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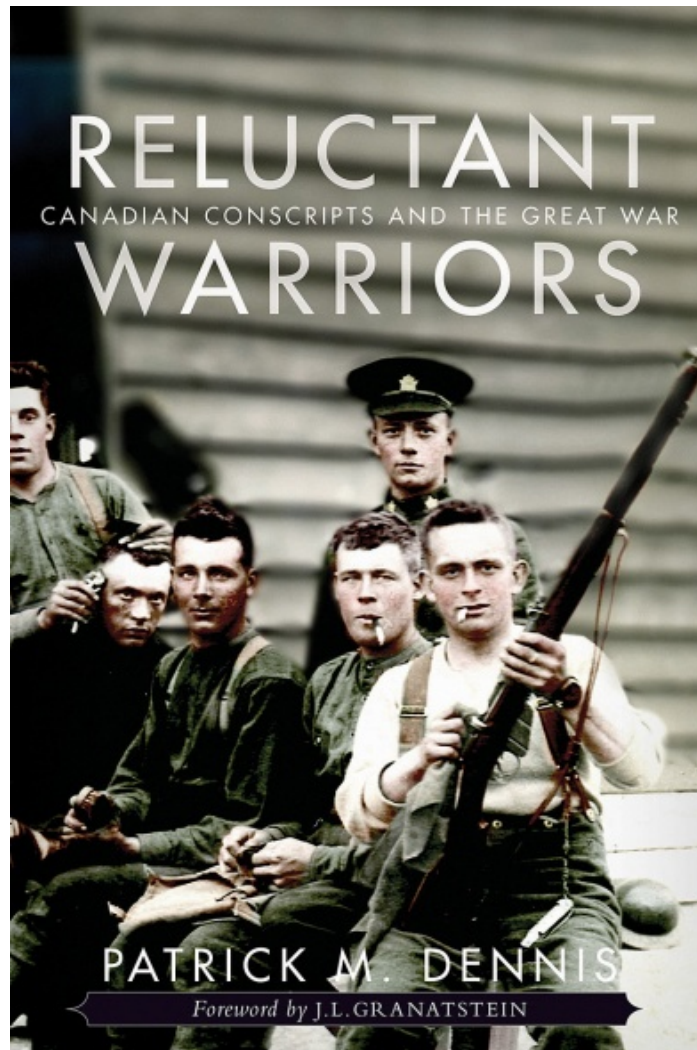


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A Response by Patrick Dennis to Reviews of *Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War*



JULY | JUILLET 2018

Preface

Just this year, in 2018, the CDA Institute began a book review section on its webpage with select reviews being republished in *ON TRACK*. To encourage the widest possible interest and participation, books on offer span the gamut, from the historical to the contemporary; international and Canadian; military, economic and political. For many different reasons, some books have proven more popular than others. Patrick Dennis's recently published work on Canadian conscripts in the First World War has, in fact, been the subject of much commentary – three standalone reviews and a comment in response to one of those reviews. To encourage debate of issues germane to Canadian security and defence – healthy discussion is indeed the very lifeblood of a profession – we are pleased to offer authors the chance to respond to comments that they have received on their work. Consequently, what follows is a measured and considered response by the book's author to the various reviews of his work that the CDA Institute has been likewise pleased to publish. And this is not a unique approach either. Dr. Chris Kilford's exploration of the failed 2016 Turkish coup excited commentary from outside observers and, to be fair, we offered him the chance to respond. His work, along with comments and replies, can be found at <https://cdainstitute.ca/vimy-paper-no-37-the-night-that-shook-a-nation-the-2016-turkish-military-coup-what-happened-and-why-it-failed/>. This present document is very much in the same spirit. It is perhaps fitting that 100 years after the end of the Great War and what Dennis has himself styled the "Year of the Conscript",¹ the issue of compulsory military service should still arouse so much interest.

Dr. Craig Leslie Mantle

Research Director and Senior Editor /
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¹ Patrick Dennis, "1918: Year of the Conscript," *Canada's History* (April-May 2018, 40-47).

The CDA Institute has now posted three reviews of my book, *Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017) – the first by Dr. Andrew Theobald this past March, and the second and third by Michel Gravel and Keith Maxwell, respectively, earlier this month. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to their views in this forum.

I am pleased first of all that Theobald found my book “compelling.” Indeed, I found that his thoughtful and well-written review highlighted many of the monograph’s strengths – thank you. But clearly, he also expressed several concerns that warrant a reply.

