

## Book Review:

David Halton, **Dispatches from the Front – Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War**, McClelland and Stewart, 2014

David Halton, son of Matthew Halton, was a renowned correspondent for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), like his father before him. Mr. Halton wrote, what some say, was the definitive biography of his father's personal and professional life, as he rose to fame and fortune.

Halton's life paralleled that of fellow correspondent William Shirer, in that he too observed Hitler's rise to power. He observed first hand all major political and military events of his time. Halton like many other correspondents of his day warned, and wrote prophetically, of the dangers of the Nazi Regime.

When war was declared, Matthew Halton became the voice of the CBC in the field, listened too loyally by Canadians on the Homefront. His voice conveyed the action that their sons and daughters saw, as well as their accomplishments, pain and suffering, and ultimately, the final victory that they helped achieve.

Matthew Halton was approached by Ernest Bushnell, Program Head of CBC, in March 1943 to become the corporation's senior war correspondent in Europe. Halton proceeded overseas just about the time Canadians were fighting in Sicily and arrived a month after the campaign started in August 1943. In fact, Halton landed in Sicily the same day the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian division ended operations there.

But Halton was to excel in the field despite his delay in arriving in theatre. On 2 September 1943, he and several other correspondents waited on the beach at Messina, in company with Canadian troops from the Maritimes. They were the first selected to be in the initial assault wave for mainland Italy. Halton's war began from there. And he was constantly in the van accompanying Canadian troops into battle.

Over the next two months, Halton accompanied Canadian troops over 500 km up the toe and boot of Italy, seldom seeing or encountering retreating Germans in great numbers. Such contact was rare at that point. All that was about to change at Ortona.

1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division's easy days were concluded by mid-November. The Germans began to put up a fight as they were ordered to dig in along a winter line - a series of well fortified defensive positions that stretched from Gaeta – 177Kms south of Rome, across the peninsula to Ortona on the Adriatic side of Italy. It turned into a slugfest for the Canadians that became known to both sides as the mini-Stalingrad.

The sounds of battle were brought into Canadian homes by Halton for the first time, and whenever he and his team accompanied Canadian troops far into the line. Canadians on the Homefront listened intensely as their sons fought on through Christmas. Perhaps the most poignant moment was captured by Halton in a field hospital that was recorded and rebroadcast home.

It was while Halton was visiting a Canadian Field hospital with his sound engineer Art Holmes that they heard an accordionist playing carols for the wounded and dying. Holmes had strung a cable into a ward for "life cases", those who might or might not live. He recorded several carols, and as Halton was about to pack up his kit and leave, one of these young soldiers woke up from a coma. Halton continued recording. The young boy said to the accordionist "Corporal, I've been dreaming of home. Would you play something for me? Play "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas.'" The young Corporal sat on the edge

of the man's bed and played for him. The Soldier died shortly after the carol.<sup>i</sup> David Halton's account of that event is enough to bring one to tears.

Halton Junior's rendering brings to the fore the pain and suffering endured by both sides. The Battle for Ortona left 2400 Canadians either dead or wounded. It had a psychological impact as hundreds were scarred by shellshock. 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was a spent force by this time with rifle companies stripped of half their strength. So profound was the impact that 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was out of operations for many months.

Halton's war continued. He followed the troops through Northwest Europe and on to war's end 8 May 1945. Ever the one for action, Halton was at once, one who loathed bloodshed, yet was addicted to the thrill of battle.

David Halton's biography of his father's life is a profound work. It is a psychological insight into the war. Amongst other things, it is well rounded personally, professionally and nationally that reminds us today, of the sacrifices and sufferings of all who endured this trial. But most importantly, was the insight it provided on the Canadians' fight through Sicily and Italy, an often-overlooked bit of Canadian History.

Their contribution in Sicily and Italy was neither insignificant nor inconsequential. Italy was a hard fought and hard-won battle that deeply impacted the lives of all on both sides. It was a joint horror, mutually shared, and was a deeply contested fight that left all impacted.

Halton Jr interviewed a German-stretcher bearer for a CBC documentary some years later. This gentleman wept openly at recalling the dead and broken bodies. He was never able to celebrate Christmas again. He said, "It's as though I am dead on those days." And such is the calibre of this book that it does not leave its reader untouched in the rendering of this account.

This book is highly recommended as a valued addition to one's personal library.

Gerry Madigan

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<sup>i</sup> David Halton, **Dispatches from the Front – Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War**, McClelland and Stewart, 2014, Pg. 201