1917
TACTICS, TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGY

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Preface

The First World War remains highly contested ground for historians, and equally contested within popular culture. In the English-speaking world, at least, the course of the war at times seems to be reduced to just two events—the battles of the Somme in 1916 and Passchendaele, or Third Ypres, in 1917—with little apparent recognition either that the course and conduct was more complex than this, or that it ended in victory for the British Empire armies and their allies in 1918. In turn Passchendaele has become a kind of shorthand to symbolise both the alleged incompetence of the British High Command on the Western Front and the tragedy and waste popularly associated with modern industrial warfare.

This is, at best, a partial view of reality and recent historical scholarship over the past twenty years or so has refuted many of the more extreme and simplistic assumptions about the conduct of the war, especially on the British side on the Western Front. This volume reflects much of that recent scholarship, especially in analysing the proposition that the British Army became a ‘learning institution’ in the course of the war. It also reflects modern scholarly concerns through the consideration of non-British cases, most obviously the German common enemy. But there are papers as well on the developments and experience within the French Army, while the singular case of the American Expeditionary Force under Pershing casts a useful contrast to the other national armies examined.

By 1917 all the combatant armies on the Western Front had suffered enormous losses, had partially reinvented themselves, and continued to analyse operational experience as it occurred for ways to better fight the war and win it. The technological, doctrinal and tactical advances made by 1917 and reinforced in many respects by the fighting that year laid the basis for the great Allied victory of the following year. They also enhanced the stresses and strains under which the enemy’s armies laboured and which, during the fighting of the following year, would eventually bring him to defeat under continuing relentless pressure in the field.
As always we are indebted to the conference speakers for making written versions of their presentations speedily available for publication. A conference of this standard would not be possible without the support of the sponsors, whose continuing involvement in this annual event we acknowledge with gratitude. The main sponsor, of course, is the Australian Army, and in the person of the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, military history has found a dedicated advocate and champion. The Army History Unit undertakes the day-to-day organisation of the conference with good humour and patience, and we especially thank its head, Roger Lee, and Andrew Richardson, for their unsparing efforts. Kurt Barnett, from Educational Technology Services, UNSW@ADFA, designed the striking cover, while Margaret McNally, our long-suffering typesetter, handled innumerable changes with her usual skill and good grace.

Peter Dennis & Jeffrey Grey
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Bill Nasson is a former school teacher, and now professor of history at the University of Cape Town. He has published widely on a range of topics but maintains a predominant interest in the South African War 1899-1902 and South Africa in the Great War. His books include The South African War 1899-1902 (1999), Britannia’s Empire: Making a British World (2006), and Springboks on the Somme: South Africa in the First World War (2007).

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Robin Prior is professor of history at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy. He has published widely on the military history of the First World War, especially on the competence or otherwise of command, the impact of technology on tactics and the economics of the war. His publications (co-authored with Trevor Wilson) include Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918 (1992); Passchendaele: the Untold Story (1996); The First World War (1999); and The Somme (2005). He is currently writing a book on the Gallipoli campaign.
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Introduction

Lieutenant General Peter Leahy

One of the more colourful advocates of unconventional warfare, Colonel T.E, Lawrence, once wrote: ‘So far as I can see, strategy is eternal and the same: but tactics are the ever-changing language through which it speaks. A general can learn as much from Belisarius as from Haig—but not a soldier. Soldiers have to know their means.’

Fundamentally, Lawrence is correct: sound tactics are the basis of final victory. Without the ability to take and hold the battlefield and to destroy the capability of the enemy’s ground forces, all political rhetoric, diplomatic manipulation and strategic positioning is of no avail. If the soldier cannot directly impose his will on the enemy, he cannot win. Up to a point, better tactics can enable an outnumbered army to overcome more numerous foes. This is not a new revelation. It has been the basis of warfare since our ancestors threw rocks at each other. Modern armies understand this very well.

The critical point about tactics, though, is that they must not be static. Scipio Africanus’s velites defeated Hannibal’s elephants at the battle of Zama by closing with them and blinding them with javelin fire from close range. I doubt this would be a successful tactical solution for defeating an attack from a formation of the elephant’s modern day equivalent, tanks, but perhaps the principle may still apply. Tactics evolve to meet the conditions of the battlefield. A major precondition for battlefield success is the ability to adjust tactics quickly. Armies know this—the modern Australian Army expends an inordinate amount of effort in ensuring that its tactics and tactical concepts are appropriate to the battlefield on which it is operating.

Nor is tactical proficiency an only child. It has siblings. Sound tactics must be underpinned by sound training. Rarely do we find a recruit with an innate understanding or knowledge of tactics. It is something that has to be taught and taught well. If the Army is fortunate, the new recruit will have the wit and intellectual capacity to take this good training and become tactically proficient. The battlefield will quickly identify those who cannot. With experience and proficiency comes tactical skill and adaptability. By this time, the recruit would have become a leader, ready to pass on through the training system all the skill and knowledge he has developed. In this way, tactical innovation and development
is passed to the new generation by those who have acquired this knowledge by practical application. The army which does this quickest and best has an immediate advantage.

It might be a truism but nonetheless it is true: the difference between an armed rabble and an army is discipline, co-operation, mutual support and teamwork. This only comes from hard, sound training so it should not be a surprise that the Army is still the single largest training institution in the country. We understand perhaps better than most the value of hard and complete training as our ‘work place’ is without question the least forgiving of mistakes.

The third sibling in my little family is of course technology. Technology has the capacity to alter the way armies operate but it is important to appreciate it cannot be the sole means of achieving victory. There have been many predictions that a new piece of technology is either a ‘war winner’ or will bring an end to warfare as we know it, from the Genoese crossbowman, through Hiram Maxim’s machine-gun to the nuclear bomb. None has achieved either of these predictions. What technology does do is complicate the process of warfare. Tactics must evolve to cope with new technology, both friendly and introduced by the enemy. Similarly, the training burden is dramatically increased by technological innovation. Roman infantry tactics had to evolve to deal with the change in enemies from other infantry-based forces to hordes of fast-moving light cavalry archers. The Germans had to adopt a crash course in revised defensive tactics after 24 British tanks rumbled out of the dawn on 15 September 1916 to attack Delville Wood on the Somme. The asymmetric warfare of the 21st century is no barrier to the need to adapt to the threats of new technologies, or, more frequently, of known technologies used in new and innovative ways. No army can afford to ignore technological change and innovation.

Equally, no army should become so mesmerised by technology and its possibilities that it forgets that technology is still only a tool. The Maginot Line is perhaps the most obvious example but history is replete with armies looking for the ’super-weapon’ that will win for them. Such quests inevitably fail—there is always a counter-measure that can and will be found.

Knowing all this, the big problem any army faces is how to do this; how to adapt tactics, reorganise training schools and courses and plan and implement the adoption of new equipment during a war. It is hard enough to do it and get it right in peace time, when the consequences of mistake or failure are much less severe. The answer, of course, is to look at how it has been done under such conditions in the past and try and establish what went right and what went wrong. It is popular to dismiss the military’s enduring interest in military history as mere hankering after past glories but what this fails to appreciate is
INTRODUCTION

that military history is a valuable source of ‘real world’ data on these problems that can be reviewed, analysed and measured repeatedly. In peacetime, despite everything we can do to make training and evaluation real, we cannot replicate the likelihood that someone will be shot and killed if the tactics are wrong or the training deficient. As Douglas MacArthur wrote in 1935:

For more than most professions the military is forced to depend upon intelligent interpretation of the past, for signposts charting the future. Devoid of opportunity, in peace, for self-instruction through actual practice of his profession, the soldier makes maximum use of historical record in assuring the readiness of himself and his command to function efficiently in emergency. The facts derived from historical analysis he applies to conditions of the present and the proximate future, thus developing a synthesis of appropriate method, organisation and doctrine. Only when it happens for real can the data be completely objective.

So while the focus of this conference is on the experiences of 90 years ago, the insights that can be drawn from those experiences have pertinent and relevant application today.

The term ‘watershed’ has become something of a cliché but for 1917 it is arguably the appropriate description. For a war that is popularly remembered solely for the scale of the killing, 1917 was a year of major development on both sides of the line. The Germans introduced new defensive techniques, the British and French refined new offensive tactics, and both sides worked to improve their existing capabilities and to discover and introduce new ones. Arguably, 1917 was the year in which the British Army was able to capitalise on all the bitter lessons it had learned from 1914 and train its all-new amateur army in the skills that enabled it to win the war in the following year. It was also the year in which the Germans on the Western Front went from developing innovative defensive tactics to the development of their ‘storm trooper’ assault squads which caused such problems for the defences of the British and French in early 1918. For the French, 1917 was perhaps the most critical of all. Rebuilding the morale and confidence of an army after a major failure would never be an easy task; to achieve this while engaged in a never-ending bitter struggle is testimony to the skill of many of the senior French command.

No professional military leader in an army of today could listen to a recounting of these events and not be able to draw something of value to them for use in the modern context.
The most awful phase of the War for the British Army [was] … the nightmare-like Flanders offensive of 1917 ... Time scatters the poppies of oblivion over most things, but the lapse of twelve years has not effaced the impressions of sordid horror and melancholy which this period of the War engraved on the mind ... the effort and sacrifice demanded of our Army—and willingly given—is scarcely credible ... when one compares the results with the dogged tenacity of infantry, gunners and transport men under loathsome nerve-wracking conditions and the utterly prodigal expenditure of munitions and technical resources of every kind, one feels resentful of the doctrinaire fanaticism which kept the machine driving on at top-pressure, month after month, as though the gain of each few yards of water-logged craters was worth every sacrifice.¹

So wrote Captain D.V. Kelly in a book published in 1930. Elsewhere in the book Kelly, who had served with 6th Leicesters (21st Division), was by no means hypercritical of General Headquarters. This makes his condemnation of Passchendaele particularly powerful. Kelly presents the images of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1917 that have come to dominate the memory of that year, at least in the United Kingdom: the offensive at Passchendaele, or the Third Battle of Ypres, to give it its proper name.² British, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Canadian, French and German soldiers battling in the mud, under appalling conditions that pushed them to the very limits of endurance; huge losses incurred for minor gains of territory; an uncomprehending and uncaring High Command. Indeed, when one adds in the failures and bloody attrition that all too rapidly succeeded the early promise of the first days of the Battle of Arras (April 1917); the false dawn of the tank attack at Cambrai in November which caused the bells to be rung for victory at home, only for the German counter-offensive to throw the attackers back; the near-defeat in the First Battle of the Atlantic; the mutinies in the French Army; the revolutions that effectively removed Britain’s ally Russia from the war;

1. D.V. Kelly, 39 Months with the “Tigers” 1915-1918 (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), 73.
2. For brevity, the term ‘BEF’ is used to refer to all British Empire troops serving under Haig’s command, not just those from the British Isles.
and the catastrophic Italian reverse at Caporetto—1917 does indeed appear to have been a grim year for the Entente in general, and the British Empire in particular.

But let us shake the kaleidoscope, and let the pieces assume another pattern. Another interpretation of 1917 is that the BEF, effectively ‘deskilled’\(^3\) in 1914-15, had undergone its major baptism of fire on the Somme in 1916 and in 1917 showed considerable evidence of the success of its ‘reskilling’. It applied the hard-won experience of 1916 and at Arras showed how much it had learned—but also how much there was still to learn. The growth in the competence of the BEF was mirrored by the rapid development of a war economy that supplied the many and various tools that the Army needed to fight. The morale of the Army was severely tested, but it did not break. Although at Passchendaele the BEF did not achieve its ambitious aims, it did succeed in several important ways: in pinning the German Army; in inflicting heavy attritional losses (as German sources make clear, the defenders also suffered appallingy) and, tantalisingly, the BEF came close to inflicting a major operational defeat on the Germans that could have had important strategic consequences. At Arras, Passchendaele and Cambrai the units of the BEF demonstrated their increasing tactical sophistication, and commanders and staffs too showed that they had improved since the Somme. At Cambrai especially the BEF gave a foretaste of the weapons system that was to prove so effective in the following year. As one ally departed the war, another in the shape of the USA, took Russia’s place. Undoubtedly 1917 was a grim time, but the British survived it.

These pictures of 1917 are not mutually exclusive. All of them contain a measure of truth, and to create an accurate portrait one needs to reflect, to a greater or lesser degree, all of the above factors. One’s interpretation ultimately depends on whether one views the glass as half-empty or half-full. The more I study the BEF in 1917, the more I am convinced that one should see it as half-full.

To see the full extent of the achievement of the BEF in 1917 we must go back to the beginning of the war. The BEF of 1914 was well-trained and well-equipped, but it was of a size that was simply inadequate for the scale and intensity of warfare to which it would be committed; a problem exacerbated by heavy losses, especially in experienced officers and NCOs, during the fighting in the early months of the war. Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, once demand rhetorically, ‘Did they remember, when they went headlong into a war like this, that they were without an army, and without any preparation to equip one?’\(^4\)—‘they’, of course, referring to the politicians. The result of this lack of preparation

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3. I owe this apt description to Dr John Bourne.
was the need for improvisation on a truly heroic scale. The creation of the mass volunteer army that bore Kitchener’s name, matched of course by the raising of citizen forces in the Dominions, was the result. The few available experienced officers and NCOs were spread very thinly indeed across new battalions; the same was true of staffs at every level. Commanders from the Commander-in-Chief of the BEF downwards found themselves with responsibilities vastly greater than anything they had experienced before, and for which their pre-war training and preparation ranged from the scant to the non-existent. And this expansion took place against a profound change in the conduct of warfare, while fighting—usually carrying out offensive operations—against a skilled and determined enemy. The wonder is that the BEF achieved as much as it did in 1917 given the very low base from which it started.

ARRAS

A body of important new work has stressed that the BEF examined its experiences in 1916, extracted lessons, and applied them to its fighting methods. The battle of Arras in April 1917 demonstrated the fruits of this learning process. The British High Command did not want to fight the battle of Arras, but found themselves committed to it, as a result of the machinations of Lloyd George and Nivelle, in order to support the French attack on the Chemin des Dames. In some ways 9 April 1917, the first day of the first major British offensive since the Somme, was comparable with 1 July 1916. The frontage was roughly similar, as was the number of attacking divisions. But some things were very different. Staff work was of an all-round higher quality in April 1917. The creeping barrage had become standard practice, while the density of heavy guns was about three times greater on the first day of Arras than on the first day on the Somme; and there was more ammunition. However, we should note that the BEF’s divisions each deployed twenty pieces of heavy artillery, which was only half the number available to French divisions. But the improved performance of the artillery was not just down to sheer numbers of guns. Near Vimy Ridge, the flash spotters and sound rangers of 1st Field Survey Company discovered 86% of the locations of enemy batteries, and generally, most German batteries were neutralised (if not actually destroyed) in the initial stages of the British attack, lavish use being made of chemical weapons. A machine-gun barrage and 40 tanks supported the attacking

infantry, who showed that their training in the tactics enshrined in the manuals issued in early 1917 that incorporated the lessons of the Somme, SS 135 and SS 143, had been put to good use. As a result 9 April 1917 was the BEF’s best day since the beginnings of trench warfare. Rightly, the capture of Vimy Ridge by Canadian (and a number of British) troops is viewed as the highlight of the day, but there was plenty of success elsewhere. Two British formations, 4th Division and 9th (Scottish) Division, achieved the longest single advance since trench warfare began, about three-and-a-half miles. German mistakes undoubtedly aided the BEF’s success, but defensive errors alone cannot explain the success of 9 April 1917. What Arras demonstrated was that by spring 1917 the BEF had mastered the set-piece, ‘bite-and-hold’ battle: a philosophy of limited battle that involved ‘biting’ a chunk out of an enemy position, and holding it against counter-attack. This method combined some of the advantages of the attackers, especially gaining the initiative, with those of the defender, digging in and using artillery and machine-guns to break up enemy assaults. Subsequent operations were to show that conducting an effective mobile battle was beyond them. On 10 and 11 April the British advance lost vigour as tiring troops met German reserves. Allenby, deprived of air reconnaissance because of bad weather, ordered his forces to commence the pursuit, but the result was the congealing of the front; the BEF had failed to turn its victorious ‘break-in’ into a ‘break-through’. The very success of British artillery on the first day inevitably led to the ground becoming shattered. Given time, engineers and pioneers would build roads and tracks which would enable the guns to move to new positions, to begin the process of hammering at enemy strongpoints as a preliminary to another major attack. Prior to 9 April, the attacking formations had made excellent use of the generous allocation of time before the assault. But lengthy pauses between attacks are the enemy of maintaining operational tempo. Thus on 11 April the British infantry found themselves up against uncut wire, with the 18-pounder guns that should have been cutting that wire still struggling forward to get into range. This was not the last time that the limitations of the bite-and-hold approach was to be revealed in the year 1917.

MESSINES

The Arras methods were repeated, with variations, at Messines in June. This battle, a preliminary to Haig’s main Flanders offensive, was entrusted to the ultimate safe pair of hands, General Sir Herbert Plumer, whose methods were described by Tim Harington, his Chief of Staff, as being underpinned by three Ts: ‘Trust, Training and

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8. For the most recent scholarship on this battle, see Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Mike Bechtold (eds), *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo, On: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007).
Thoroughness. Second Army’s preparations were typically meticulous, not least in the use of nineteen mines detonated beneath the German positions. But even before the mines were blown, the British gave themselves a crucial advantage by dominating the artillery battle. The Germans were out-numbered by a factor of 2 to 1 in heavy guns, and 5 to 1 in lighter pieces, and about half of the defenders’ guns were lost before the attack went in on 7 June.

It is fair to point out that the mines at Messines made the battle a unique, effectively unrepeatable, operation. But the mines were the icing on the cake. The basic artillery-dominated, set-piece battle was not dependent on mines for success. But it could only get an army so far. Haig has been often been criticised for delaying the main attack against the Ypres salient until six weeks had elapsed after Messines attack. As Ian Malcolm Brown has demonstrated, logistic problems made it impossible rapidly to switch forces from the Messines operation to mount a new offensive against the Gheluvelt plateau. Once again, harsh logistic realities prevented prompt exploitation of tactical success.

PASSCHENDAELE

The beginning of the Third Battle of Ypres on 31 July 1917 sent mixed messages. At a local tactical level, careful preparations, such as those carried out by the Guards Division in the Boesinghe sector, and good all-arms cooperation produced some advances of up to 3000 yards. But at the operational level there was failure. Gough, the Fifth Army commander, had wanted an advance of 6000 yards, intended to take the British troops to the German Third Position, as a preliminary to breaking out of the Ypres salient in a further series of operations. Gough’s plans proved too ambitious, not least because it played in to the hands of the Germans, who were employing flexible defensive tactics based around counter-attack formations that struck the attackers as they became over-extended. As Harington put it, ‘The further we penetrate his line, the stronger and more organised we find him … [while] the weaker and more disorganised we are liable to become.’ The weather broke, and in awful muddy conditions, the Battle of Langemarck (16-18 August) degenerated into piecemeal attacks that made minor gains at the cost of heavy losses.

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11. Second Army, ‘Notes on Training …’, 31 August 1917, Monash papers, 3DRL 2316 Item 25, Australian War Memorial, quoted in Sheffield, Forgotten Victory, 173.
HAIG AND THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE IN 1917

The BEF returned to form when Gough was sidelined and Plumer’s Second Army was handed the main effort. After a three-week period of intense preparation, the Battle of the Menin Road commenced on 20 September. A combination of thoroughly-rehearsed infantry, massed artillery support, and objectives set only 1600 yards or so ahead so that the attackers would stay within range of their own artillery and machine-guns, proved to be highly effective. The German official history bemoaned that the counter-attack formations, ready to intervene in the battle at 8.00 am, could not get into action ‘until the late afternoon; for the tremendous British barrage fire caused most serious loss of time and crippled the thrust power of the reserves’. It was a bloody battle for the attackers, and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have argued that the success of Menin Road has been exaggerated and that the praise heaped on Plumer was the product of ‘the diminishing expectations accompanying the campaign’. Gough had promised much but failed to deliver, while Plumer’s more modest endeavour lived up to lower expectations. A fair point; but Menin Road had a more profound impact on the Germans than the operations of 31 July. On that day German defence-in-depth tactics worked successfully. At Menin Road they did not, and the battle heralded a run of British offensives that brought the Germans close to defeat.

The basic methods of 20 September were repeated at Polygon Wood (26 September) and at Broodseinde (4 October). Faced by mounting casualties—159,000 men by this stage—and a precipitous decline in morale, in mid-October one faction in the German High Command advocated limited withdrawal to force Haig to redeploy his artillery. Crown Prince Rupprecht, the local Army Group commander, even began to prepare for ‘a comprehensive withdrawal’ that would have entailed giving up the Channel ports, which, of course, would have fulfilled one of the major British objectives of the campaign at a stroke.

But on 4 October the weather broke again, and the problems experienced at Arras of the very success of artillery-driven bite-and-hold attacks destroying the ground and making it difficult to get the guns forwards began to manifest themselves. Preparations for the Battle of Poelcappelle (9 October) were feeble in comparison with previous operations (although it still caused heavy damage to the Germans) when preparations were far from complete. In appalling conditions produced by heavy rain, inadequate numbers of engineers and pioneers struggled to build and maintain wooden-plank roads

under shellfire. Infantry reached the start line for the attack only after an exhausting journey along duckboard tracks ‘which eventually petered-out into waist-deep mud’. Among their many tasks, the sappers had to build gun platforms; otherwise artillery pieces could not fire. First Passchendaele (12 October) saw more of the same. But bite-and-hold could still work. Heroic and extensive engineering by the Canadian Corps produced conditions in which the capture of Passchendaele Ridge was achieved in four stages, culminating in the attack of 10 November.

The problem was not at the tactical level. Official historian Cyril Falls once commented that ‘Tactics were seldom more skilful’ at Third Ypres. The problem lay with bite-and-hold as an operational method, exacerbated, but not caused, by the terrible conditions. In order to achieve anything approaching decisive success, the attacker had to land a continuous stream of heavy blows, giving the enemy no time to recover. But the very nature of a steady advance on a relatively narrow front so churned up the ground that it effectively guaranteed a law of diminishing returns, as the longer operations continued, the more difficult it was to bring the guns forward.

The battle of Cambrai in November gave glimpse of the way out of the dilemma. It added several more elements to the BEF’s weapons system which gave a tantalising hint that mobility was returning to the battlefield; indeed, that the tactical pendulum was starting to swing towards the attacker. The innovations at Cambrai were twofold: the mass use of 476 tanks, including 98 support tanks loaded with supplies; and the use of a ‘predicted’ artillery bombardment, made possible by advances in gunnery technique by which gunners no longer had to sacrifice surprise by firing preliminary ranging shots.

In the words of General Byng, Cambrai was initially intended as a tank raid to ‘put the wind up the Boche’. It rapidly evolved into a more ambitious plan, perhaps leading to a breach of the Hindenburg Line or the capture of the key rail junction of Cambrai itself. Initially the attack of 20 November 1917 went well, except on 51st Highland Division’s front. It was an example of another mostly successful bite-and-hold operation with a new element in the shape of the mass tank attack. However, as we have seen, Cambrai was a more ambitious offensive than those of earlier in the year. The cavalry—still the only usable instrument of exploitation—were supposed to exploit through the gap created by the initial assault. By the time the attackers reached the St Quentin Canal it was getting

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HAIG AND THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE IN 1917

dark, and the cavalry operations were limited in scale and achieved little. A sobering fact is that of the 476 tanks that began the operation, only 297 were still ‘runners’ at the end of the day. The majority of the mechanical casualties had broken down rather than been disabled by enemy fire.

The battle rapidly degenerated into an attritional struggle. Worse, on 30 November the Germans launched a counter-offensive that prefigured the methods that were to be used with great effect in their 1918 spring attacks: surprise, a short artillery bombardment, stormtroops, low-flying aircraft. The British were pushed back, losing much of the ground captured in the initial assault. The Battle of Cambrai was a clear sign that both the British and German armies had developed a weapons system that under the right conditions was capable of breaking the tactical deadlock.

INTO 1918

Sometimes the battles and campaigns of the First World War are viewed in isolation. I believe that they should be set in the context of the war as a whole, and in this case it is instructive to look back from the end of the war to see how the BEF’s methods developed in 1917. This is not to use hindsight in a crude fashion, but rather to recognise that there was a learning process going on, and the battles of 1917 represented an important stage in the BEF’s development. Here I should say that I played a hand in the popularisation of the term ‘learning curve’, which has been criticised recently as not reflecting the reality that sometimes the process involved backward steps and, one might add, blind alleys.¹⁷ This is absolutely fair comment: the phrase was nothing more than a handy if strictly inaccurate piece of shorthand developed in the early 1990s in the Two Eagles, a pub around the corner from the Imperial War Museum in London where some wonderful informal seminars took place over pints and cheese doorstops. The learning process was not a simple upward progression. However it is important to recognise that battles were analysed and the perceived lessons influenced, to varying degrees, doctrine, training and the conduct of future operations.

There are many reasons why the BEF of August 1917—an army capable of achieving effective bite-and-hold operations—was transformed into the BEF of August 1918—an army able to conduct a form of mobile warfare. Here I will concentrate on three. The first is the improvement in the quality of commanders and staffs, an improvement largely

due in my view to additional experience. Quite simply, good staffs cannot be improvised overnight, and the British Army suffered particularly badly from the need to spread unavailable expertise very thinly indeed across a range of staffs. A number of bloody failures in 1916 and 1917 can be attributed to attack orders being issued from higher formations which left insufficient time for lower level staffs and commanders to prepare plans, issue orders and brief the troops that would carry them out. Compare this with the Hundred Days in 1918. The history of the Royal Artillery comments that under conditions of mobile warfare ‘It soon became practice for infantry brigadiers to organise their own fireplans with their own artillery commanders, the Commander Royal Artillery co-ordinating, stiffening (sic) and confirming them’. As Chris McCarthy has observed, the ‘flash to bang’ time for operations was often drastically reduced, and yet commanders and staffs were able to cope: for example by taking the initiative by issuing verbal preliminary orders that anticipated final orders. This showed a high degree of trust that had developed between commanders and staffs, the staff officers mostly being young men who had learned on the job; one, the future Prime Minister Anthony Eden, had been a schoolboy on the outbreak of war but became the youngest Brigade Major in the British Army. All this helped to increase the rate of operational tempo.

