

Jeffrey Williams, **Bing of Vimy – General and Governor General**, Pen & Sword Military Books, 2014, pg. 399 (first printed 1983)

Jeffrey Williams', *Bing of Vimy – General and Governor General*, published by Pen & Sword Military Books, 2014, is a very insightful book not only on the life and times of a man who was a great general, a leader of men, but also as a moulder of character and of a nation.

Williams'' book is a must read for Canadian military officers or non-commissioned members. Byng was the founder of our officer principles and care for his men. It was Byng who first initiated battlefield school and training for all. Most importantly, it was Byng who initiated sharing of the plan, development of junior leaders and command to the lowest level, that created initiative and daring on the battlefield. His principles should be familiar to any who endured basic infantry officer training at least until the late 1970s. Perhaps it also continues to this day.<sup>1</sup>

Byng paid particular attention to the training of his junior officers. He also reorganized the basic infantry unit, the platoon, to give it a measure of independence. By doing so, Byng began a trend toward flexible tactics which proved to be the successful factors for Canadian victories later in the war.<sup>2</sup>

But these were not the only factors. Byng encouraged the replacement of his senior staff with Canadian officers. This meant that Canadian soldiers were led by their own, Canadian Officers who shared common filial bonds to home, hearth, and country. Secondly, he developed their skills and provided the necessary staff training to do so. Finally he was not amiss for applying lessons learned.

Byng would carefully study and analyze not only the Canadian front, but his Allies as well and apply the conclusions to his own battle plans, and encourage his staff to do likewise. Significantly he would give leeway to his Canadian commanders to develop and defend their own plans, only questioning and modifying very little, thus building on their initiative, brain power, and confidence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Williams, **Bing of Vimy – General and Governor General**, Pen & Sword Military Books, 2014, pg.128-129

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, Williams', pg. 128-129

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, Williams', pg. 141, pg. 147, pg. 166

Finally from all this he developed the principles of combined operations for all arms to act in concert. Perhaps this was not new, but in the battle for Flers-Courcelette however, where he applied the new arm of the tank Corps, Byng significantly coordinated the artillery fire plan to hold the preliminary bombardment. This allowed his tanks to cross open ground unfettered by holes and mud. The attack was a huge success.<sup>4</sup>

But Byng's success was also limited. He was a subordinate commander in a large army. Byng had little scope to use his tactical skill, or to manage and implement the seeds of his strategic brilliance. He was assigned a narrow front. As such as part of a cog, in a very large war machine, he was obliged to act on his superior's orders. He had no leeway or choice but to assault directly on the various objectives he was given.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Byng made significant changes that had a very real bearing on Canadian success on the battlefield.

There is very much more to this book than Byng's time spent with the Canadian Corps. The Corps proudly adopted the moniker "Byng's Boys" that acknowledged not only the man who they trusted but also as the man who trusted them. Byng's gift to the Canadian Corps was "their newly-won self-confidence (that) gave them the will to be Canadian as opposed to a British force. In British eyes, they had right to be trusted with an independent role."<sup>6i</sup>

Byng was a man borne into privilege, who led what seemed to be a charmed life, and who was accorded great opportunity and honours throughout his military and post military career in the service of his country. But he was also unique amongst his contemporaries. Perhaps the following was the true measure off Byng's success, which many officers and men today should ascribe to as the foundation of their own success:

"(Byng) ...His concern for the welfare of his men, which he had shown from the beginning of his service, was not simply a professional requirement

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, Williams', pg. 136-139

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* Williams', pg. 139

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* Williams', pg. 139

related to maintaining their fitness to fight. It was rooted deep and affected his conscience, his sympathy and his emotions.”<sup>7</sup>

Jeffrey Williams’, *Bing of Vimy – General and Governor General* is not only a professionally written book, but it is also a great gripping read. It is highly recommended.

Gerry Madigan

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid* Williams’, pg. 139