

FAR EASTERN TOUR: THE CANADIAN INFANTRY IN KOREA, 1950-1953

by Brent Byron Watson

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
238 pages, \$34.95

BEYOND THE DANGER CLOSE: THE KOREAN EXPERIENCE REVEALED

by Captain Hub Gray, with Grania Litwin

Calgary: Bunker to Bunker Books. 328 pages, \$24.95

Reviewed by Major Andrew B. Godefroy

After many years of neglect by military historians, recently several new studies on Canadians in the Korean War have been published. This review examines two of the new books, one a social history of Canadian infantry serving in Korea, and another a memoir from an officer who served with the 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

At a time when the Army Historical Section was still writing official histories in a timely fashion, Lieutenant Colonel H.F. Wood wrote *Strange Battleground: The Operations in Korea and their Effects on the Defence Policy of Canada*. This was a 'first cut' at a history of this conflict, intended to provide Canadians with an overall glimpse of Canada's participation in this "collective action to resist aggression". There was no other serious examination of the conflict until John Melady's 1983 book *Korea: Canada's Forgotten War*. Melady's book was aptly titled, reflecting how little attention was paid to the conflict by Canadian history circles and by the general public. Considered by some as not even a 'real war', this 'police action' for decades received scant attention from Canadians until concerted efforts by its veterans finally drove the study of this conflict back into focus.

The recent wave of publications on Canada and the Korean War began in 1999 with the release of David Bercuson's *Blood on the Hills*. Unfortunately, this book gave every indication of having been rushed into print

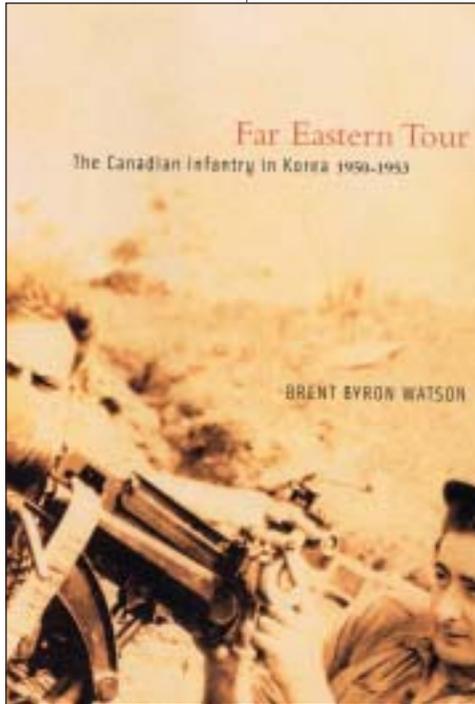
so its release would coincide with the 50th anniversary of the start of the war, and it was harshly critiqued in several reviews, including one in this journal. Then, in the last year and a half, a number of very good studies have appeared. William Johnston's superb book, *A War of Patrols*, is the first comprehensive analysis of the Canadian Army's Korean campaign since Colonel Wood's original official history. Johnston's work is complemented by several non-operational histories and a number of memoirs.

Brent Watson's *Far Eastern Tour: The Canadian Infantry in Korea, 1950-1953* is a much-needed addition to the rather sparse body of literature on Canadian post-Second World War military operations. While not an operational history, Watson's social analysis is reminiscent of Desmond Morton's popular First World War study, *When Your Number's Up*, and it provides a solid foundation from which further studies will undoubtedly take shape. The reader will immediately recognize that the book's

strength lies in its research. In addition to traveling to the battlefields of Korea, Watson interviewed several dozen veterans and arguably left few archival stones unturned in producing what is close to being a first-rate manuscript. While the book might have benefited from more combat narrative or analysis of soldiers in battle, one recognizes that this was not its central theme.

Far Eastern Tour is not without its weaknesses. First, the attempt to define the Canadian Korean War experience within the wider context of the historiography of soldiers in battle is not particularly well drawn. Interesting ideas are introduced throughout the book, but they are seldom expanded beyond a mere mention, and the reader is often left to guess what the author might be trying to convey.

Second, the book is highly critical of the transition of fighting in Korea from manoeuvre to static warfare without ever really addressing why this happened. Finally the political rhetoric and the specious parallels drawn in the book's conclusion between the defence problems of the 1950s and later Canadian military operations should have been avoided altogether. The gratuitous swipe at modern-day political and military leadership serves only to degrade what was otherwise an excellent research effort.