The second and arguably most important factor is that by the summer of 1918 the BEF had more guns and better logistic support than had been the case a year earlier. In 1917 the BEF had insufficient guns for two concurrent major offensives, or even for one major battle and a sizeable feint. Problems caused by guns wearing out, and the appalling conditions in the latter stages of Third Ypres, meant that the Royal Artillery struggled to keep even the nominal number of guns available in the field. In June 1917 restrictions were placed on the use of artillery in quiet sectors ‘to preserve the lives of the guns’. Three weeks before the opening of Third Ypres 7.7% of 18-pounders, 4.8% of 60-pounders, and no less than 23.1% of the BEF’s 6-inch guns were unusable. The Canadian Corps was allocated 227 heavy and medium guns and howitzers for its attack at Passchendaele on 26 October, but in reality only 139 guns came into action. As we have seen, moving guns from Messines to an adjacent battlefield was a time-consuming business. The lack of guns and the lack of mobility meant that the BEF could land only one major blow at

a time, leading to the temptation to exploit any success in that sector to its utmost, even though experience showed that pushing on rarely brought success. In truth, there was little else that could be done if the aim was to capitalise on initial advances.

In 1918, the situation had been transformed. To understand how this was made possible, we need to look at the impressive development of the British war economy since 1914. It stands alongside the development of the mass citizen army as one of the most impressive achievements of the British state in the 20th century. John Bourne has drawn attention to Box Repair Factory, located at Beddington to the south of London. This was one of numerous factories set up by the Ministry of Munitions. Opened in late 1916, it started repairing bomb and grenade boxes in early 1917, just in time for Arras.\(^{23}\) The implications of the Box Repair Factory are highly significant. This was an economy dedicated to supplying the most obscure needs of the armed forces. It demonstrated impressive attention to detail and efficient organisation. It denoted a war economy that was overcoming the teething problems of earlier years. To use Bourne’s phrase, it was an economy that, in 1918, allowed the BEF to fight a ‘rich man’s war’: a war in which materiel was virtually unlimited. This was particularly true of artillery.

In 1914 91 guns were produced. By 1917 production per year had risen to 6483, and in 1918 no less than 10,680 tubes appeared from the factories. Thus in the last year of the war the supply of guns began to keep pace with the demand. It is significant that a plan of December 1916 for expansion of the BEF’s field artillery was only completed with the arrival of the last 18-pdr and 4.5-in howitzer units in March and April 1918 respectively.\(^{24}\) Supply of ammunition, by contrast, had caught up with demand by 1917.\(^{25}\) By 1918 the BEF’s artillery park was of such a size that it could absorb heavy losses of guns (859 in the first week of the German spring offensive).\(^{26}\) Whereas in their offensives in the first half of 1918 the Germans had relied on a ‘battering train’ of artillery being moved up and down the front, and were running badly short of horses to move guns, the BEF had enough guns to provide a strong core of artillery integral to formations, and sufficiently flexible logistics to move guns relatively swiftly from sector to sector. So, following the suspension of the Battle of Amiens on 11 August 1918, eleven field and heavy brigades were transferred from Fourth to Third Armies in time for the launching a fresh offensive in the Bapaume area on 21 August.\(^{27}\) The time taken to transfer the guns and complete

\(^{23}\) http://www.firstworldwar.bham.ac.uk/notes/A%20List%20of%20National%20Factories%20Controlled%20by%20the%20Ministry%20of%20Munitions.doc

\(^{24}\) Farndale, *Royal Artillery*, 341, 349.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 190.

\(^{27}\) Farndale, *Royal Artillery*, 292.
Third Army’s logistic preparations for battle can be profitably compared with the six weeks that elapsed between Messines and the opening of Third Ypres the year before.

The flexibility that sufficient guns, ammunition and effective logistics gave the BEF enabled it to conduct a series of operations, both concurrent and sequential, which allowed it to place enormous pressure on the German defenders. It enabled the tactically effective bite-and-hold techniques of Messines and Menin Road at long last to have operational significance. Eschewing the attempt to achieve a breakthrough that had often characterised British operations in previous years, as well as those of the Germans in the spring, in the Hundred Days the BEF fought limited, attritional battles but rapidly switched the point of attack from sector to sector, thus keeping the defenders off-balance and continually on the back foot. In combination with the other Allied armies—and the importance of Foch as overall co-ordinator should not be underestimated—the BEF used these methods to defeat the German Army. It was a triumphant vindication of the methods of 1917, but it took the developments of 1918 to allow them to fulfil their potential.

**MORALE**

One shrinks from the attempt to describe the conditions that prevailed in the Ypres salient. No part of it was ever at rest … day and night the guns sprayed the trenches, the roads, the duckboard paths, with shrapnel and H.E., the grim resolve to kill dominating every other thought or desire … Guns sank axle-deep in the mud —Napoleon’s *fifth element*—and were salved under deadly fire … The period at Ypres ended on a note of depression. One felt that the Division was beginning to doubt its ability to achieve the impossible … [The conditions] combined to awaken a vague, inarticulate protest against the cruelty and futility of war … The men were glad to quit the Ypres salient, but they did not leave it in a happy frame of mind. Every one felt that the Division was not at its best; and that it was capable of better things had opportunity been given.

This is a quotation, not from a disillusioned officer war poet, but from the history of the 42nd (East Lancashire) Division, a book that in other places was written in a distinctly upbeat fashion. The quotation brings out the sheer nastiness of fighting in the salient in 1917—although the author is also careful to point out that it was even worse for the Germans—but above all, the impression is of frustration: of enduring and fighting, but making little apparent progress.28 One should be careful about generalising from the experience of a single division—42nd Division’s experience was of trench holding and

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minor operations—but there is plenty of evidence that the conditions during the Third Battle of Ypres placed a peculiar degree of strain on combatants.

However, one should be cautious before assenting to the oft-expressed opinion that Passchendaele was uniquely ghastly. I am not sure how one can compile a hierarchy of horror. Charles Bean, the Australian official historian, believed that the shelling at Pozières in July 1916 was worse than that at Passchendaele.\(^\text{29}\) Thanks in part to David Lloyd George's *War Memoirs*, Passchendaele became known as 'the campaign [or battle] of the mud', but some veterans believed that the mud in the latter stages of the Somme offensive in 1916 was worse.\(^\text{30}\) If horror is reduced to the statistics of the daily loss rate Passchendaele was not the worse battle of the war—it was not even the worse battle in 1917. That dubious honour belonged to Arras, which had the heaviest daily loss rate (4076). This was followed by the 1918 Hundred Days offensive (3645) and the Somme in 1916 (2943). Third Ypres, with a daily loss rate of 2323, rated as the fourth most deadly experience endured by the BEF. In absolute terms, the Somme (141 days, 420,000 losses), followed by the Hundred Days campaign (which actually lasted 96 days, and resulted in 350,000 casualties) were the bloodiest battles. Third Ypres, at 105 days (244,000 casualties) rated as the third bloodiest. Arras, which lasted for 39 days, was the fourth most lethal battle (159,000 casualties), but had it continued for the same length of time and at the same intensity as the Somme, losses at Arras would have reached 574,716—by far the bloodiest British battle of the war.\(^\text{31}\)

Whichever way one looks at it, statistically Passchendaele was not the worse battle of the war. And yet it acquired a reputation of unique horror. As I have argued elsewhere, many British soldiers in the Second World War, who were engaged in fighting some pretty horrific battles of their own, in Burma or Monte Cassino or Normandy, measured their experiences against the Western Front—often Passchendaele—and usually concluded that, as bad as things were for them in 1944, things had been worse for their fathers and uncles in 1917. The truth of the matter was a separate issue. I suspect that often they were seeking to cheer themselves up by persuading themselves that things could have been worse.\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{29}\) Bean to Edmonds, 18 April 1934, Bean papers, 3 DRL 7953 item 34, AWM.


\(^{31}\) Jonathan Nicolls, *Cheerful Sacrifice: The Battle of Arras 1917* (London: Leo Cooper, 1990), 211.

The most important point to make about the morale of the BEF in the second half of 1917 is that although it dipped, it did not break. There clearly was a decline, as revealed by the postal censorship, supported by anecdotes and various other pieces of evidence, but this decline was neither terminal nor permanent. The ultimate test of the morale and cohesion of a military unit is its willingness to obey orders. I am unaware of major examples of combat refusals at Passchendaele, and the response of the BEF to the German offensives that began in March 1918 demonstrates that any damage to morale was not lasting.33

There was of course a rather famous mutiny, at Etaples base camp in September 1917, but this was a military version of an industrial strike as soldiers protested against poor working (and living) conditions. It is noteworthy that these men were separated from their units, where good leadership by NCOs and officers and the benefits of belonging to a cohesive organisation helped to mitigate some of the harsher conditions of warfare on the Western Front. The Etaples mutiny, although it caused some short-lived alarm in the upper echelons of the BEF—this was, after all, the year of the Russian revolution, and the French mutinies had occurred a few months before—was certainly not insurrectionary in nature; neither did it mark a point at which the loyalty of the troops could no longer be relied upon. It has been well described as ‘collective bargaining in khaki’.34

One of the best, although rather strange and mystical, Canadian memoirs of the Great War is Will Bird’s *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*. Bird served with the 42nd Battalion, The Black Watch of Canada. He wrote of the aftermath of battle:

> We had little drill, but rested and slept and had good food until finally we were more like human beings. But every man who had endured Passchendaele would never be the same again, was more or less a stranger to himself.35

Bird was clearly traumatised by the experience of Passchendaele, but it is surely an exaggeration to say that *everyone* who fought there was affected to such an extent. Many simply got on with life. And it is instructive to read in Bird’s account, both overtly and between the lines, how the battalion was rebuilt, how the survivors put the terrible experience behind them, returned to trench duty, and eventually participated in the battle of Amiens. Passchendaele is proof that human beings can endure extraordinary levels of stress and strain. Collectively, the men of Haig’s army in France were pushed close to the abyss; but they did not fall into it.

The generalship of Douglas Haig remains highly controversial. While some of the sillier charges against Haig have been rebutted, there is still a case to answer.\(^{36}\) Here, given the limitations of space, I will confine my comments to some of the issues associated with the most contentious action of 1917, the Third Battle of Ypres.

Why fight at Ypres at all? There were real strategic objectives around Ypres, and Haig had long wanted to fight in this sector.\(^{37}\) One only needs to stand on Passchendaele Ridge, to look back towards Ypres, and over to the open ground beyond, for the military importance of this position to become clear. An advance out of the Ypres salient offered real strategic objectives, not least the Channel ports. One of the major reasons for Britain entering the war in August 1914 had been concern that Belgium, and especially the Belgian ports, should not fall into hostile hands. The naval situation in 1917 caused grave concern to the Admiralty and the War Cabinet. When on 20 June, Jellicoe burst out that that was ‘no good discussing plans for next Spring—we [i.e. Britain] cannot go on’ because of the submarine threat, he was exaggerating, as Haig understood.\(^{38}\) Nonetheless, the First Sea Lord’s opinion could not be ignored. Neither could his well-founded view that there was no single simple solution to the naval crisis. Part of a more complex solution was for the Army to capture the Channel coast. Only a minority of U-boats were based in the major Belgian ports, as Britain’s senior sailors knew, but the occupation of the Flanders coast would bring other important advantages, including neutralising German surface raiders. As Geoffrey Till explains, ‘The more the general U-boat threat sucked the [Royal] Navy’s light forces out of the Channel, the more vulnerable would the Army’s supply lines be to local German attack’.\(^{39}\) No one believed that the capture of the coast this would prove to be decisive, but it would be a very useful step in the right direction. It would be wrong to claim that concern for the naval position was foremost among Haig’s motives for launching the Third Battle of Ypres. It would be equally misguided to underestimate it as a factor.


\(^{37}\) Haig diary, 10 December 1916, Acc. 3155, National Library of Scotland.

\(^{38}\) Haig diary, 20 June 1917, in Sheffield & Bourne (eds), *Haig Diaries*, 301. These words do not appear in the original manuscript version of the diary, only in the later typescript version; they are, however, fully consistent with the original entry.

The question of coalition politics can be dealt with briefly. The idea that Haig had to fight Passchendaele to keep the pressure off the French Army recovering from mutiny is not wholly convincing. Senior French commanders were opposed to the battle, wanting instead limited battles.40 However it is clear that Haig did not trust the French Army. On 19 September, for example, he recorded in his diary ‘Pétain's opinion [that] its discipline is so bad that it could not resist a determined German offensive’.41 Whether this was true or not is a different matter. Haig believed it to be true, and it was undoubtedly a factor in his thinking.

Following the Allied breakout from the Ypres salient, the Germans began to retire from the coast, allowing Ostend and Zeebrugge to be captured in rapid succession. Three days after a British naval force under Sir Roger Keyes seized Ostend, the Germans had evacuated the entire Belgian coastline. The previous sentence is not an excursion into the currently fashionable genre of alternative history (or ‘allohistory’); it actually happened in October 1918. The circumstances were very different from a year earlier, but nonetheless demonstrate what Haig was seeking to achieve at Third Ypres. Haig has been criticised for planning for a breakthrough and a decisive offensive, rather than for opting to fighting a series of bite-and-hold battles.42 There is an alternative view. For the attacker, limited victories did not always produce limited casualties, as the losses at Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde in September-October 1917 were to demonstrate. To fight battles that captured little ground, and brought the Allies no nearer ending the war but incurred large losses in the process, was politically unattractive. John Terraine argued that in the aftermath of Arras GHQ had a crumb of comfort: ‘Allenby’s initial success had confirmed the belief that the enemy’s line could be broken; it remained to be seen whether the British Army could make a better job of exploitation than the French.’ Moreover there was a belief that the success at Messines had not been exploited to its full.43 Haig was out in his timing. In hindsight, it took another six months or so of tactical development before the breakthrough battle once again became possible. This was not immediately obvious in June-July 1917. Against this background, the choice of the thruster Gough over the methodical Plumer to command the main blow at Ypres becomes explicable. Haig made the wrong choice—Gough’s shortcomings as general were to become all too apparent in July-August 1917—but the decision was not inherently unreasonable.

After the victory of Broodseinde on 4 October Haig chose to fight on. In retrospect we know that this represented the high point of the offensive, but given the circumstances of three rapid victories achieved in less than two weeks it is not surprising that he took this decision. As one commentator argued:

Three-quarters of the all-important Gheluvelt-Passchendaele Ridge had been won; should Faint Heart now take his hand from the plough, when 'one more push' seemed likely to push the enemy off the dominating ridge which appeared to mark the boundary of the Promised Land? 44

At first sight, it is less easy to understand Haig’s decision to prolong the battle after the battles of Poelcappelle (9 October) and First Passchendaele (12 October) had shown that the opportunity of breaking through had vanished. The decision becomes more explicable when we consider that once the Third Battle of Ypres began, like all offensives, it gathered momentum of its own. In mid-October Haig was faced with three possibilities, none of them especially attractive.

The first option was to halt the campaign and let the BEF establish a line short of the high ground of the Passchendaele Ridge. While superficially attractive, in reality this option was not realistic. As the Second Army Chief of Staff, General Tim Harington, later stated,

... after the capture of Broodseinde and the subsequent advance and hold up at Bellevue, close under Passchendaele, there was no place where the Army could have stopped for the winter and been maintained.

I asked, in my Life of Lord Plumer, if anyone could suggest a line on which we could have stopped; I have never seen a reply. I had personally reconnoitred all the ground under the most appalling conditions and I feel sure that if he had been with me on the Gravenstafel Ridge, the most violent critic of Passchendaele would not have voted for staying there for the winter, or even for any more minutes than necessary. 45

The second option was to fall back to a tenable position closer to Ypres, abandoning the territorial gains that had been made. This would be to accept the logic of a pure battle of attrition, that ground was unimportant, but Passchendaele was never just an attritional battle. To give up the ground so recently captured at such heavy cost was psychologically and politically impossible, just as, after the losses incurred in the fighting around Ypres in 1914 and 1915, it was impossible to abandon the salient and fall back a more defensible

position, although in purely military terms it would have been sensible to do so. In April 1918, under a completely different set of circumstances, Plumer was quietly to abandon the Passchendaele Ridge in the face of a German offensive. It hurt Plumer deeply to have to issue such ‘heartrending’ orders.46

The final option was to fight on to secure the Passchendaele Ridge and there to establish to a line on which the BEF could remain for the winter. It would also serve as a jumping-off position for a spring offensive—a factor, often ignored, that I will return to on another occasion. This option would, it was clear, involve hard and bloody fighting in terrible conditions. Haig was convinced that the Ridge could be captured. He was right, although the efforts involved, and the loss of human life, were prodigious. Given the unattractive nature of the alternatives, it is not surprising that the decision was taken to fight on.

There were of course other factors that influenced Haig in his determination to continue the offensive. The effect of Haig’s over-optimism on his generalship has been convincingly demonstrated.47 Brigadier-General John Charteris, BEF head of intelligence, has often been blamed for feeding Haig over-optimistic information. Certainly, the positive nature of Charteris’s intelligence reports influenced Haig’s decision-making.48 However, Jim Beach, in his recent authoritative study of British intelligence on the Western Front, has argued that Charteris offered reinforcement of Haig’s views, but did not create them. According to Beach, the intelligence picture that Haig received in October was encouraging, but did not in itself justify continuation of the offensive.49 Neither Haig nor Charteris can be exculpated, but the system within which they operated was also at fault. Charteris was Haig’s protégé, increasingly dependent on the C-in-C’s support as he became less popular within the army. Haig was loyal to Charteris. In many contexts loyalty is an admirable trait, but there is no doubt that Haig was blinded to Charteris’s shortcomings. The latter’s treatment after his fall from grace—exiled to Mesopotamia and regarded, in Haig’s words, ‘as almost a sort of Dreyfus’ suggests why he would want to keep on the right side of his Chief.50 It would have taken a very strong man to consistently give the C-in-C messages he did not want to hear, even if Charteris did not deliberately manipulate the evidence. Yet a good intelligence system should give the commander robust, independent information and

46. Harington, Plumer, 161.
50. Haig diary, 24 August 1918, in Sheffield & Bourne (eds), Haig Diaries, 449. It seems that Haig intervened to halt Charteris’s posting to the Near East. I owe this information to Dr Jim Beach.
analysis. Haig needed cautious and sober intelligence assessments to balance his optimism. Charteris simply failed to provide what was necessary. The situation was to improve somewhat in 1918 after Charteris was replaced by Brigadier-General Edgar Cox.

Conventional intelligence was not the only factor that informed Haig's decision making. His memories of how close his I Corps had come to defeat during First Ypres in 1914, if only the Germans had pressed their attacks, were undoubtedly influential. Haig's soldier's instinct told him that the enemy was in distress; and what we know from the other side of the hill suggests that he was not totally wrong. This helps to explain Haig's fury when Macdonogh from the War Office provided a pessimistic intelligence assessment. Haig's notorious outburst, when he accused Macdonogh of relying on 'tainted' Roman Catholic sources, was not simply an example of bigotry; it referred to the belief that the Pope, by launching a peace initiative in August 1917, had taken a pro-German stance. It also probably reflected Haig's frustration that a Base Wallah in London should implicitly question the judgment of the 'man on the spot' so beloved of contemporary British doctrine.

In his 1917 despatch, and implicitly in his Final Despatch, Haig laid emphasis on the attritional impact of Passchendaele on the German Army. Even while the war was continuing, Haig's critics alleged that he tried to have it both ways: to seek breakthroughs, and when they did not materialise, to claim that the battle was really about attrition. There is something in this. In the case of Third Ypres, the objective of the battle varied between the renewal of open warfare and attrition according to the circumstances of battle. However, the attrition argument will not go away. Haig's post-war explanation of it being part of the 'great engagements' that 'wore down the strength of the German Armies' and made possible the victories of 1918, has often been assailed. Because it contains an irreducible minimum of truth it has yet to be refuted convincingly, even if during the war Haig did not hold such a clear vision as laid out in his Final Despatch.

Let the last word on Passchendaele go to an opponent. As with any opinions expressed after the event, one must take care in using this as evidence; but it is, nonetheless, a most interesting perspective of a senior German officer on Passchendaele. Writing after the war, General Hermann von Kuhl, Chief of Staff to Crown Prince Rupprecht's Army Group,

51. Haig diary, 31 October 1914, Sheffield & Bourne (eds), Haig Diaries, 76.
52. Haig diary, 15 October 1917, in ibid., 336-7.
54. See e.g. Lovat Fraser to Josiah Wedgwood MP, 28 November 1917, J.C. Wedgwood, 1st Baron Barlaston papers, PP/MCR/104, Imperial War Museum.
paid tribute to the BEF’s ‘courage’ and obstinacy in attacking in Flanders, while denying there was any prospect of a breakthrough. However, given the strategic context—Russian and Italian weakness, the state of the French Army, and the embryo state of the US commitment to the Western Front, the BEF was the only [Allied] army capable of offensive action ... If they had broken off their offensive, the German army would have seized the initiative and attacked the Allies where they were weak. To that end it would have been possible to withdraw strong forces from the east after the collapse of the Russians. For these reasons the British had to go on attacking until the onset of winter ruled out a German counter-attack.

Today, now that we are fully aware about the critical situation in which the French army found itself during the summer of 1917, there can be absolutely no doubt that through its tenacity, the British army bridged the crisis in France. The French army gained time to recover its strength, the German reserves were drawn towards Flanders. The sacrifices that the British made for the Entente were fully justified.  

The 1st Australian Division in 1917: A Snapshot

Robert Stephenson

INTRODUCTION

This paper will address the three themes of tactics, training and technology in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front during 1917 from the perspective of the 1st Australian Division. While other papers explore these themes at the macro level, this paper takes a single snapshot of their interaction at the micro, or tactical level, on the training grounds and battlefields of just one of the BEF's 55 divisions. From the time of Napoleon the 'division' became a standard feature of most European military establishments as they harnessed the political and technological advances of the French and Industrial revolutions to field larger and larger armies. By 1914 all European armies had adopted the division as the basic building block of their military forces. European armies were measured in the number of divisions, regular or first-line and reserve or second-line, which they could be put in the field on mobilisation. The measure of an army was in the number and quality of those divisions and the number of guns that could back them up. When the nations of Europe went to war in 1914 they mobilised their armies—France with 60 infantry and ten cavalry divisions; Germany in the west with 78 infantry and ten cavalry divisions, tiny Belgium with six infantry and one cavalry division; and mighty Britain also with six infantry and a single cavalry division.¹ These divisions were what historian Cyril Falls labelled the real 'unit' of the Great War.²

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1. Brigadier James E Edmonds (ed.), History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914, Vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co., 1928), 7, 15–16, 18, 432–3 and 438–9. Edmonds gives slightly different figures in a later account, stating that on mobilisation the Entente forces disposed of 199 divisions which included the forces of Belgium, with six infantry and one cavalry division; Britain, with six infantry and one cavalry division; France, with 62 infantry and ten cavalry divisions; Russia, with 114 infantry and 36 cavalry divisions; and Serbia with eleven infantry and one cavalry divisions. Confronting them were 136 divisions which Edmonds allotted to Germany, with 87 infantry and 11 cavalry divisions; and Austria with 49 infantry and 11 cavalry divisions: Brigadier Sir James E Edmonds, A Short History of World War I (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 9–10. For a brief history of the divisions raised by Britain during the Great War see Martin Middlebrook, Your Country Needs You: From Six to Sixty-Five Divisions (Barnsley: Sword and Pen Books, 2000).

The 1st Australian Division was the senior of the five Australian infantry divisions on the Western Front in 1917. It had been raised in 1914 as the major component of Australia’s expeditionary force—the Australian Imperial Force (AIF)—to support Britain and the Empire. In 1915 it was the 1st Division that led the way ashore on Gallipoli in April and it was the same Division that had seized Lone Pine and held it against fierce Turkish counter-attacks in August. Only in September, after the major fighting was over, was it joined by the 2nd Australian Division. Following the withdrawal, it was the 1st Division that provided the nucleus of two new formations—the 4th and 5th Australian Divisions—as the AIF expanded. With the move to the Western Front, it was the 1st Division that achieved the AIF’s first significant success in France, seizing Pozieres in July 1916. In 1917 it fought at Langicourt, Bullecourt, and just before Third Ypres it was finally joined the 3rd Australian Division. In September the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions spear-headed the Battle of the Menin Road—the first time two Australian divisions had gone into battle side by side. In the final year it won further laurels at Hazebrouck before joining the Australian Corps for the final 100-day campaign. It suffered more casualties than any other Australian division and its units were awarded more battle honours and Victoria Crosses than any other Australian formation in the Great War. It was the premier division of the AIF.

The 1st Division is an ideal vehicle for exploring the themes of tactics, training and technology in the BEF. As the only Australian division to serve from beginning to end it was literally the cradle and nursery of the AIF but while the focus of this paper is on the activities of just one of the five Australian divisions, much of this experience is equally applicable to the other Australian and dominion divisions, and indeed for many of the British divisions of the BEF—but probably not all. Far too often historians from the old dominions of the British Empire have focussed their attentions narrowly on the perceived differences between the various contingents that made up the BEF. This paper suggests that while the differences between the contingents were important, the current obsession with national interpretations of Great War history has obscured the fact that these contingents had far more in common than later historians have often acknowledged.

The paper is structured in two parts. The first part provides an introduction to the 1st Australian Division and what part it had played in the war leading up to Third Ypres, focussing on the factors that shaped its success in 1916 and 1917. The second part examines one of the new technologies, taking the Lewis gun as a case study, and explores how the introduction of this weapon led to a process of innovation at the tactical level, producing changes in both training and tactics. The paper concludes with some observations on how developments in the 1st Division reflect on the wider trends that were occurring throughout the BEF in 1917.
PART 1: THE MAKING OF THE 1ST AUSTRALIAN DIVISION

On the outbreak of war the Australian Government offered Britain an infantry division and light horse brigade as its initial contribution to imperial defence. Although there was no permanent divisional organisation in Australia at that time, some pre-war planning had been undertaken and in accordance with broad principles negotiated at a series of pre-war Imperial Conferences, Australia had agreed to the creation of an Imperial General Staff and the standardisation of its home forces on British models but without committing itself to establishing an expeditionary force for Britain’s use in wartime. The 1st Australian Division officially came into being on 15 August 1914 when the Governor-General approved the raising of the AIF, with command of the force going to Brigadier William Throsby Bridges. Bridges handed over his appointment as Inspector-General, was promoted major-general and took over the dual appointments of commander of the AIF and General Officer Commanding (GOC) the 1st Division. He was the first Australian officer to be promoted to the rank of major-general and the first Australian officer to command a division.

For a force created from scratch, the 1st Division was raised in the remarkably short time of just six weeks and by the beginning of November its 18,000 men, 26 medium machine-guns, 36 field guns, and nearly 5500 horses were aboard their transports off the Western Australian coast waiting to sail for Britain. It was a remarkable achievement which says a great deal about the administrative skills of Bridges, his staff and the formation commanders he chose. It was, however, a fragile organisation. The pressures of mobilisation and the decentralised manner in which it had been raised meant that training was rudimentary, at best. Most infantry units had only managed to fire the recruit rifle practice, and only one of the Division’s artillery batteries appears to have fired a live-fire practice before leaving Australia. Less than 7% of its men had seen previous active service and 35% had never served before in uniform.

