

## Ross Ellis Memorial Lecture

### *Ross Ellis: A Canadian Temperate Hero*

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Lieutenant-Colonel Ross Ellis was a remarkable soldier who led the Calgary Highlanders, and later his community and province with distinction. Ellis had those powerful but elusive qualities of a leader, defined by a British doctor in 1945: the technical knowledge to lead, but also the moral equipment to inspire.<sup>1</sup>

This article has two purposes. First it explores briefly what kind of man the wartime Canadian Army sought for its commissioned leadership. It then draws upon the correspondence between Ross Ellis and his wife Marjorie to see how one remarkable soldier negotiated his first weeks in battle in the summer of 1944. These letters reveal how, with Marjorie's encouragement, Ross Ellis sustained his own morale and nurtured

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Miller, "Psychiatric Casualties Among Officers and Men from Normandy: Distribution of Aetiological Factors." *The Lancet* 245, no. 6343 (March 1945): pp. 364–66.

a leadership style that would become legendary within the Calgary Highlanders community. Like so many others, Ross Ellis practiced a kind of temperate heroism<sup>2</sup> a reaction not only to the idealized, heroic vision of officership in the First World War, but also to British and especially German representations of wartime leadership.

The First World War cast a wide shadow over Ross Ellis' generation. And although much changed between the two wars, there were still remarkable similarities in the way in which soldiers understood and endured the war. When Talbot Papineau died in October 1917 on the muddy slopes of Passchendaele, Ross Ellis was just a toddler in High River, Alberta. They lived in different worlds. Born into a legendary French Canadian family, but raised in Philadelphia by an adoring mother, Talbot attended Oxford on one of the first Rhodes scholarships given to a Canadian. He rowed and played hockey. He returned to Canada and became a partner in a law practice in Montreal. His membership in Montreal's Canadian Club anticipated a political career.

In 1914, despite having no military experience, his friend Hamilton Gault invited him to join the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI). Eight months later, he won the Military Cross during the Patricia's first battles in the Ypres salient. For the next year and a half, he took different staff positions in the Corps Headquarters; he also wrote for Max Aitken (after 1917, Lord Beaverbrook) and lectured his fellow officers about the fate of Canada after the war.<sup>3</sup>

Then in May 1917, much to the shock of his mother, he rejoined the Patricias. His last letter, dated 27 October 1917, spoke of his desire to be remembered as a good officer, and a good son.

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<sup>2</sup> Sonya Rose uses the term temperate heroism to describe the British wartime civilian. It is also an appropriate label for the Canadian wartime officer. Sonya O. Rose, "Temperate Heroes: Concepts of Masculinity in Second World War Britain," in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester ; New York; New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 177–95.

<sup>3</sup> On Papineau's background, Sandra Gwyn, "Papineau, Talbot Mercer," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed August 17, 2017, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/papineau\\_talbot\\_mercer\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/papineau_talbot_mercer_14E.html); Sandra Gwyn, *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War*, 1st ed. (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), Chapters 5, 13; On Papineau's talks, see Talbot Papineau, *The War and Its Influences upon Canada: Address Delivered by the Late Major Talbot Papineau, M.C., to the Canadian Corps School at Pernes in February, 1917: Read to the Members of the Canadian Club of Montreal, on Monday, January 26th, 1920, by Mr. E. Languedoc*, K.C, 1920, <http://archive.org/details/McGillLibrary-128705-4858>

By the time you receive it I shall be all right or you will have news to the contrary- so you need have no anxiety. I am in a tearing hurry to finish my remaining preparations & to get to sleep. I am enjoying the whole thing enormously so far & I have as yet not the least nervousness. I have issued most minute & careful orders & I hope foreseen every eventuality. My men & officers are splendid. I have every confidence in them. We are all in fine spirits. Never did I less regret my decision than at this moment. Always know that if I do get killed I was completely happy and content to the last minute and that my only regret is due to the sorrow it will cause you and the boys. It is all worth while and as time goes by you will realize this feeling too. Remember dearest that if I can my spirit will be with you to comfort you and that my only unhappiness will be yours. I say this just in case in order that you may know what my last thoughts were. I have a sensible feeling however that my chances are good & that I can still write you gallant tales!<sup>4</sup>

Papineau's last letter offers a rich expression of an idealized moral leadership. He shows confidence in his own abilities. His real concern for his men reflects the noblesse oblige that all good British officers were to demonstrate. Papineau never married, even though he kept up an intimate correspondence with a young woman he would never meet.<sup>5</sup> His letters to his mother focused on his political and social ambitions, as well as his immediate material needs. In this last letter he urged her not to worry, and to find solace in the thought that his spirit watched over her. His final words are laced with a certain ironic humor. The late Edwardian world still lingered in his words. Three days later, on 30 October 1917, Papineau was killed. News of his death brought words of mourning, but also sincere expressions of love from his comrades.<sup>6</sup> Talbot Papineau died a soldier demonstrating the strength of his masculine ideals.

