

W. Denis Whitaker (D.S.O.) & Shelagh Whitaker, *Tug of War – The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp*, Stoddart, 1984, 461 pg.

Random House Dictionary defines serendipity as “an aptitude for making desirable discoveries by accident”. What an apt choice of words, for it was by accident that led me to the hidden treasure resting on my own bookshelf, “W. Denis Whitaker (D.S.O.) & Shelagh Whitaker, *Tug of War – The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp*, Stoddart, 1984, 461 pg.”

Facebook also played a role. A group I belong to promoting Canadian Historical works, shared some photos of a member’s book collection. There amongst the photos was the cover of “*Tug of War*”. It looked familiar, and lo and behold, I found it on my shelf. Curiosity got the better of me once again.

I picked up this work several years ago with the intention of building my Canadian historical holdings, but it went unread until recently. Here serendipity chanced once more. I found “*Tug of War*” to be a very valuable resource for my own research concerning my Uncle Leslie’s war and for the family history that I am currently writing.

Uncle Leslie O’Keefe was a private with the Canadian Scottish Regiment. He led a very troubled life following the Second World War. Leslie was one of many Canadians posted as a re-enforcement from England in the Fall of 1944. Such young men as Leslie, eventually ended up in the line with very little training, with units such as the CanScots.

Leslie regaled me with tales of patrols that were about wet and sodden hikes, and continual walking in water. And most troubling, although he had a pleasant smile, there was always a note of constant sadness and regret about Leslie.

Leslie’s sorrow was explained in part in the prologue to ‘*Tug of War*’ as, “Only the young lie buried at Adegem, and this youth is the pathos of its message. Soldiers of nineteen and twenty died miserably in the sodden polders of Zeeland. The survivors could only think, “They were but boys.”” That regret was felt by many of Leslie and his peers who I chanced to meet while he roomed in my parent’s home.

Tug of War – The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp, is not just the story of a Canadian Victory, it is also the story of missed opportunities, the impacts of the conscription crisis, and the manpower balance within the Canadian Army. There was a consequent struggle, a tug of war if you will, found in those missed opportunities, politically, militarily, while being ground out in the personality of command.

Inspired leadership could have ended the war a lot sooner, if certain conditions were recognized and acted upon. But the fog of war regrettably played a sorrier hand. In fact much of what Whitaker and Whitaker wrote and commented on, as lessons learned, still plays out today on that score, to the cost of young Canadian lives, found in decisions taken or course of actions not taken.

This book should not only be read for the personal accounts and battles endured by these young Canadians, but the reader should also be cognizant of the strategic battles played behind the scenes. These tugs of war had direct consequences not only amounting to Canadian suffering and loss, but also to that of the enemy and civilian population for measures not taken soon enough. And it is not to be read as an arm chair general with the benefit of hindsight. The authors make very clear that the factors of the fog of war, strategic direction, trust, and deception all had a role to play in what decisions were made or not made.

But they also made truly clear that “victory fever” blinded many leaders in managing strategic direction and adjustments that needed to be taken.

The immediate hope that the war would end in 1944, with what seemed to be certain victory at hand, delayed key decisions to their cost. In the end, it was the human factor and foibles that caused much of Canada’s grief. And perhaps too, the failure to realize the importance and vulnerability of one’s own centre of gravity to maintaining and selecting the aim was also another factor.

History is perfect in hindsight, indeed 20/20. But history fails to consider the struggle and tug of war for the demands on a leader’s time and attention. It takes great skill to sort out what is relevant in real time and to act accordingly.

In the end though, I was struck by the authors’ witness account, that many of the casualties amongst the rank and file were the young officers, the very young

Lieutenants, often thrown into the breach with little or no training at that stage of the war, leading, and most often, dying from the front. It was a bloody and hard-won fight that left an indelible mark on all who survived and lived to tell the tale.

This book is no longer in print but is well worth seeking out and adding to one's personal library. There is also a lesson to be learned that hidden treasures are sometimes found amongst the racks of second hand book stores. Do not let them rest on your shelves too long once bought!

Gerry Madigan

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