3. The key Imperial Conference was held in London in April 1907 where the British Government continued its attempts to get the Dominions to accept its interpretation of colonial forces as part of an imperial army. Some of the proposals put forward by Secretary of State for War, Richard Burdon Haldane, were supported by the Dominions but acceptance of British wishes was far from universal: see Two Papers Prepared by the General Staff which were Laid Before the Colonial Conference, 1907 (Melbourne: J. Kemp, Government Printer, 1907); John Gooch, The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c. 1900–1916 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 134–6; and John Mordike, An Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments 1880–1914 (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), 181, 188.


centre, where the Division could be concentrated before departure, meant that some units had only combined for the first time when they boarded their transports. Admittedly, it was always the intention to complete divisional training overseas but it would be difficult to reject Jeffrey Grey’s conclusion that ‘the 1st Division was probably the worst-trained formation ever sent from Australian shores’.6

The armada set sail on 1 November 1914, crossing the Indian Ocean bound for Suez and eventually, it was thought, to Britain. In the meantime problems with accommodation and training facilities on Salisbury Plain led to the convoy being diverted to Egypt, where it was decided the Division could complete its training. There, in the shadows of the great pyramids, the 1st Division was for the first time fully assembled. The Division then completely reorganised its infantry battalions—brining them into line with the new British four-company structure—and then raced through company, battalion, brigade and divisional training in the space of three months. It even managed some rudimentary mission-specific training for the forthcoming Gallipoli campaign.

An account of the 1st Division’s role on Gallipoli is beyond the scope this paper. What should be noted is that in the eight-month campaign the Division mounted four major operations (brigade level or above). These were the initial landings and battle for the beachhead; the attack by the 2nd Brigade at Krithia on the southern battlefield at Helles; the attack by the 1st Brigade at Lone Pine during the renewed offensive in August; and the withdrawal from the peninsula in December. Despite the troops’ selfless gallantry and stoic courage in the face of appalling conditions, the Gallipoli campaign was a failure and, leaving aside the mythology that surrounds so much of that ill-fated campaign, what it did demonstrate were the severe limitations of the original 1st Division.

The Division’s main manoeuvre elements—its infantry battalions—had very limited organic firepower. Nearly 70% of the Division’s manpower was held in its battalions but each of these contained only four machine-guns, with the rest of its firepower being generated by bolt-action rifles alone. Although the gunners made up the second largest grouping within the Division, with 15% of the manpower, their problem was the number and size of their guns. While British divisions in France contained roughly one gun for every 159 bayonets, the 1st Division had less than half this, with only one gun for every 336 bayonets. Compounding this problem was the ammunition shortage and the initial reliance on shrapnel shells, a round requiring considerable skill to employ and quite ineffective against entrenched troops. And while the Division deployed with modern

quick-firing 18-pounder guns, their relatively flat trajectory was a distinct disadvantage on the rugged ridges of the peninsula. In fact the complete absence from the Division's arsenal of any howitzers or heavy mortars to provide high-angle fire would mean that the Division could never provide sufficient fire to neutralise, much less destroy, the well-dug-in Turks.7

Following the withdrawal from the peninsula the 'old' 1st Division was vivisected, reconstituted and reorganised. It was initially split, losing half of its veterans as the nucleus for two new AIF divisions and providing the majority of the new brigade and battalion commanders. In addition the fire support assets of the Division were overhauled and expanded. The divisional artillery was finally brought into line with the British Establishment, doubling in size. Further firepower was added with the raising of divisional heavy and medium trench mortars, and each infantry brigade raised a light trench mortar and a medium machine-gun company. The infantry battalions received their first issues of the Lewis light machine-gun. The engineering capability was also expanded with a new pioneer battalion—the division's 'jack of all trades'. In three short months the Division was transformed, but by the end of the process less than half of the Division which sailed from Egypt were veterans, the majority being raw reinforcements.

In March 1916, the 1st Division again led the way. After the division landed at Marseilles, its sun-burned diggers entrained and were shunted through the French countryside north of Paris and deposited in the Armentières sector. This part of the British line was regarded as a 'nursery' sector for new divisions. Here the 'new' 1st Division was introduced to the realities of the Western Front and was issued with steel helmets, more Lewis light machine-guns, factory-produced grenades, light, medium and heavy trench mortars, 4.5-inch howitzers, and much of their worn-out heavy equipment and weapons were exchanged for newer items from the British logistics depots. Officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers were also sent to attend British schools of instruction on many of the novelties to which the Division was being introduced.8

7. The War Establishment of the 1st Australian Division in 1914 totalled 18,035 all ranks. Of the arms corps the greatest number were in the infantry with 12,234 all ranks (68%); the next largest group was the artillery with 2753 all ranks (15%); then the engineers with 785 all ranks (4%) and the light horse with 530 all ranks (3%). The total for the service corps (including AASC, Remount Department, AAMC, AAVC, chaplains, AAOC, AAPC, postal corps, AVAC and military police) amounted to a combined total of 1666 all ranks (9%). The headquarters staff and attachments amounted to 67 all ranks (less than .004%): General Staff, Australia, War Establishments of 1st Australian Division and Subsequent Units Raised and Despatched for Active Service (Melbourne: Albert J. Mullet, Government Printer, 1915), Appendix 1, 125.

The late arrival of the Division, and the deficient state of its artillery, meant that it was spared any involvement in the opening rounds of the Somme offensive. It was not until mid-July that the 1st Division moved south to launch the AIF’s first major and successful action on the Western Front. Operating as part of General Hubert Gough’s newly formed Reserve Army, the Division seized Pozières in what was seen as a significant achievement. The Division’s performance was not flawless, however, and neighbouring British formations advised that there was a noticeable tendency for the Australians to pack their forward trenches, leading to unnecessary casualties. Undoubtedly this approach stemmed from the experience on Gallipoli where the weaker Turkish artillery and the closeness of the opposing lines required a high density of troops to ensure that the line could be held. In France, however, this was not only unnecessary but it invited German retaliation. What it demonstrates is that the 1st Division, despite its Gallipoli credentials, still had much to learn about the conditions in France and the new foe. So why did the 1st Division succeed at Pozières when earlier attacks had failed?

One Australian historian suggests that the key factor in the 1st Division’s Pozières success was ‘the quality of the troops’ moreover the Division was fresh, well-trained, and experienced after its Gallipoli service.9 There may be something in the claim about the quality of the troops and the fact they were rested, but as for the others, these do not stand up to scrutiny. The Division had spent less than three months in Egypt following the withdrawal, during which time it had undertaken some rudimentary training but it had been focussed on the expansion and reorganisation of its new units. Training had to be rushed and was far from complete. In France the three months spent in the north were occupied with administration, front-line acclimatisation and only limited collective training. Tellingly the artillery was still extremely raw.10 As for the Gallipoli experience, the 1st Division never conducted a divisional attack in its time on Gallipoli—Pozières was its first. In reality there were other more subtle and telling factors at play and the first of these was the quality of its commander.

When Bridges was mortally wounded on Gallipoli Birdwood selected an old Indian Army subordinate to take over the 1st Division as there was no suitable Australian officer. Harold Bridgwood Walker was a British regular and he commanded the 1st Division for more than two and a half years. If there is a single individual who shaped the performance of the Division from 1915 onwards, it was this man. Three years earlier Walker had been commanding a British battalion in India and later one of his officers recalled of him:

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Colonel Walker was one of those ‘milestones’, which crop up from time to time in the history of most Regiments’. He was an outstanding soldier, who brought his Battalion to the highest state of efficiency … Colonel Walker was a wonderful trainer of troops. His exercises were well thought out and instructive. His criticisms were concise and to the point. There was no time for boredom. He never fussed, but kept his Battalion on the tip of its shoes, eager, and active … [and] when he left Wellington [India] I doubt if there was a better-found battalion in the British army. He was the ideal Commanding Officer, one whose steely eye and incisive manner caused him to be feared, yet deeply respected.11

According the Charles Bean, Walker ‘in his looks and his likings was an English country gentleman’ but who ‘from the first was to throw himself into the fighting’.12 Although wounded on Gallipoli he returned to take the 1st Division to France and throughout 1916 and 1917 he proved to be an astute and trusted leader, making no secret of his affection for his troops and this affection was reciprocated to an uncommon degree. One of his COs in 1917 described him thus:

Cool and courageous in action, possessing a military knowledge of the highest order, of distinctive attainments and striking personality. His motto ‘What we have we’ll hold’ was lived up to by the 1st Division, and there can be no doubt as to the personal influence he exerted.13

Walker is an example that the human dimension did count, even on the Western Front, and that good GOCs made good divisions.14

The second factor that played a key role in the early success of the 1st Division was its ability to turn battlefield observations into lessons learned. Even as it was arriving on the Somme the divisional staff was seeking out lessons from the fighting the BEF had endured in the first three weeks of the offensive. Charles Bean in his official history cites a number of British documents that were circulated to the 1st Division prior to its attack.15 Furthermore, on 14 July, just nine days before the 1st Division’s assault, Thomas Blamey—the Division’s General Staff Officer Grade 1 (GSO1) and de facto chief of staff—issued General Staff Memorandum Number 54.16 This document recorded a series

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16. 1st Australian Division, General Staff Memorandum No 54, 14 July 1916, Australian War Memorial (AWM) 4, file 1/42/18 part 1.
of lessons drawn from the recent fighting and passed on by the staff of the neighbouring 7th and 19th British Divisions. His choice of divisions is interesting. Gary Sheffield has suggested that these divisions were picked because of their relatively recent successes on the Somme.\(^\text{17}\) The 7th Division, a regular formation, had attacked and captured the fortified village of Mametz on the first day of the offensive, and according to its divisional history this success was due to three factors: the effective use of its artillery in wire-cutting and accurate barrages; all arms cooperation, itself the product of ‘careful and systematic training’; and the ‘lessons’ taught by the GOC and staff.\(^\text{18}\) The 19th (Western) Division, on the other hand, was a New Army formation which was in reserve on 1 July. On the following day however, it had taken La Boisselle employing a ‘Chinese’ barrage, which included smoke to divert German attention from its real objective. The assaulting troops then ‘raced across No Man’s Land … with comparative freedom and with scarcely a casualty’ to take the Germans by surprise.\(^\text{19}\) While these two divisions had enjoyed some modest success compared with other British formations it is likely that their selection had more to do with their proximity to the 1st Australian Division rather than a perception that they were superior divisions. Following quickly on from Memorandum 54 came a series of other divisional documents summarising further observations from the recent fighting.\(^\text{20}\) Walker’s background as a British regular and Blamey’s pre-war training at Staff College at Quetta would also have assisted this process. Not only did Blamey speak the same ‘language’ as staff qualified British officers, which included the GOC of the 19th Division, but the relationships he developed at Quetta would have eased his task in dealing with the neighbours.

The third key factor in the Division’s success was its own staff work. Good troops die just as easily as poor ones if they are mismanaged, and in France in 1916 and 1917 it was the mass of administrative and operational details that often made the difference between success and failure. In a greatly expanded army where most staffs were largely untrained and inexperienced the 1st Division was very well served. Although Gary Sheffield is rightly critical of Australian staff work on the Somme, especially in the 2nd Division, the standards set in the 1st Division by Blamey were not typical of the AIF or the BEF for this period. Not only did Blamey seek to incorporate the recent lessons into the Division’s plan but he was also scrupulous in coordinating the staff to ensure

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20. 1st Australian Division, General Staff Memorandum No 56, 18 July 1916, AWM4, file 1/42/18 part 1.
that all possible measures were to be taken to assist the assaulting troops—and this relied on sound staff work. When Blamey finished his two-year course at Quetta in 1913 he was granted a ‘B’ pass and he was perceptively described by the Commandant in the following terms:

He came here uneducated (in a military sense) but all his work during his first year was characterised by a very genuine determination to overcome this defect. By the end of the first year he had succeeded beyond all expectations. During his second year his work has been well up to the standard of his Division both in quality and quantity. His views are sound and thoughtful and his judgement, in general, is good … He has always had the courage of his opinions and, as he has advanced in general military knowledge, he has expressed his opinions with greater freedom … A self reliant man who knows what he wants and means to get on … If he is not gifted with a large amount of tact he is not, in any way, conspicuously devoid of that very necessary quality.21

His importance to Walker can be seen in the lengths Walker went to keep him. On two occasions in 1916 and 1917 Blamey left the staff to gain command experience at battalion and brigade level but on both occasions Walker insisted that he be returned because he was, in Walker’s estimation, just too valuable to the division to be employed in a regimental command.22

Walker’s confidence was well placed. Following the successful attack on Pozières, Blamey would write:

Pozières is ours captured alone by our division. We are all very proud of the feat … I will tell you all about it some day, it will be worth telling but it was a trying week for me as G.S.O. However I like the work it suits me and our plan which was chiefly mine led to a brilliant success.23

Blamey’s claim that the plan of attack was largely his should be treated with caution. Walker was no General Melchett and it is doubtful if he was a mere passenger in this process. Walker may not have liked the important minutiae of staff work but he was an intelligent fighting commander, enormously experienced, and a man acutely careful with the lives of his men. It was Walker who had stood up to Gough and insisted on a delay

21. A ‘B’ pass was awarded to officers who were ‘up to the average of Staff College students who are likely to make satisfactory Staff officers’. Brigadier W.P. Braithwaite (Commandant Staff College, Quetta), copy of confidential ‘Staff College, Quetta Final Report’, 19 December 1913, AWM182, item 1A.
23. Lieutenant-Colonel T.A. Blamey, letter to Mr J. Blamey (brother), mid-August 1914, Blamey papers, AWM: 3DRL/6643, Box 58, file 6/2.
in the 1st Division attack to allow more thorough preparations and he would not have allowed his chief of staff, no matter how much he trusted him, to develop and implement the division’s plan alone.24

In accordance with the doctrine of the day, the development of the division’s plan was to be based on ‘An Appreciation of the Situation’, which Walker and Blamey would conduct independently.25 Walker was expected to develop the concept for his attack, sketching out an outline but including his key requirements such as the timing and direction of the attack and the support needed. It was Walker who decided that the 1st Division’s assault was to be launched from the south-east of the village and that the frontage allotted to the attack required two brigades, but Bean makes clear that Walker developed his plans in conjunction with Blamey.26 Blamey and the staff then filled in the details to produce the operational orders to meet Walker’s concept. As Blamey was intimately involved in the planning process it is possible, like many chiefs of staff in the past, he probably overestimated his role since he drafted the orders and coordinated the staff but that hardly means that it was his plan or that Walker was uninvolved.

The other factor working in favour of the 1st Division was the strength of the supporting fire. The bombardment in support of its attack began on 19 July and included the heavy artillery of the Reserve Army and the artillery of the X Corps. Among this support was the 45th Heavy Artillery Group, which included one of the two Australian siege batteries armed with 9.2-inch howitzers. There was also the 1st Division’s own the trench mortars and its four brigades of field guns and howitzers, commanded by the talented Brigadier (later Lieutenant-General Sir) Joseph Talbot Hobbs.27 It is worth noting that for the first time an early version of the creeping barrage was fired in support of the division during its capture of Pozieres but it was fired not by the Australian division but by the British 25th Division, a New Army formation that was supporting it. This fire support was, according to Bean, ‘famous even among the many famous bombardments on the Western Front’.28

24. Gough had originally ordered Walker to attack on the night of 19/20 July but he successfully argued for a postponement and the attack eventually occurred on the night of 22/23 July: Bean, Official History, III: 468–9.
25. The process taught at the pre-war staff colleges and outlined in contemporary doctrine was known simply as ‘An Appreciation of a Situation’. The aim of this process was to enable a commander to make a decision about a course of action having considered the various factors that would come into play and then allow the commander to pass this on, either verbally or in writing to the staff to enable them to draft the plans to implement the choice of action. This was a simple process that also took into account the enemy plans and their possible reactions. As an example see Précis, ‘Appreciation of a Situation’, nd, AWM27, item 310/24.
27. For Hobbs’ part in the planning for the attack see Coombes, The Lionheart, 113–28.
28. 1st Australian Division, Divisional Order No 31, 21 July 1916, AWM4, file 1/42/18 part 1; and Bean, Official History, III: 491, 494 and 571 fn 49.
After holding Pozières though severe German shelling, the division was withdrawn for a short rest. Two more tours on the Somme followed, with fruitless fighting around Mouquet Farm, before the division was withdrawn north to the relatively quiet sector of Ypres in Belgium Flanders. Later in the year it returned for the final phase of the Somme campaign as the offensive petered out in the mud and rain of a bitter winter. By the end of the year the 1st Division, along with the other Australian divisions, had earned a reputation as being ‘reliable’—perhaps the ultimate accolade from General Headquarters (GHQ).²⁹

The 1st Division began New Year 1917 still holding the line in northern France. Towards the end of February it was involved in following up the German withdrawal to their new Hindenburg Line but in March it was pulled out and rested and given three weeks in which to train. The focus of this training was the new platoon organisation which had just been promulgated in Stationary Service (SS) pamphlet No. 143—*Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*.³⁰ Not surprisingly Walker, as usual, took a keen and active interest in this training. He regularly visited his brigades and units, checking to ensure that training was being conducted and he even lectured unit officers personally. His favourite subject appears to have been ‘Interior Economy’—the contemporary term for administration. He was at all times scrupulous in the care of his division.

In April the division was drawn back to the new front opposite the Hindenburg Line and involved in a series of sharp actions clearing a number of villages in the German outpost zone. In response, on 15 April the Germans launched a counter-attack at Lagnicourt against a thinly-held 1st Division line and although part of its gun line was overrun, the counter-attack was quickly defeated. The division’s second major action of 1917 was when it was sucked into the fighting around Bullecourt in May. On this occasion each of its infantry brigades rotated into the fight but operated under the control of the 2nd Australian Division.

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³⁰. General Staff, War Office, *Instruction for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* (SS 143), Army Printing and Stationary Services, February 1917. This publication was published in February but first issued in March, with further copies following in April, and minor amendments being promulgated in April and June: BGGS I ANZAC, I ANZAC Memorandum 130/119, ‘Instructions for the training of platoons for offensive action’, 23 March 1917; BGGS I ANZAC, I ANZAC Memorandum G136/238, ‘Instructions for the training of platoons for offensive action’, 21 April 1917; and MGGS Third Army, Third Army Memorandum G58/154, 23 June 1917: all held on AWM27, item 303/140.
Following Bullecourt the 1st Division was given an extended four month period of rest and training. During this time all units of the division were retrained. This time training proceeded steadily from platoon and company exercises to battalion, brigade and division. For the first time platoons and companies conduct live-fire field firing. Demonstrations were also a frequent feature with the 1st Division’s artillery and trench mortars providing demonstrations of barrages and aircraft of the 3rd Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, assisted with air-ground contact training. By the end of this period, Charles Bean claims that the Australian divisions were probably at their zenith.31 At the end of July the division moved north to the rear areas of Belgium Flanders in preparation for its first operation in what was to become known as the Third Battle of Ypres.32

The Battle of the Menin Road was the first of these operations. For this attack the division was only one of eleven British divisions attacking on a frontage of thirteen kilometres. At 5.40 am on 20 September the lead troops of the division stood up, many lit cigarettes and they advanced behind their barrage. The division attacked on the frontage of 1000 metres with two brigades making the assault. The brigades were arrayed in depth, leap-frogging their battalions as they secured the three objective lines and biting 1500 metres out of the German defences. The Germans, held at bay by the standing British barrage, were unable to deliver their counter-attacks. Although there was some German resistance, notably some of the machine-gun crews housed in concrete pill boxes, they were swiftly dealt with using the new platoon tactics.33

What led to this signature success and how does it compare with Pozières more than a year before? The first factor, and the first among several ‘equals’, is stability. Not so much organisational stability, since the division had seen great changes in 1917, losing two of its artillery brigades, reorganising its infantry battalions again and absorbing new technologies such as the radio. Rather, and more importantly, the division’s command structure had managed to remain relatively stable throughout this turmoil. Walker still headed the division, becoming the longest serving AIF divisional commander, and Blamey was still his GSO1. The division was also fortunate in that it had remained for this entire time part of the same corps—I ANZAC—under its old chief (William Birdwood) and his chief of staff (Cyril Brudenell White). This stability gave Walker and the 1st Division significant advantages over British formations which tended to be moved from one corps to the next and having to constantly adjust to each corps’ slightly different way of doing things.

32. Ibid., 730–2.
33. Ibid., 735–90.
The second factor for the success was, like Pozières, the quality of the staff work. In this case, however, the quality extended from the headquarters of Second Army, where General Hubert Plumer and his chief of staff Charles Harrington were meticulous in their preparations, down to the divisional staff. Although Blamey was to miss Menin Road, as he was sick in Britain at the time, in his place Walker had secured the services of an excellent replacement. Colonel John Dill was a British regular who was at Staff College when the war broke out. He had previously served as an operations staff officer with British and Canadian formations before being seconded to the 1st Division. Dill later served with the Operations Branch of GHQ and as Chief of the Imperial General Staff 1940-41.34 Between Walker and Dill, nothing was left to chance.

For example, during the night of 19/20 September as the preliminary bombardment intensified, the division’s two assault brigades moved forward. They did so along especially constructed tracks to their assembly positions. Each brigade followed a separate track which was sign-posted and guides were waiting at any points where it seemed the troops might take the wrong direction. The battalion forming-up areas were all taped out on the ground by their Intelligence Officers. Each soldier had a small colour paint patch on the rear rim of his helmet, denoting the objective line he was meant to hold on.35

The third factor and one linked closely to the quality of the staff was the strength of the artillery support. To deal with the new German ‘zone’ defences the ‘rolling’ or ‘creeping’ barrage, first trialled on the Somme in the previous year, had by now been perfected. No longer was the barrage just a single line of shells moving forward at the pace of the infantry. At Menin Road the rolling barrage consisted of five successive lines of fire extending 900 metres deep. The first line was fired by the 18-pounders, the second by a combination of 18-pounders and 4.5-inch howitzers, and the furthest three by Vickers machineguns, and the heavy guns of the corps and army artillery. The 1st Division’s support included ‘A’ Group comprising three Army field artillery brigades (AIF); ‘B’ Group comprising the two brigades of the 3rd Australian Division; and the medium and heavy mortars of the 1st and 3rd Divisions—giving an overall gun density of one piece to every five metres of front to be attacked. Of note, however, is the fact that the division was not supported by any of its own guns, these having been relieved for rest after supporting other formations for much of July and August. In addition the division’s Commander Royal Artillery, Brigadier Walter ‘Wacky’ Coxen, was given control of two

35. 1st Australian Division, Instruction No 3 Issued under Divisional Order No 31, 15 September 1917, AWM4, file 1/42/32 part 1.
6-inch howitzer batteries and one brigade of field artillery for any special divisional tasks. From the beginning of the assault through to the anticipated defeat of any German counter-attacks the I ANZAC barrage was to fire continuously for eight hours and eight minutes.\footnote{1st Australian Division, Divisional Order No 31, 9 September 1917, AWM4, file 1/42/32 part 1.}

The final factor in the division’s success was the quality and training of the troops. The ‘new model’ Australian infantry had been trained to a high level in the summer months leading up to the offensive. Advancing in well-armed groups, armed with Lewis guns and rifle grenades, and intimately supported by their own medium machine-guns and trench mortars, they were shepherded across No Man’s Land by a creeping barrage which protected them as they consolidated and dug-in on their objectives. They were irresistible. While the 1st Division still suffered more than two and a half thousand casualties, the diggers were left elated with their success while the effect on the Germans was crushing. Following further success at Polygon Wood by the 4th and 5th Australian Divisions in the next step-by-step attack, the 1st Division returned to the line two weeks later to attack again at Broodseinde.\footnote{Divisional casualties at Menin Road were 2754: Bean, \textit{Official History}, IV: 789 fn169.}

The division finished the year in Belgium licking its wounds after fighting through the muddy finish to the great British offensive. During the year the Division suffered a total of 9082 battle casualties, with 90% falling in the four major engagements of Lagnicourt, Bullecourt, Menin Road and Broodseinde. About 65% of those casualties fell on the division’s infantry brigades. Although the division still had an establishment strength of 18,000 as it had at Gallipoli, the AIF’s recruiting crisis ensured that it was never at full strength and even in August, at a time when it was at its peak following an extended period of rest and training, it was still less than 15,000 strong. In many other ways it was also a fundamentally different organisation from the one that had stormed ashore on the rocky Gallipoli Peninsula.\footnote{Ibid., 393 fn142, 544 fn178, 734 fn149, 789 fn169, 684 fn2, and 876 fn130.}

\textbf{PART 2: ENTER THE LEWIS GUN}

The story of the Lewis gun and the 1st Division is an ideal case study for examining the impact of technology on the development of tactics and training in the BEF in 1917. The Lewis light machine-gun (LMG) was designed in the United States in 1911 by Colonel Isaac Newton Lewis. Initially turned down by all armies except Belgium and
Britain, the Mark I version of the gun was approved for issue in mid-October 1915 but it had been in production for some time. As a light machine-gun it turned out to be the best weapon of its type fielded during the Great War and it would eventually provide the British infantry with their own intimate direct fire support.  

The first time that the 1st Division was introduced to the Lewis gun was in Egypt, following the withdrawal from Gallipoli. By then tactical developments on the Western Front and the mobilisation of British industry had begun to see a range of new weapons systems that were being incorporated within existing organisations or within new purpose designed ones. At brigade-level just one of these changes saw the creation of a brigade machine-gun company, of sixteen medium machineguns. This was achieved by the relatively simple expedient of stripping the Vickers guns out of each of the battalions but it left the battalion commanders feeling disenchanted.

Fortunately, accompanying this change was the adoption of new weapons within the battalion. In mid-March the Australian battalions began to receive small quantities of the Lewis gun. Initially the new LMG was issued on the basis of four guns per battalion, organised into a single LMG Section. This allocation was only designed to partially offset the loss of the Vickers guns; however, following the move to France and as production increased, the number of LMGs issued to each battalion increased—first to eight guns and then to twelve. Unintentionally, this additional firepower then drove internal changes within the battalion's organisation and the way it fought.

By late-July 1916 the battalion LMG Section had disappeared from the 1st Division to be replaced by six LMG detachments, each equipped with two guns. This allowed the guns to be dispersed to lower levels and each rifle company was now provided with a permanent two-gun detachment, with the remaining two detachments being held with battalion headquarters as the Commanding Officer's reserve. By the end of the year

39. The Lewis gun was gas-operated, air-cooled, with a calibre of .303-inch and an effective range of 750 metres, and weighed 11.8 kilograms. The infantry version had a 47-round drum magazine: John Walter, Machine-guns of Two World Wars (London: Greenhill Books, 2005), 119.

