

## *Old Soldiers Never Lie: Oral History and Military History*

by **R.H. ROY**

It has been about thirty years since I started work on my first book of military history. It was a history of the Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's), a unit based in Victoria and a "descendant" of a famous battalion, the 16th, which fought in France and Belgium with the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the Great War. Fortunately, at least from an historian's point of view, I was a veteran of the Second World War and, moreover, I had been from 1951 to 1953 "narrator" in the old Army Historical Section, Canadian Army Headquarters. I had had the good fortune to serve under Colonel C.P. Stacey in the Historical Section, and on reflection, I could not have had better training in writing military history.

I do not know of any extant tape-recorded interviews of army officers or soldiers made during the Second World War. There are numerous tapes of war correspondents describing battles, talking with pilots at airfields, and the like, for later radio broadcast to the Canadian public. Personally, I have found them to be of very limited use. Wartime censorship restricted their value and the motive behind them was to entertain, while only very generally informing those on the Home Front.

Of far greater value is the textual evidence available. Each unit, brigade, division, and corps kept a war diary. There are Operation Orders, Intelligence Reports, Patrol Reports, military maps, and a host of other documents available to the historian. Among these are two types of documents which are at least related to oral history. Battle Reports are interviews, conducted by the historical officers in each division, about certain aspects of very recent battles in which the person being interviewed had played a major role. These interviews were typed and remain a significant source of historical information. A second is the wireless log, kept by the signallers at battalion and senior formation headquarters. As messages came in and replies or enquiries were sent out, each was recorded. Reading the minute-by-minute logs of messages gives one an accurate account of decisions made, actions taken, and a sense of the tremendous anxiety — and sometimes confusion — of warfare.

Despite all the documentary evidence one might find, and despite the immediacy of the wireless logs, there is still something missing. Only by interviewing the veteran who took part in the battle can one get some idea of what it was like to be there. Eyewitness accounts can be vivid and give life to an otherwise straightforward and sometimes dull

account of an engagement or battle. Action on the battlefield is a life-and-death affair, and rarely does the passion of combat, with its fears and triumphs, shine through logs or war diaries. The latter, of course, are usually written one or two days after an action by a non-participating officer, the adjutant. Signallers keeping logs were generally at battalion tactical headquarters sending messages back to the brigade or higher formations.

The value of interviewing the veteran who was in the field becomes immediately apparent. He was at the sharp end. He saw what was happening and frequently knew why. Shellfire could knock out a command tank and affect the control of a large number of men. The sudden inspiration of a corporal or a major could tip the balance between victory and defeat. Clouds of dust thrown up by shellfire or numerous tanks could result in direction being lost and an important objective being missed. In the drama of an attack where hundreds or thousands of men were involved, so much was happening every minute that most of it could not be recorded, and only those who survived can explain, to a certain extent, why events transpired as they did.

A question is always raised about the memories of the veterans being interviewed. There is no doubt whatsoever that the sooner a veteran is interviewed after a battle, the more accurate his recall is likely to be. Is it worth one's while, therefore, to attempt to interview a veteran many years after a war is over? In my own experience, the answer is yes, but one must be very cautious and must be prepared to double check the answers one receives before accepting them as historical evidence.

There are a number of factors which one must consider when interviewing veterans. Generally, owing to their rank and command responsibilities, officers give a better account of a battle than rank and file soldiers. The latter have a restricted view of the battlefield. They know what went on in their section or platoon, but when it comes to the movement of platoons and companies one must seek higher ranks. If a soldier or officer has had experience in battle, his account is likely to be better than one who is "green." A Canadian soldier sighting a German tank approaching him for the first time is liable to think it is a Tiger, whereas it might only be a Mark IV. There is a tendency to exaggerate enemy armour, shell-fire, and numbers when one first encounters them, and this factor must be taken into account.

Most veterans I have interviewed tend to remember certain events better than others, especially events in which they were deeply involved. Sometimes only an hour or perhaps a morning of an action which lasted several days remain as clear as crystal in their memory, while the remainder is a blank. Memory is selective at the best of times and under the stress and passion of battle, when the mind is numbed by the noise of exploding shells and shocked by death and destruction all around, a soldier functions by instinct rather than reason. He is intent on survival, and if one were to interview him even immediately after a fight there might be only a few clear patches in the fog of battle. He might say what he thinks happened, but his sense of time and distance can become confused, and exhaustion and terror can wipe out the sequence of events which the historian tries to recreate.