For example, he argues that “The wider target of the work is Canadian historiography’s perceived denigration of this conscript contribution.” In this respect, I can assure readers that this was not my intent. The principal focus of *Reluctant Warriors* is on Canadian conscripts at war – what Theobald describes as a “long overdue examination.” The main aim, though, was to prove or disprove the allegation that these men had arrived on the Western Front too late and in insufficient numbers to make any difference to the success of the Canadian Corps in the Hundred Days, not to target the historiography per se. To fully examine this thesis, the reader is also provided with the necessary contextual information – the essential political, military, social and cultural developments that eventually saw more than 47,000 conscripts leave Canada’s shores.

Theobald adds that “*Reluctant Warriors* does a fine job of asserting the operational effectiveness and importance of conscripts but neglects to tackle why the so-called myths surrounding them have proved so resonant.” Yes, well, my firm sense is that the “why” in this assertion would warrant a separate study altogether. Nonetheless, while I confess that I did not examine all these myths directly, they were not ignored in the manuscript. For instance, one consequence of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie not mentioning conscripts and their vital role as reinforcements in his post-war “Interim Report on the Operations of the Canadian Corps during the Year 1918” is itself one major reason why these myths “have proved so resonant” for the past century.

Theobald goes on to argue that “Most historians did not care to look deeply into conscription because it was plainly about division and its enormous cost.” Perhaps, but at the risk of repeating myself, *Reluctant Warriors* is not about “conscription” – it is about the conscripts themselves, their journey to war, their training, the battles that they fought, their sacrifice, and ultimately about their impact on the success of the Canadian Corps. In this respect, many Canadian historians like Jack Granatstein and J. MacKay Hitsman, Desmond Morton, Elizabeth Armstrong and Amy Shaw have all written at length about “conscription” and I refer the reader to their works in my endnotes. On the other hand, one military historian has speculated that the real reason no Canadian study has ever been done on conscripts until now was because it was simply “too hard,” not necessarily because of any “divisions” that historians “would rather avoid.”

However, when Theobald points out that “Evidence of that division is largely absent from *Reluctant Warriors*,” he is, for the most part, correct. But this was, in fact, another deliberate decision taken by myself and my editors to maintain the focus of this study primarily on the conscripts themselves. Indeed, three chapters on the “politics of conscription” were deleted from the draft manuscript for precisely this reason. Nevertheless, and contrary to Theobald’s view that *Reluctant Warriors* “does not actually” cover the “essential political, military and social factors” that resulted in conscripts being sent to war, readers will find a succinct narrative that does address each of these factors, especially in chapters 1 and 2, some twenty percent of the book’s contents.

As to the assertion that “it was political expediency that begat and sustained the same myths that *Reluctant Warriors* is devoted to tearing down,” here I think that political myths about conscripts are being conflated somewhat with military myths; while the two may enjoy a symbiotic relationship, they are distinct, and the aim of *Reluctant Warriors* is to make that distinction clear. Politics may well have “begat” these myths, but there is compelling evidence presented in *Reluctant Warriors* that these myths were “sustained” over the past century by other forces – social, cultural, and yes, academic as well.

Theobald also writes:

Tellingly, conscription is seldom described as part of a 'crisis' in the work. The associated canard, the claim that French Canadians did not volunteer and were therefore to be blamed for forcing the country to resort to compulsory service, has to be confronted, especially in light of the vital combat role played by conscripts from all parts of the country. In *Reluctant Warriors*, there is no sign of the central 'us versus them' dichotomy that underlies everything to do with conscription.

Again, my book is not about "conscription." That said, I *do* confront the myth that "French Canadians did not volunteer and were therefore to be blamed...." First, my research reveals that the opposition to conscription was indeed a nation-wide phenomenon, and that, while resistance to conscription was ostensibly greatest in Quebec, there was fierce opposition to it across the country. Second, readers will discover the battlefield exploits of many French Canadians who were conscripted while living in other provinces in Canada. Those numbers are not insignificant and, as Theobald has pointed out, is the subject of new research recently published in this area. Third, there is indeed no sign of the "us versus them" paradigm in my book, mainly because my research has led me to categorically reject this dichotomy. If nothing else, by late 1917, exemption requests alone make it clear that the "us" in this case were clearly pro-conscriptionists, whilst the "them" were all those opposed to conscription and/or to fighting in a European war. In this regard, the evidence I present overwhelmingly suggests that French Canadians did not have a monopoly on the latter. Consequently, this is one central myth that is directly confronted in *Reluctant Warriors*.