40. The Germans had started the war with both independent machine-gun batteries (called sections) and machine-gun companies (of six guns with a spare) attached to each infantry regiment so although the proportion of machine-guns was similar between British and German establishments, the Germans had already decided that the weapons were best controlled at brigade level: R.V.K. Applin, Machine-Gun Tactics (London: Hugh Rees, 1910), 196–7. The British began reorganising their four-gun battalion machine-gun sections into brigade companies in September 1915 but this change was initiated in the AIF until after the withdrawal from Gallipoli. The original change was notified in Army Order No 414 of 22 October 1915.


enough LMGs could be issued so that each company now had on average four Lewis guns. With this change came the first directions to allocate guns permanently to platoons for both training and operations.\textsuperscript{43} This trend however, was not consistent and there were considerable local variations even within Australian battalions.\textsuperscript{44}

Although the BEF learned many lessons from the 1916 Somme fighting it was by the end of the year in a state of low-level organisational chaos brought about by the plethora of new weapons and emerging tactics. And what became clear in the review of the year’s fighting was that there was significant variation in the manner in which units and formations were organised, how they trained and how they fought. I ANZAC, after reviewing the way in which its divisions were conducting operations, issued its own guidance on how the battalions of the corps were in the future to be organised and trained.\textsuperscript{45} Of note is that this circular, General Staff Circular No. 33, stressed the role of the platoon as the basis of infantry minor tactics—but this learning process was still very uneven across the BEF.

Two weeks after I ANZAC had published its revised tactical notes, the corps’ superior headquarters, the newly created Fifth Army, was expressing concerns at the slow progress many of its formations were making. The GOC, Hubert Gough, called a conference for his senior commanders and staff and expressed his displeasure at the state of affairs:

> I have asked you to meet here to-day because, as a result of inspecting the five divisions now out of the line and training, I have realised that the old principles of company and battalion organization are being neglected in a good many units, and therefore, that all training in these units is of little value and will not lead to the results necessary to ensure success in any attack …

In some units not a single platoon was organised. Sections were broken up, section commanders did not know who were in the sections or that they were expected to command them, platoons did not have their bombers organised as a section under its own commander, bombers were scattered haphazard throughout sections … platoon commanders never exercise nor train their bombers, on drill and route marching parades as well as in billets section organization was entirely neglected and broken up …

\textsuperscript{43} CO 8th Battalion (AIF), 8th Battalion Memorandum ‘Re Attached. G/1209’ to HQ 2nd Infantry Brigade (AIF), 13 December 1916; and I ANZAC, I ANZAC G130/83 General Staff Circular No 30 ‘Organisation, Training, and Fighting of Infantry Battalion’, 16 December 1916: both on AWM27, item 303/150.

\textsuperscript{44} In the 18th Battalion (AIF) the CO recommended that when the 16-gun establishment had been met he proposed that each company would only received three Lewis guns and that the remaining four were to be held in battalion reserve under the Lewis Gun Officer: CO 18th Battalion (AIF), Memorandum ‘Organisation of an Infantry Battalion’ to HQ 5th Infantry Brigade (AIF), 12 December 1916, AWM27, item 304/46.

Now as regards the organisation of companies, I found that platoons were broken up on parade and that the temporary formations formed were not divided into sections and section commanders detailed. Again, company commanders did not make platoon commanders train platoons and did not supervise their training. Again, company commanders did not train or even exercise the Lewis gun detachments, nor did they train or exercise their bombers, or in some cases indeed ever see them. But given the BEF’s propensity to constantly move divisions between corps, the ANZAC and Canadian Corps being exceptions, there appeared to be little hope of achieving any conformity until General Headquarters (GHQ) stepped in and this took until February of the following year.

In February 1917 GHQ issued its new ‘SS143’—*Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*. As noted previously this new doctrine called for a major restructure of the battalion and the reorganisation of the platoon, finally establishing the platoon as the basis of infantry operations. This was to be achieved by redistributing the company LMGs, bombers and rifle-grenadiers so that they were no longer to be regarded as specialist weapon systems but were now added to the growing inventory of the standard infantryman and employed within the platoon. From March 1917 each of the 1st Division’s infantry battalions was restructured to maintain its four companies but they would now have four platoons each organised identically with: a section of bombers; a LMG section; a section of riflemen; and a section of rifle-grenadiers. Now throughout the BEF senior commanders all began talking about the platoon fighting its own battles. It was with this organisation that the division fought on the Hindenburg outpost line, at Bullecourt and during Third Ypres.

By the end of 1917 the BEF’s platoon organisation reached maturity and from then on it came to be seen as the basis of tactical manoeuvre for the infantry. Although this process had started even before the Lewis gun’s arrival, the issue of the LMG down to platoon level increased its firepower and stimulated the development of more sophisticated tactics. These changes however, were more far-reaching than infantry minor tactics and just as the introduction of the four-company battalion had shifted the power structures within the battalion, the introduction of the Lewis gun accelerated this process driving

46. GOC Fifth Army, Fifth Army GA68/0/29, ‘Précis of Remarks Made by the Army Commander at the Conference held on 27 December 1916, AWM27, item 303/191.
more authority and responsibility to even lower levels. In 1914 the ‘platoon’ was a new, and in some quarters an undesirable, development. By 1917 it was the basis of infantry tactics.

What is most remarkable about the Lewis gun is not so much its technology; after all machineguns had been around for half a century, but it is more in the process of organisational development that it sparked. Initially introduced as a one-for-one replacement of the Vickers, its early employment was as a simple replacement and its control was kept centralised. But as more of these weapons became available their use became more widespread, leading to low-level experimentation occurring without any direction from GHQ or the War Office. Indeed the higher echelons of the BEF initially had little control or influence over these developments. Only when it was realised that these changes had led to irreversible changes did GHQ seek to capture these developments and institutionalise them in doctrine. By 1917 experienced officers were for the first time but not the last, reflecting that it was these developments which ‘gave rise to the saying so often heard during the Great War, “This is a Platoon Commander’s War!”’

It should be pointed out that the Lewis gun is just one example of technologies that were impacting on the BEF’s training and tactics. In 1916 and 1917 there were literally dozens of other technologies that were being exploited and that were driving change. The use of the humble hand grenade and rifle grenade also played their part in the growth of the platoon but within the division there were many others. Motorisation was gradually replacing horse-power and revolutionising battlefield logistics. The field artillery was becoming more accurate through the widespread use of field survey, calibration and meteorological data. The same guns were becoming more versatile through the use of different rounds and fuses to generate different battlefield effects. Although it was not until the Spring of 1917 that a safe instantaneous fuse—the 106 fuse—was fielded, it joined a growing number of new types of artillery rounds—non-fatal gas in September 1916, smoke in November 1916 and lethal gas in May 1917. By combining different rounds, including shrapnel, high explosive, smoke and chemical, and varying the intensity of the bombardment, the gunners could mix-and-match the effects of their fire. This allowed different artillery tactics and techniques to be perfected including wire-cutting, the creeping and box barrage, and, most important—accurate predictive fire. These changes were underpinned by the emergence of radio and exploiting air power for close air support, artillery direction and aerial photography. Outside of the division the development of British flash-spotting and sound-ranging techniques allowed the BEF to

gain the upper hand in the counter-battery battle. The tank was added to the combined-arms team and on the administrative front enormous advances were made in the medical sciences preventing disease and preserving manpower. All of these played a part in what was nothing short of a revolution in military affairs.\[49\]

### CONCLUSION

What does this snapshot of the 1st Australian Division tells about the role of technology, training and tactics on the Western Front in 1917. The first is that the BEF was wracked by several competing trends as it struggled to expand and master the challenges of trench warfare, and the 1st Division experienced the full force of these trends. When the 1st Division landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula its combat power was generated primarily by the rifles of its infantrymen and its commanders depended on them, their bayonets and little else to achieve a decision. Against a resolute defender, well dug-in, the result could only be bloody stalemate. In search of a solution commanders were forced to centralise scare resources to ensure better coordination but simultaneously it deprived units of their ability to generate firepower. Improvised expedients were tried but they failed because they could not tip the balance on their own in limited numbers. Until additional man-portable weapons could be developed and produced in sufficient quantity there was little the infantry could do for themselves. Rather they had to rely on the artillery to shepherd them across No Man’s Land.

The greatest initial tactical challenge the BEF faced was in its indirect fire support. Although the initial response to the lack of fire power had been to increase the divisional artillery establishment, it was soon realised that this response lacked flexibility. In the wake of the Battle of the Somme GHQ assessed that too much of the BEF’s field artillery was locked-up in the division. Experience had shown that attempting to mass guns for operations had ‘led to the divorce of the divisional artillery from its division being the rule rather than the exception’. To overcome this GHQ decided to reduce and standardise the divisional artillery establishment and thereby create a number of independent artillery brigades. These army brigades, along with the increasing number of medium and heavy artillery groups, could then be placed at the disposal of higher command and be deployed as needed without disrupting the internal economy of the divisions.\[50\]

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50. After this proposed reorganisation about one third of the British field artillery would be available to place under the command of the corps GOCR: CGS GHQ BEEGHQ BEEGHQ Memorandum OB/1866 to First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Armies, 16 November 1916, AWM27, item 303/35 Part 2.
Capitalising on the hard-learned lessons of 1916 the more astute commanders of the BEF would in 1917 devise a solution to the deadlock on the Western Front. The massing of the guns, generally under the control of the corps and army artillery staff, and sustained by better logistics, the BEF would undertake limited ‘bite and hold’ attacks to seize sections of the German line and then smash any counter-attacks under a deluge of shells. By Third Ypres the BEF’s progress toward the centralisation of its artillery reached its peak with most indirect fire support assets firmly under army and corps control.

Although the most dramatic and obvious changes in 1917 were in the artillery, there were equally important but quieter changes in the infantry. In 1914 the company was the tactical unit of the battalion but as early as 1915 this began to change and by the August offensive on Gallipoli there emerged a platoon organisation that was as much tactical as it was administrative. The firepower that was being devolved to the junior infantry commander also led to the development of new low-level tactics based around the platoon. By 1917 the platoon reached maturity as a fighting organisation, becoming one of the key building-blocks of the BEF’s new tactical doctrine. New infantry tactics combined with the additional and increasingly accurate and effective indirect firepower would eventually allow a return to manoeuvre on the battlefield. This certainly did not happen overnight, but by 1917 a combined arms revolution was well underway and leading to what Jonathon Bailey has described as the birth of modern warfare.\footnote{51}

In the midst this bloody revolution in military affairs (RMA)—an RMA Williamson Murray considers to be the RMA of the 20th century—the human element was crucial.\footnote{52} Not so much the individual courage of the front line digger, although that was of course still vital, but rather the intellectual and moral powers of commanders like Walker and his not-so-humble servant Blamey. Throughout the BEF in dozens of divisions like-minded professionals grappled with the implications of new technology, experimented with new tactics to exploit it and adapted the way they organised and trained their troops. It was not a neat process but war is never neat and often bloody. It was a process of adaptation and improvisation which was characterised by the competing trends—centralisation or decentralisation, concentration and diffusion, the specialist versus the generalist. By the end of 1917 they had ‘cracked the code’ and in the following year they would drive their opponents from the field.

‘The Canadians’, wrote British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, ‘played a part of such distinction [during the Battle of the Somme] that thenceforward they were marked out as storm troops; for the remainder of the war they were brought along to head the assault in one great battle after another. Whenever the Germans found the Canadian Corps coming into the line they prepared for the worst.’¹ This statement about the Canadian storm troopers nicely sums up the reputation of the Canadian Corps in the Great War. When British forces were supposedly mired in the mud, the Canadians were thrown into battle to deliver victory time and time again.

Lloyd George may have come to this judgement during the war, but one should not discount that he was fighting his own war of reputations in the 1930s when he penned his multi-volume memoirs from which the above observation originated, and at that time he was taking few prisoners among the British High Command.² In his bitter attacks on the generals—those dead and alive—it fitted his perception of the futile war effort on the Western Front to portray the tough Dominion soldiers as storm troops, especially in relation to British soldiers who never had a chance since they were led by donkeys.

This qualification is not meant to discount the combat effectiveness of the Canadian Corps, but rather to observe that this shock army of the British Expeditionary Force is, not surprisingly, viewed back through the victories of the last two years of the war, especially through the titanic battles of the Hundred Days, Passchendaele, and Vimy Ridge. Despite this string of victories, the Canadians had stumbled at times in their first two years on the Western Front as the four divisions grappled with the art of warfighting.³ Learning and processing tactical lessons on the Western Front was slow and painful. Despite some

3. For an examination of this uneven learning curve, see Tim Cook, At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916, Volume I (Viking, 2007).
severe setbacks on battlefields like Festubert in May 1915 and St Eloi in April 1916, the Canadians had exhibited tenacity during several engagements, but their role on the Somme, except for the capture of Courcellette on 15 September, was more often characterised by unimaginatively slogging forward through frontal assaults.

But the title of shock troops, if perhaps a stretch for 1915-16, better fits the campaigns of 1917. Here, the Canadians were engaged in three major set-piece battles at Vimy, Hill 70, and Passchendaele, as well as continuing to engage in minor operations, raiding, and actively holding the trenches. These latter minor operations had indeed forged a reputation among the Canadians for being particularly aggressive during the normal trench warfare operations along the Western Front. But the Canadians, like other formations on the Western Front, went through an active learning process. They paid for their failures and victories in blood, and slowly developed more effective warfighting tactics and doctrines that welded together new weapon systems.

The Canadian approach to battle focused on carefully prepared set-piece engagements. It was ‘not glamorous, but effective’. The Western Front indeed left little room for glamour. But the Canadians responded to this environment with a fighting system that was glamorous in its intensity and intricacy, as it focused on limited set-piece engagements, robust fighting units, and an understanding that the command and control problems that plague all forces could only be met with decentralisation and faith in junior soldiers. Good commanders and aggressive soldiers employed and refined their fighting tactics in the four major Canadian engagements that signposted the essential year of transformation. By the end of 1917, the Canadian Corps were indeed among the elite storm formations within the British Army.

The Canadians had first arrived on the Western Front in February 1915 under the command of Lieutenant-General E.A.H. Alderson. The Canadian Corps was formed half a year later in September 1915, with the addition of a second division. When Sir Julian Byng took over in May 1916, after Alderson was fired after the debacle of the St Eloi battle a month earlier, Byng had three divisions, and a fourth would be added at the end of the Battle of the Somme. The Canadian Corps remained four divisions strong for the rest of the war, and a fifth division was broken up for reinforcements in early 1918 to keep the over-sized corps up to strength.

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While the individual divisions did not differ much from the British until the last year of the war, the Canadian Corps was a special structure in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The Corps was viewed as the Dominion’s central contribution to the war effort. As such, it was Canada’s army in the field, and Canadian politicians and soldiers expected that it be kept together in a coherent formation. British corps were hollow shells, with divisions passing through them, shifting continuously depending on operational requirements. Lieutenant-General Ivor Maxse, one of the finest British generals of the war and an acknowledged expert trainer of his men, revealed the incoherent British policy: in a period of less than a year, 30 divisions had passed through his corps. In contrast, the Canadian Corps was a semi-permanent structure, and its four divisions fought together for most of the war under the corps commander. With the corps fluctuating between 85,000 and 100,000 men, it punched far above the weight of its four divisions, and above that of most British corps.

Canadian units almost always trained and fought together. Officers soon learned the idiosyncrasies of those in higher, lateral, or lower formations. The men who formed the Corps worked together for months and then years, many having come up through the original 1st Division, and all the while getting to know each other through cross-postings and by attending the same training schools. Brigadier-General Ox Webber, a professional British soldier who was the last GSO1 of the Canadian Corps, remarked: “The Canadian Corps was an organization. It had life; there was a family feeling present. British Corps was a machine to supply the necessary formations … the British Corps had no life.”

While it is important to note that the Canadian Corps could be a dysfunctional family that suffered its share of petty jealousies, weak officers, and ambivalent enlisted men, the corps structure was strong and sufficiently flexible to allow for divisions to instigate their own training, but also to benefit from the overall corps doctrine that pulled the best from British, French, and Canadian analysis.

Sir Julian Byng was the single most important figure in shaping the Canadians. An experienced cavalry general with royal connections, Byng was transferred to the Canadians to transform them after some of the failures in 1915-16. With the BEF and the Canadian Corps undergoing the painful post-battle analysis of what had happened to their fighting...

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formations on the Somme, Byng ordered every battalion, artillery and infantry brigade, and division to conduct courts of inquiry.\textsuperscript{11} Despite his reputation as being a ‘cheerfully unintellectual cavalryman’, Byng understood that his Canadians needed to improve to survive.\textsuperscript{12} Pre-battle preparation, the interaction of supporting arms, the usefulness of equipment in action, necessary improvement to tactics, the reason why communication had failed: all were queried and probed in the attempt to build upon success and reverse failure. This exchange of ideas within the corps was also supported by lessons circulating throughout the larger BEF that was undergoing its own gut-wrenching analysis. The period after the Somme would be the key pivotal moment in the Canadian Corps, and marked an important transformation.\textsuperscript{13}

The Somme had been a gunner’s battle, with massive artillery bombardments shattering the enemy lines. But the German infantry had proved their resilience time and time again, with deep dugouts providing protection and grim determination resulting in a robust defence. Faulty allied shells, poorly designed fuses that often failed to detonate shells, and infantry attacking over a wide front usually meant that bombardments of hundreds of thousands of shells did not usually destroy the enemy strongpoints that stretched back several kilometres, with trenches built into reverse slopes, protected by barbed wire, hardened machine-gun positions, and counter-attacking forces. The Somme proved that gunners would instead have to focus on suppressing enemy fire.

The introduction of the creeping barrage was an important step forward, and it fused the attack doctrine involving the infantry and artillery. The barrage would usually rest on an enemy position for a few minutes, and then lift forward in 100-yard jumps every few minutes, with the infantry eventually following it into the enemy lines. Instead of gunfire preceding movement, fire was now combined with movement. Yet having several hundred guns firing in unison on the same target and then moving forward at the same pace along broken terrain, with worn-out guns, faulty shells, and disruptive enemy fire, usually meant that shells dropped short and killed Canadians. As well, communication was so rudimentary that once a barrage started, it could not be called off, or brought back to deal with obstinate defenders.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} See the instructions for the inquiry and suggestions for areas of study: Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Records of the Department of Militia and Defence (hereafter RG 9), v. 4011, 17/1, G. 428, 3 November 1916.
\textsuperscript{12} Christopher Pugsley, ‘Learning from the Canadian Corps on the Western Front’, \textit{Canadian Military History} 15:1 (Winter 2006), 12.
STORM TROOPS

Even though forward defensive zones were erased by heavy shellfire, enemy artillery shells still wrought havoc on attacking forces passing over No Man’s Land or pre-registered fields of fire. Enemy guns also had to be suppressed. Larger-calibre guns, more shells, better fuses (especially the 106 fuse, which detonated shells on contact with wire instead of having them bury in the ground), improved intelligence-gathering systems—including aerial photography and scientific advancements like sound-ranging and flash-spotting—were employed and coordinated more effectively in the newly-created Canadian Corps Counter-Battery Office, headed by Colonel Andrew McNaughton. This new emphasis on locating, targeting, and suppressing enemy guns would pay dividends in the 1917 battles.  

If gunnery was essential, the introduction of the tank on the Somme had proved almost entirely useless in helping the infantry break into enemy defences, let alone break out of them into the rear areas beyond. The addition of heavy machine-gun units laying down tens of thousands of bullets in direct and indirect fire was more helpful, as well as harassing enemy communication trenches that were the main underground routes from front to rear. Counter-attacking troops using such routes were highly effective on the Somme. The Canadian and British units had found no consistent method yet to prepare for this onslaught that only gained in strength as the battle wore on, while the isolated attackers-turned-defenders lost men and used up precious ammunition and grenades while fighting over the bodies of their fallen comrades. These new machine-gun offered some hope of holding back the surging German forces.

‘It may be taken for granted that in attacking the front system of the enemy’s trenches the first three lines will be wiped out; the fourth may reach the enemy’s second line; the fifth may take it.’ Such tactics and doctrinal predictions were less than inspiring for the man at the sharp end. Infantry and machine-gun units had taken the brunt of the fighting on the Somme, suffering 90% of the 24,000 casualties. With the artillery often failing to destroy enemy strongpoints, the infantry had been left to push their way forward on their own. The fighting sub-unit of the platoon was the key to manoeuvring on the battlefield, and its four sections of about twelve men were at the pointiest part of the sharp end. After

the Somme, Arthur Currie, commander of the 1st Division, was sent by Byng to examine the French and British fighting experiences. His report echoed that of others in the BEF that the platoon structure had to be reorganised to create a more balanced unit capable of manoeuvre on the battlefield. It also had to be equipped with more robust firepower.

Reforms over the winter of 1916, incorporating lessons from BEF-wide doctrinal pamphlets like S.S. 143, *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, and S.S. 144, *The Normal Formation for the Attack*, plus the internal evaluations carried out by the Canadians, resulted in the reorganised infantry platoon. Riflemen, bombers, rifle-grenadiers, and Lewis machine-gun sub-units would now give the infantry more flexibility in attacking strongpoints. Grenades could be lobbed into positions while Lewis gunners laid down suppressing fire. The riflemen were to advance on the flanks, or through the gaps, to attack positions from enfilade. It was never that easy, as there were often no gaps within the interlocking defensive fields of fire, but infantrymen had a more flexible organisation and system of weapons which better allowed them to fight their way forward when the artillery barrage broke down, as it often did.

‘It is not too much to say that this is the Platoon Commander’s war’, observed one headquarters document at the end of December 1916. This was a sea-change in the thinking in the hierarchical army. Since the first months of the war, but culminating on the Somme, it had been proven that company commanders could not possibly coordinate the actions of some 150 to 200 men in four platoons. Attempts to do so only resulted in removing all opportunity of exploiting success through individual initiative. If combat platoons and sections could not be controlled by voice command, the men in them had to be empowered and allowed to fight their own battles. The answer was to reshape the doctrine and provide more leadership and flexibility among junior officers and senior NCOs.

Much of the training over the winter of 1916 was devoted to breaking the doctrinal constraints that only officers could lead. Sir Julian Byng was serious about decentralising the command structure, informing his privates and NCOs that despite the confusion on the battlefield, they could not wait for officers to give orders since they might not be alive to do so. Success was in their hands; they must keep going forward and carry out their mission-orientated goals. In the words of Byng, ‘In an emergency the man who does something is sometimes wrong; but the man who does nothing is always wrong’.

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18. LAC, MG 30 E100, Sir Arthur Currie papers (hereafter CP), v. 35, file 159, Notes on French Attacks Northeast of Verdun in October and December 1916.
While commanders like Currie and McNaughton studied the lessons from the sharp end, much of the running of the corps, devising of new training, and assistance in helping Byng carry out his reforms, was done by staff officers. In early 1917, corps chief of staff was forty-two-year-old Percy Pollexfen de Blaquiere Radcliffe. While more than a few Canadians probably snickered at his ‘royal-sounding’ name, he was a good gunner with a sharp mind for planning intricate operations. Byng trusted Radcliffe completely. The two worked hand-in-hand to fashion operational plans and orders. Professionally-trained soldiers like George Farmer, ‘Tim’ Harington, Cecil Romer, Alan Brooke (one of three future chiefs of the imperial general staff who served with the Canadians—the other two were Sir John Dill and Edmund Ironside), and Ox Webber took the grand vision of commanders like Byng and Currie, ensuring that their orders were carried out: from planning to training, from logistics to getting men to the battlefield on time.

Lieutenant-Colonel D.E. Macintyre, who would rise through the ranks and become Canada’s first divisional GSO1, noted frankly that Canada ‘should be forever grateful’ for the services of these influential British professionals. By apprenticing to professionals, the Canadians learned the ropes, eventually moving into these staff positions. This ‘Canadianisation’ process was important, but it could not be rushed. Divisional commanders like Richard Turner and Arthur Currie were deeply nationalistic, but both made strong cases to keep experienced Imperial officers until the Canadians were ready. By the summer of 1917, there were fourteen Canadian general staff officers and twelve Imperial in the Canadian field formations; there were eighteen Canadian administrative staff officers and only one Imperial; and there were nine Canadian brigade majors and five Imperials.

These figures reveal that the Canadians benefited from fighting within the BEF. Good staff officers and fine commanders, evolved tactics and doctrine, a nearly unique structure in the Canadian Corps, and some hard knocks in the first two years of the war, were an important impetus in preparing the Canadians for the difficult battles of 1917.

As the Canadians were hammering out a new doctrine, engaging in new training, and establishing new organisations, they were still holding the line on the Western Front. The year of 1916 had been a bloody one for the Allies and the Germans, and few saw any end
to the fighting in 1917. While there would be no major offensive on the Western Front until the April Battle of Arras, the Canadians unleashed fierce trench raids.

The Canadians had earned a reputation as elite troops for their raiding in the previous year, and many soldiers and subsequent historians suggested that the Canadians pioneered these dark arts. They did not, but they helped elevate it. Raiding was an effective means to hone battlecraft skills among the troops. From November 1916 to the end of March 1917, the Canadian Corps launched 60 raids, 48 of which managed to enter the German trenches. Some 338 prisoners were taken and the Canadians were justifiably proud of their aggressive manner. The Canadians were so brash that they even carried out daylight raids, which took the Germans completely by surprise. Intricately planned, with artillery and machine-gun bombardments, these operations were directed against the enemy to kill, gather information, and win control of No Man’s Land. The Canadians had a number of high profile raids that were brought to the attention of the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, and he ordered that other units emulate the Canadians. While these operations provided for an ongoing ability to sharpen the planning that was required in large-scale operations, they could indeed be wasteful.

Much of the raiding on the Canadian front was directed against the outlying trenches around Vimy Ridge. The Germans had captured the seven-kilometre-long formidable ridge in the first months of the war and held it tenaciously against at least three sustained Allied offensives. Some 300,000 Germans, French and British troops had been lost in the various attacks and counter-attacks on the ridge, and its pockmarked western slope was now a wasteland of mud, craters, and unburied corpses. But within this open graveyard, the Germans had spent more than two years fortifying the ridge with deep trenches and dugouts, barbed wire, and machine-gun nests.

The Canadian assault would be a part of a larger British offensive, which in turn was to support the main French attack to the south. Haig had this Arras offensive imposed on him by his dominant ally, the French, but also by his prime minister, who had little faith in his general. It would result in a long, unpopular, and costly series of battles. The Canadians were on the northern part of the line against the most prominent feature in northern France. Members of the French general staff, upon hearing of the order for the

27. Cook, At the Sharp End, 294.
Canadian Corps to take the fortress, could barely hide their contempt, suggesting the colonials would have almost no chance of success.\textsuperscript{29}

Preparation was the key to victory. On the Somme, the Canadians had little time to prepare for their battles. Now, however, Byng ordered a full survey of the terrain through aerial photographs and intelligence patrols. Some 40,000 maps were issued to the troops to orientate them with the ground. Units practised behind the lines, attacking over prepared terrain that matched what they would find on their sector of the front.

