REVIEW OF TERRY COPP’S FIELDS OF FIRE

Donald Graves’s condemnation of Terry Copp’s Fields of Fire [Volume 4, No. 3 Autumn 2003] demands a response.

Graves unflinchingly offers a defence of the two “seminal works” in Canadian military history that Copp is accused of inadequately taking into account – Jack English’s A Study of Failure in High Command and C.P. Stacey’s The Victory Campaign. It is, of course, Stacey’s infamous condemnation of Canadian capability – “it cannot be said that it was by tactical superiority that we won the Battle of Normandy” – that Copp specifically sets out to redress in his book. In his review, Graves neglects to point out that Stacey’s criticism of Canadian tactical competence was in large measure based on a report from a regiment of 10th SS Freundsberg Panzer Division which, Stacey admitted, never met Canadians in battle. Stacey’s evidence includes, among other things, Simonds’s firing of a host of commanding officers at the end of August 1944, and the slow progress of II Canadian Corps toward the Falaise-Chambois Gap. These and the now famous quote from General Foulkes inspired Copp’s buoyant counter argument (and I boldly paraphrase): if our training was that ‘haphazard and casual’ – how come we beat them?

Graves’s exasperation with Copp’s scholarship is puzzling. What are the exacting academic standards he seeks? I can sympathize if his frustration is that Copp has produced a tactical history when his devotees have been waiting for an operational analysis comparing First Canadian to Second British Army, but that’s not what the review states. Graves would seem to be irritated by Copp’s rehash of Canadian battalion successes as evidence to rebut Stacey, but he fails to reveal what would satisfy him. An examination of every Canadian battalion in II Corps against their opposite numbers? A difficult but not impossible job. One could chalk up the number of decidedly dim-witted attacks launched by units of the 12th SS Panzer Division and compare this to, say, the Black Watch. Meyer’s lads would win hands down. Would that be good enough? Perhaps just the 1st Battalion of the 25th Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the Hitler Jugend – and as this, indeed every, German battalion, is whittled down to company or even platoon strength, the study becomes easier. That, in fact, is Copp’s point: artillery strikes and actual battlefield killing made the final difference in Normandy.

The maps in Fields of Fire are sternly criticized – but, again, what is the standard? Maps are the lingua franca of military history. A good map takes the place of extensive explanation, while tactical analysis, appropriately illustrated, makes complex doctrine understandable. These are not easy to produce, for they require clear-cut martial graphics, a certain intimacy with the terrain, as well as an understanding of doctrine (ours and the enemy’s). Diagnostic maps don’t appear in Fields of Fire or in Graves’s own excellent history of the South Alberta Regiment. Why savage Copp for something Graves did not think particularly necessary for his own book?

Graves’s lament about the book’s inadequate photographs is, however, well taken. Professor Copp owns one of the finest aerial photo libraries in America. Military historians long for a complete series of photos for key battles – including extreme close-ups. Modern technology applied to photos taken after Operation “Spring”, for example, could show where or if the 22nd British Armoured Brigade’s tanks actually appeared. There should be six knocked-out 1st Hussar Shermans in the area of the St. Martin Factory and May-sur-Orne; confirming this would help sort out much of the contradiction regarding actual tank support. Black Watch bodies were left on the Verrières slopes until after “Totalize”; Allied photo reconnaissance aircraft filmed the area in late July and early August; a closer view might show the extent of Major Griffin’s advance on to the ridge – another unclear historical point. Stacey ignores the 9th SS exploitation at the finale of “Spring”. That division claims one of their tanks reached Hill 67 on 26 July; evidence of mechanized unit progress (tracks, tank hulls) could show if this has been exaggerated.

Regarding the ‘much ado about nothing’ flap over Copp’s alleged miscomprehension of the divisional commander’s job: one would have to be calculatedly unaware to imagine that Terry Copp, after 30 years specialization in military history, has no idea what a general’s job is.

In all, the review presumes a general defence of Stacey – but the term “tactical superiority” itself needs definition. Graves’s rebuttal does not offer examples of German tactical success to prove Copp wrong – that would be pretty difficult to do. If battlefield success is not the standard for alleged German pre-eminence, then what is? Staff work? Technology? There is much to consider in Stacey; identifying Crerar’s and Foulke’s fingerprints might be a start. Copp at least tries. Graves avoids the tactical battlefield. He does not distinguish defensive counter strokes from strategic offensives. He chooses to ignore Copp’s references to decidedly credible and obvious Canadian victories. Populist doctrine aside, Auftragstaktik wasn’t worth much without air parity, and Fingerspitzengefühl was practically non-existent throughout the fighting in Normandy. The Germans
were disciplined, methodical, and predictable – doctrine was beaten into them, often to the point of inflexibility and inept tactical performance. Copp suggests this, and Graves misses it.

A distinguished Canadian military historian, having read *Fields of Fire* observed: “I think that Copp may make market sense by celebration. English is dealing with folks who believe that Canadians are untutored but natural-born warriors. I cheer for all sides and urge more different perspectives.” A far more elegant way to end a review.

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