For Theobald, *Reluctant Warriors* does not address several issues that appear to be of special interest to him, all of which I believe are secondary to the book's primary focus. To wit:

This does not mean that conscripts did not fight effectively, but a failure to even perfunctorily examine, for instance, the recruiting situation in Quebec, fosters many contextual generalizations. The narrative also focuses solely on those who dutifully accepted compulsory service and reached the Western Front. Leaving aside conscripts who never left Canada, what about those who refused to 'discharge their civil responsibilities as loyal citizens' (p.11)? The Quebec City riots receive only a single mention (p.56), accompanied by the blithe statement that 'four civilians were killed.'

Recruitment in Quebec was not a primary focus of my study. Nonetheless, I refer either directly or indirectly to this subject on at least a dozen occasions. For more, I refer my readers to Richard Holt's PhD dissertation, "Filling the Ranks: Recruiting, Training and Reinforcements in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918" (The University of Western Ontario, 2011). (Note: after my manuscript had gone to the publisher, Holt's thesis was published in 2017 by McGill-Queen's University Press as *Filling the Ranks: Manpower in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918*.) Likewise, *Reluctant Warriors* does not focus "solely on those who accepted compulsory service." Many defaulters who were apprehended and who made it to England, France or Belgium are detailed in my book, including at least four who received the Military Medal for gallantry. That said, *Reluctant Warriors* is purposely not about those men who did not report or did not make it overseas. Moreover, with respect to the Quebec riots, another area not directly related to my thesis, I do refer my readers to a scholarly article on this subject: Martin Auger, "On the Brink of Civil War: The Canadian Government and the Suppression of the 1918 Quebec Easter Riots", *The Canadian Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (2008), 503-540. As for "the blithe statement that 'four civilians were killed,'" I am not certain that it was "blithe" at all, but regardless, these are not my words, they are a quotation from the diary of Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden.

As to his assertion that the book "is virtually devoid of French language sources," I object. Apart from two articles quoted from the French language newspaper *La Patrie*, my bibliography also includes the following French language sources:

- Gagnon, Jean-Pierre. *Le 22^e bataillon (canadien-français) 1914 – 1919, Étude socio-militaire*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1986;
- Lapointe, Arthur J. *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat*. St.-Ulric, Québec: Privately published, 1919; and
- Litalien, Michel. *Écrire sa guerre, Témoignages de soldats canadiens-français (1914-1919)*. Outrement, Québec: Éditions Athéna, 2011.

In addition, I also draw on the following two articles published in the bilingual *Canadian Military Journal/Revue Militaire Canadienne*:

- Moffat, Ian C.D. “Forgotten Battlefields - Canadians in Siberia, 1918-1919.” *Canadian Military Journal* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 73-83; and
- Richard, Béatrice. “Henri Bourassa and Conscription: Traitor or Saviour.” *Canadian Military Journal* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2006-2007): 75-83.

It must be said, however, that there is a relative dearth of Canadian French language sources on the First World War. As for Mourad Djebabla’s, “‘Fight or Farm’: Canadian Farmers and the Dilemma of the War Effort in World War I (1914-1918),” *Canadian Military Journal* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 57-67, I originally referenced this article in an early version of my manuscript, but it was later deleted along with several others that addressed some of the “politics of conscription.” As for Jean Martin’s, “Francophone Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918: The Evidence,” *Canadian Military History* 25, no. 1 (2016), 1-16, sadly this important article was published after my manuscript had gone to the publisher. Nonetheless, I agree with many of his findings, and Jean and I have been in touch since.

Theobald goes on to suggest that “This is a missed opportunity to explore the wide gulf between the ‘white man’s war’ of August 1914 and the German offensive of March 1918 – and how equality of sacrifice helped to alter Canada.” Again, I must disagree. To have done so would have been a serious departure from the main focus of *Reluctant Warriors*. More importantly, Timothy C. Winegard has already explored key elements of this social history of the First World War in his splendid book, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

In addition, Theobald writes:

The operational claims also deserve closer scrutiny. In asserting conscript combat effectiveness, the narrative approaches Bishop Strachan territory, essentially arguing that all Canadian conscripts who reached the front lines became reliable soldiers. Surely some conscripts, like many volunteers, performed less than admirably, but there is no room for their stories here.