The pre-battle planning would be an important key to victory: ‘our fights are won or lost before we go into them’, exclaimed Brigadier Victor Odlum.\textsuperscript{30} He was overstating the case but adequate preparation gave the infantry a fighting chance against the fortified positions in depth and bristling with machine-guns. The digging of twelve underground tunnels, some stretching back over a kilometre, allowed the Canadian infantry to escape the sweeping enemy fire during the forming up for battles, and helped to close the gap when the lead formations ‘hit the bags’.

The Canadians were given an enormous complement of guns, machine-guns, and mortars to support the men at the sharp end. Although the Canadians were under observation from the Germans on the hill, the allied guns ringed the battlefield in a giant arc. More than half of the 983 guns were British, Australian, or other Dominion forces. The preliminary bombardment by about half the batteries began on 20 March and lasted for thirteen punishing days. Over 200,000 18-pounder shells would be fired, as well as another 143,000 larger calibre ammunition.\textsuperscript{31} The bombardment focused on enemy fortifications, barbed wire, and lines of communication. One by one the enemy’s positions were destroyed. During the last week leading to D-Day, the shellfire doubled in intensity and weight, and even then dozens of guns were held back for the creeping barrage that would also accompany the opening assault. On the Vimy front, the ratio of heavy siege guns per yardage of front was increased by a factor of three in comparison to that of the Somme half a year earlier.\textsuperscript{32}

While it was essential to soften up the enemy defences, the enemy guns also had to be silenced. Scientific gunnery was essential and Andrew McNaughton played a key role as the new counter-battery officer. McNaughton and his staff relied on intelligence,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30}LAC, MG 30 E300, Victor Odlum papers, v. 21, Odlum to Nelson, 4 November 1917.
\item \textsuperscript{31}For the Corps’ fire plan, see LAC, Digitised War Diary, Royal Artillery, Canadian Corps, April 1917, Canadian Corps, Artillery Instruction for the Capture of Vimy Ridge, Appendix G.1.
\end{itemize}
aerial photographs, unremitting study, and scientific principles to destroy or reduce the effectiveness of enemy gunners. The counter-battery force was extremely successful, locating 83% of the enemy’s 89 guns and a few additional mortars, knocking out dozens of them before the battle, and then another 47 after zero hour on 9 April.33

After weeks of pounding the enemy lines, more than twenty Canadian battalions from all four Canadian divisions lined up for the first-wave of assaults on 9 April. The Byng Boys, as the Canadians liked to call themselves, advanced at 5:30 am. Behind a devastating creeping barrage that tore through the enemy lines, methodically jumping forward a hundred yards every three minutes, some units barely encountered the enemy, merely marching over the shattered ground. Other formations along the ridge had to fight nearly every yard of the advance.34 It was a shock and awe operation, but there were no bloodless victories on the Western Front.

The harsh fighting crept into the 10th, when most of the ridge was finally in Canadian hands. The Canadian Corps owned the shattered ridge by the 12th, but 3508 Canadians were killed, and another 7000 were wounded. In fact, the approximately 10,500 casualties were spread over four days of battle, with about 8000 on the 9th, making the fighting at Vimy far more intense and costly than the slaughter of the Somme that accounted for 24,000 casualties but was spread over three months.35 While more Canadians were committed to this battle than any single engagement on the Somme, even new training, discipline, and tactics revealed that when forces won on the Western Front, they lost.

The Canadians had solidified their reputation as dogged fighters, with a significant victory that redeemed the offensive to the south, as the British success ground to a halt after initial deep penetrations, and the French attack infamously was shot to pieces, eventually leading to mutiny among much of the French fighting forces. The Canadian operation was a significant tactical victory, driving the Germans from their strongpoint and offering a much-needed publicity coup for the Allies. But it should be recognised, as many Canadians did at the time, that the British had ably supported the Canadians. The battle could not have been won without the Empire’s logistical and artillery support, not to mention contributing an attacking brigade on the 2nd Division’s front. The victorious Canadian

34. See the four chapters on the Canadian divisional attacks in Hayes et al. (eds), *Vimy Ridge*.
35. For the 8000 figure on the 9th, see LAC, RG 9, III, v. 3846, 51/7, Notes on the Vimy Ridge Operation by General Radcliffe, 34.
commander, Sir Julian Byng, paid a high tribute to Sir Henry Horne, commander of the First Army: ‘Horne has been more than helpful and backed me up in everything.’

If this full backing has been relegated to the dustbin of history over the years in the throes of elevating the Battle of Vimy Ridge to iconic status and a milestone in the evolution of Canada’s slow march to nationhood, the historian must temper such heady nationalist claims. But there is no need to downplay the significance of Vimy, both for the larger war effort and the maturation process of the Canadians in particular. Vimy would be the turning point in the war for the Canadian Corps: the hinge on which it moved from an amateur to a professional war-fighting formation. After Vimy, remembered E.S. Russenholt, ‘there was a feeling that we had mastered this job and that we were the finest troops on earth’.

Battlefield success could be attributed to a number of factors. The time for preparation had been essential and it had been used wisely. Without the advanced training of the infantry, as well as empowering the infantry with the right weapons, to create a powerful and flexible fighting system, the Canadians would have been marching straight to the gallows. The artillery barrage had been devastating, and the counter-battery work essential for suppressing enemy fire. New tactics like cycling units through the increasingly shot-up spearhead forces allowed for shorter bounds to keep the momentum of the attack. The terrain had still favoured the defenders, but once the ridge was lost, it was almost impossible to recapture, due to the steep drop on the eastern side.

After the success of Vimy, Byng was promoted to command the Third Army. His protégé, Arthur Currie, who had proven himself as a brigade and divisional commander, was given the corps in June 1917. But Currie was ready for command, and he had a methodical approach to battle. Learning from Byng, Currie had been trained to demand thorough planning and preparation, and had already revealed himself to be morally courageous as he had many times demanded more guns or more time from his superiors to fully support the infantry at the sharp end.

In the summer of 1917, the Canadian Corps was ordered to capture Lens as part of a strategic diversion to draw German reserves away from Haig’s Flanders offensive. An ugly little town at the centre of the coal-mining area of France, Lens was pitted with enormous mines, slagheaps and tailings. These were ideal defensive positions and had been heavily fortified by the Germans. As well, the city and the surrounding countryside were in ruins, providing good cover for defenders.

37. Transcripts to the 1964 CBC Radio program, Flanders’ Fields, episode 9, p. 30.
Sir Henry Horne, the general officer commander of the First Army, ordered Currie to plan for a frontal assault into Lens. Currie might rightly have been nervous in orchestrating his first major battle, but after surveying the front Currie felt it would be a costly attack, more likely to attrite Canadian attackers than the dug-in defenders. ‘If we were going to fight at all’, Currie told Horne, ‘let us fight for something worth having.’ Horne, who had a reputation for caring for his men, sensibly agreed. Instead of a frontal attack into the low-lying parts of the city, Currie consulted his divisional commanders and planned to take Hill 70, a desolate, blasted chalky hill, mined and bristling with machine-gun strongpoints. The British had attacked it as part of their failed Loos offensive in September 1915, but the Germans had driven them off it. Hill 70 overlooked and outflanked the city of Lens to the south, and it was the key to victory. Currie knew the Germans would not relinquish it without a fight, but he planned for it and would make them pay if they tried to recapture it.

While Currie was preparing his operation, the assault battalions practised behind the lines. Vimy had shown that success rested on junior officers and NCOs knowing the terrain and their role in the battle. Practice grounds, map-readings, and lectures were given to the infantry before they were unleashed on the battlefield. This training occurred throughout July. The 25th Battalion, for example, had an astonishing twenty days to rehearse their part in the attack.

Despite this preparation, there was no chance of surprising the enemy. German intelligence had already determined the Canadians were opposite them and they had long been identified as an assault force, ‘whom the British Higher Command always employ for the most difficult and costly fighting’. The Germans shelled day and night, but torrents of rain affected their visibility. The rain would prove disastrous on the Passchendaele battlefield to the north, but Currie, with more limited objectives, was able to delay his assault, pushing back the operation until he was satisfied that all the preparations had been made.

Crash bombardments over the next two weeks by both sides took a toll on all within artillery range. Canadian Corps siege guns fired at targets of opportunity, and always to suppress the enemy from repairing wrecked trenches and destroyed barbed wire. However,

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38. LAC, MG 30 E100, Sir Arthur Currie papers (hereafter CP), v. 13, file 39, Currie to Ralston, 9 February 1928.
40. LAC, RG 9, v. 4693, 53/10, 25th Battalion report.
41. LAC, RG 9, v. 4066, 11/10, Extracts from German Wireless, August 1917.
42. LAC, Digitised War Diary, Canadian Corps, Appendix III/I-III/5, Summary of Operations, 2 August 1917.
there was a shortage of field guns, and the necessary preparatory barrage to soften up enemy strongpoints and clear wire took more time than planned since many of the Canadian Corps’ newest guns had been moved north to support the Passchendaele offensive. The Canadians were left with older, more decrepit guns, with barrels worn down and melted from prolonged firing. The bad weather also hindered Canadian gunners in targeting their objectives, although the counter-battery fire was continually improving within the system of scientific gunnery and intelligence gathering. Assisted by aircraft from the Royal Flying Corps, the artillery had neutralised 40 out of an estimated 102 enemy batteries by the time the infantry went over the top.43

The key to Currie’s plan was biting off the hill and then holding it against counter-attack. The latter part of the plan would be accomplished through the establishment of a kill zone. Upon reaching their objectives, the infantry were to dig in to the chalk soil and wait for the inevitable German counter-attacks. Nine brigades of artillery consisting of more than 200 guns and 160 machine-guns, as well riflemen, grenadiers, and mortar teams, would be brought to bear on the killing ground in front of the newly-captured positions. If Currie’s men bit off the hill, the Germans would be bled white in recapturing it.

A feint to the south and active British shelling to the north confused the Germans as to the true direction of the attack, but they were ready all along the front when the barrage lit off at 4:25 am. More than five thousand Canadians in ten battalions attacked behind a barrage from over 200 artillery pieces. Ahead of the barrage, heavy guns dropped a second jumping barrage, while ahead of this in a third barrage, the heaviest siege guns focused on strongpoints, communication trenches, and suspected battery positions.

Throughout the 15th, the Canadians captured and dug-in to their objectives. Like at Vimy, new units were cycled through the battle to push on to the second and third objectives. And then they waited for the German response. Over the next four days the Germans launched 21 counter-attacks in wave assaults. Most were torn apart by shells and small-arms fire. The Canadians had achieved a tactical Verdun-like situation, where the Germans were forced to counter-attack into the face of massed fire.

Although the Germans retained Lens, by the end of the battle some 25,000 Germans were killed or wounded in the storm of shell and bullets. ‘The fighting at Lens cost us, once again, the expenditure of considerable numbers of troops who had to be replaced’, wrote General Hermann von Kuhl. ‘The whole previously worked out plan for relieving the fought-out troops in Flanders had been wrecked.’44 Seven German divisions were

mauled. Sir Douglas Haig told Currie he believed Hill 70 to be ‘one of the finest minor operations of the war’. Despite the overwhelming Canadian victory, 9198 Canadians would be listed as killed, wounded, and missing from 15-25 August, and almost another 2000 Canadians were added to the casualty lists in the opening two weeks of the month in preparation for the battle. The Hill 70 operation was second only to Vimy as the largest Canadian Corps undertaking to that point in the war.

Although Haig’s Flanders campaign had been delayed by the Arras offensive that dragged on longer than he wanted, and was far more costly in men and materiel, the Third Battle of Ypres, or Passchendaele as it is better known, had been launched on 31 July 1917. The rain started on the afternoon of the first day of battle, and it continued for much of the next four months. The million-shell bombardments that now preceded all major offensives in order to destroy enemy fortifications or suppress enemy fire also shattered the terrain and reduced the battlefield to a quagmire of glutinous sludge and water-filled shell holes. With a pulverised irrigation system, the heaviest rain in years had nowhere to drain, and the water therefore lay pooled in the shell craters. With each offensive, the British pounded the Germans, but also mulched the ground over which their infantry had to advance. When they tried to attack without artillery barrages, they were massacred. There was nothing to do but inch forward.

Only detailed preparation and planning might deliver victory on this unimaginable battlefield of mud and unburied corpses. Currie sent out senior staff officers to survey the ground. The artillery and machine-gun positions indicated on tattered, stained maps often simply did not exist, with the Canadians left guessing as to where they had been swallowed by the mud. Those that could be found were in poor condition. Because it was almost impossible to move the guns in the mud, the Canadians took over the Australian guns, which were heavily worn. Of the 550 heavy and light artillery pieces, only 290 could be located or were in working order. Currie waded through the mud to check himself and then demanded more guns from army headquarters. Haig ensured that Currie got what he needed. Although the Canadians would have 587 available guns, no more than about 60% of them could be employed at any one time since there was simply not enough solid ground from which to lay down fire.

The terrain influenced Currie’s operation. The lessons of Hill 70 were of little use, and this would instead by a series of limited attacks. The Canadians had enormous firepower at their disposal and like previous battles the enemy front line and rear areas would be softened up by shellfire. Gunner Andrew McNaughton estimated that the entire expenditure of artillery in three years of the South African War was some 273,000 rounds, weighing roughly 2800 tons; at Passchendaele, the Canadians would fire this amount in two days. Massive artillery firepower would allow for bite and hold operations to pull the Corps from the mud at the base of the ridge and on to slightly drier land. But for the poor bloody infantry surveying the ridge from their mushy rifle pits, there did not appear much to bite.

Adequate preparation was the key to the Canadian Corps’ attack doctrine, and it was no different here in the bog. Thousands of infantry and pioneer units worked night after night laying duckboard roads, digging new gun pits, and stockpiling ammunition. All the while the Germans deluged the front in shrapnel, high explosives, and poison gas, as their doctrine advocated strangling an attack before it started. In the ten days before the first phase of the battle, Canadian labour groups suffered more than 1500 casualties. Currie lamented the losses, but the logistical work had to be pushed through ‘at all costs’.51

Despite the conditions, the Canadians were ready and with surprisingly high morale. ‘We thought of ourselves as a special combat group’, recounted infantryman Arthur Hickson.52 The Canadians attacked in four limited operations in late October and early November. The 26 October assault was a shallow push, but it achieved its goal of pulling the Canadians out of the muck at the base of Passchendaele Ridge. Although the Canadians had been supported by their creeping barrage and accurate counter-battery fire, the fighting on the 26th, and over the next three days had been costly with some 2791 casualties. That was not a terrible sacrifice for a two-division attack, but it was spread, for the most part, among seven infantry battalions, each with an average strength of only 600.

The second phase of the operation was launched on 30 October, and from a wider, dryer base. But this too was a limited bite: six first-wave battalions would advance on a front of 3000 metres, to a depth of about 600 metres. But they would be facing some of the most difficult terrain on the ridge, including the strongpoints of Bellevue Spur, Crest Farm, and the Woodland Plantations. These areas were flooded and protected by dozens of

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52. Arthur O. Hickson, As It Was Then (Wolfville, NS: Acadia University, 1988), 58.
53. LAC, RG 24, v. 1810, file GAQ 1-6, Statement of Casualties at Passchendaele.
machine-gun nests and cement pillboxes. The Canadians went forward behind a powerful barrage. It was grim work, but position after position was snuffed out in harsh fighting. The Canadians suffered close to 1500 casualties, but had captured much of the ridge.

The third phase of the battle, on 6 November, would aim to overrun what was left of the village. The fighting season was winding down and German morale was low. When the attack went in on the 6th, a good barrage, followed by fresh Canadian units from the 1st and 2nd Divisions, crashed through the German lines. One enemy prisoner testified that ‘the Canadians came over practically in their own barrage and attacked so suddenly that they had [no] opportunity to use their machine-guns’.54 It must have seemed that way to some defenders, but many positions held out all along the front. Behind stiff fighting, the Canadians captured Passchendaele village and dug in. Over the next week, the Canadian gunners would fire off the tens of thousands of shells to both hold the rubble and expand the Canadian front to make it more secure on the 10th, after which Haig finally closed down the campaign. Some 16,000 Canadians were killed or wounded, adding to the British butcher’s bill of a quarter million.

Over a thirty-day period, records show that the Canadian gunners fired an astonishing 1,453,056 shells in support of the operations.55 This was indeed a storm of steel. But shells were not enough for victory in the mud. Time and time again, the Canadian infantry were forced to attack and counter-attack against enemy defenders when the barrage broke down or failed to destroy and even suppress enemy fire. Since Vimy, the basic infantry assault doctrine revolved around mutually supporting platoons advancing in fire and movement tactics, where Lewis gunners, riflemen, and grenadiers overpowered opposition by flanking manoeuvres. But there was no homogeneity to individual Canadian assaults, and some divisions, brigades, and battalions stacked a heavy density of infantry to yardage of front, while others planned for timed reinforcements to carry through.56 The Canadian Corps was a homogenous formation, but its sub-units often acted and reacted differently to the fighting at the sharp end.

Unlike Hill 70, the Arras battles, and Vimy, at Passchendaele the Canadians could only prepare for counter-attacks by keeping their own forces close to the front. Both sides suffered under terrible conditions, with lack of ammunition and jammed weapons often determining the fate of men and formations. Passchendaele, unlike previous operations,

54. LAC, RG 9, v. 4816, Canadian Corps Summary of Intelligence, 7 November 1917.
55. LAC, RG 24, v. 1831, file GAQ 8/7, Canadian Corps Ammunition Expenditure.
was also a hurried campaign, where the Canadians had far less time to prepare for each phase of the assault. The limited set-piece battles reflected this compressed planning stage, as well as the debilitating effects of the terrain, but victory had been attained within an increased tempo of operations. Despite these changes from 1916 to 1917, Currie put the credit squarely on those at the sharp end: ‘the fighting spirit of the men, tempered by discipline, developed by training, and enhanced by the confidence in themselves and their officers created a year of unbroken success’.  

The Canadian Corps had delivered victory in three successive, if different, battles. At the core of the Canadian way of battle was close artillery and infantry cooperation, supported by detailed planning and preparation. When these set-piece operations broke down, as they generally did, the reforms to infantry, both through reorganisation, rearming and empowering lower ranks to drive forward in battle, provided the tools to deliver victory. But there were other factors that should be addressed, even if they are harder to draw a definitive impact on operational effectiveness.

The structural advantage of the Corps, as well as the ability of the Canadians to make organisational changes within their homogenous corps, was remarked upon by officer and men at the time as being a critical difference between the Corps and other British formations. The four Canadian divisions were almost always up to strength due to an increasingly efficient reinforcement system, and the Canadian Corps in 1918 would have more guns and machine-guns per capita than any other British formation of its size.  

Strong and open-minded commanders, supported by efficient professional staff officers, provided important leadership at the top.

One should also not discount the soldiers at the sharp end, who were motivated for battle. The Canadians may not have been the wildmen of the north, or composed solely of voyageurs and cowboys, as they and others claimed, but they sometimes liked to think that they were. The Canadian reputation for fierceness in raiding and in taking no prisoners were attributes that could have been applied to other elite forces, but certainly Canadians embraced this reputation.  

Brooke Claxton, a gunner whose wartime experience transformed him into a Canadian nationalist, keenly felt the difference between Canadian and British troops: ‘We get into a hole & our feeling is “come on boys, this—thing is a hole. We’ve got to get into action as soon as possible so let’s get it out and get to bed” &
everyone jumps & pulls & heaves and uses the brain. The Imperial says “fuck the fucking thing. I’m going to fucking well stay in the bloody hole.” This was no doubt unfair, as we know there were some good British soldiers and formations, but the Canadians often saw themselves as something different, and this sense of distinctiveness sometimes involved disparagement of the British.

While there is evidence of such remarks from the lowliest private to corps commander Currie of British formations not up to the task of fighting, the Canadian Corps was deeply supported by the British. From staff officers to corps commander Byng, from the logistical support that allowed the Canadians to focus on being a teeth formation, to the ongoing artillery, mortar, and infantry support, both as units attached to the corps or supporting on the flanks, the Canadians fought as part of the BEF, and benefited immeasurably from its association.

National armies made up of hundreds of thousands of individuals do and say many things about comrades-in-arms, but Canadian soldiers at the time, and chest-thumping nationalistic writers since then, might have been better to pause on the anecdote supplied by combat veteran E.S. Russenholt. The 44th Battalion encountered the haggard, broken remains of an Imperial regiment that had been fighting for several days, and all the while under heavy artillery fire during the 1918 March Offensive:

A 44th officer, with the thoughtless joviality of the newcomer, asks a stalwart Imperial Sergeant, ‘What became of your infantrymen. Did they all run away?’ Quietly the Tommy points up to the crest of the hill where the torn and blackened post line shows on the skyline, saying ‘You’ll find most of ’em up on that there ’ill, sir?’ Hastily, the Canadian officer assures the Britisher that he will take his word for it.

National rivalries were important and to be expected, but not always fair. Not all British troops were gap-toothed, malnourished lads from London or Manchester slums. Although the four Canadian, five Australian and one New Zealand division totalled ten strong divisions, Haig had 48 other British divisions by early 1918. Most were hard-hitting forces that delivered victory time and time again in the coming months, although its worth remembering that the Canadians could draw their impressive record back a full year to April 1917.

In assessing Canadian combat effectiveness in 1917, one must also account for how the terrain played an essential role in the three major Canadian battles of 1917. Vimy Ridge was a devastating obstacle, but once it was lost to the Germans it was nearly impossible to recapture. British formations attacking to the south during the Arras offensive had no such protection and suffered from fierce counter-attacks. At Hill 70, the Canadians employed an innovative plan of capturing the high ground and using it to draw the enemy into a kill zone. And, of course, at Passchendaele the ground almost entirely dictated the tempo of operations.

The combat effectiveness of the German troops opposite the Canadians remains an important gap in our understanding, and in any final assessment of the Canadians. Some of the German units at Vimy were not good, others were elite Prussian Guards; at Hill 70, there were divisions that again ranged from mediocre to strong, although they showed remarkable discipline in their relentless gut-wrenching counter-attacks. At Passchendaele, the Canadians arrived at the end of a long and brutal campaign and some of the German divisions faced were low in strength, if still high in machine-gunners.

Byng’s Corps had become Currie’s Corps by the mid-point in 1917, but it relied heavily on the set-piece battle for victory. Currie wrote after Vimy: ‘The greatest lesson to be learned from these operations is this: if the lessons of the War have been thoroughly mastered, if the Artillery preparation and support is good; if our Intelligence is properly appreciated; there is no position that cannot be wrestled from the enemy by well-disciplined, well-trained and well-led troops attacking on a sound plan.’ Currie alluded to several battle-winning factors that had become part of the Canadian attack doctrine in 1917. This year was the crucible of battle. The Canadians would continue to move along multiple learning curves during the fighting in 1918. Additional organisational changes, the decentralisation of command that was needed to combat the ever present support problem of control in a war fought in the infancy of wireless radio, improved logistical support, man-management, training, and a steady flow of reinforcements were all essential in driving the Canadians forward. The Canadian Corps, like all formations, continued to learn its lessons the hard way, in what Noel Birch, one of the British Army’s great gunners of the war, noted presciently as ‘the pitiless school of war’. While it was a terrible school, after a long maturation process and support from their allies, the Canadian Corps embraced the title of shock troops.

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63. LAC, RG 9, v. 4014, 25/2, Appreciation of the Enemy’s Defences and Disposition around Hill 70, 19 July 1917.
64. CWM, Sir Arthur Currie papers, 58A 1.59.4, 1st Canadian Division’s Report on Vimy and Subsequent Fighting, 9 April–5 May 1917.
Masterpiece or Massacre: The New Zealand Division and Two Battles of 1917

Glyn Harper

For the New Zealand Division 1917 was a crucial year. Brought up to full strength after its severe bleeding on the Somme in September 1916 and after spending many months training the large number of reinforcements, the New Zealand Division was involved in three set-piece battles and two minor actions during the year. Prior to the first military engagement of 1917 the New Zealand Division was in the peak of condition. At the end of the year after suffering its worst-ever military disaster the Division was a spent force incapable of further military action. This paper examines the first and last of these set-piece battles and offers some explanation for their vastly different outcomes.

THE MASTERPIECE: MESSINES JUNE 1917

As a preliminary to the launch of the British Expeditionary Force’s (BEF) main offensive for 1917 the Messines Ridge was to be captured. This ridgeline ran for nearly ten kilometres from St Yves in the south to just beyond Wytschaete. This would secure the southern flank of the Ypres offensive planned later in the year as well as ejecting the Germans from a vital piece of high ground thus denying them observation over the potential battlefield.

Responsibility for mounting the attack at Messines was assigned to General Herbert Plumer’s Second Army which had spent many months planning and preparing it. Despite his unmilitary appearance Plumer was one of the most able generals in the BEF and this operation involved several innovative features. For a start the objectives were strictly limited in what Plumer’s colleague General Henry Rawlinson called a ‘bite and hold’ operation. Capture of the ridgeline was the ultimate prize; there was to be no attempt at breaking through the German lines. Artillery support, upon which success of the operation depended, was to be overwhelming: more than 2000 guns of which a third were heavy and medium. The American military theorist Stephen Biddle has calculated that the ten-day artillery bombardment that preceded the infantry attack on 7 June was ‘of literally atomic magnitude’ with more explosive power than a US W48 tactical nuclear warhead dumped...
on every mile of the German frontline trenches. The infantry from the nine divisions involved in this attack, and with three more in reserve, were both well trained and moved into location early so that most commenced the attack well rested. Railways had been constructed right up to the start line to ensure adequate logistical support throughout the operation. All preparations had been made under cover of darkness so as to preserve the element of surprise. Then there was the knockout blow. Twenty-one mine shifts had been sunk deep under the German lines and filled with more than a million pounds of high explosive. Their detonation would signal the start of the attack. As the Australian official historian, Charles Bean, commented on Messines: ‘Never had a big British operation been prepared in such detail.’

The New Zealand Division had a key role in this attack. As a result of being involved in only minor actions since leaving the Somme in October 1916 and being able to train those formations not holding the front-line trenches the Division was in fine form. In April 1917 the various artillery and infantry brigades underwent, in turn, twelve days of intensive training for their roles in forthcoming offensive. The history of the New Zealand Division records of this training:

… nothing was left undone to achieve realism. The ground at the training area happened to conform with the actual position to be assaulted, and replicas of the whole German trenches and our assembly ones were cut out a foot deep to scale. In these, battalions and brigades rehearsed the delicate operations of the assembly and attack, and attained the invaluable certainty of purpose. The final full-dress rehearsals were witnessed and criticized by the Second Army Commander and his Staff.

