

Brent Byron Watson, *Far Eastern Tour: The Canadian Infantry in Korea, 1950-1953*.  
Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002.

**By P. Whitney Lackenbauer**  
**University of Saskatchewan**



Before the guns fell silent in Korea in late July 1953, Canada's contribution to the Korean War had already ceased to be of much interest in domestic and international circles. But for those who served in Korea – and for the 312 Canadians who never returned – this “far eastern tour” was no distant sideshow. As Brent Watson reminds us, the Korean War “remains the largest Canadian military operation of the post-1945 era” (ix) and as such is worthy of remembrance and serious appraisal. “In Korea, the Canadians encountered a land, a climate, a people, and an enemy that were more unfamiliar and unforgiving than anything Canadian soldiers had ever faced before. Yet the impression remains that Korea was a ‘conflict’ or a ‘police action’ or even a ‘peacekeeping operation’.... Korea was most certainly a war, and it is high time the public acknowledged this fact.”(17)

Far Eastern Tour is a marvelous study of the Korean War from the perspective of the Canadian infantrymen serving with 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade. This was an infantry war (of the 1543 battle casualties, more than ninety percent were suffered by infantry units) and Watson provides an interesting and informative study from military and socio-cultural perspectives. In a sobering corrective to “popular” depictions, Watson concludes that the “Canadians did not perform particularly well in Korea” (77), the exceptions being 2 PPCLI's stand at Kap'yong and 2 R22eR's defence at Hill 227. Like David Bercuson in Blood on the Hills,<sup>i</sup> he attributes this lackluster performance to improper and inadequate training, poor weapons and equipment, and an insufficient appreciation of the terrain and nature of combat in the Far East.

While commentators frequently stress the divisions between military history and social history, this book is a remarkable tribute to what can be accomplished when the artificial boundaries between the two fields are transgressed. Watson ably narrates the

soldier's experience, from recruitment and voluntary enlistment with the Canadian Army Special Force (CASF), through "inadequate" training in Canada and the United States, to harsh conditions on the front lines, to the return to a country that had already long forgotten their contribution. The difficult combat conditions against an able enemy were exacerbated by chronic unpreparedness for small-unit, "hit and run" fighting. Inadequate weapons training reflected a misguided "doctrinal belief that individual rifle fire meant very little to the overall conduct of operations,"(25) and the "art" of patrolling required "sound collective training, particularly at the section and platoon levels"(28) that was not provided until late in the war. In addition, the Canadians resented and treated poorly the Korean Augmentation Troops, Commonwealth (KATCOMs) that were integrated into their ranks, and strongly resisted their perceived threat to the Canadians' comradeship and small-group cohesion. They did, however, respect the Korean Service Corps (KSC) reinforcements or "rice burners" who carried heavy loads and ascended steep hills to supply them (62).

Watson's forays into the social landscape of the Canadian infantry in Korea highlighted conditions that were similarly unforgiving. Intense fear (measured by the "pucker factor") and more frequently boredom, sleep deprivation and chronic fatigue, bland American C-rations, and apparent disinterest back home all strained morale. Alcohol helped to lighten spirits, though it was sometimes misused and became a source of disciplinary problems. Although the mortality rate from disease was the lowest in Canadian military history, soldiers were susceptible to a disturbing variety of diseases, both environmentally- and socially-contracted. Through the eyes of Canadian service personnel, Korea was a filthy place, filled with parasitic and infectious diseases. Canadians had the unfortunate distinction of suffering from the highest rates of venereal disease in the conflict, ten times the Canadian overseas rate in 1945. While Watson's descriptions of the major sexually transmitted diseases were overly detailed, his excellent analysis reveals that rest and recreation leave ("R & R") boosted morale but could also leave uncomfortable legacies.

The author's research is impressive, drawing on a thorough review of the archival material in Ottawa (from departmental correspondence to war diaries and training pamphlets) as well as oral interviews with veterans who attended the 1996 Korean

Veterans Association conference in Calgary. His crisp narrative style is eminently readable and accessible, seamlessly weaving quantitative analysis with colourful, personal anecdotes. The detail is incredible, and while there is some tedious repetition – his fixation on field stoves, for example – the overall effect is very impressive and enjoyable.

In Watson's assessment, the Canadians were generally outfought, particularly in the last eighteen months of the war. They never adopted a more flexible tactical approach than that of the mobile warfare anticipated in Northwest Europe (78-79). The difficulties proved most acute during the final two years of truce talks, when the Canadians were ordered to hold static defensive positions and, in the face of aggressive Chinese small-unit dispersion tactics, were constrained in their activities. In a recent challenge, Bill Johnston's A War of Patrols suggests that this experience demonstrated how the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalions filled with skilled volunteer soldiers proved more effective than the regular force 1<sup>st</sup> battalions on the Korean battlefields. After re-reading Far Eastern Tour, I remain convinced that Watson's is the more compelling argument, although not necessary for the reasons he explicitly provides. It was governmental and political constraints more than operational or tactical impotence that were responsible for the shortcomings experienced during the post-July 1951 period of attritional stalemate. Adaptation to battlefield realities always takes time, however, and Johnston does mount an interesting challenge to the notion that 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade was "slapped together" and rushed off to war," asserting instead that it was "the best prepared and most combat-ready force Canada has ever fielded at the onset of a conflict"<sup>ii</sup> – the opposite conclusion to that drawn by Watson. I anxiously await future studies that will weigh in on this interesting debate.

With the recent flurry of monographs on Canadians and the Korean War, perhaps it is no longer useful to use the traditional description of it as "the forgotten war," even if public indifference at the time relegated the Canadian soldiers to "forgotten people"(153). Far Eastern Tour is certainly one of the best of these studies, and deserves a wide readership. The author's final analysis is overwhelmingly negative towards the Canadian experience, but it does provide important insights into military and social "lessons learned" that remain relevant today. Watson's fresh approach, clear

and engaging style, and solid use of evidence will make this book attractive and useful to veterans, academics, undergraduate students, and an interested public. It is a must read for those interested in military and Canadian social history.

*P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Ph.D., is currently a postdoctoral fellow with the Canada Research Chair (Native-Newcomer Relations) at the University of Saskatchewan. He will be an assistant professor at St. Jerome's University (affiliated with the University of Waterloo) beginning this summer. An editor of An Inside Look at External Affairs During the Trudeau Years: The Memoirs of Mark MacGuigan and co-editor of Mackenzie King: Citizenship and Community, he is presently working on histories of the Canadian Rangers and the DEW Line.*

---

<sup>i</sup> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> William Johnston, *A War of Patrols* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), xix-xx.