The ability and knowledge of the interviewer play a major part in extracting information from men who have been in battle. Personally, I have found my own wartime experience as an infantry lieutenant to be invaluable. To know army organization, ranks, procedure, the arrangements for attack or defence, weapons used, and all the rest, makes it easy to question and probe. To know army jargon and terminology is useful since one

can speak the language and understand the phrases the veteran might use. To be able to read a military map, know the range of supporting artillery, and be well aware of the capabilities and limitations of armour and self-propelled guns is very useful. Knowledge of the time it takes to gap a mine-field, dig a slit trench, or site a defensive position all adds to one's ability to judge the information one receives from a veteran.

One of the advantages of interviewing a veteran is the documentary evidence available for either supporting evidence or for refreshing his memory. A primary tool is the military map. Maps come in various scales and show the battlefield in great detail. Buildings, roads, bridges, railroads, open and forested areas are all there, together with contours showing the hills and valleys of the terrain. Frequently one can get "defence overprint" maps which show, in red or blue symbols, such information as the location of enemy trenches, barbed wire, and machine-gun posts. Once one gets the veteran oriented on the map, his memory improves as he recollects the lay of the land and the situation facing him. The next most valuable tool is the war diary. These vary in value, but a good one — one where the writer went to some pains to describe a battle as it was related to him at the time — is extremely useful. Here is recorded the battalion's plan of attack, the role of the supporting artillery and tanks, overhead air cover, flanking attacks, and so on. All these details, together with the account of the battle itself, help the veteran to recall not only his own role in the action but bring back other incidents to his memory as well. The interviewer, of course, should be extremely well acquainted with the available documentary evidence, so much so that the person being interviewed might think he had been there with him.

One of the greatest uses I have made of tape-recorded interviews was while writing the biography of Major-General G.R. Pearkes. Pearkes joined the army as a private early in 1915. By war's end he commanded a battalion and was one of the most decorated officers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. His experiences in both wars were important to my study, yet I could find only about a dozen letters he had written to his mother. He did not keep a personal diary and I have met only a very few people he served with in action. Once again military maps and war diaries had to be obtained. A letter in the local paper requesting military maps of the front lines of the Great War resulted in a surprising number of responses. Trench maps were especially valuable, since advances in Flanders were measured by yards, not miles. Unit war diaries from the three units Pearkes served with overseas were available from the National Archives. I always had both trench maps and diaries with me whenever I went to interview him, and they were absolutely invaluable to freshen his memory, which was very good, even though he was in his early seventies. He also used them to explain situations to me so that I could understand "his" war.

Pearkes related what occurred on his front with remarkable accuracy. I checked his verbal account every way I could with supporting primary and secondary evidence available to me but rarely did I catch him out. He was a modest man and tended to play down his own role as a platoon, company, and battalion commander. He accepted his wounds as a matter of course, and his endurance and courage came out through my questioning rather than his volunteering. His account of how he won the Victoria Cross was very matter-of-fact, yet so vivid that I was amazed how he survived the frightful slaughter of Passchendaele.

In all, I had eighty-five interviews with him, more than any other person. He kept few papers, and even when he resigned from the House of Commons, after fifteen years as a

Member of Parliament, including three years as Minister of National Defence, he left all his files and correspondence in his office for his successor. He showed admirable patience as I prodded and probed his memory during the three years I worked on his biography, and I am grateful to him for it. Without those interviews, my job would have been much more difficult, and the biography would have been a poor one indeed.

There are various books and articles written about the art of interviewing. Given a good tape recorder, a willing subject, a lack of background noise, and all the other things one might wish for, my own feeling is that one of the essentials for the interviewer is a thorough knowledge of the area in which it is proposed to question the subject. Certainly military men will quickly be turned off if the interviewer has no concept of the milieu in which they worked, lived, and fought. Sympathy they do not need, but understanding and appreciation will cause the veteran to be one of the most valuable subjects imaginable for an interview.