The training for Messines included testing tactics for open warfare and for obtaining the maximum firepower from the recent reorganisation of platoons into specialised sections of riflemen, Lewis gunners, bombers and rifle bombers. As a result the historian Christopher Pugsley believes that the New Zealand Division was ‘at its peak’ for Messines. He writes that 'the combination of enthusiasm, esprit de corps and training reached its high point for this battle'.

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In II Anzac Corps’ sector the New Zealand Division was in the centre between the 3rd Australian Division on the right and the British 25th Division on the left. Its role included the capture of the heavily fortified Messines village upon which the whole Army plan depended. Once the village was taken the 4th Australian Division could pass through it on the way to the final objective, a line about a mile beyond the crest. At 3:10 am on the morning of 7 June the mines went up (only nineteen of them exploded) and a colossal barrage over a kilometre deep crashed down on the German defences. The noise from the explosion was distinctly heard as far away as the United Kingdom and an observatory on the Isle of Wight registered it on its seismograph. The war correspondent Philip Gibbs described it as:

The most diabolical splendour I have ever seen. Out of the dark ridges of Messines and Wytschaete and that ill-famed Hill 60 there gushed out and up enormous volumes of scarlet flame from the exploding mines and of earth and smoke all lighted up by the flame spilling over into mountains of fierce colour, so that the countryside was illuminated by red light. A German officer on the receiving end of this ‘diabolical splendour’ recorded this vivid account of the event and its effect on his battalion:

In the front line the relief was in full swing: when suddenly, at 4.00 am, there was an almighty roar and the earth began to quake and everything flew off the chairs: explosion! Attack! Both officers and men poured out of the entrance into the open air. An awe-inspiring and appalling sight met their eyes. The hills from Wijtschate to Messines were enveloped in a great sea of flames. Fourteen fiery volcanoes and masses of earth erupted vertically into the sky colouring it a blood red. Then the great masses of earth crashed back down to the ground and, simultaneously, drum fire of an unprecedented violence crashed down. Time passed worryingly then, at about 5.00 am a runner arrived from the front, with dreadful news: ‘3rd Battalion Bavarian Infantry Regiment 17 has been blown sky high.’

Many other German battalions on the ridge suffered a similar fate.

Immediately following this eruption the infantry from the nine assault divisions moved off in the semi-darkness and advanced into the smoke and dust-cloud that hung over the ridge. Moving behind a protective artillery barrage they occupied the Messines

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6. Quoted in ibid.
Ridge almost unopposed. So effective was the British artillery’s counter-battery fire that it was ten minutes before a feeble German barrage fired on the advancing infantry. By then it was too late.

The New Zealand Division easily captured Messines village by 7:00 am and a New Zealand soldier, Lance Corporal Samuel Frickleton, won a Victoria Cross in the fighting to clear the village's outskirts. That afternoon the New Zealanders repelled a German counter-attack which crumpled under heavy machine-gun and artillery fire.

The New Zealand infantry remained around (but not in) the village of Messines for the next two days and it was then they experienced the bulk of their casualties. The exposed ridgeline was overcrowded with Allied soldiers and the New Zealand position was no exception. Major-General Andrew Russell, the New Zealand Division’s commanding officer, requested but had not been permitted to thin out his defences. The German artillery, once it had recovered from the shock of the opening attack, pounded the Messines village and its outskirts mercilessly. On 8 June those New Zealanders on the ridge endured a German artillery bombardment that lasted uninterrupted for ten hours. Fortunately, though, the survivors were withdrawn into reserve the next morning.

The attack, beginning in the early hours of 7 June 1917, was a complete success, the finest of the war to date according to Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the BEF. The battle of Messines came to be regarded as a model for offensives on the Western Front. Careful planning, effective preparation, and excellent infantry-artillery cooperation had produced an outstanding success. As Russell later commented:

The battle … was won through the weight of metal thrown on to the enemy positions and the mettle of the men who advanced to attack. Everything went like clockwork.

This success did not come cheap, though; it never did on the Western Front. When the New Zealanders were withdrawn from Messines village on the morning of 9 June they had suffered nearly 4000 casualties of which some 700 were killed in action in just over two days of fighting.

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THIRD YPRES

New Zealand’s next large-scale military actions were the two attacks made in October 1917 in the Flanders region of Belgium as part of Third Battle of Ypres. They rank as two of the most significant military engagements the country has ever undertaken.

The Third Battle of Ypres was the BEF’s main campaign for 1917 and it aimed to clear the Germans from the Belgian Channel Ports as well as relieving pressure on the French Army in the south. If it succeeded it would be a strategic victory seriously damaging Germany’s ability to remain in the war. Beginning on 31 July and ending on 10 November 1917, Third Ypres consisted of eight separate battles. The New Zealand Division took part in just two of these, the battle of Broodseinde on 4 October and First Passchendaele fought just over a week later on 12 October. Broodseinde, which involved four Anzac Divisions attacking side by side for the only time in history, was a stunning success for all those divisions of Second Army involved. For its part the New Zealand Division easily captured all its objectives, advancing the British line by nearly 2000 yards and taking 1159 German prisoners. New Zealand casualties were heavy, numbering 1853 of which more than 450 had been killed. The New Zealand casualty rate was around 25% in a battle where everything had gone according to plan.11 As one young soldier wrote of 4 October: ‘It’s marvelous the way these “Stunts” as we call them are got up, everything run like clockwork.’12

But in the afternoon of 4 October heavy rain started falling, turning the Flanders region into a quagmire. Prince Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria and the German Army commander, reflected after the attack of 12 October that the rain was ‘our most effective ally’.13 Many experienced soldiers thought that this break in the weather meant an end to the Third Ypres offensive. It was not to be though, and Haig, in the most controversial and questioned decision he made during the war, ordered that it should continue. The New Zealand Division’s next attack would be far from a textbook or ‘clockwork’ operation.

The warning signs were clear to anyone who cared to notice them. Convinced that the Germans were near breaking point Haig ordered a new attack on 9 October which is known as the Battle of Poelcapelle. Poorly planned, lacking adequate artillery support, ignoring weather and terrain conditions, the attack was a disaster for the eleven divisions involved. In the Anzac sector two British divisions, the 49th and the 66th of II Anzac Corps, and the 2nd Australian Division of I Anzac Corps took part. While their planned advance was a short one, between 600 and 900 yards, not a single objective was taken and the casualties were horrendous. The 49th Division alone suffered more than 2500 casualties in this attack. Yet still Haig persisted in continuing the offensive, writing in his diary that the results of this attack 'were very successful'. Then he informed his headquarters:

I am of the opinion that the operations of the 49th and 66th Divisions, carried out today under great difficulties of assembly, will afford the II Anzac Corps a sufficiently good jumping off line for operations on October 12th, on which date I hope that the II Anzac Corps will capture Passchendaele.\(^{14}\)

The New Zealand Division and the 3rd Australian Division were now condemned to make an attack that should never have gone ahead.

Never in its history have New Zealand troops been ordered to carry out an attack in such unfavourable circumstances. Nothing at all was right for it. Here is a brief list:

- The terrain was like glutinous porridge and it was raining heavily. This made a mockery of any attempt at tactical finesse like fire and manoeuvre and outflanking enemy strong points.
- The objectives were very deep, over 3000 yards, the equivalent of 30 rugby football fields. It included those objectives set for 9 October.
- Only two days were allocated to plan and coordinate the attack.
- Artillery support was totally inadequate. The New Zealand artillery commander Brigadier Napier Johnston informed General Russell of this before the attack commenced. Few guns had been moved forward; those that had been did not have stable gun platforms and were short of shells.

The troops were exhausted just reaching the start line and their morale was low. This was especially so for the 3rd Rifle Brigade which had just completed a month detached as labourers from the division, one of the disadvantages of maintaining a four-brigade division. Since 4 September, the 3rd Rifle Brigade had been in the Ypres salient burying telephone cables and constructing roads. This work had to be done at night, often while wearing gas masks. The Brigade’s history candidly admits that in October its soldiers ‘were almost worn out and [were] certainly unready for immediate combative action’. Added to this was the fact that neither of the two brigades to be used had undertaken any training at all for this assault.

The German obstacles ahead of them were formidable. These included the many pill boxes and two belts of barbed wire each about 30 yards thick, all of which was clearly visible from the New Zealand start line. What was not observed, though, were the many hidden machine-gun nests and sniper teams moved into position for this attack.

The German defenders knew the attack was coming. Not only could they see the preparations being made but a British deserter and three other soldiers captured in raids on the night of 11 October informed their captors of the exact time of the attack. The attack was doomed before it even started. Nor is this the hindsight of an historian. Those New Zealand soldiers in the line on the morning of 12 October knew that the task ahead of them was formidable and that their prospects of survival were slim.

First Passchendaele on 12 October was an absolute disaster. Nothing went to plan and the fate of this attack is best reflected in its opening artillery barrage. It was universally condemned as ‘very feeble’. Worse than this it damaged the wrong people. Leonard Hart of 1 Otago Battalion recalled:

Through some blunder our artillery barrage opened up about two hundred yards short of the specified range and thus opened right in the midst of us. It was a truly awful time—our men getting cut to pieces in dozens by our own guns. Immediate disorganisation followed.

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16. This deficiency was not lost on the soldiers making this attack. As Rifleman Andrew Copland of the 2nd Battalion, New Zealand Rifle Brigade, wrote to his family: ‘Had the business have had the organisation it should have had and us the training, we know we would have been more successful and had less casualties.’ Letter, 7 November 1917, copy in author’s possession.
17. The deserter was from the 9th (Scottish) Division which had returned to the front line on the New Zealand Division’s left flank after a two-week break. Two of the prisoners of war also came from this division; the other was from the British 48th Division: see Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, 229, and Harper, *Massacre at Passchendaele*, 79-80.
18. Report on Operations 11-14 October 1917, War Diary, 2nd Canterbury Battalion, WA 78/1, ANZ.
Leonard Hart’s infantry company lost 148 of its 180 members on this morning. 20

The two New Zealand infantry brigades making this attack—2nd Brigade (the South Island Battalions) and the 3rd New Zealand Rifle Brigade—suffered appalling losses. Most New Zealand soldiers never saw a German that morning. Two brief accounts follow.

Corporal Harold Green, C Company of the 3rd Rifles:

At 6 am a tremendous bombardment opened and we went over in a sea of mud. The fire from the German pill boxes was hellish and our barrage failed. The emplacements for our guns were not solid enough and the guns tilted causing trouble in our ranks from the shells of our own 18 pounders. The wire entanglements, the mud and the pill boxes prevented any success. C Company lost heavily and the 3rd Battalion lost about half its numbers in casualties. Our Colonel, Winter-Evans, was killed. 150 of C Company went over and casualties numbered 82, including all the sergeants except Goodfellow. The attack was an impossible attempt. The ground was swampy and very muddy and heavy cross fire from the pill boxes did not give us a chance. The Black Watch on our left were in exactly the same position. The stunt should never have been ordered under such conditions. It was absolute murder. 21

Private Ernest Langford of 2 Otago Battalion was more succinct:

Attack a failure on account of wire encountered. Casualties extremely heavy. Hun machine guns and snipers play havoc. Absolute hell … Brigade practically wiped out. 22

Not one objective was taken and the cost was massive. Some 846 New Zealanders were killed on this dismal Flanders morning and a further 2000 soldiers were wounded. Another 138 New Zealanders died of their wounds over the next week. 23 More New Zealanders were killed or maimed in these few short hours than on any other day in the nation’s history.

Third Ypres finished in November after the Canadians finally captured the red brick stains in the mud that had once been the village of Passchendaele. The offensive advanced the British line by six miles and captured the objectives that had been set for the first two weeks. The BEF suffered some 275,000 casualties of which 70,000 had been killed. The effects of this battle when combined with the dreadful climatic and terrain conditions ‘brought dire consequences’ upon the morale and fighting ability of the BEF. 24 Many

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22. Private Ernest H. Langford, diary entry, 12 October 1917, MS papers 2242, ATL.
writers have commented that for the first time in the war, after Third Ypres the BEF lost its confidence and sense of optimism which was replaced by a ‘deadly depression’. This was certainly the case for the New Zealand Division which experienced its nadir at the end of 1917. Every military formation has its breaking point and the New Zealand Division almost reached the limits of endurance at the close of 1917. For the survivors of Passchendaele the war seemed never-ending and ceased to have a purpose. More than this, they now began to doubt whether the Allies could ever defeat Germany. Their sense of humour remained intact, though, and was one of the vital coping mechanisms available to soldiers. While they told newcomers that the war was going to last a lifetime, they reassured them that ‘The first seven years will be the hardest’.

But for the New Zealanders the misery of 1917 was not finished. On 3 December the 2nd Brigade carried out another costly attack at Polderhoek which gained some ground but not the objective. The New Zealand Division then wintered in the Ypres salient until relieved in late February and loathed the experience. While here they suffered another 3000 casualties, most through sickness, but a further 500 New Zealand soldiers were killed. It really was a winter of discontent.

On the eve of the disaster of 12 October a senior New Zealand commander recorded in his diary:

We all hope for the best tomorrow, but I do not feel as confident as usual. Things are being rushed too much. The weather is rotten, the roads very bad, and the objectives have not been properly bombarded. However, we will hope for the best.

Hope had now replaced the methodical planning, the periods of realistic training, the all arms cooperation and tactical finesse that had been so successful at Messines earlier in the year. But as two influential American writers reminded their readers in 1996, ‘Hope is not a method’. Unfortunately many New Zealand and allied soldiers died or suffered unimaginable privations after 4 October 1917 because their senior commanders now believed it was.

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25. Harper, Massacre at Passchendaele, 94.
26. Quoted in ibid.
28. Quoted in Stewart, The New Zealand Division 1916-1919, 292. Stewart did not identify the officer but stated that he was ‘a senior and experienced officer’.
From Vryheid to Flanders: The Mixed Fortunes of the South African Brigade

Bill Nason

Early in September 1917, a soldier of the Transvaal Scottish sent his younger game-hunting brother in Vryheid a mock invitation from a billet along the Canal du Nord: `You really should stop shooting those poor springboks. Rather come across here and die yourself. It is such a thrill to mix your ashes into the soil of our country's Flaamsche Forefathers.'

Lieutenant Norman McCarthy, an officer said to be able to bend a spent rifle cartridge between his thumb and forefinger, sounded uncannily like the poet Rupert Brooke. Some two-and-a-half years earlier, Brooke had invited the actor John Drinkwater to come and die as it would be great fun. Appropriately enough, there was a Belgian parallel to this. Early in 1915 Brooke had just returned from the doomed expedition to save Antwerp from the advancing Germans. Subsequently, that tawny son of England would slip the fate of McCarthy and other South African sons of England, that of foundering in Flanders. Instead, almost as if he had been a feverish South African in German East Africa in 1916, two months later Brooke died reputedly from an infected mosquito bite.

Rupert Brooke’s compulsive abandonment to the early grip of war was not famously ironic. Equally, Norman McCarthy’s suggestion in 1917 of brotherly release into the promise of death was entirely ironic. The Union of South Africa’s expeditionary war effort, a tricky business from the outset, was by then under mounting pressure, and from more than one quarter. It is worth summarising briefly the extent of those difficulties. Firstly, there were those of a distanced and alienated home front. In the reasonable assessment of one scholar, by 1917 well over half of the Afrikaner population was opposed to their country’s war policy. In the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme, Afrikaner nationalists as well as English socialist anti-war critics did not mince their words. South Africa’s Western Front casualties were all down to bungling and callous British generalship, wasteful of

1. McCarthy Letters (privately held), N. McCarthy to A. McCarthy, 3 September 1917. The author is grateful to Mr G. McCarthy for permission to quote from this family material.
2. His exact words were, ‘Come and die. It will be great fun’: cited in Jonathan Rutherford, Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), 39.
the lives of deluded empire patriots. Tears shed in Pretoria and London over the grievous losses of the South African Brigade at Delville Wood were of a crocodile kind.

Nor was this the only cause of huffing and puffing. The evacuation from East Africa by the beginning of 1917 of some two-thirds of the Union forces that had landed there less than six months earlier, had severely dented Dominion pride. Even strident pro-war papers, like The Rand Daily Mail and The Natal Witness, turned on an expeditionary venture that had been, according to their editorials, ‘callously’ or ‘criminally’ neglectful of soldiers’ health and welfare needs.4 Inevitably, if by then the volunteer recruitment tills still held something, it was not much. By mid-year, even in large loyalist cities like Durban and Cape Town, subdued recruiting committees were coming close to shutting up shop.

Secondly, there was the balance sheet of the South African infantry effort in Europe. That, too, did not make altogether good reading. On the Somme killing ground of Delville Wood, the Union’s Springbok Brigade had been gutted of two-thirds of its strength. Although reconstituted after its July 1916 dismemberment by an infusion of some 3000 troops from the South African base camp in Hampshire, the contingent continued to bleed. More or less continuous participation in offensives before the Third Ypres campaign left a grim toll. Undisguised rage among officers over hazardous assault tactics now added to alienation and despair from the deadening effects of trench warfare and the grisly corpse count. This became more pronounced after losses at Fampoux in May. There, despite scant reconnaissance and a hesitant and apprehensive South African command, the Brigade was ordered forward. After taking heavy losses for a trifling gain of a couple of hundred yards, it was stopped dead in its tracks. By turn ghoulsh or sardonic, soldiers were soon dubbing themselves ‘suicide Springboks’, or ‘Springboks in the soup’. Alliteration, at least, was alive and well.5

This was in many ways a demoralising milieu, thick with grievance and despair. In the lines, German South West Africa and Somme veterans were disdainful of batches of higher-paid 1917 recruits, viewing them as mercenary or faint-hearted, morally inferior to the selfless patriots of 1914 and 1915. At the same time, one sympathetic sergeant-major found trench training of new soldiers ‘quite sickening’, given what lay in store for them. Weary of cultivating illusions, others assigned dead rats for bayonet practice and teased the nervous with tips on which body parts were most handy for use as trench scaffolding.6

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4. The Rand Daily Mail, 10 January 1917; The Natal Witness, 6 February 1917.
5. Diocesan College Magazine XIV: 2 (1918), 11.
Another destabilising element for morale was the increased use of South African infantry companies in mass burial parties, prompting this reflection from a distressed officer in Flanders. For his men to have to endure a further battle round, 'with the reek of death still in their nostrils … these memories would be distressing to even the hardest … this misuse of fighting troops was cruel and useless'. No less telling by August and September was a distinct dip in the tone of popular soldiering songs and doggerel verse: biting, sombre, homesick, yearning with desire for normal life. Thus, a Poperinge training camp for the Ypres offensive was lit by a new chant, ‘Now where will my favourite girl be/ To hell with France, Flamsch and Blighty/ They aren’t so mighty/ Africa’s the place for me’. This appears to have been the closest South African Infantry Brigade equivalent of the raucous Australian Imperial Force refrain, ‘Blighty is a failure/ Take me to Australia’.

Yet, being worn-down in 1917 did not necessarily amount to being worn-through. Surveillance by line command of the mood of men and of oscillating attitudes confirmed a basic cohesion, rather than any imminent prospect of serious restiveness or disintegration. Visiting wealthy benefactors, such as the Johannesburg mining magnate, Lionel Phillips (who enjoyed parading about in a tin hat and gas mask), were not unduly perturbed. Cheered by continuing faith in the rightness of the British cause, this was, he noted, a disciplined body of educated troops who knew what to do and who knew how vital it was to keep going. By June 1917 the strength of a body that had originally comprised around 5800 white ‘colonials’ in 1915 had been whittled down to just over 2900 officers and men. What influences were sustaining its order and commitment, a capacity for disciplined endurance and tenacious conduct that had become, to quote Trevor Wilson, ‘legendary’?

Naturally, there were the usual rituals intended to boost the soldierly spirit, such as showy national appointments, lectures and visiting civilian patronage. In August, General Sir Hubert Gough appointed to his Fifth Army Staff the son of General Louis Botha, the Union prime minister and Britain’s former Anglo-Boer War adversary. While that may have brought some celebration, the rank-and-file impact of such morale-raising measures could also be ambiguous. Rifleman Joe Samuels recalled annoyance at having to get ‘properly spruced up’ for an eminent home visitor’s tour of the Brigade’s Eyre Camp in September. Lionel Phillips was, quite frankly, a pain, one of those ‘nobs with big arses

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and a lot to say who knew bugger all about what it was like’. He was always eager to ‘pat us on the back … telling us how proud the War Office was, of how we were General Botha’s finest, finishing off the squareheads. All a load of old bunk, but what a ball we had, anyway … fags and chocolate. Very nice … but somehow you never got what you really needed when those nobs came round. Like back then … what the boys were all dying for was more carbolic powder to help with the stink and the maggots.’

Other seeping influences were more settled in scope and more indoctrinating in their hold. These provided imaginative fuel to power re-mobilisation. One was the known familiarity of Flemish Belgium. If not a home from home, it was a place of fictive kinship, worth rallying to in order to drive back an enemy invader. For Brigade infantrymen, Flanders had been an initial drilling and digging ground for several months before the Somme. Beyond the experience of early trench warfare training, there was also time for congenial contact with Belgian civilians, with the Union’s loyalist Afrikaners and Anglo-Afrikaners being welcomed by Flaamschen as natural cultural cousins. The Dutch/Afrikaans vocabulary of Springbok ‘Dutchies’ enabled troops to read newspapers from Antwerp or Ostend, and to communicate comfortably with Flemish-speakers. At the same time, it was not all easy going. Soldiers raised on a European diet of collegiate school rugby and Latin Classics were put out to discover Belgians expecting them to be ‘black men’ from Africa. As one baffled corporal recorded, they were their ‘European brethren’, not ‘natives, asiatics, or any other dark types’.

However dread its landscape, Flanders was still a zone of the imaginative will, a martial nursery of Springbok assertion behind the sinuous sound of the Brigade motto, Eendracht Maakt Macht, ‘Union is Strength’.

Another positive influence on cohesion was the moral stiffening of a living blood sacrifice. This was the presence within the reconstituted post-1916 Brigade of a rump of decorated Delville Wood veterans, ‘Devil’s Wood’ survivors whose exemplary virtue and resilient fighting spirit helped to keep up the stock of a resurrectionist Somme battle inheritance deep into 1917. Repeated ceremonial remembrance of Delville Wood sealed a symbiosis between past loss and pending offensive renewal: for a July 1916 veteran like Captain Theo Ross, it was the calibre of South African regimental character that heavy casualties could be taken on the chin. All that ‘new drafts’ needed was moral tutelage in sticking to the job and remaining ‘dauntless’ in the continuing fight to vindicate the Brigade’s dead, a readiness ‘to pass through, if need be, their own Delville’. In that

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respect, casualties were spiritualised, embalmed in Delville Wood as the European hub of a fortified South African nation, a murderous French patch that some fighting Springboks had outlived.

Thirdly, there was the persistence of a high level of camaraderie, lubricated by educational integration, consent rather than compulsion, and strong personal fusion between men and officers who styled themselves as soldiers of real individual initiative and responsibility, champions of speed and independent action. Cohesion and identity found perhaps their most memorable expression in an aura of ‘military Scottishness’. In this transmuted warrior identity, full-throated Jocks of the Scots colonial diaspora carried the entire contingent along on the tartan bombast of the Transvaal Scottish, the Cape Town Highlanders, and the Cape Duke of Edinburgh’s Rifles.16

There was a further dimension. Irrespective of its halved complement by 1917, an assembled Brigade remained drenched in the signs, symbols and speech of a distinctive white Springbok identity, with the mind of many of its members still locked up in an expressive world of African settler frontier war. For all that it was the trench systems of Passchendaele Ridge rather than the bush of the Transkei, the uplifting stimulants of a colonial warrior culture were still potent. Shrieking war cries in mock ‘Zulu Gaelic’, ‘Basuto Gaelic’ and Rhodesian ‘Matabeleland Gaelic’ confirmed and renewed offensive impetus. So did self-parody as white Zulu, le Zulu blanc, as line officers joined the lower ranks in bursts of belligerence, Usuthu! and Bayete!17

Central to the Brigade’s training regime under Brigadier-General Frederick Dawson was a general reinforcement of notions or principles of South African soldiering temperament and innovation. If we take the instance of Passchendaele, it is evident enough that preparation in matters such as more flexible infantry assault tactics involved initiation in the general planning programs of British corps commanders. Manoeuvres over replica enemy ground festooned with clay models and tape lines to simulate strong points and barbed wire circuits, and battle course lectures on topography and weaponry, have been assessed crisply by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson.18 There is little point to recapitulating this topic here. Rather, let us turn to how South African command sought to raise the combat performance of its infantry. Who would manufacture the lyrical, romantic, national inspiration to lend a forceful edge to standard training ground instruction?

17. The Selbornian V: 3 (1918), 19.
Early in September, Major-General Henry Timson Lukin set the ball rolling. Saddled with overall command of the 9th Division since December 1916, ‘Tim’ or ‘Little Tim’ Lukin had returned to his contingent to rouse its officers and men. British-born but no rooinek or redneck, Lukin was a tough, no-nonsense colonial soldier, a South African veteran of 19th-century African land wars, the Anglo-Boer War and the recent successful German South West Africa campaign. Personally brave and invariably in the thick of things, he carried survival from Delville Wood gassing as a sort of performance obligation, that of being a British bulldog at home on the South African veldt. In Lukin’s view, a strong kick-off required preaching the message of national esteem—the incentive that Brigade morale required was the spur of Anglo-Afrikaner South Africanism, or at least some of its founding battlefield mythologies.

‘Tim’ Lukin’s message was candid. Combining with General Frederick Maxwell’s 27th Brigade, the South African force would be attacking on a strongly-held section of the front, running north of the deadly Menin Road. There could be no disguising of the heavy odds. Enemy positions ahead had already been subject to costly, failed assaults by other British divisions. However, if ‘in strength’, Union infantry ‘could not be withstood’. After all, if they were ever tired, they were tired of deadlock and reverses, not of the prospect of a successful offensive. And, if the going looked perilous, who better than to ‘win through’ than highly competent Springboks? Did they not have a reputation of being among the most robust and capable of imperial soldiers, with tenacity and initiative to match that of Australians and New Zealanders?

As if this were not sufficient, a quixotic Lukin conjured up more. Tactically, Belgium was a damp South African hinterland: conditions for an offensive in the north were right, just the kind of terrain for an advancing Brigade. For its men had a ‘natural’ aptitude for bushcraft improvisation and stealth, something that would serve them well in worming across soggy, low-lying ground and in navigating craters, canals, and ditches. Their ranks included widely-schooled and experienced guides, crack scouts who had acquitted themselves across the night-time sands of German South West Africa, in the perilous thickets of Delville Wood, and around the ragged bush of German East Africa.