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<sup>4</sup> Talbot Papineau to Caroline Papineau, 27 October 1917 (Letter Transcripts). I am indebted to Dr. Geoff Keelan for his insights on Papineau, and for the generous use of the transcripts he made of the Papineau correspondence found in Library and Archives Canada [LAC]. See also, Geoff Keelan, "Canada's Cultural Mobilization during the First World War and a Case for Canadian War Culture," *Canadian Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (2016) doi:10.3138/chr.97.3: pp. 398-399.

<sup>5</sup> See Gwyn, *Tapestry of War*, chapter 12, for his correspondence with Beatrice Fox.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, W. Stewart Thomson, "The Late Major Papineau," *The Globe*, 7 November 1917, p. 6.

Ross Ellis was part of what some have called the “greatest generation.”<sup>7</sup> It may be better to call him part of the first ‘modern generation.’ Medical advances meant his generation lived longer than their parents; they were far better educated; high school became a common feature of Canadian life as Colonel Ellis grew up. So did mass media, not only newspapers, but increasingly radio and film. The idea of adolescence evolved dramatically as Ross Ellis grew older. Many of his generation would also face the instability of the depression.<sup>8</sup>

What did this mean? For the aging army examiners looking to find young Potential Officer Material, it meant trying to figure out what kind of potential officers, but also what kind of men they would be. Strome Galloway’s memoirs recounts an interview between a wizened personnel officer, and a young recruit:

“Well, my boy,” he asked the smart young candidate standing nervously across the table, “do you drink?”

“No, sir,” replied the youth.

“Do you smoke?”

Again the reply was negative.

“For God’s sake,” continued the officer, “then tell me what you do to make yourself smell like a man.”

“I use Lifebuoy soap, sir,” was the candidate’s reply.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*. 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1998)

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Comacchio, “Dancing to Perdition: Adolescence and Leisure in Interwar English Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, 3 (Fall 1997): pp. 5–35; Cynthia Comacchio, “A Postscript for Father’: Defining a New Fatherhood in Interwar Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 78, 3 (September 1997): 392; See also Mark Osborne Humphries, “War’s Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine, and the Gendered Politics of Trauma, 1914–1939,” *Canadian Historical Review* 91, 3 (September 2010): pp. 503–31.

<sup>9</sup> Strome Galloway, *Bravely into Battle: The Autobiography of a Canadian Soldier in World War Two* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988), p. 75.

Figuring out this generation would be tricky.

Remarkable changes between the wars did not alter the image of the army officer a generation later. The front pages of the *Defence Forces List* from October 1939 featured military outfitters in Canada and the UK. One advertisement displayed a tall, lean cavalry officer who sports high leather boots, spurs, and baggy jodhpurs. His bearing suggests a certain aloof, masculine authority, which is reinforced by the objects he holds: a cane and leather gloves in his left hand, a cigarette in his right. His Sam Browne belt gleams over his carefully tailored jacket. His tie has a small knot, and a wide felt cap shades his eyes. Most prominent is a thick, clipped moustache over an unsmiling mouth. The moustache was important. William Lyle recalls that the urgent need to look like a Permanent Force officer led to a shortage of moustache wax in Winnipeg during the opening months of the war.<sup>10</sup> This is a neat picture of an ideal officer: immaculate, confident. He even bore a striking resemblance to Talbot Papineau.

The military looked to three sources to find such men in the first months of the war: the pre-war militia, fellows like Ross Ellis; RMC graduates; and the Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC). There were 22 COTC contingents at the outbreak of war, training university students throughout the school terms so they could gain militia commissions once they graduated.<sup>11</sup> Army officials called these men long-term officer candidates, chosen for their formal education, and less for their military experience. The belief, noted Stephen Harris, Jack English and others, was that these young officers, especially those drawn from the sciences, would best apply new technologies, especially artillery, signals, and armour to the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> Scientifically trained young men, it was hoped, would be the key to avoiding the deadlock of the Western Front.

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<sup>10</sup> Canada, Department of National Defence, *Defence Forces List, Canada: Naval, Military and Air Forces* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1939); William Montgomery Lyle, *As I Remember* (Waterloo: Kenyon Press, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Two excellent studies of Canadian university COTC contingents include: Andrew Theobald, "Western's War: A Study of an Ontario Canadian Officers' Training Corps Contingent, 1939-1945," *Ontario History* 98, no. 1 (Spring 2006): p. 52. See also Eric McGeer, *Varsity's Soldiers: The University of Toronto Contingent of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps, 1914-1968* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Stephen John Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

H.D.G. “Harry” Crerar was the architect of the Army, and its officer corps. As Chief of the General Staff in 1940, Crerar placed the army on a wartime footing, taking initiatives for which others never forgave him. First, he closed RMC for the duration of the war; he then put the army’s administration into the hands of civilians, even social scientists. Then he centralized the army’s recruitment and training in ways that threatened the tribal system of regimental selection that some thought formed the strength of the pre-war forces.<sup>13</sup>

