

No Holding Back: Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944.

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No Holding Back: Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944 (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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For more than fifty years historians have reiterated the view that the Allied armies in Normandy were able to defeat a more efficient, more dynamic, and better-led German Army only through the use of what historian John Ellis called 'brute force' in the form of massed tanks, artillery, and air power. The First Canadian Army in particular has been criticized as badly trained and poorly led. Operation Totalize, the attempt in early August 1944 to smash through the German defences [End Page 506] south of Caen, has been repeatedly held up as an example of Canadian failure because German resistance brought the advance to a halt short of the city of Falaise, denying the Allies a momentary opportunity to encircle the enemy forces in Normandy and perhaps bring the war to a quicker end.

This view has persisted because, until recently, Totalize has not been well served by historians of the Normandy campaign. Brian Reid's *No Holding Back* examines the operation's planning, execution, and historiography closely and dispels the confusion that has shrouded our understanding of this crucial operation. Previous accounts emphasize operational novelties like the night advance by tanks and the first use of armoured personnel carriers, and contend that Lt.-Gen. Guy Simonds, commanding II Canadian Corps, squandered a brief opportunity for rapid exploitation to Falaise on the morning of 8 August by waiting for a second heavy bomber strike. Reid builds on the latest research and his background as an artilleryman in the Canadian Forces to explore the reasons why Simonds considered standard artillery resources inadequate to support the operation, and therefore made air support the key feature of his plan.

Reid painstakingly details the complex technical arrangements for Totalize and includes a wealth of excellent maps and sketches. He uncovers important new information, revealing that the Eighth US Army Air Force could have aborted the second day's bombing with as little as

two hours' warning, a fact that every other account has missed (130). In explaining the slow progress in mopping up bypassed areas like May-sur-Orne after the initial advance, he reveals that artillery support was thought unnecessary because May was to have been 'obliterated' by bombing. In fact May went largely untouched (204). And while Simonds has frequently been criticized for crafting a flawed plan, Reid is the first to support this generalization with specific evidence, pointing to poor staff work in assigning objectives, and a failure to appreciate the importance of Quesnay Wood as an anti-tank barrier. Reid is among the few who appropriately weigh the general's own inexperience; Simonds rose five levels in rank during the war but boasted only three months of battlefield command before the Normandy invasion (364). While the book's early sections on the stunted professional development of the pre-war Canadian Army could have been more directly related to its performance in Normandy, it is clear that Canadian formation commanders were not all up to the challenge of their appointments.

While there is much to applaud in Reid's work, there are a few weaknesses. Like Totalize itself, the book sometimes gets bogged down **[End Page 507]** in details – perhaps inevitable, given the complexity of both – and at certain points it would have been helpful to summarize and highlight the main points. We get caught up, for example, in artillery organization or subunit actions across the battlefield, and while these are important it should be emphasized that continuing German resistance and traffic jams in bypassed areas delayed both armour and artillery in their move forward to continue the advance.

My main quarrel, however, is with the presentation of an account by the commanding officer of the Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment, which perpetuates the idea that the road to Falaise was momentarily open. There is no evidence to support Lt.-Col. Gordon's claim that he could have been in Falaise 'in an hour or so, had we started soon after first light' (220), or to explain how such a drive could have been supported when...

by imploring his colleagues to engage less in 'self-congratulation' and more in honest dialogue with contemporary directions in historiography.

Many of Cook's key observations about the history behind official history are captured by the experiences of one of Clio's lesser-known warriors, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Harrison, commander of the Army's field historical section in the Second World War. In September 1945, while foraging the deserted battlegrounds of Europe for documentary evidence of Canada's military exploits, Harrison wrote 'excitedly' (131) to his boss, Colonel Stacey, that he had discovered an abandoned operations trailer with the files of a Canadian Corps commander inside. Back in London, Harrison set to work with other colleagues transposing frontline war diaries and battle reports into polished accounts that Stacey further refined into his celebrated monograph, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945* (1948).

Harrison had entered the highly contingent world of official history production in 1943, in Italy, when General Harry Crerar had anointed him his cipher. Given licence to recount the 'secret and personal history of the campaign' (108), Harrison suddenly found himself in the grey zone of official knowledge where he enjoyed privileged access to what another officer cynically described as competing 'sets of lies' (103). Later, when he left the military to pursue an academic career, Harrison reflected on the 'inhibited and ironical position' of the official historian for whom it was sometimes more expedient to 'sit on material' than publish 'all he knows.' 'Dead men become public property,' he observed, but 'the living belong to themselves' (159). Tim Cook has done a fine job exploring this truism with respect to official military history, but the implications of his findings will resonate with other public historians as well.

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No Holding Back: Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944.
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