfield who was the first Commander Royal Artillery [CRA] and they talked about people; those with adverse comments on file went back to Canada. The problem was the huge expansion, the scramble for talent. There was experimentation and many failed.

As for himself, he had come into the militia after taking the long course, and he was promoted reasonably quickly to captain. He served as adjutant of his unit, the 7th Regiment, and his unit was mobilized in September 1939 – a tribute to its results at camp and in competition and to its very near complete strength. It was also for geography, but based on some crude assessments of readiness. He thought there were differences between Toronto and Prairie-Maritime artillery units: sophistication. Their officers were a bit crude but competent – he called his a schoolboy attitude – and there was no fraternization for a time. But [overseas] postings broke this down. He agreed there was an element of snobbery here, of class.

In the UK his battery and another merged and he was left over; he thought he might get sent home, but instead he was posted to the 1st Medium Regiment; in 1941 when a new Medium Regiment, the 5th, was formed General A.G.L. McNaughton called him in and offered him command. He was allowed to handpick 40 men from his old regiment and 40 more from another. Matthews claimed to have been puzzled by his rise. He obviously kept track of his rank – he knew he was senior artillery major in 1941, e.g., but he never got the call. He wasn't bypassed, it was just that he didn't get a regiment until then.

He admitted to a certain nervousness about taking over a unit of that size, but more from fear of artillery accidents. As it was, the Brits were very helpful, friendly – “they were damn glad to see us.” He did say that his regiment initially had steel-wheeled 60-pounders, but they devised a way of carrying them on tank transporters and found they could get into action almost as quickly as rubber-tired guns. He worried too about the lack of opportunity to train with other arms, and when exercises of that sort began he was frustrated that the other units weren't ready. Later as a Counter-Battery Officer [of I Canadian Corps, 1942–43], he roamed around as eyes and ears for the Commander Corps Royal Artillery [CCRA], he being under-



Major-General A. Bruce Matthews.
[Library and Archives Canada PA 138399]

employed, and found that some artillery regiments were slack – no pickets etc. This suggested the truth of complaints about the training standard.

He described [GOC 1st Canadian Division Major-General H.L.N.] Salmon as a conventional commander, no innovator. He wasn't easy to serve under, though he was pleasant enough. But he wasn't always clear in training in giving his instructions, and it was hard for officers to know what to do. Still, even if he was no Simonds, he knew his way around. He remembers a Monty order for all officers to do physical training (PT) for 30 minutes per day and Salmon always arriving late for the HQ exercises – the awkward squad. In his own medium regiment there was vigorous PT five days a week.

McNaughton, he said, was revered the first year, especially by gunners. But his charm diminished considerably. He used to hear senior people bemoaning him. Andy was a dragon about equipment and could be found under a vehicle. He literally remembered going to a conference at Corps and finding McNaughton under a truck, looking for the source of transmission problems. But he had a difficult role – Cabinet orders to keep Canada first. He wasn't an eloquent

man and didn't try to persuade the Brits of this – he would just say these are my orders. There was a sense about him of refighting World War I, and General Brooke [the Chief of the Imperial General Staff] and Monty found him tiresome, lacking in spirit and drive.

In Sicily and Italy [where he was CRA of 1st Canadian Division in the rank of brigadier], Matthews admired 8th Army procedures where there were no frills but all were kept informed. Verbal orders were followed occasionally by a memo. Thus when he became CCRA in North West Europe [of II Canadian Corps from January 1944], he never had time and he had constant meetings to work out fire plans, but it was easy as he'd watched 8th Army operate. Other senior commanders had difficulty in figuring out what was wanted after a Corps or Army Orders Group...

He spoke of the freedom a GOC had in Italy where they were more on their own. In North West Europe, however, the operations were so big you were just a cog, and there was little a GOC could do about tactical requirements. It was a rushed, difficult atmosphere in which to command. After the Normandy breakthrough and after the Rhine crossings there were periods of relative freedom, however.

