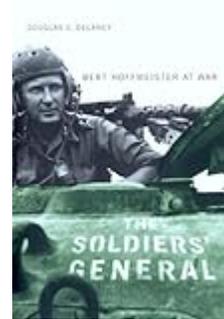


Douglas E. Delaney. *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005. 320 pp. \$93.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-1148-4; \$35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7748-1149-1.



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The Challenge of Leadership

It seems remarkable that Douglas E. Delaney, a professional soldier and fine historian, would argue that Bert Hoffmeister “was the most successful Canadian battlefield commander of the Second World War” (p. 3). That is a large claim, for Hoffmeister was not a professional soldier. Unlike his fellow divisional commanders, he did not learn his trade at Canada’s Royal Military College or in British staff courses. He joined the Seaforth Highlanders of Vancouver in 1927, partly for social reasons, as the militia unit offered few opportunities for real training. Instead, Delaney argues that Hoffmeister’s work in the forestry industry taught him a great deal about organization and leadership.

When the Seaforths left for overseas in December 1939, thirty-two-year-old Major Hoffmeister knew that he was not ready for war. Early in 1941, Hoffmeister was diagnosed with “hysteria” and was briefly hospitalized for treatment. In Delaney’s view, this crisis stemmed from his growing frustration with not having a chance to learn the technical side of his trade. Delaney offers a highly critical picture of the Canadian army’s time in England, arguing that it was saved by the steadying influ-

ence of British General Bernard Law Montgomery. After a staff course in 1942 helped him regain his confidence, Hoffmeister took command of the Seaforths, whose reputation had suffered under previous commanders. Delaney’s keen research details how Hoffmeister called on both his personal qualities and his growing technical competence to turn the unit around.

Battlefield command remains the harshest test of military leadership, and Hoffmeister proved his worth. After successfully leading the Seaforths in Sicily during the summer of 1943, Hoffmeister was promoted in Italy to command the next highest formation, a brigade. In both commands, he developed a reputation for leading from the front. In the awful fighting for the Italian city of Ortona in December 1943, Hoffmeister insisted, even when given a choice in the face of mounting casualties, that the battle be fought to the end. Three months later his reputation as a “fighter” helped him win the command of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division over more senior, professional soldiers (p. 120).

The division’s first test at the Liri Valley in May 1944 was difficult, and Delaney speculates that “mixed praise

from above and criticism from below undermined the confidence that had been on the mend since [Hoffmeister's] 1941 nervous crisis" (p. 162). The general and his division recovered. Everyone up the chain of command took credit for Hoffmeister's unorthodox but successful plan to seize an important piece of high ground on the Gothic Line in August 1944. But difficult fighting continued in the Po River Valley in September and the Battle of the Rivers in December. We know far too little about these encounters, but Delaney's assessments (and detailed maps) reveal how horrendous were the conditions that the Allies had to overcome.

Early in 1945, the Canadians in Italy joined First Canadian Army in Northwest Europe to finish the war in the Netherlands and Germany. The switch to Canadian command took some getting used to; the British in Italy did not insist on written orders as did the Canadians in the Netherlands. Hoffmeister's division (now dubbed the "Mighty Maroon Machine" for the color of its shoulder patches) broke out north of Arnhem in mid-April, but the final weeks of the war were not easy. At Otterloo, Hoffmeister's divisional headquarters was nearly overrun. The division's costly battle for the northern Dutch port of Delfzijl was a difficult and costly attack that was won just three days before the war ended.

Delaney's military and academic credentials make this work a keen tactical study. Unlike many military historians, Delaney has trained soldiers so his extensive discussions here on these matters are important additions to our understanding of how the Canadian army actually worked. Since Delaney has been a staff officer, he knows how to assess an operational order. He also has walked the ground over which Hoffmeister's men fought, so his judgments are well considered and thorough. Finally, Delaney's clear prose does not become bogged down in the annoying details of the military archive. This is a book that non-specialists will find accessible and interesting.

Leadership is always an important consideration in

war, and it has become a subject of renewed interest in the Canadian forces of today. Delaney's final assessment of Hoffmeister's command style is an especially fine study of military leadership. Hoffmeister seems one of the few Canadian senior commanders who understood that command held both "technical and human dimensions" (p. 227). Learning the job took time and constant study, and Delaney shows how Hoffmeister tried to be a flexible commander who wanted his units to move as quickly and efficiently as possible. But, Hoffmeister also appears here as a refreshingly human general, especially when measured against his other Canadian senior commanders, such as Harry Crerar or E. L. M. Burns. When comparing Hoffmeister's style to that of Guy Simonds (a professional soldier who many consider Canada's most successful battlefield commander), Delaney is blunt: "Simonds used fear; Hoffmeister built teams" (p. 123). Not surprisingly, Hoffmeister looked to British generals as his role models.

So was Hoffmeister "the most successful Canadian battlefield commander of the Second World War" (p. 3)? Perhaps, although some will still insist that Simonds, as arrogant as he was, was a far more astute tactician. The strength of this work comes in what it says about military leadership and the little-known details that go into the workings of a division. But how did Hoffmeister measure up against other divisional commanders? Sometimes we get the impression that Hoffmeister was alone in the way he responded to the battlefield. We should not forget that, when considered within the battles for the Liri Valley or the Gothic Line, a divisional commander like Hoffmeister played a relatively minor role. Surely, there were other commanders who displayed the same acumen, or, even if they were not as charismatic as Hoffmeister, managed to organize and inspire their troops to similar results. It would have been instructive to measure Hoffmeister's performance against other divisions with which, or against which, the Canadians fought. Still, this is a first-rate account of a remarkable commander who seemingly found the right balance between tactical skill and personal charisma.

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