

## A Keen Soldier: The Execution of Second World War Private Harold Pringle

By Andrew Clark

Knopf Canada, 342 pages, \$35.95

'Harold, we received word from Ottawa," said the priest. "They found against you. Your appeal has been denied. So it will be today, this morning." Harold knew what "it" meant. By eight o'clock this morning it would all be over. Once he was dead, his guards and executioners could all go home. He would never go home.

With this short passage, journalist and documentary filmmaker Andrew Clark boldly begins *A Keen Soldier* at its most dramatic moment. With the climactic conclusion revealed up front, Clark proceeds to introduce readers to Private Harold Pringle, the only Canadian soldier to be sentenced to death during the Second World War, and the extraordinary wartime circumstances that led to his controversial execution.

At the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, Pringle was just 18. Eager to enlist, he left Flinton, Ont., with his father. Together they signed up as reinforcements for the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. Having served in this regiment in the First World War, the elder Pringle felt he could keep a watchful eye on his young son. However, the pressure of being back in a strict military environment proved too much for the Great War veteran. Unable to cope with his earlier wartime memories, Harold's father was repatriated to Canada, suffering from delayed shell shock (now termed post-traumatic stress disorder).

Left to fare on his own, young Private Pringle soon discovered the darker side of wartime service in England. It seems that Pringle, frequently absent without official leave (AWOL) and running afoul of the military police, was anything but a "keen soldier."

However, the staggering official statistics of similar infractions perpetrated by Canadian soldiers reveal that Pringle's was not a unique case. Clark's revelation of widespread criminal behaviour and desertion within the Canadian Army stands in stark contrast to the glossed-over image of our troops traditionally presented by most mainstream historians. While many veterans will question the necessity of revisiting this less-than-glamorous aspect of their legacy, *A Keen Soldier* helps to put into perspective some of the more sordid incidents that have scandalized Canada's present-day military.

Once Pringle's saga moves to the frontline horrors of the Italian campaign, the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder is further explored. Having proved himself in combat on a number of occasions, Pringle realized that he could no longer stand the psychological strain of the battlefield. Like thousands of other allied soldiers, he simply walked away from the war and headed to Rome, where he became one of the original members of the Sailor Gang, a group of gangsters made up of several U.S., British and Canadian deserters.

In March, 1945, at the time Pringle discarded his uniform, a total of 1,033 Canadians were already in detention in Italy, with 100 of them awaiting trial; a further 500 deserters were still at large. Many of those rounded up by the military police were diagnosed as "shell shocked" and unable to return to the front lines. In an ironic twist, the officer eventually placed in charge of Pringle's execution, and the members of his firing squad, were themselves all shell-shock sufferers.

Using personal correspondence, court documents and interviews with many of the principal characters, Clark masterfully tells the story of Pringle's final days. To bridge the gaps, he resorts to fictionalizing several of the conversations that might have taken place. While this makes the book a much more compelling read, it also turns it into a fiction/non-fiction hybrid.

Pringle was eventually apprehended by the military authorities after one of his gang members was killed. Charged in connection with the murder, Pringle was soon fighting far more powerful forces than just the prosecution's evidence. With the war over, the Allies were eager to make an example of these deserter gangs. (The exploits of one group in particular, the Lane Gang, had become legendary throughout Italy.) Although Pringle and his mates were members of the much less notorious Sailor Gang, to maximize the public-relations benefit, military prosecutors deliberately decided to group them all together.

As revealed through witness testimonies, it became apparent that the Sailor Gang murder was a drunken mishap. Nevertheless, military press officers spun the story into a gangland hit by hardened criminals. With only six days to prepare, Pringle's lawyer vainly attempted to make a case for his client. In assessing this particular court martial, one military lawyer concluded: "I can't believe they found him guilty. There was reasonable doubt a mile wide."

Eight other Canadian soldiers were convicted of murder during the Second World War, but only Pringle faced a firing squad. A Keen Soldier makes the compelling case that this young man was killed to appease British political interests, and because "Prime Minister MacKenzie King and his staff did not think a deserter was worth saving."

Clark stops short of completely exonerating Pringle, but he does a wonderful job of putting the tragic story of this young soldier into a more complete historical context. A former soldier, Scott Taylor is the editor and publisher of *Esprit de Corps* military magazine. He is also the author of several books, including the national best-sellers *Tarnished Brass: Crime and Corruption in the Canadian Forces* and *Tested Mettle: Canada's Peacekeepers at War* .