Crerar was also a man of his times. Few rose to the top of the tiny pre-war Permanent Force through bombast, or even charisma. He was the product of a wealthy, Hamilton, Ontario background who believed that individual initiative (and merit) would allow the best to rise to the top. Still, the government’s early promise that young soldiers of suitable ability could rise through the ranks to attain commissioned ranks must have wrangled Crerar. This was especially so in August 1942, when the Army suddenly faced a projected officer shortage. Crerar conceded that the army had to adopt a short term officer policy, one that stressed military experience over formal education. The taps were turned on for a year, when army officials suddenly announced an officer surplus. That news prompted Crerar to write a memorandum in June 1943 that began with the words: “Much confused thinking is prevalent at the present time in respect to who is, and what constitutes, an ‘Officer.’” It was a curious document. One might have thought that Crerar, then I Corps Commander readying his men for the Italian campaign would have more pressing issues at hand. But Crerar was determined to deflect criticism that the army’s preference for educated, long-term officers retained the taint of class privilege. His logic was strained:

The widespread institution of State schools and University scholarships has permitted the able and ambitious sons of poor families to obtain all the benefits of higher education. There is now no reason or excuse for the inclusion of “family,” or “money,” as factors in respect to appointment to Commissioned rank. Given the required characteristics of a leader, and

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<sup>13</sup> More on Crerar’s early initiatives can be found in Geoffrey Hayes, *Crerar’s Lieutenants: Inventing the Canadian Junior Army Officer, 1939-45*, Studies in Canadian Military History (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, Canadian War Museum, 2017); see also Paul Douglas Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

good education, progression from Corporal to Colonel, or higher, is a matter which largely lies in the hands of the individual concerned.<sup>14</sup>

Crerar was a manager, not an inspiring leader. His logic could not squelch the feeling that commissioned officers came from an exclusive social caste. Still, he knew where he could go to help choose, train and inspire his young officer corps. Two people we can mention here.

One was Brock Chisholm, a first war veteran who became one of the first psychiatrists in Canada in private practice. Chisholm's public talks on sex, birth control, and proper parenting had already gained him a controversial reputation in the 1930s. He advanced his wartime standing with a pamphlet he wrote and published himself while commanding a brigade in northern Ontario in 1940.<sup>15</sup> If Chisholm hoped that the pamphlet would get him noticed, he was not disappointed. It was called *A Platoon Commander's Responsibility for the Morale of His Men*. Chisholm portrayed the father-son relationship in the modern middle-class family as a fitting analogy for the officer-soldier association in the army. He likened the soldier to a "small boy [who] identifies himself with his father, who to him represents manhood, and acquires his attitudes without any reasoning process at all, or at least accepts them as valid though he may rebel against them."<sup>16</sup> Again we might think of the idealized leadership that Talbot Papineau aspired to in October 1917. But times had changed. It remained to be seen how a young lieutenant could be fathers to the 'small boys' who made up the wartime Canadian army.

Before rising to head the Army's medical services, Chisholm first led the army's directorate of personnel selection. It was Chisholm who brought the social scientists into the army. They in turn devised a series of intelligence tests that sought to measure, among other things, a soldiers' suitability for commissioned rank. Eliot Jaques was a

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<sup>14</sup> General Crerar to All Commanders and Commanding Officers, I Canadian Corps, 18 June 1943. Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Record Group (RG 24) 24, vol. 10,771, file D283.

<sup>15</sup> Allan Irving, *Brock Chisholm: Doctor to the World* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1998), pp. 33, 35.

<sup>16</sup> C. Brock Chisholm, "A Platoon Commander's Responsibility for the Morale of His Men," Appendix 12 of *Canadian Army Training Memorandum 4* (July 1941): p. 44.

bright young graduate of the University of Toronto with a brand new medical degree from Johns Hopkins. He had worked at the Harvard Psychological Clinic before joining the Canadian army as a lieutenant in 1942. His checklist of personality traits were to help Personnel Selection officers as they interviewed Potential officer Material.<sup>17</sup> Later these methods would cause a stir: In 1944, one observer noted how “It seemed to the writer that certain interviews placed undue emphasis on sex matters (the interviewer seemed to get more enjoyment from this part of the interview than did the candidates) and some of the extremely personal questions asked seemed to deserve the answer given by an Irish Sgt. ‘Begging your pardon Sir, it is none of your business.’”<sup>18</sup> Such probing caused some panic among young men who were reluctant to reveal how little they knew about such matters. Murray Edwards recalled that rumours spread in England about how potential officers would fail if they blushed when questioned about sex: “Most of us in those days couldn’t spell the word.”<sup>19</sup>

If Brock Chisholm helped select the army’s officers on a more scientific basis, then it was the role of Milton Gregg to train and inspire them. Milton Fowler Gregg, VC was the embodiment of the ideal officer. The young schoolteacher from rural New Brunswick had come up through the ranks, was wounded at Second Ypres and the Somme before earning his commission, first in the British Army, then with the Royal Canadian Regiment. For a remarkable series of days in battle near Cambrai in October 1918, Milton Gregg earned the Victoria Cross.