Furthermore, much was made of the Union’s ‘commando’ military tradition. Facing his former command, Lukin stressed the Brigade’s unique national combat pedigree. What expeditionary force South Africans embodied was a winning amalgam of regular British professionalism and brilliant Boer amateurism. For their battalions blended the British imperial heritage of discipline and orderly hierarchy with the valuable residue of

free Boer fighting traditions. These independent *burghe*r or citizen soldiering habits in the field would sustain operations involving small units and independent initiative, tactical flexibility, swift firing movements, prolonged endurance through rapid re-grouping, and frank consultation between officers and men. This Union Defence Forces pedigree would strengthen greatly the battle preparedness of assault formations. Now, surprise, speed, and bunched concentration were all. Moreover, tactics and national instincts seemed at last to be coinciding fully. For advancing South Africans would be executing General Herbert Plumer's offensive planning of thinning out troops aimed at first objectives, and maintaining the protective insulation of wide gaps between moving forces.²⁰

No longer setting out in ponderous, shoulder-to-shoulder mass waves, striding infantry would be closing on enemy positions in the classic style of commandos, ‘the Cossacks of the old Boer states’, only without horses.²¹ As agile raiders, Pretoria’s lines of infantry commandos would tilt and turn as deftly as any herd of leaping *springbokken*, seizing targets through narrow partial attacks. An effusive Lukin reminded his former Brigade of earlier Union campaigning accomplishments, especially successful night sorties through the wide spaces of South West Africa. If the operational demand was stealthy frontal movement and rushing the enemy, training was there to breathe new tactical life into warfare at which South Africans were adept: applying patience, subterfuge, speed, and flexibility in action. It amounted to banking up an irresistible tide.

The Brigade commander, General Frederick Dawson, was rather less sanguine about prospects. His more muted assessment reflected several worries. One concerned the adequacy of Flanders training for new recruits, and the uncertain level of their soldiering skills for rapid infiltration. Pushed forward in poor light, platoons of newly-minted commandos risked getting seriously lost. Another worry was the extreme unfamiliarity of increasingly swollen ground, with troops ‘soaked through and shivering’, having to paddle across ‘evil-smelling slime’.²² A third anxiety was effective coordination of limited-objective attacks in controlled stages when observation and signalling conditions looked dicey.

Dawson’s officers were experienced and capable. But they had their own share of misgivings about morale. The massive British casualties produced by Gough’s attacks in August had not exactly settled South African nerves. Indeed, some officers were themselves infected. Immediately prior to action late in September, one of these, Captain Albert Mcdonald, implored another officer to take over his shaking command. He found Mcdonald to be ‘in a terrible state of nerves and fear which he seemed unable to

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²¹. SANMMH, Mss.920, C.E. Borain to M. Borain, 19 October 1917.
fight down. He appeared to dread the coming of the dawn … there was raw panic such as I have never before encountered … I could do nothing to comfort him.23 Aware of rising panic about him, Lieutenant Geoffrey Lawrence yearned to be able to ladle out unlimited rum.24 Others in charge of the 3rd and 4th South African Infantry longed for the narcotic of homely farm comforts, a masculine ration of *biltong* (dried meat), *mejbos* (dried apricot), and fearfully alcoholic raw spirit, *skokjaan* or *witblits* (white lightning) to deaden churning stomachs.25

What of the state of technical competence? Here, circumstances for effective technical preparation of attack looked favourable. Dawson’s command contained an arsenal of artisans whose number included skilled gold miners from the deep reefs of the Witwatersrand. Accustomed to burrowing through the ‘flint-hard rock’ of Johannesburg, they had been finding the chalky soil of trench digging and tunnelling as soft as ‘cheese’. Their proficiency through 1916 had been rated as superlative by the Royal Engineers Tunnelling Company.26 Communications capability looked no less promising. The Oversea Contingent included an expert Corps Signal Company of some two hundred Union Post Office telegraphists, linemen and drivers. Commanded by skilled officers drawn from post office engineering works and the ranks of Witwatersrand electrical engineers, most recruits were highly experienced, having cut their keys in service during the 1914-15 Afrikaner Rebellion and subsequent German South West Africa campaign.27

The Union was also making a general contribution to meeting rearward supply demands. By mid-1917 the Army Service Corps in the French rear had several thousand Coloured drivers in Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport Companies, furnished in response to War Office need. Doing well at horsemanship and in equipment maintenance, companies were moving large consignments of munitions, lumber, and metal construction goods to distribution posts as well as firing lines. Again, despite excessively long hours and bad weather, all this shifting seems to have been accomplished with pace and smart handling. Lastly, there was involvement in that classic twentieth-century supply system for warfare, the railway. In response to a 1916 appeal to the Dominions for Railway Operating Companies, Pretoria had posted units to Europe. Staffed by men who had been in South African Railways service, through the course of 1917 companies were hard at it in both France and Belgium. Feverish activity included constructing new

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24. Ibid., 152.
light railways to feed the Passchendaele build-up, transferring shell to various field gun batteries, repairing locomotives and rolling stock, and undertaking runs for the Royal Engineers. In some sectors, such as Messines Village and Ridge, by June 1917 British Transportation command was relying on a Union company to handle all railway traffic and transportation defence works.28

Certainly, there was general appreciation of the spread of technical proficiency represented by these varied bodies. If John Buchan’s swooning account of the South African Forces is to be swallowed, Union volunteers were matching the industrial and other needs of modern war with impressive expertise, thanks to a high recruitment standard of what he termed ‘specialized knowledge, character, intelligence, and military experience’.29 Earlier, at home, the Railways and Harbours Magazine had welcomed Britain’s reliance on ‘the special breeding of Dominion mechanics’ for wheeling up tons of supplies and extending lines to provision advances. The only drawback was that railways were too few or too over-loaded, slowing down impatient South Africans, and frustrating the ‘renowned promptitude and thoroughness which have characterised their military efforts’.30

In some respects, such confident assumptions were not wholly mistaken. Groups in communications and transport were doing work that was skilfully managed and effective. Yet, there were worries as the picture was not entirely bright. In Europe, Cape Horse Transport soldiers were keeping up their shady German East Africa campaign reputation for indiscipline, petty pilfering and hitting the bottle. With repeated spells in port detention barracks evidently having little disciplinary effect on offenders, throughout 1917 senior British officers were at their wit’s end.31 Trained transport auxiliaries were kicking their heels in confinement, and supply capacity was being cut periodically. Exasperation of another kind was caused by companies under-supplying munitions in some places, and over-supplying in others. At times, it was, as one officer remarked, ‘really a most willy-nilly affair. I still sigh at the thought of the whole business. It was enough to make one pray even for bog Irish navvies.’32

Belgium’s own notorious bog of later 1917, the squelching low ground of the Ypres salient, was racking up a further toll even before the start of South African participation in that costly offensive. For the Flanders weather was also bad in more than just the

29. Ibid., 279.
32. SANMMH, Mss.920, Major J. Chapman to B. Dingwall, 15 July 1917.
atrocious Flanders way. Infected infantry who had arrived from service in disease-ridden East Africa were stuck in sodden, humid, trenches throughout much of August and early September. Inevitably, soldiers who were malarial or weakened from other earlier parasitic illness were hit hard by such unhealthy conditions, landing field hospitals with cases of tropical disease from half a world away. As local army doctors muttered ruefully, they were not exactly equipped for the field treatment of malaria, ‘or other festering germs brought here from the bush’.33

Then there were tricky equipment episodes with some newer recruits. While they may have had a fair dose of acrobatic drilling in preparation for battle, hasty training had not always drilled into them the need to avoid blundering across technology-oriented fighting terrain. Signals officers who investigated why battery communications had suddenly stopped working would sometimes find that a reserve party of soldiers had turned a cable trench into a roaring kitchen, burning out vital wire lines. Or, that a foraging infantryman had hacked off a length of observation line cable to use as cord to fix up a bivouac. The damage of an instant could take hours to be rectified, all the while spiking the effectiveness of battery support for advancing infantry.34

Such problems suggested that any progress would require a large number of circles to be squared. Still, at the heart of things lay the natural qualities of the core of Union veterans. These were tough nuts schooled in recent desert or bush campaigns, troops lauded at home for having prevailed in the wilderness. They were led by mostly good officers who valued preparation, and who understood the crucial importance of speed and surprise in planning dispersed assaults. Peppering their English training ground vocabulary with evocative Dutch-Afrikaans terms, commanders assured infantrymen that they would not be charging off towards the Germans in a mass way, but as a series of jabbing prongs, inflicting the surprise and shock of strikes by blits of slang, lightning or a snake.35

Disrupting the outer German defensive cordon would require rapid blows, delivered through controlled, stinging attacks that would catch the enemy on his back foot. It would also require exceptionally close co-operation between artillery and infantry. Thus, in September, British gunners were brought across to tour the South African Brigade's front assembly areas, to discuss coordination difficulties, and to fix the lie of the land with infantry officers.36 In this busy preparatory activity, the iconic Edward Thackeray, veteran

33. SANMMH, Mss.616.9883, J. de Vos Meiring, Diary, entry for 26 August 1917.
35. Diocesan College Magazine XII: 26 (1918), 28.
36. The Selbornian V: 3 (1918), 17.
of Delville Wood, remained a tireless and energetic worker, impressing upon subordinates the need to perfect turning movements, to take account of timetable problems and to adapt advances, and to exercise higher levels of individual responsibility.  

This included assaulting new targets, and encouraging attackers to outpace or to swerve away from a covering barrage in order not to slacken their drive towards an objective that looked attainable. Almost needless to say, flexibility of this kind looked theoretically bold. If, in practice, it meant Passchendaele in 1917, and ‘an infantry advance against complex and powerfully defended enemy positions’, it also looked always potentially calamitous.

Still, in the Menin Road push of September, the South African contingent managed to overcome considerable adversity. Despite initial disarray in the dark across ground described as ‘slimy’ and ‘swampy’, with a vanguard 3rd and 4th infantry losing contact with supporting 1st and 2nd Battalions through poor signalling, small pockets of troops converged to attack in file. Directed by section commanders, infantry advanced in bounds, obliquely, scuttling from shell-hole to shell-hole cover to draw breath and mark location and direction. Their assigned task was the demolition of fortified farmhouses, pillboxes and embankment strongpoints. On 20 September, maintaining momentum in a step-by-step assault and weaving clear of a wayward British creeping barrage, after several desperate hours Union soldiers managed to reach their objectives of Borry Farm, Beck House and Mitchell’s Farm.

Almost simultaneously, another formation bore down on a huddle of enemy nests on the Zonnebeke stream, overcoming machine-gun lines and driving back defenders. While one has to be wary of sunny operational assessments of total German ‘panic’ and ‘chaos’, a fat haul of prisoners and abandoned weapons and stores certainly suggested disorderly flight. Lieutenant-Colonel Thackeray’s own command, the 3rd Battalion of just under 700 men, played the same game of stealthy calculation and storming assault along a right flank. Banking on the shock of a surprise attack, by now Thackeray understood well his command’s capacities for action and, in a sense, its own art of the possible. Successes had to be immediate, achieved through swift, evanescent strikes, or they might not come at all. If outfaced and held down by the enemy, he was unsure of how long many of its heads would continue to hold.

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40. SANMMH, Mss.920, E.F. Thackeray, Message notebooks, 21 September 1917.
In the event, this Springbok segment toppled its main target, the formidable Vampir Farm defensive post, and then launched a series of well-ordered assaults upon more minor and more distant enemy positions. Caught out by these slanting rushes, German pockets north of Potsdam and south of Borry Farm, already hammered by preliminary bombardment, were overrun to a chorus of whooping Zulu ‘war cries’. When this phase ran into difficulty, at least some measure of tactical sanity prevailed. Crossing open ground at Potsdam, advancing Transvaal Scottish came within range of withering machine-gun fire from an intact pillbox on their right flank. With increasing numbers shot down and the attack wave in danger of breaking up, the outlook for the advancing South Africans suddenly turned nasty.

The position was retrieved by quick-acting command. Troops were pulled back and put to ground in a honeycomb of shell-holes. With infantry regrouped in these defensive pits, the force resumed its assault under a covering hail of Lewis gun fire, leap-frogging forward in timed stages to splash through the Zonnebeke waters and cut down Potsdam defenders. There, the shrieking bloodlust and gratuitous bayonetting of cowed and bewildered enemy soldiers turned the stomach of at least one Brigade officer, who found it ‘all quite sickening, poor devils … they were hardly able to stand their ground’.  

Thrown off balance by the pace and ferocity of the South African push, the Germans withdrew southwards, leaving their cracked forward shield for deeper embankment diggings towards the Ypres-Roulers railway line. Maintaining their advance towards the northern railway ground buttress so as to deny the enemy a chance to catch breath, the South African force sprayed out small units for coordinated attacks on various lighter enemy positions, such as rail embankment dugouts. For a fleeting spell, the Brigade’s string of rapid attacks resembled success by instalments. Yet, these were, of course, the inching, piecemeal gains of a much larger and shaky piecemeal picture. Spoiling German counter-attacks along the rail artery sector which mowed down South African infantry inflicted a substantial price. The Brigade’s lunging attacks in its area of advance had cut its adversary, but had not quite pinned resisting Germans against the ropes.

Elsewhere, there were more snuffing out strikes to come. Partly in concert with the Royal Scots, the Union force took the bastions of the Bremen Redoubt, Zevenkote and Waterend Farm, during which one of its more crazed NCOs won a Victoria Cross. This prompted Jan Smuts to hail the ‘brilliant advance’ of ‘South Africa’s boys’, who were helping to seal a victorious British campaign in Ypres. Meanwhile, scrabbling for survival

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in increasingly appalling battle conditions through September and October, those boys were sliding as their Brigade shed over half its fighting strength. With rank-and-file morale perilously low, withdrawal from the unprofitable Ypres salient on 23 October was relief which came not a day too soon. In the later oral testimony of a surviving rifleman, ‘we carried our front and stuck it out … but, in truth, we were played out, and should’ve been finished had we been left there any longer’.  

What, then, did this all up to for a Dominion expeditionary force that had emerged from the wreckage of 1916? In one way, the Flanders autumn of 1917 brought a fleeting glimpse of the morning after a grim night before. Decisive running strikes, conceived of as rampaging ‘bush’ attacks, brought some capture of ground and the psychological lift of having struck invasive blows at the enemy perimeter. Beyond a revitalisation of self-belief, this brought on exhilaration, as two NCOs noted ‘real excitement’, and ‘reward which animated us all’.  

In observing this mood, it may be useful to restate again the national ambience of the Union’s white Springbok combat culture. What two leading authorities on Passchendaele have termed ‘hammer blows’ to ‘suitably limited objectives’ suited South African soldiering inclinations, or views of their natural military manner. This lay behind satisfaction with tactics turning upon stealth, small unit fire and movement, individual initiative and flexibility, and storming assaults. It lay behind transmitted campaign memory, for optimistic spirits who recalled night drives through the clawing desert sands of South West Africa. They had, after all, quickly fixed the Germans there, bisecting a vast and barren territory. By comparison, Flanders was a short, cluttered corridor down which to manoeuvre and concentrate against the enemy’s weaker spots. Thirdly, a cherished sense of zealous conduct in warfare lay behind beaming comparison with those other stalwart and self-reliant empire patriots, Australians, ‘also capable of rising to uncommon heights in fighting line duties’ and with a known reputation for getting things done.  

In the longer run, it was absorption in another draining, interminable, grisly slog in the latter months of the year that dissipated so much of the Union force’s energies, and eroded infantry resolve. Soldiers were soon stuck in a terrible battle that bore little relation to the light-footed one their commanders had told them to expect, and on which there had been an early whetting of appetite. Virtually immobilised in trenches to the east, close to the foot of Passchendaele ridge, the only pin-prick gain was the taking of Wallemolen.

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43. Cited in Nasson, ‘South Africans in Flanders’, 301.
44. South African College Magazine XX: 6 (1918), 34.
45. Prior & Wilson, Passchendaele, 197.
46. SANMMH, Mss. 920, F. Struben, Diaries, vol. 2, entry for 16 October 1917.
village on 13 October. With almost everything still turned against them, the success of that assault barely registered.

In the end, it was another stark lesson that modern war in the European Old World would remain a tougher nut to crack than modern war in the New. In Belgium, Pretoria’s troops had more dependable transport, food, water, and a more sophisticated level of military supply. But there, they were being swallowed by what the perceptive observer, Geoffrey Lawrence, called ‘a war machine’, ‘geared up’ and unstoppable.\(^47\) If in 1917 it was meant to be an enormous British steamroller, for Lawrence and many more of ‘Botha’s boys’, it ended up gravely short of steam. For soldiers on the front line, thousands of miles from home, surviving and seeing the war through had become a focus of anxiety far more corrosive than their lingering sense that the home front was anything but wholly committed to their cause. The psychological burden of a political ‘demonology of home front betrayers’ had always been far more acute for South African combatants than for other Dominion soldiers, such as Australians.\(^48\)

Yet, by late-1917, even such a setting was not entirely without paradox. After Ypres, Lieutenant Lawrence’s Brigade was replenished by a draft of experienced men who re-attested from the heat of a war of another kind, the dismal German East Africa campaign. In a South African-led bush war that had turned bad, they had been unable to corner the enemy. To add insult to ignominy, Jan Smuts’s white servicemen had been obliged to make way for harder and more adaptable African troops, now pressing on to try to finish a job that floundering South Africans had left uncompleted.\(^49\) There lay a hopeful world of expansionary colonial conquest that had effectively gone down. As we have noted earlier, that had done little for the domestic war mood, where the campaign’s chaotic military administration, inadequate rationing and negligent health care provision had become a national scandal by early 1917.\(^50\)

Still, at the same time there was another little side to this coin. While the Union’s African expeditionary effort had run dry, that still left the Western Front, a remaining ditch from which its most committed overseas crusaders could continue the main fight against Germany. Some of these discharged infantrymen who quickly re-attested were remarkably

\(^{47}\) The Selbornian V: 2 (1918), 22.


\(^{50}\) Anne Samson, Britain, South Africa and the East Africa Campaign 1914-1918: The Union comes of Age (London: Tauris, 2006), 179-80; Nasson, Springboks, 107.
elastic veterans. Seeing themselves quite self-consciously as a patriotic fellowship, this ‘bunch’ or ‘commando band’ of die-hard underdogs were in no mind to let go of the war before victory had been achieved. To be sure, the reverses of Delville Wood, German East Africa and Passchendaele provided much that needed to be swallowed hard in pursuing more training and further trials for the next offensive against the enemy. But digesting those experiences through the course of 1917 was also a recognition of what a geographically and militarily extended white South Africanism had become. Continuing immersion in the war enabled the national force of a Springbok mission to converge with other empire and Dominion identities. In this case it also meant not merely marching in step with allies behind a vital cause, but portraying a specific kind of heroic and manly spirit. These, in any event, were the terms in which one indomitable observer saw it in December 1917:

Springboks
You’ve heard of the great Canadians,
Of Indians, and Famous Anzacs,
But now more word of the Springboks,
Who never turn their backs.
So let the sun sink on this land,
Where the sun burns brown and tan,
And always answer proudly if you’re asked:
‘Oh, me? I’m a South Aff-Rican’.

Impressively unhesitating, this embodied one idealised national stereotype only too well. Equally, had the scurrilous British trench newspaper, The Wipers Times, had a Springbok streak to its black humour, it is not hard to imagine another version:

Jock and Bok
Went up a trench
To aid those French and Belgies
Across the water
There they found tea
As well as some brie
And what’s more
A very large mortar.

51. SANMMH, Mss.920, C.S. Rendall, Correspondence, Rendall to C.B. Roberts, 4 December 1917.  
Either way, South Africa in 2007 paid no homage to its European nor its African war moment of 1917, just as the 1916 anniversary passed by with virtually no public display of war commemoration and remembrance of a distinctive South African Great War contribution. In September 2007 it was left to the Flemish of Flanders to mark the fate of Union volunteers on their soil, returning European settlers of Dominion and Empire, a world away.

APPENDIX 1

Email communication to the author, August 2007, from Filip Debergh, Belgium: *Commemoration South Africans—Passchendaele 1917–2007*

Dear Sir,

Just to tell you that there will be a ‘remembrance’ moment on the 20 Sept. 2007 for the South Africans who fought in the Ypres Salient. On the 20th Sept. 1917 the South African infantry were involved in an attack near the Belgian village Zonnebeke. Their actions were part of the second phase in the Third Battle of Ypres, better known as the battle for Passchendaele. They reached their objectives but the toll in human lives was high. Of the 2576 ranks involved 1255 were registered as wounded, missing or killed. In the battle officially named ‘Battle of the Menin Road’, David Schalke Ross was wounded. He was 14 years old. W.H. Hewitt was awarded the VC.

On Frezenberg where the jumping off line was, a new monument was erected a month ago to commemorate the Scottish soldiers that fought there. The South African brigade was part of the 9th Scottish Division and a bronze plaque will refer to the South African brigade.

20 pupils of Hoerskool Waterkloof, Pretoria, who have an exchange programme with St Leo College in Bruges, Belgium, will lay a wreath at the monument and will get a lecture on what happened on that infamous 20th Sept.

At 8 o’clock in the evening the pupils will also lay a wreath at the Menin Gate in Ypres where the last post has sounded for ninety years now. Two panels on the Menin Gate contain the names of South African soldiers who died near Ypres, but have no known grave.
APPENDIX 2

Extract from 21 September 2007 Belgian press report by Piet Lesage on ‘Zonnebeke/Leper Herdenken Wereldoorog I’ZUID-AFRIKANEN HERDENKEN GESNEUVELDE LANDGENOTEN

Twintig leerlingen van de Hoerskool Waterkloof uit Pretoria hebben gisteren de Ypres Salient bezocht. De datum was niet toevallig: dag op dag 90 jaar verleden sneuvelden heel wat van hun landgenoten bij de start van de Derde Slag bij leper. De burgemeester van Zonnebeke sprak zijn waardering uit voor de bijdrage van de Zuid-Afrikanen, die hier 12,000 kilometer van huis voor onze vrijheid kwamen vechten. Drie van de Zuid-Afrikaanse leerlingen brachten elk het verhaal van een van de soldaten in het Zuid-Afrikaans. Ze plaatsten ook drie kruisjes bij het Scottish Monument.

SOUTH AFRICANS COMMEMORATE FALLEN COUNTRYMEN

Yesterday twenty students from Waterkloof High School in Pretoria visited the Ypres Salient. The date was not accidental: 90 years ago to the day, many of their compatriots died in the opening stage of the Third Battle of Ypres. The mayor of Zonnebeke expressed his appreciation of the contribution of South Africans, who had come here from their homes 12,000 kilometres away to fight for our freedom. Three of the South African students each presented a personal story of one of the soldiers in South African Afrikaans. They also placed three crosses at the Scottish Monument. (Translation from Flemish by the author).
A host of troubles faced France and its Allies in 1917. Among the significant events that year were the Russian Revolution and the disintegration of the Russian Army, the entry of the United States into the war, the breakthrough at Caporetto in Italy and the retreat of Allied forces behind the Piave River, the failure of the Nivelle offensive in April 1917, and the high cost and small gains of the Passchendaele offensive in Flanders. Despite the impending arrival of American forces, the significant gains of the Central Powers in Russia and Italy seemed to suggest the Central Powers' inevitable victory in the war.

Raymond Poincaré, President of the Third Republic during the Great War, called 1917 ‘L’ Année Trouble’, or ‘The Troubled Year’, and observed, ‘We had divisions between the politicians, divisions between the generals, and even the beginning of mutinies. If we had continued this, what would have happened?’ Among the troubles that year were the outbreak of mutiny in the army, escalation of strikes in key defence industries, disagreement over war aims and a compromise peace, and turmoil from four different governments. In retrospect, the French refusal to stop fighting and their remaining in the war under extraordinarily demanding circumstances enabled the Allies to emerge victorious. Why did the French Army not collapse? Why did it not suffer significant loss of terrain as the Russians and Italians had done? How did the French, after terrible losses over three years, remain resilient when the Central Powers seemed ready and capable of driving them from the battlefield?

To begin, the French Army suffered from low morale in 1917 but the army was not as fragile as some have portrayed it. The year began at a low point, for the periodic report on morale of 15 December 1916, noted a ‘crisis of depression’ in the army. Soldiers' letters to their families expressed the desire for an immediate end to the war, even if this resulted in only a ‘partial victory’. The soldiers also called for an effort from the British and Italians

commensurate with that of the French.\(^2\) The report for late December noted the soldiers’ concerns about Romania’s defeat, changes in France’s political leadership, and the removal of General Joseph Joffre from command. The report also noted soldiers’ concerns about poor conditions in the trenches and the prospect of few passes or leaves.

Despite the pessimism, spirits revived in early 1917 as the new commander of the army, General Robert Nivelle, promised a victory. While significant doubts existed in the highest political and military circles about the offensive’s chances for success, hopes—obviously false ones—for ending the war created a bubble of optimism in the trenches. The report for 1 February observed, ‘No one doubts the scale or the violence of the coming action, and the great majority [of the soldiers] are confident of success’.\(^3\) When the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany, French confidence briefly rose even higher. The report on 15 February noted, ‘The mass [of the soldiers] think that an ally of this importance would not join our side if Germany was not at the end of its rope’.\(^4\) The limit of this optimism, however, was suggested two weeks later when the report noted an increase in ‘subversive’ letters,\(^5\) and another two weeks later when the report highlighted numerous complaints about political and military leaders and an increase in discontent.\(^6\)

On the eve of Nivelle’s offensive, soldiers expressed their confidence in the success of the coming attack, but as the report for the period 10-25 April noted, the failure of Nivelle’s offensive burst the bubble of French optimism and unleashed a wave of discontent in the trenches.\(^7\) Two weeks later the morale report noted a sharp increase in the number of letters blaming commanders for the failure of the offensive and the soldiers’ desire for ‘an immediate peace’.\(^8\) As discontent mounted mutiny broke out, particularly in the units involved in the failed April offensive. With 54 divisions being affected, and perhaps 30,000 soldiers, the largest number of incidents occurred between May 25 and

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June 10. France’s highest commanders saw these ‘collective acts of indiscipline’, as they described the mutinous incidents, originating not from within the army but from outside it (propaganda from the press, pacifist ideas from the rear, limits on punishment for disciplinary infractions, ideas from the Russian revolution, turmoil in Paris, etc.). The report for 11 June 1917, concluded, ‘The revolt seen through the [soldiers’] correspondence seems less military than political’.

