

2022

Review of "Always Ready: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada" by Donald E. Graves with Captain (ret'd) Mihail Murgoci

Roger Sarty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sarty, Roger "Review of "Always Ready: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada" by Donald E. Graves with Captain (ret'd) Mihail Murgoci." *Canadian Military History* 31, 2 (2022)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Canadian Military History* by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Donald E. Graves with Captain (ret'd) Mihail Murgoci. *Always Ready: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada*. Toronto: The Royal Regiment of Canada Association, 2017. Pp. 574.

Regimental histories, one of the most traditional forms of military history, have flourished in Canada amidst the growth of new approaches and topics of study in the field. The best regimental histories have shared in the evolution from what has been characterised (often unfairly) as uncritical “drums and trumpet” tales of glory to studies of “war and society.” That is the case with *Always Ready*, which celebrates the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Royal Regiment of Canada in 2011-2012.

Donald Graves provides a full and lively account of the regiment’s creation and history. The unit was formed in an outburst of military patriotism in Toronto in late 1861 during the American Civil War. The impetus was a war scare after a federal US cruiser seized Confederate diplomats from the British mail steamer *Trent* in international waters. Diplomacy prevailed but tensions continued, as did defence preparations by the British army garrison in the British North American colonies and by the Canadian volunteer militia, which had been established only in 1855. The new Toronto unit was recognised as a part of the militia organisation in 1862 and in 1863 received the designation “royal,” becoming the Tenth or Royal Regiment of Toronto Volunteers (and later the 10th Regiment Royal Grenadiers). Benefitting from the support of local businessmen to augment meagre government-provided resources, the regiment became well established. It was thus able to quickly mobilise and deploy with British units that responded to the Fenian incursion at Fort Erie in June 1866. In 1885, the regiment raised a battalion of 250 personnel that saw action at the Battles at Fish Creek and Batoche in the North-West Resistance. Personnel from the unit served with the Canadian contingents in South Africa, 1899-1902, including the Battle of Paardeberg in February 1900. The regiment contributed thousands of personnel to several overseas Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) battalions, particularly the 3rd and 58th Battalions, during the First World War. In 1920, these CEF battalions were perpetuated by a new militia unit, the Toronto Regiment. In 1936, the Toronto Regiment amalgamated with the Royals and the members of the two units then selected the new designation The Royal Regiment of Canada, which came into effect

in early 1939. Soon after, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the regiment mobilised its own active service battalion that went to England in 1940, then served in the disastrous Dieppe Raid of 1942 and the North-West Europe Campaign of 1944-1945. More recently, the unit has contributed personnel to the Canadian forces in worldwide deployment, including the conflicts in the Balkans in 1994-2001 and in Afghanistan in 2004-2012.

The story of the regiment tracks much of the history of the Canadian Army and especially that of the militia which constituted the bulk of the army until the expansion of the regular force in the 1950s. One of the strengths of this book is that it consistently places the regiment's history into this larger context. The author is able to do so, as he explains in the preface and repeatedly acknowledges in the references, because of the spadework done by previous histories of the regiment. Most notable was *Battle Royal*, originally published in 1962 to mark the centennial and then updated in 1979, by Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) Donald J. Goodspeed.¹ He was a veteran of the Second World War and a regular army officer, who, after joining the Army Historical Section in 1958, became one of the country's leading military historians, leaving the service in 1970 to take up a university professorship. *Battle Royal* is a meticulously detailed account of some 700 pages.

Always Ready is similarly substantial—and also from the hand of a prominent military historian—but it is a different type of production. *Battle Royal* is a soldier's book, written by a soldier for other soldiers. Such is the tactical detail for the battles of the world wars that participants could track through the specific actions they experienced. At the time Goodspeed originally published, the readership included many participants. The regiment supplied something like 9,000 troops for overseas service during the world wars and in the early 1960s many of these veterans were in mid-life or, in the case of those who had served in 1914-1918, in their 60s and 70s. By contrast, *Always Ready* is directed to a wider audience for whom Canada's major wars are now nearly as remote as ancient history; military life, let alone battle, are nearly equally remote, save for the very small numbers in the armed forces after repeated budget and personnel cuts since the 1960s.

¹ Major D. J. Goodspeed, *Battle Royal: A History of the Royal Regiment of Canada, 1862-1962* (Toronto: The Royal Regiment of Canada Association, 1962).

Always Ready seeks to capture the experience of Canada's militia soldiers 'in the round,' with illustrated features on weapons, uniforms, tactics, medical services in combat zones (including treatment of battle fatigue), rations carried in the field and the songs soldiers sang, among other topics. A central theme developed with illustrated features as well as in the main text is the history of Toronto to provide context for the lives of those who joined the regiment and the many others who supported it, particularly in grim times of defence budget cuts that seemed to hit the reserve forces hardest.

Above all, the book is about people. The volume is peppered with illustrated biographical vignettes on members of all ranks and much of the main text is built on personal accounts. One of its strengths is the vivid accounts of service in the Balkans and Afghanistan in the 1990s-2000s by members of the regiment on deployment with the regular forces. In the chapters on the world wars, the use of personal stories allows the author to focus on selected, evocative incidents which are well set in context with clear explanatory passages. These often cite Goodspeed's account and quote the big picture conclusions he drew from the tactical detail. This approach makes the reading less demanding than *Battle Royal*. No less accessible for the general reader are the author's more granular accounts of the most important actions. The standout is the treatment of the Dieppe fiasco, the subject of two chapters, with a third on the experiences of the prisoners of war taken by the Germans that day. It is a gripping re-telling of a well-known story that relates step by step the horror the troops faced as they landed in the centre of what can only be described as a trap from hell. Tasked to scale the steep cliffs of the eastern headland, the regiment was landed late, thus losing the cover of darkness and without benefit of surprise, stripping away the two elements that the inexperienced planners had counted upon for success. The defenders were fully alert and had precisely registered their weapons to bring murderous fire on every square foot of the beach. An appendix, built on systematic analysis of both printed and archival sources on the battle, debunks two popular books that claim the Royal's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas E. Catto, did less than was possible. He led a small group that managed to cut through the barbed wire on the sea wall with a single pair of hand cutters (the bangalore torpedoes that were supposed to do the job were lost in the landing), scaled the cliff, took out two defended houses and went for cover only when they were out of ammunition and when it was

clear the Essex Scottish, with whom Catto was to have established contact, had not made it off the beach.

The most striking contribution of the book, at least to this reader, is its engagement with John Keegan's challenge to historians to better explore the "face of battle," admittedly impossible as it is to fully grasp the sensory and emotional overload of combat. This is a challenge the author has taken up through his whole career. The best regimental histories are the product of close collaboration with the regiment and its wider family. In this case Captain (ret'd) Mihail Murgoci led the work to gather personal stories and many previously unpublished illustrations (among the remarkable total of 768 in the book, 177 of them in colour). It is, as the author emphasises, these personal stories and the powerful images that are the key elements of this beautifully produced volume.

ROGER SARTY, *WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY*

Note: This title can only be purchased from the Royal Regiment of Canada. Price: \$40 plus shipping; \$55 within Ontario; \$60 within Canada. For purchase, contact alwaysreadybook@gmail.com.