Milton Gregg then emerged as a role model and mentor for the wartime officer corps a generation later. In the fall of 1939 he stepped down as Sergeant at Arms of the House of Commons to take a regiment overseas, and to set up officer training in the UK. He returned to Canada to take over Officer Training Centre (OTC) Brockville in the spring of 1942, succeeding a stuffy commandant who had driven morale into the ground. Gregg walked through the gates of OTC Brockville and, with a trusted, hand-picked team of instructors, turned the place around, throwing out the rule book, and by his own example (and a remarkable charisma) began to transform officer training.

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<sup>17</sup> See Jaques’ “Memorandum of [Army Examiner’s ] Recommendation of Enlisted Men for O.T.C.’s (December 1942), LAC, Record Group, [RG] 24, vol. 10,259, file 52/Reports/10/01.

<sup>18</sup> Major J.R. Wilkinson to CMHQ, “Visit to #1 Cdn OCTU Selection Centre: 25-26 August 1943,” 23 September 1943, LAC, RG 24, vol. 10,259, file 52/Reports/10.

<sup>19</sup> Murray Edwards, transcribed undated interview, The Memory Project.



He quickly earned his admirers. The unit war diarist recorded the kind of silly hijinks the cadets practised on one another, all with Gregg's quiet approval. In August 1942, OTC Brockville welcomed fifty francophone cadets who had marched 246 kilometres from St. Jerome, Quebec. Friendly rivalries soon broke out between French- and English-speaking companies. Raiding parties lifted "rifles, trousers, shirts and other intimate garments without detection. There were embarrassed men on parade the next morning, some trouserless, some rifle-less and a few with no clothing whatever." Such indignities raised the "Irish" in Lieutenant Ginsberg, who retaliated, scouring nearby towns for fireworks that he tried to sneak into the French-speaking company area at night. They failed to ignite, but the war diarist gleefully praised Ginsberg for his "imagination and initiative."<sup>20</sup> Gregg arranged in September for French- and English-speaking cadets to share quarters, a remarkable concession at the time. He and his staff then began conversational French classes at Brockville Collegiate. His francophone staff also personified the kind of attributes that he valued. Among them was Captain Henri Parent; the BMA Blitz declared that he "est le père adoptif de tous ces jeunes nèophytes de l'armée, et son premier soin dès leur arrivée est de leur faire comprendre qu'un officier doit être en tout temps et en tout lieu un vrai 'gentleman.'"<sup>21</sup> It should be remembered that some personnel records of the time listed just two "racial" categories: Anglo-Celtic and French Canadian. Milton Gregg was conducting an experiment in race relations.

Those who had grown up reading the English boys' papers in the 1930s may have seen in Gregg the character of the "dazzling schoolmaster" who could win over his charges with his unorthodox methods and quiet manliness.<sup>22</sup> Leo Heaps was not one to fawn, but he owed his career to Milton Gregg. He wrote just after the war that Gregg was "a man who was as humble as he was gallant and it was a fine experience to serve

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<sup>20</sup> War Diary (WD) OTC Brockville, July 1942, LAC, RG 24, vol. 16,936.

<sup>21</sup> BMA Blitz, June 1942, 4; WD, OTC Brockville, LAC, RG 24, vol. 16,936. Translation: Parent "is the adopted father of these young men, and his first goal on their arrival is to make them understand that an officer must always be a true gentleman."

<sup>22</sup> Kelly Boyd, "Knowing Your Place: The Tensions of Manliness in Boys' Story Papers, 1918-30," in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 153.

under him.”<sup>23</sup> Barney Danson taught at the battle training school that Gregg later organized in Vernon, British Columbia. Gregg’s methods were simple: “He chose men whom he thought could perform to his standards and gave them direction and a very light rein; then the chosen ones worked their butts off for him.”<sup>24</sup> Milton Gregg had an eye for talent. Ross Ellis returned to Canada to become the chief instructor at the battle school in Vernon in 1943.

Milton Gregg also helped create an ideal officer role model for a wider Canadian audience. He was not David Niven, the calm, aristocratic young officer in the British film, *The Way Ahead*.<sup>25</sup> He was Pete Coventry, a young store clerk who rose through the ranks in three short films produced by the National Film Board in 1943. In *Battle is our Business*, young Coventry first demonstrates his popularity, his easy going manner, and his military knowledge at Currie Barracks near Calgary. Then he was off to OTC Brockville in *Up From the Ranks*, where he displays his toughness, discipline and good humour. Finally, in *13 Platoon*, newly commissioned Lieutenant Coventry wins over a stubborn, restless group of soldiers just itching to go overseas. Coventry has a hard time at first. His platoon is wary of this OTC graduate, this ‘90 day wonder,’ a graduate of just three months’ training at OTC. But a long route march proves the young officer’s physical, but also moral suitability for commissioned leadership.<sup>26</sup>

