

BOOK REVIEWS

NAMED BY THE ENEMY: A HISTORY OF THE ROYAL WINNIPEG RIFLES

by Brian A. Reid

Kingston, ON: Robin Brass Studio, 2005

300 pages, \$69.95

Reviewed by Bernd Horn

The adage “you cannot judge a book by its cover” is actually false in this instance. This book is exactly what it appears to be – a high-quality, very polished regimental history. It is an incredibly handsome book, exactly what one would expect from a Robin Brass publication.

The book title derives its name from the fact that the Winnipeg Rifles, also known as the “Little Black Devils,” derived their nickname from the Métis during the North West Rebellion in 1885. The Métis knew who the ‘men in red serge’ were, but asked who were the troops in the dark tunics, who they referred to as ‘the little black devils.’ They, of course, were referring to the Winnipeg Rifles.

The book is written by former artillery officer and relatively well-known author on military history, Brian Reid, who produced the volume specifically for the Winnipeg Rifles Association. The book has the quality of a coffee table presentation, yet it is a very respectable regimental history. It is well written, with an entertaining and fast moving text. It is also based upon sound research. However, anyone looking for a very detailed history or analysis of the larger context of the respective periods or conflicts in question will be somewhat disappointed. It is, understandably so, a pure narrative of the history of the “Little Black Devils.” Nonetheless, it is an excellent *survey history* of the regiment, captured in just 300 pages. The author has created a succinct overview of the regiment, punctuated with brilliant testimonials by various participants. As such, he achieves a good broad brush overview of key events and achievements, and a global understanding of the “Little Black Devils” participation in conflict, at home, and abroad.

The text begins naturally enough with the organizations and individuals that preceded the regiment, as well as the circumstances surrounding its establishment in the vibrant but volatile and quickly growing Canadian West in 1883. Of particular interest is the account of members who participated as boatmen on the Nile River in Field Marshal Sir Garnet Wolseley’s attempted relief of the besieged General ‘Chinese’ Gordon at Khartoum, Sudan, in 1884-1885.

The text moves quickly on to recount the regiment’s part in the North-West Rebellion and the Boer War. Then, not surprisingly, much of its focus is upon the First World War and Second World War. In fact, of 248 pages of actual text dedicated to recounting the regiment’s history, 54 and 111 pages respectively, or 67 percent of the book, are devoted to these two conflicts. However, this is to be expected, as the regiment played an important and distinctive role during these two great conflicts. In this regard, the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 provides an illuminating example. During this epic battle, the Winnipeg Rifles lost two of every three men engaged in combat. A total of 570 men from a strength of 900 were killed, wounded, or missing at the end of the fight.

In a similar light, the volume also captures the regiment’s Second World War contributions. The author’s delivery of the major campaigns, such as the D-Day landings and subsequent break-out, as well as the liberation of the Low Countries, is told in a very intimate manner that is a blend of battle narrative and dramatic first-person accounts. This is a technique Reid uses to good effect throughout the book.

The volume concludes with the post-war necessity of demobilization, peacetime soldiering, and the realities of militia units within the Canadian defence construct. Once again, it is an excellent narrative that sheds light on the regiment and its contribution to national defence, at home and abroad.

Significant to the telling of the stories is the rich array of black and white photographs that bring the text to life. Many have not been widely published, and they provide an interesting, fresh presentation. The volume also boasts excellent maps that situate the reader exactly to the large number of battlefields that shaped the regiment’s history. Additionally, the book has a detailed endnote section, index, and bibliography, which collectively provide excellent support to those who wish to dig deeper into the history of this proud fighting unit.

In the end, *Named by the Enemy* is an excellent regimental history, and a great addition to Canadian military history literature. It is strongly recommended for anyone interested in The Winnipeg Rifles or Canadian military history in general.

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