Learning from the Canadian Corps on the Western Front

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Abstract
There is a curious paradox about the Canadian Corps that is summed up in this quotation from Canadian Brass, Stephen J. Harris’s study of the evolution of a professional army in Canada. How did this military organisation become so effective in war, considering the background it had and the structure that supported it for most of its existence? This model of tactical excellence was born amid the chaos of Canadian Minister of Defence Sam Hughes’ egomaniacal control at Valcartier Camp. It was beset by jealousies, political backhanders, corruption and influence peddling, and saddled with favourites as incompetent officers who at best were ‘very weak’ and had ‘no power or habit of command.’ Hughes determined to ensure that no Regular soldier received a command appointment, and instead put in his favourites. These were drawn from the citizen militia, whose ability was summed up by the young iconoclast and future military theorist J.F.C. Fuller, who remarked that the Canadians had potential only “if the officers could all be shot.” Yet the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) rose above this administrative nightmare, even if its impact continued to haunt the force for most of its existence.

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The Canadian Corps that fought on the Western Front was the CEF’s largest formation and its principal combat element, but not its only one. Other units in the CEF served outside the Corps, including the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, forestry and railway units, and various medical hospitals. Forming the Corps, Canada’s first fighting division in Europe, comprised mainly of troops from the First Contingent who had sailed in fall 1914, served as an individual division under British command. The growing size and complexity of Canadian forces overseas led in September 1915 to the creation of the Canadi...