So how did Crerar’s Lieutenants fare? Officially, not very well. The official army historian Colonel Stacey was critical of a ‘proportion’ of regimental officers in Normandy who were found wanting during the Normandy campaign. That verdict has sat for many decades. Stacey’s boss at the time he wrote the army history was Charles Foulkes, whose 2 Division in Normandy faced horrendous casualties against Foulkes’ uninspiring leadership. Stacey thought it prudent to quote Foulkes’ assessment of the

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<sup>23</sup> Leo Heaps, *Escape from Arnhem: A Canadian among the Lost Paratroops* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1945), 4; Frank Flaherty, “Coldwell Claims Troops Discriminated Against Owing to Political Views,” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 31 October 1945, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Barney Danson, *Not Bad for a Sergeant: The Memoirs of Barney Danson* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2002), p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Reed, (dir.) *The Way Ahead* (GFD, 1944).

<sup>26</sup> Julian Roffman. (dir.) *Battle Is Our Business; Up From the Ranks; 13 Platoon*, National Film Board of Canada, 1943.

campaign: "We would not have been successful had it not been for our air and artillery support."<sup>27</sup>

The official verdict only reinforced an impression that the battalion, company and platoon officers who led First Canadian Army, and died in far greater proportion than their men and the estimates, were invisible. Too many reinforcement officers barely had time to get to their units before they were wounded or killed. The cartoonist Bing Coughlin, may have understood this. His popular wartime cartoon, *Herbie*, seldom included the face of an officer. Sometimes the officer's head was turned away as Herbie explained another snafu. Sometimes officers were sketched out of the frame entirely. Herbie's officers inhabited a different world. They were anonymous, and too often invisible.

The official verdict has long needed revision. Ross Ellis was not invisible. His letters to his wife Marjorie reveal some of the physical and psychological challenges that many faced as they became immersed in the climate and culture of war. These letters also detail the many subtle but important ways Ross Ellis emerged to become such a remarkable leader. Like so many wartime couples facing a long and uncertain separation, Ross and Marjorie married in England in March 1944. We should learn much more about the critical roles that the spouses, partners and parents played in the lives of soldiers. Marjorie remained in England working as a nurse, often playing a matronly role as she checked on the progress of her husband's battalion. The letters from Ross also reveal her many other roles. She was a supplier of goods as well as news and rumours. She sat at the hub of a wider network of family and regimental connection. Marjorie was also a confidante to her husband, allowing him to speak (or not) in ways he could not with his fellow officers, or his men. Marjorie formed a physical and emotional link to the routines and attachments of home.

Army censors at the time understood that soldiers' letters had to be read closely to ensure that they did not compromise military operations. Very few letters breached security, but army officials quickly realized that thousands of soldier's letters could offer a measure of an army's morale. One set of letters is surely not representative of a

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<sup>27</sup> C. P Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945*, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, v. 3 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), pp. 271, 275, 276.

whole army, but Ross's letters to Marjorie reveal how they worked together to maintain his morale through some of the worst fighting the Canadians faced in the Second World War. In this, the letters reveal the nuts and bolts of one revered soldier's approach to leadership.

The Calgary Highlanders landed in Normandy as part of the Canadian 2 Division in the first week of July 1944. Ross's first letters from France detail the challenge of finding cover from German shelling. He admitted that his hands were raw from digging in the hard Norman soil, but he soon compared the task of finding shelter to setting up a cozy new household. He was happy with his efforts: "John & I now have quite a little home made from a piece of canvas, a couple of pieces of wire and wood, all attached to the back of the jeep which serves as one wall. Last night we had our beds and bed rolls and our little stove which comes in handy. Before we went to bed we made some tea and ate the cheese and crackers which came in Mothers parcel. As John climbed out of his pyjamas this morning at 0830 hours he said, 'Who would believe there is a war on?'"<sup>28</sup>

Parcels shaped a crucial connection to home. Food became an obsession, for as Ross admitted in August, "'Haven't eaten since noon yesterday but have managed the odd hot drink.'" Later that month, he made light of his batman's ability to scrounge for a good meal. "Had a very good sleep last night, eight hours, breakfast in bed, and have had an easy day. A most unfortunate incident happened this afternoon. A chicken was stepped on by my batman and it was so badly wounded we had to kill it. Once dead it seemed a shame to leave it there so we had it for supper. It was really good."<sup>29</sup> Marjorie must have been reassured by Ross's gentle, ironic humour.

Cleanliness was another preoccupation, a way of imposing order on himself, but also on a dirty and chaotic landscape. "I am very grubby at the moment," Ross admitted on 11 July 1944. "Haven't shaved or had my clothes off since Sunday morning. I did manage a wash and cleaned my teeth to-day by using some water from my water bottle." Five days later he carefully described a sponge bath he enjoyed "using a 10 inch

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<sup>28</sup> Ross Ellis to Marjorie Ross, 9 July 1944. [hereafter Ellis letters] The Calgary Highlanders Regimental Museum and Archives, Military Museums of Calgary, Alberta. My thanks to curator Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Vernon for making digital copies of these letters available.

