

THE VANCOUVER SUN

The view from 60 years on: REMEMBRANCE | It's important to recapture the horror of war -- and do it well

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A PERFECT HELL

The True Story of the Forgotten Canadian Commandos of the Second World War

BY JOHN NADLER

Doubleday Canada, 402 pages (\$34.95)

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RARE COURAGE

Veterans of the Second World War Remember

BY ROD MICKLEBURGH with RUDYARD GRIFFITHS

McClelland & Stewart, 186 pages (\$34.99)

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The Second World War was an unspeakable horror. About 60 million civilians and soldiers were killed or wounded between 1939 and 1945. Forty-two thousand Canadians were among the dead.

This most murderous period in human history is slowly fading from living memory. Fewer and fewer veterans march in Remembrance Day parades. Those who remain turn out with campaign ribbons and medals proudly polished, souvenirs from their combat-ready youth. They offered up their lives to their country and, by their victory, did nothing less than preserve freedom.

Somehow, over the years, an illusion has been created that the outcome was inevitable. Not so, the historian Jack Granatstein points out in the foreword to **Rare Courage**, by Rod Mickleburgh with Rudyard Griffiths. In 1941, before Germany turned on the Soviet Union and Pearl Harbour caused the United States to declare war, the Axis held sway over Europe.

The bibliography of the Second World War is thick with memoirs, narratives of particular battles and campaigns, and novels. Sixty years after the fact, we should expect that additions to the canon will reveal unexpected stories or serve up new perspectives on the emotions and sensations of warfare.

We know that the generation that fought on the Allied side was courageous and we believe in the righteousness of the cause. Reiterating these facts simply isn't enough.

Unfortunately, recent historiography is too awestruck for objectivity, too sanitized to convey the visceral impact of being at the front.

So it is with *A Perfect Hell*, John Nadler's account of the exploits of the First Special Service Force (FSSF), joint Canada–U.S. regiments specially trained in commando tactics. Ordinary men stepped away from their ordinary lives to be trained in parachuting, sabotage and silent killing techniques. They were responsible for smashing German positions in Italy and daringly holding the strategic Anzio beachhead, despite being vastly outnumbered.

The Force's men were changed, certainly, by the experience. But Nadler doesn't penetrate the meaning and substance of those changes, saying only such things as "Killing a man by slitting his throat means crossing a line and occupying a place in the world from which there is no going back."

He writes in clichés about "the appalling indifference of war: death is dealt by shells and bullets that care nothing for their targets." And he employs melodramatic descriptions like "the sky wept like a wound."

The FSSF was a unique unit, but *A Perfect Hell* is a hackneyed book.

Rare Courage anthologizes first-person accounts from 20 Canadian veterans. It was published as part of the Dominion Institute's Memory Project, a national storytelling initiative aimed at fostering a greater appreciation for veterans' contributions to Canada.

In most of their voices, understatement belies their courage. "You were scared every night," admits Air Force bomb aimer Grant McRae of Montreal. "There were lots of things to be concerned about."

There's the touching innocence of William Newell from London, Ont.: "I signed up for the navy. The girls seemed to like navy uniforms better than the others. A little more excitement to it. Did it work? Oh, yes. Wonderful."

Very striking is a remark from Stanley Grizzle of Toronto, the only black soldier in the collection. "Hitler was a bad guy, but there were a lot of bad guys in Canada who wouldn't hire us. That's the way I saw it," he says, explaining why he didn't enlist and expressing how harsh Canadian society was in that day, from his perspective.