A memoir by Captain Hub Grey, *Beyond the Danger Close*, presents an examination of the Canadian infantry soldier in this war. As a young officer in the 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry — the first Canadian unit sent to Korea — Grey served as second in command of the battalion's mortar platoon at the Battle of Kap'young in 1951. He later served as a platoon commander in D Company until the unit returned to Canada the following year. Grey left the Army in 1953, but his exploits during his short career in battle make fascinating reading.

The central focus of Grey's book is the Battle of Kap'young. Aiming to correct virtually all previous accounts of this engagement, Grey has meticulously reconstructed its events and his role in it. More importantly perhaps, he has brought to light the valiant actions of several of his comrades in battle whose efforts were never officially recognized. Particular attention is given to a fellow subaltern, Lieutenant Mike Levy. Levy, the son of a British geologist stationed at Shanghai, was taken prisoner by the Japanese in 1942 at age 16. He and four others escaped through occupied China to Kunming in 1944, and he hitched a flight to India. Conversant in Chinese and already demonstrating considerable talent, the 18-year-old Levy immediately joined the British Army and was commissioned as a Captain in Special Operations Executive (SOE) Force 136, where he later earned a Mention in Dispatches. While serving with the Patricia's at Kap'young, Levy, now a lieutenant, demonstrated the same personal bravery and courage in leading his men in battle, and single-handedly beat off wave after wave of Chinese attackers. What makes Grey's story about Levy so remarkable is that, prior to publication of this book, little if anything was known about this remarkable man. It makes one wonder how many other unknown heroes there are.

Grey also details another morbidly interesting event — the possibility that he may have stumbled across evidence of the use of chemical or biological agents against Chinese soldiers. In a chilling account, he describes how, during a patrol, he and his men came across a group of heavily-armed Chinese soldiers, all sitting on their haunches almost in a parade formation, perfectly still, and, upon closer inspection, perfectly dead. As the dead Chinese troops showed no sign of injury, Lieutenant Grey and his soldiers were left with more questions than answers. This account alone makes the book worth reading.

Though labeled a memoir, Grey's work is much more. In addition to providing a riveting, often humorous, narrative account of his personal experiences, the book includes a wealth of relevant information, interesting facts, anecdotal stories of members of the unit, extensive supporting documentation, and perhaps the most detailed maps of the Kap'young battle produced to date. Grey is a stickler for details, as the depth of his research ably demonstrates. While its format is a bit unconventional, the book is a must read for any student of this war.

As we move past the 50th anniversary of the end of the 'shooting war' in Korea, Canadians find themselves re-fighting its battles on the pages of history. There are high expectations of the historical community: what is needed are more books like Johnston's and Watson's, supported by the unique personal accounts offered by people such as Grey. Only when all of these stories are told will the battles of the Korean War finally be over.

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THE DUST OF EMPIRE: THE RACE FOR MASTERY IN THE ASIAN HEARTLAND

by Karl E. Meyer

New York: PublicAffairs. 252 pages, \$37.50

Reviewed by Philippe Lagassé

With his ambitious *The Dust of Empire*, Karl E. Meyer aims to inform readers about two subjects: the troubled history of Central Asia and the perils of empire. The book succeeds with the first, but fails with the second. Relying on an anecdotal approach, Meyer provides lively narrative histories of Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Caucasus and the Central Asian states. Unfortunately, this same anecdotal approach is unconvincing when used to equate

the United States at the turn of the 21st century to the British Empire of the late 19th century. While comparing the two nations at the height of their power is a valuable exercise, Meyer's partisan aversion to the George W. Bush administration leads him to propose exaggerated similarities between Victorian Britain and contemporary America. As a result, *The Dust of Empire* is a work of uneven scholarly merit.

Save for the few who study or have traveled in the region, Central Asia remains a mystery to most westerners. A territorial mass inhabited by innumerable tribes speaking countless languages, the rugged lands cradled between the Persian Gulf, Russia and South East Asia are characterized by their inaccessibility. Yet, in spite of this fact, the history of Central Asia is one of continuous conquest. Empires, both indigenous and foreign, have sought to emulate Genghis Khan's seizure of