In this respect, I welcome such “scrutiny.” But readers should be aware that six years of research and a sometimes-brutal peer-review process tempered all my findings; ultimately, by and large those found in *Reluctant Warriors* were endorsed by several well-published historians and have been supported by many others. The reference to “Bishop Strachan territory,” though, is a bit unclear.

Nonetheless, I can also assure readers that I do not argue that “all Canadian conscripts who reached the front lines became reliable soldiers.” Indeed, I quote Corporal Deward Barnes of the 19th Battalion who wrote that on 28 August 1918 he suddenly found himself “in charge of half a company.” Later, as these men sheltered in a deep trench, Barnes ordered the men “to make [fire] steps” in order to see and shoot over the parapet. Paralyzed by fear no doubt, “One or two of the draftees . . . refused,” he recalled, and “although the majority were good men,” he “threatened to shoot them if they didn’t dig.” But to be fair, I also note that “soldiers who actually fought alongside the draftees, junior leaders and ordinary infantrymen alike, were in general well-satisfied with their performance on the battlefield.” And I conclude by stating that “Most [conscripts] performed admirably, sometimes magnificently.” But perhaps Jack Granatstein said it even better in his Foreword to my book when he wrote, “Some conscripts may have been shirkers—so were some volunteers—but most did their duty in a succession of great and terrible battles that broke the German Army.”

Referring to the oft-quoted statistic that “Only 24,000 Conscripts Saw Service at the Front” (p.225), Theobald agrees “that this provided a significant reinforcement in frontline infantry strength during the Hundred Days,” but he also adds that “the use of ‘only’ in conjunction with this number is surely appropriate in the overall context of the war.” Again, I cannot agree. If conscripts had flowed to the Canadian Corps throughout the war this would be a valid statement. But conscripts first arrived on the Western Front in the spring of 1918, and their numbers assume their rightful significance only when one considers that these 24,000 were despatched during the last six months of the war – a pivotal point during which the Canadian Corps sustained record casualties. Thus, to look at these 24,000 men simply in “the overall context of the war” is to perpetuate the central myth challenged in *Reluctant Warriors*. These men were assigned primarily to the infantry. At its peak in 1918, the infantry consisted of 48 battalions with about 50,000 men. Therefore, to fully appreciate the contribution made by conscripts during the Hundred Days, this is the single most important context that must be taken into account, not the percentage of conscripts as part of the 620,000 men in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, or the 425,000 volunteers who served overseas, or the 345,000 men and nurses who served in France and Flanders, or even the 236,618 officers and other ranks who served in Canada’s infantry battalions.

Theobald also challenges my analysis of the impact of the manpower crisis in the First World War on “the conscription crisis of the Second World War” and my claim “that Canadians paid a steep price for forgetting the operational importance of conscripts in 1918.” He is correct that Canadians recalled the “vicious internal division” caused by the crisis in the First World War, but fails to mention that Canadians, except for Quebec, voted overwhelmingly in favour of conscription in a plebiscite in April 1942. For his part, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King recalled the political divisions caused by the original crisis but dismissed out-of-hand any evidence of the military necessity of conscription or the military successes that conscripts had brought to Currie’s Canadian Corps in an earlier war. That forgetting did come with a price. J.L. Ralston, minister of national defence and commanding officer of the 85th Battalion in the First World War, knew the value of conscripts, as did the commander of the Canadian Army, General H.D.G. Crerar. But when Ralston insisted that the prime minister order Canadian conscripts overseas in late 1944, King balked and essentially fired Ralston. All of this is wonderfully documented in Dan Byers’ seminal study, *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016). That said, while readers should also be aware that I am not a conscriptionist, unlike Theobald, I do not rule out the possibility that one day Canada might be forced once more to compel its youth into uniform.

In summary, I cannot agree that *Reluctant Warriors* sidesteps “crucial context.” Whilst providing sufficient background for all readers to understand how Canadian conscripts found themselves in combat on the Western Front, I defer as required to those military historians who have carefully documented the many political, social, cultural and economic factors that made such a defining event in Canadian history a reality. For the record, these historians include Patrice Dutil and David Mackenzie, whose scholarly work, *Embattled Nation: Canada’s Wartime Election of 1917* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017) was published long after I submitted my original manuscript to UBC Press, as well as Jean Martin and his “La participation des francophones dans le Corps expéditionnaire canadien (1914-1919): il faut reviser à la hausse,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (September 2015), 405-423. That said, *Reluctant Warriors* remains a definitive study of Canadian conscripts at war – the first of its kind.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that Theobald also addressed the subject of conscripts in his book *The Bitter Harvest of War: New Brunswick and the Conscription Crisis of 1917* (New Brunswick: Goose Lane, 2008), p. 92. He wrote that “few conscripts played a role in the final fighting.” I trust that *Reluctant*

Warriors has now persuaded him, as it has with so many others, that new evidence overwhelmingly suggests that this is simply not true.