We talked about his own role as a division commander. He wasn't awed by this. As a CRA and CCRA, he had intimate relations with infantry and armoured commanders, watched attacks with them, and he knew their minds better, he thought, than they did. The turnover in infantry commanders was such that he'd been involved longer than many of them – George Kitching, Rod Keller, Dan Spry, etc. (Kitching, he added, was very able and found himself caught in a difficult situation between the Poles and Canadians in August 1944. As it was, he made a good comeback after he was sacked. Matthews doubted that even a highly trained 4th Canadian Armoured Division could have done better at Falaise – the fog of war was terrific. It surprised him when Kitching was sacked so quickly, but he didn't think Simonds did it to save his own job. Certainly there was no rumour machine in operation. He felt sorry for Kitching).

Matthews had had reasonable experience in Sicily and Italy, but even so it was difficult to command. He gave brigadiers a free run, and his job was to allocate support to them. He had trouble with [Brigadier W.J.] Megill, the one PFER who may have resented serving under a militia GOC, but it was too late in the war to do anything about this.

Simonds would come frequently to his HQ as would [First Canadian Army commander General Harry] Crerar and Monty. Simonds drew up the overall plan, allocating areas to his divisions. He'd go over Matthews' plan, asking pointed questions. But most discussion/negotiation was through GSO1s who argued over supplies, road use, etc. As a division commander, Matthews modelled himself on Simonds. He would go forward to brigades, as he was constantly urged to do. And when an attack was on, he'd try to go to battalions near the start line to sense if the company and platoon commanders had a grip on their objectives. The problem was that time for reconnaissance was never available, and as a result there were always mines, etc., that no one knew about. Of course, because we had air superiority, battalions could be trucked very close to the start lines.

His 2nd Division had had a hard time – Dieppe and then Carpiquet in Normandy. Morale had dents in it. When he took over in November 1944, he was told that the division needed careful handling and its morale boosted, as well as more training. Fortunately he had 6–8 weeks to do this, and he ran company schools, training, etc. He also gave reassurance, reasoned with the troops, asked for questions, etc.

He tried to avoid hospital visits, something easy to do because evacuation was so prompt. He was appalled by the casualties, tried to talk to the troops about this and to assure them he was trying to minimize them. He talked of this with Simonds and [II Canadian Corps' Chief of Staff, Brigadier N. Elliott] Rodger too – was everything being done to minimize casualties? Had something gone seriously wrong if they were high in a particular operation? What made it all harder was the reinforcement situation and the cold, wet winter of 1944–45.

He thought Crerar was a professional, but so academic in the way he approached things by the book. He could be charming to talk to, but his Orders Groups weren't inspiring as he monotonously outlined his plans. There was not much vigour there, not much aggression, though he wasn't incompetent. Matthews said he didn't resent this, but it was clear he was no admirer. Nor did he admire Churchill Mann [Crerar's chief of staff]. There was a gap between Mann and the division commanders because Mann was eccentric. He seemed to feel he had to polish up Crerar's plans to make them more dynamic.

Simonds lived up to his reputation. He was brusque and demanding but reasonable. If you said a plan wouldn't work, he'd listen, though he might insist. He had a reputation for being ruthless with people,

but Matthews saw no signs of this. As CRA in 1st Division he was close to him; of course, Simonds understood gunners' problems. For example, Matthews' Headquarters ship was sunk en route to Sicily, and he landed with a typewriter and a clerk. He spoke warmly of the way the Brits helped the Canadians learn. They gave advice with good grace. The armour got similar help, but the infantry, he said, didn't – it was too big. Despite the borrowed help, when the first divisional shoot was laid on, he had to tell Simonds that it couldn't start when scheduled. "When will it be ready?" "Three hours later." "Then make it so." Simonds trusted Matthews.