<sup>29</sup> Ellis Letters, 13, 17 August 1944.

square biscuit tin as my tub and am now lying naked in the sun right beside my trench." That urge to bring order may explain his efforts to tend a temporary cemetery for the Calgary's first fatalities. Among the battalion's first war dead was a friend, Company Sergeant Major Norris "Norrie" Lawson, who died on 18 July.<sup>30</sup> Ellis admitted to Marjorie that Lawson's death was difficult. "Things like that go past me now and I can't seem to take them as I should." In a letter written a day after Lawson died, Ellis relayed how he "spent all afternoon at our wee cemetery fixing it up. We raked the ground, smoothed the edges of the graves and then put a low stone fence along the edge of the plot (leaving two sides open). We found some undamaged flowers in the village and put a large bouquet on each grave. It now looks quite nice, a clean bright spot in a very desolate field."<sup>31</sup> Such detailed attention to these graves may have helped deal with the first of many sudden deaths. No doubt the men would have noticed Major Ellis' efforts.

Just as Talbot Papineau prepared his mother for his last battle in October 1917, Ross Ellis tried to reassure Marjorie as he awaited his first battle in late July 1944. Ellis' language was not nearly as flowery, but it was direct and sincere: "There is no use me saying that things will or will not happen as we would like them to happen. I want my wife to know that you are the one person in this mixed up world who means everything to me."<sup>32</sup>

The Calgary's first actions south of Caen on 19/20 July cost 92 wounded, 4 killed, with two missing. The war diary reported that a long night under enemy shelling brought "forth many beards, red eyes, and tired bodies." But it showed a determination too: "We are in position and nothing can push us out. Every man in the Bn. [Battalion] has a score to settle and will go to no end of trouble and fatigue to accomplish the job." The next day, 20 July 1944, produced heavy rain, German counterattacks and difficult reverses as 2 Division fought over the rolling wheat fields south of Caen. The Calgary war diarist admitted that another infantry battalion, the South Saskatchewan Regiment, (SSR) was "very badly mauled." Indeed. SSR casualties surpassed 200 on that day, with 60 killed, including 8 officers. More SSR officers died on that one day than the most

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<sup>30</sup> Company Sergeant Major Norris is buried at Beny sur Mer Canadian War Cemetery.

<sup>31</sup> Ellis Letters, 11, 16, 22, 19 July 1944.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis Letters, 22 July 1944.

intensive casualty rates had forecast for an entire month.<sup>33</sup> As the rain filled the slit trenches, the Calgary war diarist admitted that these were “a very demoralizing state of affairs and yet, still the boys fight on, in excellent spirits. No sleep as yet and certainly very very irregular meals fail to do anything but keep our spirits high.”<sup>34</sup>

We should be cautious; war diarists can be overly optimistic. But Ross Ellis’ letters from the time share the kind of optimism that could sustain a unit’s morale. Fatigue and the stress of battle crept into his letters of late July and early August. His handwriting was deteriorating from his usually crisp penmanship. On 5 August, Ross admitted to being “a bit punch drunk” and “so tired I can’t think very well. In our last do I was going steady for nearly 3 days with no sleep.” Marjorie again offered him emotional strength. “Your love keeps me going and on my feet and for that I am very thankful.” Ellis’ men provided a similar kind of strength. He was effusive at the end of July: “I’m awfully proud of these lads and they are absolutely superb as fighters and in the way they take punishment and then came back to hand it out.” Later he wrote, “I can’t explain the feeling I have for them but the morning I brought them out I wandered through the companies before falling into bed and they were smiling despite what we had gone through and it hadn’t been pleasant. They are boys you can’t help being proud [of] and what more can I say.”<sup>35</sup> This was not bluster; Marjorie would have seen through that. Good officers tended to their men in whatever circumstances, no matter how tired. Talbot Papineau would have appreciated this same paternal pride and confidence in his men a generation before.

Some recent scholarship has maintained that declining morale slowed the advance of First Canadian Army as it pushed south of Caen in August 1944.<sup>36</sup> Such criticisms echo the judgements of the Canadian Official Historian. Ross Ellis was not privy to the harsh assessments of his generals, or of post-war historians. His letters from the field were full of enthusiasm for the Canadians’ achievement. On 13 August 1944,

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<sup>33</sup> See [cwgc.org](http://cwgc.org) fatalities from 20 July 1944, South Saskatchewan Regiment. See also Hayes, *Crerar’s Lieutenants*, p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> War Diary, Calgary Highlanders, July, August 1944. Digital copy from Laurier Military Archives, Wilfrid Laurier University. <http://lmharchive.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Calgary-Highlanders.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Ellis Letters, 5 August, 31 July 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Fennell. *Fighting the People’s War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 549.

