

## Review of "Canada's Mechanized Infantry: The Evolution of a Combat Arm, 1920-2012" by Peter Kasurak

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Peter Kasurak. *Canada's Mechanized Infantry: The Evolution of a Combat Arm, 1920-2012*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020. Pp. 264.

Peter Kasurak's *Canada's Mechanized Infantry* is something between an operational and an intellectual history of an idea. This book has an interesting approach and represents a deep look at a very specific military problem: how Canada has tried to move, protect and support its infantry in battle with mechanised vehicles since the end of the First World War.

A full disclosure is necessary. I had the opportunity to examine Kasurak's sources for this book in detail. He very graciously gave me access to his Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) files for a Cold War regimental history I was writing at the height of the covid-19 pandemic, when all the archives were shuttered. On the one hand, I am significantly indebted to him for his generosity, and this may not make for a fully unbiased review. On the other hand, it is uncommon for one historian to peek behind the curtain of another's source base and I believe there are some valuable insights to be gained from the experience that are worth sharing.

This is a book about what the Canadian Army wants to be and how it has gone about trying to achieve this vision, focusing on the army's mechanisation process across an eighty-year period. Peter Kasurak traces the mechanisation of the Canadian infantry from the interwar years to the end of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, following a thread from the (somewhat) famous Burns-Simonds debate in *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, all the way to the LAV-III. The first section, up to and including the Second World War, is a nuts-and-bolts look at how mechanisation played out in high-intensity warfighting in Normandy and Northwest Europe. The second and third sections on the Cold War and post-Cold War periods are more of an intellectual history of how and why the idea of mechanisation was picked up, handled, mishandled and applied. Kasurak argues that the key Canadian choices regarding the roles and vehicles of mechanised infantry find their roots in the interwar years, but that a traditional preference for fighting on foot and preserving existing organisational structures has repeatedly reasserted itself. *Mechanized Infantry* follows an interesting tangent from Kasurak's first, broader work, *A National Army: The*

*Evolution of Canada's Army, 1950-2000* (2013).<sup>1</sup> It situates the mechanisation of Canada's infantry within an argument familiar to readers of *A National Army*: that as a "subordinate colonial force," the army as an institution lacked the organisational capacity to create its own doctrine and form long-range plans (p. 7). The results are not so much tragic as endlessly frustrating.

This book contains a generally harsh view of the Canadian Army that, while acknowledging the organisation's ability to innovate and implement good ideas, also identifies the army as the source of many of its own misfortunes. Yes, the Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien years were tough ones for Canada's armed forces. But the army did itself no favours, Kasurak argues, with its preference for top-down decision-making over studied operational research (OR), and when sticking to forms of tactical organisation dictated by the demands of the regimental system rather than effectiveness. Throughout *Canada's Mechanized Infantry* he highlights several attempts to merge the infantry and armour corps to create a *panzergrenadier*-style single combat arm that OR and war games suggested as the optimal solution on a modern battlefield. The army quashed these ideas with no discussion, as the regimental system always came first. In a similar vein, Kasurak assesses that of the five major attempts to establish or revise mechanised infantry doctrine in the eighty-year span covered by the book, only one, the Army Tactics and Organization Board of the 1960s, "could be called professional and comprehensive. The others were marred by the *ex ante* decisions of senior leaders, who relied on their experience and professional judgment" (p. 213).

*Canada's Mechanized Infantry* can be usefully read alongside other works on Canada's Cold War military policies, particularly Andrew Godefroy's *In Peace Prepared* (2014) for its alternate views on combat development; Isabel Campbell's *Unlikely Diplomats* (2013) for its social history of the army's early Cold War years in Germany; and Frank Maas's *The Price of Alliance* (2017) for its look at the

<sup>1</sup> Peter Kasurak, *A National Army: The Evolution of Canada's Army, 1950-2000* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).

politics of procurement that shaped policies Kasurak discusses.<sup>2</sup> I also found Alex Souchen's *War Junk* (2020), a study in the afterlife of postwar mechanised forces, to be worth reading as a tangential accompaniment.<sup>3</sup>

The source base for *Canada's Mechanized Infantry* involved extensive dealings with the government's ATIP system, that place where angels fear to tread. Kasurak filed about eighty successful formal or informal ATIP requests and received tens of thousands of pages of documents from the 1960s through 2000s. This is extremely impressive, particularly since ATIP related to the holdings of Library and Archives Canada ground to a halt during the pandemic and show no signs of getting moving again. Our country's burdensome declassification process and the often tedious (and at-present broken) ATIP system mean that historians of Canada's Cold War period fight an uphill battle to access government materials at the best of times. *Mechanized Infantry's* secondary literature is modest, but its explorations of the original sources are extremely good, illuminating and generally highly useful both to this study itself and to the wider academic community. We are slowly piecing together a better portrait of why Canada's fighting forces have, in recent decades, seemed so dysfunctional.

However, the sources are also a potential pitfall. I am not completely convinced that this is a comprehensive work on the subject. Kasurak has absolutely made the good-faith effort. But the bulk of the research had to be gathered by throwing ATIP darts and hoping they hit something relevant and unredacted. Kasurak has thrown many darts and achieved a great many hits, probably consulting more sources than most military history projects, and certainly more than most histories writing in this period. However, owing to the restrictive working environment this could not be a free-ranging exploration, and I am left wondering what might have been missed in the wording of an ATIP request, or blacked out by an overzealous censor or perhaps badly understood at the ATIP

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Godefroy, *In Peace Prepared: Innovation and Adaptation in Canada's Cold War Army* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014); Isabel Campbell, *Unlikely Diplomats: The Canadian Brigade in Germany, 1951-64* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013); and Frank Maas, *The Price of Alliance: The Politics and Procurement of Leopard Tanks for Canada's NATO Brigade* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Alex Souchen, *War Junk: Munitions Disposal and Postwar Reconstruction in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020).

desk. The author also carried out a small number of interviews and consulted some existing oral history collections, but the book remains weighted towards its ATIP findings.

For the period of the 1960s onwards Kasurak discusses the intellectual heavy lifting behind combat development, including the writing of doctrine, operational research, a few major exercises, plenty on war games, as well as procurement and industrial policy. But this feels somewhat disconnected from the actual training done with mechanised vehicles, and the operations carried out with them in Cyprus, Somalia and the Balkans (though combat operations in Afghanistan are covered briefly). I would have been interested to see further exploration of real use-cases, and perhaps the mechanisation lessons drawn from work with the British Army Training Unit Suffield and the RENDEZVOUS divisional exercises of the 1980s and early 1990s. I had a feeling as if something was missing that would connect the intellectual and the physical realities of mechanisation, particularly in chapters 6 and 7, which span the 1970s through to 2012. I suspect this has something to do with the research necessarily following the trail cut by successful ATIP requests. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with this, of course, and as discussed, all historians of the period face this dilemma. While it would surprise me if *Canada's Mechanized Infantry* was the final word on its subject, it is certainly an excellent place to start, and I would hope to see many studies launched because of it.

Peter Kasurak has given us a lot to think about, and has done the field a service with his deft research and his critical eye. I highly recommend this book to fellow students and scholars of the Cold War period.

ROBERT C. ENGEN, *DEAKIN UNIVERSITY AND THE AUSTRALIAN WAR COLLEGE*