BOOK REVIEWS

FOB DOC: A DOCTOR ON THE FRONT LINES IN AFGHANISTAN - A WAR DIARY
by Captain Ray Wiss, MD
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009
194 pages, $32.95 (hard cover)
Reviewed by Tod Strickland

The military memoir is among the oldest of historical genres; each new conflict seems to bring with it a crop of new authors who decide to share their experiences, feelings, and fears with the broader public. Although many are undoubtedly familiar with British and American examples, such as Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, or Charles B. MacDonald’s classic Company Commander, Canadian authors have also put pen to paper, and examples abound. The First World War gave us James H. Pedley’s Only This, recounting the life of an infantry subaltern, while the Second World War produced Richard Malone writing of life as a staff officer in A Portrait of War, 1939-1943, to name but two. Other readers will no doubt be able to cite many different titles and favourites from almost every war, conflict, or skirmish that has involved Canadian warriors.

The genre forms an important element in military writing for two distinct reasons. First, it generally steers the reader away from dry academic history, and ‘fills in the holes’ found in many historical monographs, providing details of day-to-day life and experience that are often glossed over by the ‘serious’ historian. Where else but in a memoir would one find descriptions of what it felt and smelt like to be on the Western Front, or to take over a platoon after its commander had been killed in the assault on Vimy Ridge? The second reason, admittedly closely related to the first, is that it makes history both personal and accessible. It allows the reader to be immersed in the action, to see the faces of the men on the landing craft, to get a sense of the boredom interspersed with terror, which appears to be a constant of operational military service, no matter the era, and to breathe a sigh of relief when the last patrol is finished.

Our war in Afghanistan, although ongoing, has generated a similar increase in literary activity. Former battalion commanders have taken their experiences and put them to print, telling of life in the infantry and what it means to lead men in battle. John Conrad’s What the Thunder Said approached the task from a different perspective, describing the lives and the lot of our combat logisticians and their absolutely essential, if unheralded, role. More recently, one author and his remarkable book warrant particular note, namely, Captain Ray Wiss’s FOB Doc: A Doctor on the Front Lines in Afghanistan - A War Diary.

Good memoirs are engaging on a personal level, provide detail that would only usually be available to the participants in the events, and force the reader to examine participants’ preconceptions of the situation at hand. Wiss’s book is all of this and so much more. Covering the author’s experiences as a military doctor, from November 2007 through the spring of 2008, it presents a story that has received little attention to this point – that of our military medical professionals working on the front lines.

Ray Wiss is an engaging personality. He comes across as a man of character and conviction who not only volunteered to be placed into a combat zone, but went there to patch up the inevitable results of soldiers and insurgents engaged in battle. His sense of pride, his intelligence, and his strong conviction in what he is doing, as well as the overall mission itself, all spring forth from the pages. He is not a journalist writing with a sense of detachment from the incredible scenes that encompassed him. Instead, he is an active participant, chronicling what he witnessed in the time that he could spare from his primary duties. It immediately becomes evident that this is not ‘MASH,’ complete with madcap surgeons rebelling against a machine they do not understand. Rather, it is the remarkable story of young men and women doing the best they can, far from home, with their idealism and motivation still relatively intact.

The portraits that Wiss paints of his fellow soldiers, the operating rooms, and their daily routine of boredom, supplemented by occasions of adrenaline, fear, and everyday courage, are incredible. They draw the reader in with a strength to which it is difficult to do justice, and they leave lasting impressions. It becomes readily evident that although Wiss is their superior in rank and station, he has enduring, real respect and admiration for the men and women with whom he works. This particular aspect of the portrayal is powerful and moving.

Additionally, the situations that he describes as he goes about the day-to-day task of caring for his soldiers, and living as a ‘fobbit,’ could never be part of the everyday realm for the vast majority of his readership. The window he provides enables outsiders to see what it is to live in close quarters with his team, to witness the detritus that is left after the ‘medevac’ leaves, to breathe a sigh of relief when a road move is completed after a stress filled, although thankfully uneventful, day. These constitute situations which many soldiers will recognize, and Wiss acknowledges them properly by making them
accessible to those, whether in uniform or out, who have never set foot in the Afghanistan theatre.

As an infantryman, I found myself fascinated by the medical practices that Wiss described. The innovative use of technology, in this case, a portable ultrasound machine, was amazing, and one could not help but be impressed with the fact that tools completely unavailable to a unit medical station five years ago are now on the verge of becoming routine issue. Moving away from the tangible, I also found myself pausing as I read the reflections and thoughts, the internal debates, and the ethical issues that Doc Wiss pondered and faced throughout his tour. These are not revelations that patients are exposed to very often, and they make the author all the more accessible and credible.

The potential readership for this book is extremely broad, as it will appeal to both military and medical professionals, as well as laymen. Anyone who wants to get a fairly unfiltered perspective on the war, why young Canadians are in Afghanistan, what they are doing, and what it means to leave your family behind while you strap on a flak jacket and helmet, will be amply rewarded by reading this book. It is complemented by a glossary defining both the slang and the lexicon of the Canadian military, as well an appropriate range of photographs and maps. And it is written in a style and manner such that the subject matter should be easily understandable to almost anyone.

It is rare to find a book at which some criticism or negative comment cannot be directed, but this might well be it. Some might argue that context is lacking, or that it misses the big picture, but that is not the author’s purpose or focus here. This is a memoir of one man’s experiences in combat, and I believe it is one of the better memoirs to come out of the Canadian experience in Afghanistan. Its greatest strengths rest in its rather unique perspective, and in the strength of character of its author. This is further demonstrated when one realizes that there are no profits being accrued by the writer, and that instead, all royalties are being generously donated to the Military Families Fund. This is a book that should be widely read and appreciated.

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**NOTES**

6. FOB is the military acronym for Forward Operating Base.

**THE SPY WITHIN: LARRY CHIN AND CHINA’S PENETRATION OF THE CIA**

by Tod Hoffman

Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2008

309 pages, $29.95


Reviewed by Richard Desjardins

For several years, US and Canadian intelligence agencies have reported aggressive Chinese intelligence activities taking place on the North American continent. According to these reports, China has focused heavily upon acquiring Western technology as part of its larger focus on economic development. If it is no longer surprising to hear about these efforts, we should remember that it was not always so. If China is fast becoming the new strategic adversary, the Soviet Union held that position for nearly fifty years.

When the story of Larry Chin was first reported in the press in the early-1980s, it shed light on a Chinese ‘import’ with which the public was not familiar: Chinese espionage in the West. It was only a decade earlier that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had been recognized by Canada (1970) and the United States as the legitimate government of China. In large part because of its conscious policy of turning inward, China was largely an unknown entity to the rest of the world. In fact, much knowledge about China was based upon sketchy reports from refugees.

Tod Hoffman has made an important contribution to a subject that remains shrouded in secrecy and rumours. If China has made significant progress in ‘opening a window’ on its military, the domain of intelligence remains largely closed. Mr. Hoffman is providing us with a limited but very much needed account of Chinese intelligence practices.

Earlier accounts of Chinese intelligence activities took the form of ‘spy stories.’ French journalists Roger Faligot and Rémi Kauffer provided such a narrative in their biography of Chinese spy chief Kang Sheng. Another biography of Kang Sheng appeared shortly thereafter, purportedly based upon privileged access to Chinese government documents, thus lending this account greater credibility. However, these books failed to extract a textbook version of Chinese intelligence practices. Those interested had to wait until 1994, when Nicholas Eftimiades, a former CIA analyst, published what remains the only manual providing a description of China’s intelligence structure, including a description of its various agencies and their functions.