just after the Canadians had punched a gaping hole in the German defences during Operation Totalize, Ross boasted, "We have been showing Jerry a thing or three and doing a pretty good job of it. Maybe he will realize that the Canadians are here with the one idea of finishing the war in the shortest possible time. Our American friends are doing an awfully good job on our flank and when we finally join forces it will be some team. ...I was shaken a bit today but other than a stiff neck and a very sore shin I am ready to last the night out but am due for some sleep." Four days later he wrote with a cure for his flagging morale: "A couple of days rest sure does wonders for everybody and that combined with baths, mail, and letters written we all feel pretty good." In that same letter, he asked Marjorie to assure a comrade (likely wounded and back in England) "that he belongs to the finest battalion in any army. That is a sincere belief Marjorie and repeated actions have only strengthened it."<sup>37</sup> Battalion level leadership was an important source of morale. Ellis' sincere confidence in his battalion and its achievements was another mark of his buoyant leadership.

Morale also grew with success. On 1 September 1944, he wrote Marjorie again. The battle for Normandy was over, and the Canadians were pushing towards the Seine river.

These last few days have really been something. We have been moving so fast trying to catch up to these blighters that we have loaded the marching troops on to transport and have really been rolling. We came through a town yesterday that really lifted our spirits higher than they were. The Calgary Stampede parade on the King's visit has nothing on us. My armoured car looked like the home festival float by the time we were out of the town. We had to drive through in low gear to keep from running over people. They cheered us, gave us fruit, wine and flowers and generally went a little mad. The streets were quite wide but there was only a very narrow lane left through the people for us to move in. It was an experience we will remember for a long time.<sup>38</sup>

Visions of home helped Ross and Marjorie share his experience as the Canadians rolled out of Normandy in the fall of 1944. The Canadians had faced terrible losses, the worst of any Allied formations. That made Ross' optimism, his enthusiasm even more crucial.

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<sup>37</sup> Ellis Letters, 13, 17 August 1944.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis Letters, 1 September 1944.

When Ross Ellis took over the Calgarys later in the fall, the Regimental newspaper gave him a warm welcome. "Most of us have known him for a long time...there is a warm feeling for him deep down inside of us. He's not merely the finest soldier in the Battalion; he's a man among men, a man who has been through everything with us and who knows us better than we know ourselves."<sup>39</sup> "A man among men." That is a telling phrase, one of the highest compliments one could pay a man of that generation.

Certainly by his actions on the Walcheren causeway in October 1944, Colonel Ellis displayed all the attributes of a hero. The task of inventing a Canadian battlefield hero was a tricky business. The first Canadian army officers to win the Victoria Cross, Cecil Merritt and John Foote, earned their decorations at Dieppe in 1942. They could not receive their decorations until they were released from prisoner of war camps three years later. Paul Triquet won the VC in Italy with the Royal 22e Regiment through an act of remarkable courage and determination in the fall of 1943.<sup>40</sup> But Triquet's halting English, his marital status (he was separated from his wife before the war), and his opposition to conscription made him an imperfect candidate to be a Canadian hero. John Keefer Mahony earned his VC with the Westminster Regiment, fighting across the Melfa River in May 1944. The newsreels that announced his award show a tall, very thin, long-faced man looking terribly awkward as he speaks at a mess dinner under tent in Italy.<sup>41</sup> When King George awarded him his VC in August, the press reported that Mahony "appeared pale and nervous."<sup>42</sup> The Canadian Army was still working on its public relations, but in fairness, the media's attention was then fixed on Normandy.

The announcement that Major David Vivian Currie of the South Alberta Regiment had earned the Victoria Cross came in November 1944. Timing was important. The announcement came just as the battles of the Scheldt had ended.

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in David Jay Bercuson. *Battalion of Heroes: The Calgary Highlanders in World War I*. (Calgary : Toronto: Calgary Highlanders Regimental Funds Foundation; Distributed by Penguin Books, 1994), p. 181.

<sup>40</sup> John MacFarlane, *Triquet's Cross: a Story of Military Heroism* (Montreal Que: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Canadian Army Newsreel, No. 37, *Mahony, V.C.* (1944), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGFZd-29HV4>.

<sup>42</sup> "Major Mahony Receives V.C. from the King," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 3 August 1944, p. 3.



Wartime journalist Ralph Allen thought that Currie had an especially attractive, manly profile that distinguished him from more famous British officers:

The Canadian Army's fourth and newest VC has a strong, stubborn face, and the hard athletic build of a welterweight boxer. His eyes are the same steely shade of blue as Field Marshal Montgomery's, although there is more warmth in them than in Monty's. His mouth is firm but humorous. With a little retouching, he could be made to fit the role of an avenging superman, or a peaceable garage mechanic. No real contradiction is involved, because Currie has been both.