Michel Gravel has had posted two reviews of my book on the CDA Institute's site, one on 18 June as a comment to Dr. Theobald's review of 4 March, then a second, lengthier and revised review on 4 July. Readers should also be aware that Mr. Gravel's original comment/review was posted to amazon.ca and chapters.indigo.ca at the same time, and that the amazon.ca review has since been revised to correspond with the CDA Institute's review of 4 July. Confusing? Yes, but more importantly, all of Mr. Gravel's comments are extremely critical of *Reluctant Warriors*, some of which, sadly, are of the *ad hominem* variety. Consequently, I will briefly address only those points that I believe will be useful to the CDA Institute's audience in deciding whether to read my book or not.

First, readers will quickly discover that the "myths" associated with conscripts, in particular those referring to them as "slackers," are anything but a "strawman." *Reluctant Warriors* provides ample evidence to the contrary. Second, the statement that "There were no volunteers after 1914," is not mine, as Gravel asserts, but a quotation from another historian. Gravel then departs from a review of my book to focus at great length on a subject that is of great personal interest to him – the British-Canadian Recruiting Mission (BCRM). However, *Reluctant Warriors* makes only very brief mention of this subject, essentially to provide context on CEF recruitment in 1917-1918. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, my book is about "conscripts", not about BCRM volunteers.

Full disclosure: I briefly challenged Gravel's conclusions about conscripts and BCRM men in an endnote that I wrote in a peer-reviewed journal article about my grandfather's wartime experience: "A Canadian Conscript Goes to War—August 1918: Old Myths Re-examined," *Canadian Military History* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2009), 21-36. At the time, we discussed this subject directly but could only agree to disagree. Four years later, the late Lieutenant-Colonel (Ret'd) Dr. Richard Holt came to conclusions similar to mine that he published as "British Blood Calls British Blood: The British-Canadian Recruiting Mission of 1917-1918," *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 27-37.

Another subject that Gravel was very disappointed to learn was not adequately addressed in my book was "defaulters" – conscripts who failed to report as ordered. As mentioned above, while *Reluctant Warriors* documents many defaulters who served overseas, some of whom won medals for gallantry,

those who remained in Canada, and in particular those unapprehended defaulters, are not the subject of this book and deliberately so.

Finally, he concludes his comment/review by asserting that “the effectiveness of the MSA [Military Service Act] could only have been judged had the war persisted. The war ended too soon for us to make a proper assessment.” I strongly disagree. The vital contribution made by Canadian conscripts during the Hundred Days campaign is itself ample evidence of the success of the MSA in 1918. With regard to the MSA itself, I provide the following quotation from G.W.L. Nicholson’s *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, corrected second printing (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1964), p. 353:

It must be concluded that while the administration of the Military Service Act was often inefficient and attended by many gross malpractices, the Act itself was neither a failure nor ineffective. Statistics show that it did produce the military results which it was designed to produce.

And then there is this, “An Election The Way Out,” *The Globe*, 18 December 1919, p. 6:

The object for which the [Union Government] Coalition had been formed was achieved when during the historic Hundred Days . . . the sixty thousand casualties incurred by the Corps in its splendid advance were made good largely by draftees who proved themselves to be fine fighting men and stout Canadians in the field, but who would not have been available for the reinforcement of the Corps had the Military Service Act not been enforced.

Turning to Gravel’s second and revised review, he curiously notes, “There were more medals awarded to conscripted soldiers than one would have guessed.” In this respect, and as I point out in my book, readers should be aware that “between August 1918 and July 1919 a total of 6519 ‘Medals and Bars’ were awarded the CEF, but the conscript share of that total was less than one percent. See Harry Abbink, *The Military Medal: Canadian recipients, 1916-1922* (Calgary: Alison Pub. Co., 1987), Table 1.” Given that conscripts represented on average about a quarter of the trench strength of each infantry battalion during the Hundred Days, one would not be faulted for thinking that “conscripted soldiers” received considerably fewer medals “than one would have guessed.”

