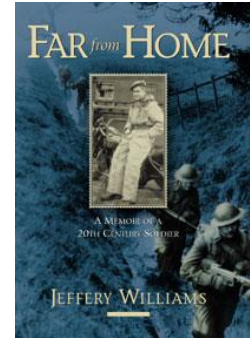


Jeffery Williams. *Far From Home: A Memoir of a 20th Century Soldier*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003.

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Military memoirs have always been popular with the public but problematic with historians. At best memoirs present the ‘actualities of war’ in ways conventional histories do not; at worst they offer selective, even manufactured memories. Jeffrey Williams spent most of his long career as a staff officer during the Second World War and much of the Cold War. He later became an award-winning popular historian and biographer. The skills he acquired from both professions serve him well here. Though military historians may decry a lack of broad analysis, this well-written, highly personal work is a compelling read.

Military historians may ask why Williams devotes seven of 24 chapters and over 100 pages to his days growing up in Calgary. Certainly Williams includes plenty of pleasant anecdotes, perhaps too many. But the picture drawn in these first chapters reveals a city and country that has largely passed by. Like so many other Canadians at that time, Calgarians were never far from their rural and largely British roots. Williams was a boy scout and a cadet who likely learned more about tactics from the kids he played with on 18th Street. Drawn by the appeal of a military career and the vague understanding that war might come, Williams enlisted with the Calgary Highlanders in May 1937. When the Highlanders were called out in September 1939, Williams recalls that he had “no uplifting sense of personal mission: I simply wanted to be with my friends in the regiment wherever we were sent” (124). As the war progressed his regimental friends became more elusive. After fighting the heat and mosquitoes of

Camp Shilo, Williams went overseas with the Highlanders in August 1940. He describes well the conditions he found in Aldershot and the many other places where he trained in England. On 6 June 1944, he was on the War Staff Course in Kingston. Two months later he landed in Normandy and began organizing the supply and repair of armoured vehicles. It was “an interesting and important job, but it was not what I had joined the army for” (232).

Despite all his efforts to rejoin his regiment, Williams remained on staff to war's end. Memoirs by staff officers are rare, and Williams admirably details the kinds of crucial tasks that were so central to First Canadian Army's success. To his credit Williams often visited the forward units, and widened his experience by taking leaves aboard British destroyers. But while the fighting was raging in the Scheldt and the Rhineland, Williams was on “the fringe of war,” often taking leaves in Antwerp and London where he met the very best of society.

Williams' diplomatic and social skills were a valuable asset when he joined the peacetime army at the outset of the Cold War. Except for his year in Korea as a company commander with the Patricias, he filled a series of important and often delicate postings in Washington, London, Germany, Halifax, Kingston, and Ottawa. Realizing that his staff training would keep him from a field command and higher promotion, Williams retired in 1970.

Early on the author asks “How far back can one's memory be cast?” (9) It is a good question, for memories can be fickle. Though he used his extensive army files to help write his memoirs, Williams kept no diary during his service. So what stock should we place in the dialogue he includes, some of which he recreates after more than a half

century? Williams recalls that he arranged in early 1945 for two canoes to be flown in to assist the Algonquin Regiment whose troops were patrolling the Maas River near the island of Kapelsche Veer. He notes simply: "The Algonquins said that they [the canoes] worked a treat" (247). The Algonquins never launched canoes to patrol the Maas; the Lincoln and Welland Regiment used them to attack Kapelsche Veer in January 1945. The results were disastrous.

Still, there is real value in the details related here. William's experience says much about the nature of military leadership in Canada. Recalling Calgary before the war, Williams felt that there were few class distinctions, an observation drawn from times that destroyed fortunes and left empty mansions available for regimental officer messes. The handsome young officer with meticulous grooming who asked his Colonel that "formal blue jackets" be worn in the evening did not last long. "To me he was a romantic, bewitched by uniforms, music and ceremonial, and far too conscious of the social position conferred on him by the King's Commission" (130).

Early regimental training was rudimentary, but junior officers learned "the enduring military virtues": "first among which was care of our men, exemplified by the invariable rule that officers did not touch food until they were sure that the men had received theirs. Woe betide the subaltern who didn't know the name of every man in his platoon, where he came from and his state of training. At the end of long marches, we inspected our men's feet. There was no fudging this—you have to hold each soldiers' dirty and sometimes smelly feet, with no signs of distaste, and treat his blisters" (144).

Officers held considerable status, but that could not lead to snobbery or aloofness. Williams is far too diplomatic to criticize his fellow officers, but he had no

patience for the “strange” Calgary Highlander CO who did not visit one of his wounded officers in hospital (205). And for the Calgary host who refused to allow his son, an enlisted sailor, to join a officer gathering, George Pearkes had a simple solution that impressed the young Williams. After giving his host an icy smile, Pearkes heartily welcomed the young man into the party and gave him his full attention.

Jeffrey William’s career took him to many places. It is unfortunate, however, that the author does not reflect on some of the broader changes and events he saw during his career. By the time he retired the Canadian Forces wore a single uniform, yet we hear nothing about his views on unification. On the threat of nuclear war, Williams observes that the Army and the government “took our work seriously” (333) but we learn little about Canada’s often-confused nuclear weapons policy.

Above all this is a highly personal memoir in which mothers, grandfathers and lost fathers loom large. To his credit, he recounts the impact his many postings had on his wife and children. Those looking for insights into Canada’s defence policy may be disappointed. But for those interested in a well-written, anecdotal account of a Canadian in uniform, this is a very rich work.

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