Frank Duberville's photographs of Currie show a very different kind of idealized officer from the one who appeared in the *Defence Forces List* of 1939. The two figures share the same relaxed masculine pose, the same cigarette in hand. But the gleaming riding boots and impeccably tailored uniform of 1939 are gone, replaced by muddy boots and a greasy, ill-fitting pair of coveralls. Ralph Allen was right. Currie's eyes were warmer than Monty's, softened by stress and fatigue. He also seemed far more approachable than the intimidating-looking cavalry officer of 1939. Unlike many of his comrades, David Currie had no moustache. He very much resembled the garage mechanic that he once was. Wearing a field cap in battle would be silly, he commented, and a helmet was too "heavy and uncomfortable" and would do little good "against a 90-pound shell." Instead, he wore the soft black beret to "give his men more confidence."

The press also found attractive Currie's quiet speech and demeanour. Ralph Allen liked his habit of answering "questions with self-possession, candor and an honest humility that was completely free of any trace of false modesty." Currie openly acknowledged that he was sometimes scared in battle, especially when he called an artillery barrage down onto his position to stop a German counterattack: "That stuff really shakes you." Currie's appearance fit the commonly held view that the war was a job. The action in France, he stated, "was the worst job we've ever had to do. And almost the best." His men "were tops," and he spoke of his "boys" with a sincere paternal affection: "You get the best men in the world working with you, and it's a

pleasure to look after them.”<sup>43</sup> During a CBC Radio interview on his return to Canada in December, Currie compared the soldiers’ determination to see the war through with that of a Western farmer who survived a crop failure and resolutely moved on. When pressed, Currie recounted the details of his action at the Normandy village of St. Lambert sur Dives, where he earned the VC in August 1944. When he told his men that they would not be withdrawing from the position, they responded, “Ok, boss.” The interviewer closed with the remark, “That one pair of words, ‘Ok, boss’ is very typical of the whole Canadian spirit in this war.”<sup>44</sup> In an army that was seemingly bereft of heroic leadership, especially at the senior ranks, David Currie emerged as the public embodiment of the Canadian hero.

There were of course many others. In February 1945, John Clare of the *Toronto Daily Star* was in the Rhineland, where the Canadians saw action as costly as the worst days of Normandy. Clare was escorted forward, likely by Vern Stott, the Commanding Officer of the South Saskatchewan Regiment. Stott was a former Calgary Highlander who had taken over the SSR after its commanding officer was killed back in July 1944. With a firm and cool hand, Stott had helped rebuilt the SSR. Its fight onto Calcar Ridge in February saw the Germans put up a stout defence. Clare wrote, “but none fought as well as the platoon commander from the western regiment, his batman and a rifleman. When their platoon went into action these three advanced up a draw leading to the ridge. They ran into a German platoon. For a long time they were unreported and today they were found. They were all dead.” The troops took some consolation in the thirty dead Germans who were “thickly strewn” around their slit trench.

Here was another invisible Canadian officer. Security concerns kept Clare from reporting the dead officer’s name and unit, although he was likely Lieutenant Gordon Finch, one of fifteen lieutenants who died on 26 February 1945. Clare went to some lengths to contrast him with the captured German officer who likely killed him. The reported noted how Colonel Stott’s knuckles whitened as he pointed out the German soldier in the prisoner cage: “Apart from the gray green mass of soldiers stood a

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<sup>43</sup> Ralph Allen, “Tough Fighting Man, Mild Auto Mechanic, V.C. Winner Is Both,” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 28 November 1944, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> “Major David Currie Battles in Normandy, Wins the Victoria Cross,” *CBC Radio News*, 16 December 1944, CBC Digital Archives, <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/1944-major-david-currie-battles-in-normandy-wins-vc>.

paratroop captain beautifully tailored, handsome and looking as if he might have stepped off the set of a Hollywood Nazi spy thriller. His well-shined jackboots were still glistening. His blue gray raincoat was as sleek as a seal's waistcoat. His hard mouth was unsmiling, scornful." He told an interrogator that the Canadians were "completely mad to come here and fight in Europe." Clare hastened to correct him: "Not 'completely mad,' captain, just plain ordinary mad. But then, how would a Nazi understand a thing like that."<sup>45</sup>

Inventing the wartime Canadian Army officer corps posed a real challenge to General Crerar and his planners. The pre-war militia and Permanent Force foundations were thin. When the army suddenly grew beyond expectation in 1940, his officials worked hard to articulate what the ideal officer would look and act like. He was a contradiction, or rather he changed as the war progressed. He was to be well educated, but also an everyman. He was to be a superb soldier, as well as a father figure, sometimes a mother figure. He was allowed to show fear, as long as it did not affect those men around him. For inspiration he looked, not to his generals, but to his fellow officers, sometimes his own men. A touch of irony and good humour always helped. That too was something he shared with the generation that fought the First World War. And very often he looked to his wife to bolster his own flagging morale, and that of his battalion. It is remarkable how this army created so many men like Ross Ellis or Paul Triquet, David Currie, or Vern Stott. They were the best of Canada's first modern generation. True to form they led with little fanfare, and even less recognition.

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<sup>45</sup> John Clare, "Thirty of 40 Nazis Die That's How Its Going," *Toronto Daily Star*, 28 February 1945, p. 17.