Still, as a commander Simonds kept the pressure on which contributed to casualties and waste. He would regularly get annoyed at the armour which wouldn't go far enough forward for him. He pioneered night armoured attacks in Normandy, and Matthews did the fire plan using tracers, etc. as guides. There were real problems with supplies, and the bridgehead was chaos; red smoke shells arrived only at the last minute, e.g. The real difficulty was that everything had to be done at once, that there was never time. For example, the old idea of registering artillery targets was scrapped, and they shot by the map – a problem as the maps weren't very accurate. The pressure, the magnitude of the operations, was unbelievable. Simonds was genuinely innovative, though he had limited success. At Caen, he had 4th Armoured Division which was semi-trained, and 2nd and 3rd Divisions which had had a hard time.

He mentioned that after the war Simonds married the ex-wife of G.G. Sinclair, a lawyer, and the two of them and the Matthews went to Jamaica together a few times. Simonds decided to learn golf and spent hours practicing. He wanted to be good at anything he did, and his wife would ask Matthews how he'd played, knowing that there'd be trouble if things had gone badly. He became a good player.

Rod Keller and Chris Vokes were close friends. Matthews knew Vokes well but not Keller. He never felt confident that either really grasped things. Vokes was likeable and full of energy, but very nervous at times. He would ring up Matthews as CRA in the middle of the night, worried about some firing. In fact he was an ideal brigade commander, comfortable lying in the mud looking through binoculars. But he didn't meet the standards the 8th Army or Simonds wanted. Keller was the same, and his artillery commanders had a hard time with him. It was difficult to find him in action. Vokes was very

critical of everyone from the prime minister on down and didn't think much of the higher echelons.

Charles Foulkes he liked as an individual, but he wasn't popular with his commanders or 8th Army. He had a difficult time with 2nd Division and got really smeared at Carpiquet. It wasn't his fault that he had trouble with his brigade commanders – he hadn't had the division long. Foulkes and Simonds tolerated one another, though he thought Foulkes was envious of Simonds. Still, Foulkes was a better corps commander than a division commander.

Why did Foulkes rise despite all? Probably his seniority as a PFER who couldn't be overlooked. Clearly Matthews couldn't quite understand this – others could have done better with 2nd Division, like [Brigadier Sherwood] Lett, and again he said Foulkes was unpopular up and down.

Harry Foster was a better brigadier than division commander, a tough fighter. He thought he didn't enjoy being a division commander. But when Foster (or Vokes with whom he traded divisions) was on his flank they did all that was asked. (Later, in a telephone conversation on 14 May 1991, General Matthews said that he thought he'd been too harsh on Vokes and Foster. Both were good brigade commanders, and he was incorrect if he suggested they were a bit edgy as division commanders. He had no right to say that, and he'd served under Vokes for 7–8 months without difficulty.)

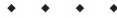
Holly Keefer was ambitious and able, though Matthews didn't like the way he instantly adopted Highland dress when he took over 3rd Division. He thought he looked down at others because of his education. Still he was a good brigade commander, and he got on well with him.

Dan Spry was dreadfully young – about a month or two younger than Matthews! Their first action in Italy, when Spry got a brigade, had a complex plan requiring two barrages and a change of axis between. It didn't work and Matthews as CRA had to stop the barrage in mid-shoot, something never done. But Spry learned. Then the strain got too much, and he had to be relieved.

Matthews said he thought Canada, for political reasons, took on too much in the war. The country couldn't support an Army, and we were always begging for assistance. It would have been better just to have two corps and serve under the UK.

On reinforcements: there were problems especially with French-Canadian units, but he didn't seem to see them as darkly as Ottawa

did. He had enough French to cope, and he could talk to the French-speaking units (two battalions and one medium regiment) in 2nd Division. He got on well with them. Still, he had to put anglophone officers into the Maisonneuves, officers who couldn't speak French. He blamed our making too many commitments for the [officer shortage] crisis, though he didn't criticize [Defence Minister J. Layton] Ralston who worked hard.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.L. Granatstein has received the Order of Canada and the Pierre Berton Award, among other distinctions. He is the former director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum.