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Wartime memories: Words and photos relate Canadians' experiences in WWII

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A Perfect Hell: The True Story of the Forgotten Canadian Commandos of the Second World War

By John Nadler, Doubleday Canada, 402 pages, \$34.95

Rare Courage: Veterans of the Second World War Remember

By Rod Mickleburgh with Rudyard Griffiths

McClelland & Stewart, 186 pages, \$34.99

A Soldier's View: The Personal Photographs of Canadians at War 1939–1945

By Blake Heathcote, Doubleday Canada, 323 pages, \$45

The Second World War was an unspeakable horror. Approximately 60 million civilians and soldiers were killed between 1939 and 1945. Forty-two thousand Canadians were among the dead. This most murderous period in human history is slowly fading from living memory. Fewer and fewer veterans march in Remembrance Day parades. Those who remain turn out with campaign ribbons and medals proudly polished, souvenirs from their combat-ready youth. They offered up their lives to their country and, by their victory, did nothing less than preserve freedom.

Somehow, over the years, an illusion has been created that the outcome was inevitable. Not so, as historian Jack Granatstein points out in his foreword to **Rare Courage**. In 1941, before Germany turned on the Soviet Union and Pearl Harbour caused the United States to declare war, the Axis held sway over Europe.

The bibliography of the Second World War is thick with memoirs, narratives of particular battles and campaigns, and novels. Sixty years after the fact, we should expect that additions to the canon will reveal unexpected stories or serve up new perspectives on the emotions

and sensations of warfare. We know that the generation that fought on the Allied side was courageous and we believe in the righteousness of their cause. Reiterating these facts simply isn't enough. Unfortunately, recent historiography is too awe-struck for objectivity, too sanitized to convey the visceral impact of being at the front.

So it is with *A Perfect Hell*, John Nadler's account of the exploits of the First Special Service Force (FSSF), joint Canada-U.S. regiments specially trained in commando tactics. Ordinary men stepped away from their ordinary lives to be trained in parachuting, sabotage and silent killing techniques. They were responsible for smashing German positions in Italy and daringly holding the strategic Anzio beachhead despite being vastly outnumbered.

The Force's men were changed, certainly, by the experience. But Nadler doesn't penetrate the meaning and substance of those changes, giving only vagaries, like, "Killing a man by slitting his throat means crossing a line and occupying a place in the world from which there is no going back." He writes in time-worn clichés about "the appalling indifference of war: death is dealt by shells and bullets that care nothing for their targets," and employs melodramatic descriptions like "the sky wept like a wound." The FSSF was a unique unit, but *A Perfect Hell* is a hackneyed book.

Rare Courage anthologizes first-person accounts from 20 Canadian veterans. It was published as part of the Dominion Institute's Memory Project, a national storytelling initiative aimed at fostering a greater appreciation for veterans' contributions to Canada.

In most of their voices is a misleading understatement that belies their courage. "You were scared every night," admits Air Force bomb aimer Grant McRae of Montreal. "There were lots of things to be concerned about."

There's the touching innocence of William Newell from London, Ont.: "I signed up for the navy. The girls seemed to like navy uniforms better than the others. A little more excitement to it. Did it work? Oh, yes. Wonderful."

Very striking is a remark from Stanley Grizzle of Toronto, the only black soldier in the collection. "Hitler was a bad guy, but there were a lot of bad guys in Canada who wouldn't hire us. That's the way I saw it," explaining why he didn't enlist (he was eventually drafted) and expressing how harsh Canadian society was in that day from his perspective.

Since 1999, Blake Heathcote has traversed the country recording the memories of Canada's veterans for his Testaments of Honour project, in association with the Department of Veterans Affairs and Canadian Heritage. Along the way, he compiled an archive of nearly 9,000 photographs from their private collections, a selection of which make up *A Soldier's View*.

In these pictures, we catch a glimpse of how they saw the war, from the optimism of those who hadn't yet been sent overseas; to the devastated landscapes and mutilated corpses of

the battlefields; to the aircraft engulfed in flames and the ships encrusted with ice; to the delirious celebrations that greeted the Allies' advance across occupied Europe.

Seeing the war from their perspective lends these events an immediacy that only the best prose can capture. There is particular poignancy in those simple accompanying captions that mention, with alarming nonchalance, that one of the subjects died or went missing in combat within hours or days of posing.

As much as the soldiers' ranks have thinned 60 years after the end of hostilities, they will only continue to diminish exponentially. Therefore, the sentimental imperative to capture their recollections is real. Those of us who have never been to war have much to learn from those who have. However, sentiment aside, not every reminiscence warrants a book and not every story carries a lesson. A little more literary discretion, then, would be welcome.

Tod Hoffman is a Montreal writer.