

**THE CANADIAN RANGERS: A LIVING HISTORY.** P. Whitney Lackenbauer. 2013. Vancouver: UBC Press. xv + 618 p., illustrated. ISBN 978-0-7748-2453-8 (Pb). Hard cover, Cdn\$95.00, US\$99.00; soft cover, Cdn\$34.95, US\$37.95.

Those who aim to read this book should be aware that they will have to devote much time in order to do it justice. For it is long, very long, and its perusal reminded me of the long, very long, patrols undertaken occasionally by the subject of the book, the famous Canadian Rangers, the territorial militia that is now established as an important part of the defence apparatus of the Canadian Arctic and which has also become an element of what one might call sociological development in that area.

The military unit history is a notoriously difficult genre to write although it is very common in the lists of booksellers. Such works tended in the past to be written by veterans, or relatives of veterans, who quite naturally wanted to stress, often at great length, the heroism of those participating in various actions, and who wished to lament the casualty rate, glossing over any unfortunate questions concerning possible bad behaviour of the troops towards civilians and, Heaven forfend, any suggestion that some were rather less brave than others. Nowadays the veterans are becoming fewer and fewer but they have been replaced by many authors, passionate about their subject and following the same general line, who make a handsome living out of such works. Bookshops at airports are replete with them. Centenaries, such as the forthcoming start of World War I, always result in a flurry. Curiously it seems perfectly acceptable to adopt a much more critical attitude concerning higher echelons... such and such a division was poorly handled, for example, at the Crossing of the Rhine, but the division was full of individual heroes, and the Fusiliers achieved miracles, as they always do.

How does the present work fit into this pattern? Here we have a series of very small sub-units scattered over a huge area that owed their genesis to the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers, watching western Canada against the Japanese in World War II, with the full Canadian Rangers with a more northern brief, being established in 1947. Equipping a Ranger, all volunteers, was easy: a .303 Lee-Enfield rifle, frequently of ancient vintage, per man, with an arm band and, more recently, a quasi uniform of a red sweatshirt with the Rangers crest. The original officers were what would in military slang be called 'retreads' although many had had distinguished careers in the regular army (it was surely unnecessary to remind readers that VC stands for Victoria Cross) although a few were ordained clergymen which would seem to be an instant disqualification for what might become a combat role. The Rangers were local citizens who wanted to 'do their bit' and very many of them were, and are, members of the indigenous population. The military ambience of the Rangers seems to be rather informal... there is certainly no drill, although in the early days military veterans could put on an impressive show (page 46) and in some of the photographs in the book the casualness shown seems unusual even in these most unorthodox units. On page 478, we have a Sergeant (note the rank) steering a boat with his lifejacket undone!

Here we come to the crux of the matter. It appears that the Rangers have never actually seen action, although they did have

at least one substantial, impressive and very amusing 'victory' over a regular Canadian unit, the famous 'Van Doos' no less, albeit in an exercise. This was in 1955 and showed that the Rangers possessed considerable military prowess (pages 152–155). The author claims that the Rangers were, and are, unique in that they are a local force providing 'boots on the ground', maintaining observation facilities, acting in the aid of the civil power with regard to disaster relief, and so forth. A local militia in fact. This reviewer is not so sure about this. The coast watchers in the Solomon Islands towards the start of World War II seem to have had much the same brief and one has to reflect on the numerous Soviet citizens who simply melted into the Russian forest in 1941 and 1942 and who, while not engaging the Germans or their allies in actual combat, did much the same work as would have been done by the Rangers had the Japanese invaded British Columbia or, later, any Soviet incursion in the Arctic.

How has the author tackled this obviously tricky subject? The answer is simple: with extreme thoroughness over a period of many years. The amount of work he must have undertaken is prodigious and the book reflects this from the table of contents onwards. We have no fewer than 480 pages of text with 121 pages of critical apparatus. Nothing trivial here! His aim is to explain 'how and why the Rangers took shape, how cycles of waxing and waning support influenced the form and pace of their development during the Cold War and how the organization has grown and gained national recognition over the last three decades' (page 7). For there have been several threats to the existence of the Rangers but these seem to have been defeated partly on the grounds of the extreme cheapness of the organisation, costs being almost nil compared with the equivalent in the regular army. The other point was the profound efficiency of the Rangers as a whole, familiar as they are with living in conditions of extreme hardship and with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the local area, local being defined as hundreds of square miles around their homebase. In terms of numbers, recently there were some 5000 Rangers in some 178 patrol units throughout northern Canada. An important aim for the Rangers has been increasing the understanding and acceptance of the Canadian forces among the indigenous inhabitants of the region as a whole. A recent development has been the establishment of junior patrol groups, essentially cadets, with the aim of increasing internal cohesion and providing opportunities for worthwhile activity among the youth.

This is a very worthy book excellently produced and with only one typo that this reviewer noted. Unfortunately this is in the first line of the 'Introduction', and is a confusion of latitudes and longitudes. There is no doubt that it will be read avidly by Rangers and by those associated with them and by anyone who wants an in depth study of an interesting body. But is it the ideal book to present a national institution to the Canadian public? Would they pick it up at the aforementioned airport bookshop? Here the answer is surely negative: weight and thickness alone being a deterrent factor. The author has sought to answer any question anyone might reasonably have about a subject that clearly fascinates him and is dear to his heart, and has to a large extent succeeded, but he has lessened the usefulness of the book by its volume. It would have benefited from fairly severe, even ruthless, editing. If it had been cut by at least 150 pages, possible because the work does tend to be repetitious, and the very large number of illustrations reduced

by half, it would command a more ready sale than the number, one fears, that will actually be sold, although the price is very reasonable.

There is, however, an alternative. It is no part of the duty of a reviewer to make suggestions to an author but in this case one feels like indulging oneself. My recommendation would be for him to write another book on the Rangers, of a much more popular *timbre*, aiming at no more than 200 pages, with a

hugely reduced critical apparatus, and a catchy title such as *The Rangers: Canada's northern guardians*. This would be effective in helping to achieve one of his aims in the present volume: to make an interesting and wholly admirable organisation familiar to those who are fortunate enough to be served by it. Go on! The Rangers deserve it! (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd., Cambridge CB2 1ER ([irs30@cam.ac.uk](mailto:irs30@cam.ac.uk))).