Subsequently Gravel reiterates his earlier challenge regarding Nicholson's 1944 estimate of the number of conscripts who served at the front – 24,132. This argument is tied at the hip to his unwavering view that a great number of these men were BCRM volunteers (here he writes an "important minority," although in his own book, *Tough as Nails: The Epic Story of Hillie Foley, DCM and bar, MM, C de G* (Nepean: CEF Books, 2006), he writes an "important majority." My research, however, confirms that Nicholson's original "estimate is fairly accurate." Indeed, Richard Holt once suggested that the Nicholson number is likely a bit low – I concur and explain why in my book.

The rest of Gravel's review once again takes up the subject of BCRM men and defaulters, both of which are addressed above. He concludes by declaring that "Overall, *Reluctant Warriors* is a solid start to studying the men of the Military Service Act of 1917, but it is, unfortunately, incomplete." To this critique I invite Mr. Gravel to re-read the introduction to *Reluctant Warriors*. There, it is quite clear that my aim was to provide:

A close analysis of the large number of conscripts who did flow to the Corps in the late spring, summer and early fall of 1918, coupled with an in-depth examination of their role as critical reinforcements to the line infantry battalions. ... The focus is on the conscripts themselves, on the key events that shaped their long and troubled journey from Canada's farms, factories, forests and sea coasts to all the major battlefields of the Canadian Corps in 1918, and finally on new evidence that has come to light which challenges the reader to confront enduring myths, both about these conscripts and about their senior commanders.

In this respect, I submit that this peer-reviewed, award-winning academic monograph is much more than a "solid start." Indeed, it is complete insofar as its declared intentions. That said, throughout my speaking tour in more than 25 cities, I have told my audiences on each occasion that further scholarly research is indeed required on this subject. Let it be so. *Sic itur ad astra*.

Next, I should like to offer some thoughts on Mr. Keith Maxwell's very kind review of 12 July. First, I must confess that he and I have been friends and colleagues for many years. Indeed, the community of military historians in Canada is a very small one, and most colleagues would agree that it is almost impossible to have one of their books reviewed by a member of that community who is a complete stranger.

Like Theobald's review, Maxwell's is carefully crafted but with one important difference. He focuses primarily on how well *Reluctant Warriors* succeeds in telling the readers what I set out to do – i.e., what the conscripts actually did and how their contribution to the Canadian Corps challenged some long-standing myths about these so-called slackers. Thank you for that. In this respect, it is quite clear that Maxwell has done a fair bit of research of his own on this subject.

From a critical perspective, Maxwell does not agree with my analysis of Currie's decision on 27 August 1918 not to take an operational pause and to relieve in place two exhausted infantry divisions (the 2nd and 3rd Canadian). The next day, while 3rd Canadian Division enjoyed some success, Major-General Harry Burstall's 4th and 5th Infantry Brigades were nearly annihilated and made virtually no progress whatsoever. I argue, as several other historians have, that Currie was pushing "too hard" at this point. The reasons why are complex and represent one area that certainly deserves additional scholarly research. That said, Currie's original battle plan was to pause, and he chose not to – choosing instead to maintain pressure on the enemy. That was a costly mistake in my view, for which Currie must be held accountable. In addition, I argue that Burstall (General Officer Commanding 2nd Division) must also be held equally accountable. In this respect, more research is required on the impact that a continuous flow of mainly conscript reinforcements had on the decision-making of the Canadian Corps' senior leadership.

In summary, I am grateful to the CDA Institute for posting this response to the reviews and comments that *Reluctant Warriors* has generated; I invite all readers to seek out this new chapter in Canadian military history and to discover for themselves the myth-challenging exploits of conscripts at war.

~ Colonel (Ret'd) Patrick M. Dennis, OMM, CD,
July 2018.

References

Book Review No. 6 – Theobald of Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors – Canadian Conscripts and the Great War* (also includes Gravel’s comment at bottom)

<https://cdainstitute.ca/book-review-no-6-theobald-of-patrick-m-dennis-reluctant-warriors-canadian-conscripts-in-the-great-war/>

Book Review No. 15 – Gravel of Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors – Canadian Conscripts and the Great War*

<https://cdainstitute.ca/book-review-no-15-gravel-of-dennis-reluctant-warriors/>

Book Review No. 16 – Maxwell of Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors – Canadian Conscripts and the Great War*

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