In assessing the mutinies, one must be cautious, for as David Lloyd George noted in his memoirs, ‘Patriotic Frenchmen ever since the mutinies have done their best to suppress the record of this weakness to which the intrepid spirit of French youth temporarily succumbed’. Most authors in recent years nonetheless have seen the primary causes of the mutinies coming from within the army and their being more a protest than a revolt. Recent historical studies also suggest soldiers had grievances beyond their revulsion toward the futility and cost of the Nivelle offensive. Along with other authors, Leonard V. Smith, an American, has noted, that some units affected by mutinous sentiments did not participate in the attack on the Chemin des Dames. Poorly-conducted operations, costly offensives, miserable living conditions, and an inadequate number of leaves demanded much of the soldiers and pushed them to the point where many refused to leave the trenches. Denis Rolland entitled his recent book *La grève des tranchées*, or ‘The Strike in the Trenches’, to suggest the mutinies’ limited nature. Agreeing with Guy Pedroncini, he concluded, ‘The motives of the revolt were not revolutionary but the language frequently was’.

Despite characterisations of the ‘collective acts of indiscipline’ as more a protest than a revolt, the disobedient actions did constitute a mutiny and did have a political dimension. Even though soldiers rarely attacked officers or non-commissioned officers and usually did little more than shout revolutionary slogans and refuse to leave the trenches, tens of thousands of them disobeyed the orders of their commanders, refused to attack, encouraged others to resist, and called for an end to the war. Some soldiers also abandoned their posts, including their combat positions, and tried to march on Paris. Their demands, especially those calling for an immediate end of the war or even for a revolution, suggested goals well outside the bounds of the military. The sum total of soldiers’ actions clearly went beyond a strike and pushed the French army to the edge of collapse.

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According to Guy Pedroncini, ‘calm’ began to return during the period 7-30 June, but ‘some serious incidents’ and a ‘large number’ of smaller incidents nonetheless occurred in succeeding weeks and months. In August significant incidents took place around Verdun where the French were preparing to attack. The soldiers’ experience with previous costly attacks at Verdun, says Pedroncini, explains these incidents. Other incidents occurred in the final months of 1917 and in January 1918, but the worst phase of the mutinies clearly had passed by early June.

Perhaps the best indicator of the mutinies’ effect comes from the failure of the Germans to take advantage of them. Throughout the weeks of disorder, the French High Command feared the Germans would learn of the mutinies, attack weakened units, and make large gains. Adding to their worries, they intercepted a German radio-telegram message in mid-May that included information about three French battalions calling for an end to the war and refusing to leave their trenches in an attack. Also, they were aware of at least one German newspaper publishing comments from a French soldier about two infantry regiments refusing to enter the trenches. Denis Rolland has concluded, ‘The Germans were fully informed about what was happening in French lines and in the rear’. French prisoners, he says, provided the Germans a great deal of information about the mutinies. With this information in hand, the Germans attacked the Chemin des Dames, where many of the mutinous incidents occurred, at least fourteen times in June and July. The largest attacks of these attacks, however, involved only two German divisions along a three-kilometre front. As a result of these attacks, Tenth and Sixth armies, the units most affected by the mutinies, lost more than 5500 killed between 15 May and 15 July, but they did not collapse or surrender large amounts of terrain. They also did not lose their hatred of the Germans. Rolland cites only two cases of fraternisation during this period, one of which occurred on the Chemin des Dames.

Clearly, the mutinies had a limited effect on the defensive capability of the French. Mutinous French soldiers did not abandon the war effort, and numerous small German attacks during the crisis did not reveal a completely undisciplined, crumbling force. In the face of continued French resistance German commanders saw no compelling reason

16. Ibid., 174.
18. Rolland, La grève des tranchées, 367.
to switch their strategic focus in 1917 from the Eastern to the Western Front. Concerned about British offensive efforts in Flanders, they also saw no reason to shift forces from Flanders. Though the Germans continued to launch small attacks against French positions, they remained focused on the Eastern Front and Italy where they could obtain much larger gains and on Flanders where Haig attacked along different portions of the front in April, June, and late July.

The mutinies had a greater effect on the offensive, rather than the defensive, capability of the French army. Relatively few soldiers actually abandoned their posts in the trenches, but at the height of the mutinies many of them refused to charge forward without massive amounts of fire support. The strategic framework for the largest offensives in late 1917 came from several meetings in May of France’s and Great Britain’s political and military leaders. In essence, the British agreed to carry the main burden of offensive operations, and General Philippe Pétain agreed to provide supporting attacks for General Sir Douglas Haig’s offensive in Flanders. Appointed as Chief of the General Staff on April 29 and then as commander of the armies of the north and northeast on May 17, Pétain promised First Army would participate in the offensive alongside the British while Sixth and Second armies provided support by attacking the Chemin des Dames in early June and near Verdun in mid-July. First Army eventually participated in the Flanders offensive, but Haig had to delay the start of his offensive while the French took extraordinary steps to ensure the success of their infantry. On 4 June, after being warned soldiers would not leave the trenches, Pétain formally cancelled the Sixth Army’s offensive against the Chemin des Dames. Delays also occurred in Second Army’s attack near Verdun. Though Pétain had agreed to attack in mid-July, the promised operation near Verdun did not occur until late August, and it proved difficult to execute. Only massive amounts of artillery enabled the infantry to advance, and several German counterattacks proved hard to reverse.

The French launched other attacks, such as small offensives by Fourth and Tenth armies, but following the Verdun offensive in August, they launched no major attacks until late October when they seized la Malmaison (on the western end of the Chemin des Dames). This operation demonstrated that the French had regained some of their confidence and revived some of their offensive capability. A well-planned and well-executed operation, the attack involved three corps, delivered a powerful blow, and seized two successive objectives. Even though the army remained fragile and a small number of ‘collective acts of indiscipline’ continued to occur, the French secured the heights of the Chemin des Dames, the ridge along which 30,000 soldiers had died in Nivelle’s offensive.

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22. Pedroncini, Les mutineries de 1917, 178-9; Rolland, La grève des tranchées, 364.
Whatever the effects of the mutinies may have been, Sir Douglas Haig had an exaggerated view of them. The source of this exaggeration may have been Pétain, perhaps to obtain a larger effort from the British. According to Lloyd George, Pétain approached him at the end of a meeting not long after he had replaced Nivelle and said, 'I suppose you think I can't fight'. The British Prime Minister replied, 'No, General, with your record I could not make that mistake, but I am certain that for some reason or other you won't fight'.

According to the British official history, Pétain visited Haig's headquarters on 19 September and told the field marshal that he did not have a single soldier in the front line upon whom he could rely. Discipline was so bad in the French army, Haig noted in his diary, that Pétain believed the French 'could not resist a determined German offensive'.

Haig entered other negative assessments of the French in his diary, including one in early January 1918 when he expressed doubts about whether the French could withstand a strong enemy offensive. Yet, on 15 October, the British liaison officer to GQG (Grand Quartier Général, Supreme Headquarters) reported to the British War Committee that French morale had improved and that 'discipline was now good'. And two weeks later the French launched the offensive at la Malmaison. Thus, Haig's assessment appears excessively pessimistic. The French Army in late October was by no means the disciplined force General Joseph Joffre had commanded in 1915 and 1916, but it was far from being the broken, demoralised force Haig perceived it to be.

Returning to the question of why France remained in the fight, the most important step in ending the mutinies and reviving the operational capability of the French Army was appointing Pétain as commander of the armies of the north and northeast on May 17. Pétain dominated the army but, more importantly, he had the confidence of most soldiers. They knew he sincerely and deeply cared for them and would not squander their lives in pointless operations. They also knew General Sir Henry Wilson, the British liaison officer to the GQG, was wrong when he wrote: 'Pétain was squat, do little and have small losses'. Pétain, they knew, would do far more than 'wait for the Americans and the tanks'.

Before the mutinies spread, Pétain focused on changing the army's operational methods and upgrading French arms. His Directive No. 1, which was published on 19 May, explained his operational concept of limited offensives. The French Army would
not remain passive, but it would attack only under carefully controlled conditions with maximum artillery support and it would not launch successive attacks at the same point, one after the other. Such attacks had produced huge casualties in the past. He also initiated a massive rearmament program that in essence was a transformation of the French Army. The program sought to improve the quality and number of aircraft, heavy artillery, tanks, and chemical and smoke rounds. To ensure French soldiers got the maximum benefit from these improvements and increases, he initiated an energetic training program that emphasised using all the weapons effectively. Reducing losses and improving weapons not only addressed the grievances of exhausted, mutinous soldiers but also allowed the strengthening of units prior to the arrival of large numbers of American troops.

As the mutinies spread between 16 and 31 May, Pétain focused on restoring order. As many authors have noted, he used a combination of carrot and stick to restore discipline. First, he did his best to improve the lives of troops in the front line. By improving the quality of food, increasing the number of leaves, and enhancing rest areas behind the front lines, he made their lives easier even if they were not enjoyable. And by limiting alcohol consumption, he ensured drunkenness played a smaller role in disciplinary problems. Second, he insisted commanders pay attention to soldiers’ needs. He required commanders to appear weekly before their soldiers and address them and also required them and their staff officers to appear frequently in the trenches. He promised harsh treatment to officers who failed to do their duty or restore order. Third, to revive morale, he relied on personal appeals to the soldiers and personally visited as many as 90 divisions. His message was clear. Soldiers should not throw away the sacrifices of themselves and others; they should return to their duties and obey their leaders. France could expect a ‘victorious peace’, he promised, commensurate with the heavy sacrifice made by its soldiers. No other leader had as much credibility with soldiers as Pétain, and no one else could have exerted as much influence as quickly and effectively as he did.

Pétain also moved quickly to punish some of the mutinous soldiers. With President Raymond Poincaré and War Minister Paul Painlevé’s assistance, he established procedures to accelerate the judicial process, but he did not establish ‘kangaroo courts’ or resort to the ‘decimation’ of mutinous units (the execution of ten per cent of the soldiers). Instead, he made examples of a select number of the mutinous soldiers and publicised their punishment. According to Guy Pedroncini, the Army convicted 3427 soldiers for a variety of offences committed during the mutinies and sentenced 554 to death. Only seven soldiers, according to Pétain, went before firing squads immediately and 55 eventually were executed. Depending on the time considered and the offences included,
other authors have offered different numbers (as low as 26 executed). In comparison to an attack in which 10,000 may have died, this is not a large number of convictions or executions, but the number is not insignificant. Even though more soldiers could have been executed, Pétain used the ultimate sanction judiciously to serve as an example to others and restore order.

As part of his reforms, Pétain insisted on a defensive strategy that relied on limited offensives, not all-out breakthrough operations. In many ways France had no choice in the adoption of such a strategy, but in discussions at the highest levels, some political leaders favoured an offensive strategy. Painlevé succeeded in turning aside demands for offensives while he was President of the Council, as did Georges Clemenceau. In early October, in one of the first meetings of the War Committee under Clemenceau, one of the participants criticised Pétain’s defensive strategy, and Pétain responded by defending his operational methods and offering to resign if someone had a better idea. Clemenceau intervened forcefully and said, ‘I am not for an offensive, because we do not have the means. It is necessary to hold; it is necessary to endure’. He added, ‘I do not want to risk today the outcome of the war on an offensive. General Pétain is under my orders; I support him entirely.’ Beyond a doubt, the adoption of an offensive strategy late in 1917 may have unraveled the army and placed the outcome of the war at risk.

Pétain’s efforts thus extended into every critical area of the Army. He addressed strategy, doctrine, leadership, weaponry, treatment of soldiers, and discipline. All in all, his efforts saved many soldiers’ lives and gave them enough hope for them to return to their posts. Including the losses in Nivelle’s offensive, 1917 proved the least costly for France of all five calendar years in the war with only 12% of its total losses.

The Army nonetheless remained a fragile instrument, for many French soldiers saw few reasons for optimism. Revolution in Russia and German successes on the Eastern Front created the spectre of the Germans becoming ever-more powerful on the Western Front. Not even the promise of American involvement gave the soldiers hope. When one of France’s most important political leaders stated publicly that the Americans would not
be ready until 1919, the attitude of the soldiers worsened. Only sustained efforts by the British near Ypres gave them hope, but they did not expect the British offensives at Passchendaele or Cambrai to shorten the war or reduce French casualties. Without Pétain’s leadership and reforms, soldiers’ pessimism undoubtedly would have been greater and the possibility of their remaining in the trenches even less.

Another important reason for France’s remaining in the war is that its political system proved far more resilient than political events in Paris suggested. For some observers the political scene was chaotic, seemingly on the edge of collapse, especially in the wake of the Nivelle offensive and the mutinies. In his memoirs Poincaré noted the turmoil in 1917 when he highlighted ‘divisions between the politicians’. The most obvious evidence of these divisions appears in the several changes in ministries in 1917. Only three ministries existed between the outbreak of the war and December 1916 (René Viviani twice and Aristide Briand once), but four existed in 1917. Briand governed three months from December 1916 to March 1917; Alexandre Ribot five and one-half months from March to September; Paul Painlevé two months from September to November; and Georges Clemenceau for the remainder of the year. The Painlevé government was the only government during the war to be voted out of power; all the others resigned.

Throughout 1917 French soldiers had reservations about political events in Paris and many doubted their political leaders’ motivations. These doubts became obvious in March 1917 when Briand’s government resigned. The incident provoking the government’s resignation occurred during a session of the Chamber of Deputies when the Minister of War, General Hubert Lyautey, refused to discuss military aviation during a closed, secret session. When the session became public, he surprised the deputies by insisting that discussion of a military topic in the Chamber of Deputies even in closed session would expose the national defence to ‘grave risks’. In the ensuing outpouring of rage, Lyautey resigned, and the entire Briand ministry soon followed him. According to the periodic morale report, Lyautey’s resignation had a ‘very resounding’ effect on soldiers. The report noted, ‘The impression is bad. They judge the assembly in more and more harsh terms.’ Clearly, instability and infighting in Paris increased soldiers’ dismay.

33. État-Major Général, Bureau des Services Spéciaux (Contrôle Postal), Renseignements sur les corps de troupe d’après le Contrôle Postal, Deuxième quinzaine de décembre, 2 janvier 1918, SHAT 16N1485.
With political divisions worsening, the *Union Sacrée*, or Sacred Union, ended. After the major political parties had rallied wholeheartedly in August 1914 to the defence of the nation and the defeat of German aggression, the idea of the Sacred Union dominated French politics. In subsequent years France held no national elections and was governed by a centre-left coalition that sought to put aside political rivalries. Some fraying of national unity occurred in 1915, but as months passed and casualties mounted more extensive fraying occurred in 1916 and accelerated in 1917. In April 1917 three socialist delegates visited St Petersburg and were dismayed by the obvious crumbling of the Russian Army. The following month members of the party attempted to take part in an international meeting of socialists in Stockholm. Those who organised the conference wanted to assemble delegates from all socialist parties, including France and Germany, and discuss ‘universal peace’ and how to ‘prepare the way to peace’. At a meeting of the War Committee on May 31, Poincaré asked Pétain if he could keep the army ‘in hand’ if French socialists discussed terms for peace with German delegates at Stockholm, and Pétain responded ‘no’ in a loud, clear voice. The President of the Council of Ministers, Ribot, decided not to provide the socialists their passports and allow them to take part in the conference. He announced his decision in the Chamber of Deputies on June 1. After the Chamber of Deputies affirmed in August its support of Ribot’s decision, the Socialists withdrew their support for his government, which resigned on September 7. The Socialists subsequently refused to support Painlevé’s new government because Ribot remained the Minister of Foreign Affairs and because they remained angry over the government’s having refused to let them take part in the international Socialist conference.

The absence of Socialists in Painlevé’s ministry did not mean they had abandoned the fight or the government could no longer function. In early September 1917 Albert Thomas, the Socialist who had served as Minister of Armaments, addressed a group of workers at a factory and asked them to ‘multiply their efforts’ so a future military victory ‘may bring likewise an enduring victory for labour …’. Two months later, he emphasised that his party was not seeking a compromise peace and would continue to support France’s defence ‘outside and above the governments’. Even though some socialists believed the government had rejected an option that could have produced peace, their discontent, as Guy Pedroncini has observed, was ‘far’ from boiling over into open rebellion. Most of them wanted peace, not a Russian-style revolution or a French defeat.

The notion of France’s speaking with ‘one voice’, however, had ended.

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43. Quoted in Bonnefous, *La grande guerre*, 351.
Strikes by factory workers added additional turmoil to the political scene. Though there had been a few strikes earlier in the war, signs of workers’ discontent began increasing in late 1916. The demands of total war and the ravages of German submarine warfare created numerous shortages (except for food which remained plentiful, though expensive), and a rapid rise in prices and long working hours generated much discontent among factory workers, many of whom were women. In January 1917 a series of strikes struck the war industries, but the government stymied the strikers by ordering mandatory government arbitration. A more serious wave of strikes began in May during the mutinies. The May Day parade in 1917 was interrupted by several thousand demonstrators chanting ‘Down with War’, and strikes in June involved as many as 100,000 workers in war industries. As the national consensus behind the war effort became increasingly frayed, many of those striking wanted peace, but like the mutinous soldiers who returned to the trenches, very few of them wanted peace at any price. Had workers in the factories disrupted the manufacture of war materiel, they could have upset the entire war effort, but they chose not to do so. The increasing discontent and dismay of the French people nonetheless were obvious in the more numerous strikes and demonstrations.

Additional evidence of the French people becoming weary of war came from an increased number of young men avoiding military service in early 1917. Young Frenchmen proved more resistant to being conscripted into military service at the beginning of the conflict than at the end, but the year 1917 proved to be an anomaly. According to figures released by the Ministry of War, the highest rate of those refusing to report for service was 2.59% at the end of 1915. Yet, as Philippe Boulanger has noted, the published figures for 1917 are incomplete. During the turmoil of 1917, the French general staff decided not to publish statistics on those refusing conscription for fear the increased numbers would affect the next conscription class. Clearly, the number of those refusing conscription had increased. Amist a rising concern about some young men escaping the ‘blood tax’, the law of 10 August 1917, became the ‘fundamental law’ to curtail the shirking of conscription or front-line service, and by 1918, the number refusing conscription had dropped to 0.8%. Thus, as the turmoil of early 1917 waned and the avoiding of conscription became more difficult, French families returned again to sending their sons to the army.

HOW DID FRANCE WEATHER THE TROUBLES OF 1917?

Though the French people did not get a chance to vote formally on whether France stayed in the war, they made their attitude toward the war clear. Their discontent and dismay surfaced most clearly in the strikes of early 1917 and the rising number of young men avoiding conscription during the same period. By continuing to work in the factories and producing record amounts of war materiel and by continuing to send their sons to the army, however, the French people reluctantly but effectively supported the continuation of the war. They recognised the terrible sacrifices France had made and did not wish to render those sacrifices useless.

A series of scandals added to the turmoil in 1917. In one of these a manager of a small, left-wing newspaper, *Bonnet Rouge*, was arrested returning from Switzerland with a cheque for a large sum of money. Amidst charges of the Germans having used the newspaper to influence French opinion, it was discovered that the Minister of the Interior, Louis-Jean Malvy, had previously provided subsidies to the newspaper. The affair escalated dramatically when it was discovered that Malvy had a relationship with an alleged German spy, Mata Hari. When one of the strange characters involved in the affair, Almereyda, died in prison, many suspected he had been killed before he identified other high-ranking French leaders involved in the affair. Another scandal came from the discovery that Paul Bolo, a shady character also known as ‘Bolo Pacha’, had provided money that came from Germany to bribe several leading French newspapers. These sensational events, as well as others, contributed to the idea of Paris being deeply corrupt and irreconcilably divided. To make matters worse, Léon Daudet, accused Malvy of being a traitor, of having revealed Nivelle’s plans to the Germans. Though a formal military investigation concluded the charges of treason were ‘absurd’, 48 the scandals and the atmosphere of intrigue and deceit damaged the reputation and authority of the government.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution in March 1917 and the Nivelle offensive of April, serious doubts about France’s gaining peace with a victory emerged. Amidst the debilitating scandals, the French received the grave news of the Central Powers’ success in Russia and Italy. Political leaders faced the hard question of whether they should continue the war or seek peace on the best possible terms. As they cautiously explored several peace feelers, they considered the possibility of a compromise peace with Germany or a separate peace between Austria and the Allied powers, as well as a peace mediated by the Pope. During the same period acrimonious debates occurred in the Chamber of Deputies about France’s modifying its war aims. The Socialists who had traveled to St Petersburg in April had learned of the secret pre-war accords between France and Russia, and in June fierce

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arguments over France’s war aims occurred in secret sessions of the Chamber of Deputies. One deputy insisted, ‘You must modify your war aims’. In October another secret session of the Chamber of Deputies focused on supposed efforts by ex-Premier Briand to reach peace with Germany by surrendering Alsace-Lorraine.

In the end fierce debates and exploration of alternatives did not push France out of the war or lead it down a path separate from its allies. Its political leaders realised Germany would not offer an acceptable peace while making huge gains against Russia, and they refused to make concessions on the most important points, Alsace-Lorraine and Belgium. In reality, French political leaders considered the alternatives and chose to continue the war.

The French government also continued to make decisions that sustained or strengthened the war effort. Of the people responsible for France’s staying in the war, one of those usually not given much credit is Paul Painlevé who served as Minister of War from 20 March to 10 September and President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of War from 13 September to 13 November 1917. Painlevé’s government was the first during the war not to have a Socialist representative in it, and historians have criticised him often for his indecisiveness and weakness. Lloyd George observed, ‘He was too sensitive and too excitable for the position of a national leader in a bad crisis of a nation’s destiny. He shrank from personal criticism with the dislike of the man who could not retort in kind.’ Simply stated, Painlevé faced a host of significant challenges and lacked not only the political backing but also the flamboyance, confidence, and oratorical skills of politicians such as Viviani and Briand. Yet, while he was Minister of War and President of the Council of Ministers, he played a key role in several important events that proved to be extremely important in ensuring the eventual victory of France.

While serving as Minister of War, for example, Painlevé issued a decree expediting the process of courts martial. At the height of the mutinies he retained military courts but eliminated the right of soldiers to appeal their convictions in cases of mass disobedience. In essence his decree of 9 June shortened legal delays and allowed Pétain to punish soldiers swiftly. Poincaré, as President of the Third Republic, cooperated in this endeavour by turning over to Pétain his right to pardon soldiers. Though ‘violent objections’ came from the Chamber of Deputies, the change resulted, Painlevé insisted, in the reduction

49. Quoted in Bonnefous, La grande guerre, 250.
52. Lloyd George, War Memoirs, 1602.
of collective acts of disobedience. As Guy Pedroncini has argued, ‘political necessities’ caused Painlevé to intervene in several cases and, and with Pétain’s concurrence, the decree was abrogated in mid-July after most of the crisis had passed. While Painlevé did not act decisively, he nonetheless provided Pétain a legal method for acting swiftly against the mutinous soldiers, and instead of relying on ‘pitiless executions’ Pétain used it with ‘moderation’ to ensure the acquiescence of soldiers and politicians.

Painlevé also established procedures for political leaders to visit front-line units. Since the beginning of the war, the army’s leaders had objected to politicians visiting units and distracting them, but leading politicians tried to reassure soldiers by frequently appearing in units and occasionally visiting trenches. Some political leaders also served in uniform and fought in the front lines. When the Chamber of Deputies discussed the Nivelle operation in a secret session from 29 June to 7 July, it heard from several deputies, including Jean Ybarnégaray who had fought on the Chemin des Dames in the ‘first line’ and who delivered a passionate critique of the planning and conduct of the offensive. As far as the generals were concerned, however, French politicians spent too much time at the front and interfered too often with military decision-making. A formal investigation by three senior generals of Nivelle’s failed offensive, for example, complained that members of the government who were present on the front at the beginning of the operation and who had no experience in combat spread false information in Paris about the offensive. The erroneous information, said Painlevé in his memoirs, added to the air of ‘intrigue’ surrounding the operation and permeating Paris. Yet, the formal investigation also criticised the Ribot government for not having prevented Nivelle’s offensive.

Unwilling to risk the ire of the army’s generals or act contrary to the wishes of other politicians, Painlevé responded by allowing specially selected delegates from the Chamber of Deputies and Senate to visit units and conduct inspections. Without being accompanied by an officer, the delegates could visit the front merely by notifying the Minister of War. Only the conduct of operations lay outside their purview. While the politicians may have distracted the generals, their honest concern and their personal visits proved to be an important factor in sustaining soldiers’ fighting spirit. With a great amount of information coming from letters, visits, and personal reports, individual deputies may have disagreed on the facts or misinterpreted events, but they did not suffer from a shortage of timely information. Painlevé’s action thus struck a balance between the desires of the politicians and generals.

55. Bonnefous, La grande guerre, 278.
56. Painlevé, Comment j’ai nommé Foch et Pétain, 176-86.
Painlevé’s most important achievement was his raising Pétain and Foch to the top of the army. He stated in his memoirs, ‘It was I who had complete responsibility … it was I who chose them precisely because of the qualities and concepts that I knew were theirs’. The choice of Pétain nonetheless was an obvious one. Shortly after the failure of Nivelle’s offensive Painlevé received a letter from a general officer who said, ‘Only one man is capable of getting us out of this [mess]’. In an ‘almost unanimous voice’, says Painlevé, the entire army agreed with Pétain’s promotion. Painlevé explains, ‘By his understanding of the heart of troops as well as by the prudence and certainty of his methods of war, no one was more qualified [than Pétain] to restore the lost confidence of the combatants, officers and soldiers’. By the morning of 27 April, Painlevé and Ribot, the Premier, had agreed to promote Pétain and Foch to the top of the army. Despite strong resistance within the Council of Ministers, their proposal to replace Nivelle, less than two weeks after the offensive began, prevailed.57

Painlevé also played an important role in the elevation of Foch who had been relieved in December 1916 from command of an army group. The first step occurred when Painlevé supported Foch’s nomination as Chief of the General Staff. The next step occurred when Painlevé met with Lloyd George in August 1917 and suggested Foch be appointed Allied chief of the general staff. As with Pétain, Foch was an obvious choice given his positive relations with the British and his thorough understanding of the war,58 but Lloyd George was not prepared for such a step. Painlevé nonetheless set the stage for Foch to become Supreme Commander in 1918. Similarly, Painlevé played an exceedingly important role in the creation of the Supreme War Council. Although English-language sources usually give Lloyd George most of the credit for creating the Supreme War Council,59 the idea of such a council had long percolated through the minds of French leaders who anxiously sought greater unity of command among the Allies. The Allies finally created a Supreme War Council at a meeting in Rapallo, Italy, in November 1917, a week before Painlevé’s government fell. Thus the rudimentary first steps toward unity of command among the Allies occurred while Painlevé was President of the Council of Ministers. While he does not deserve complete credit, he certainly deserves some of the credit for France’s taking important steps along the road to victory. Though admittedly indecisive, he was not irresponsible or defeatist.

57. Ibid., 127, 81, 83, 85.
58. Ibid., 241, 248.
With hindsight, it is clear that Clemenceau was the right man to follow Painlevé as President of the Council of Ministers. Unlike Painlevé he did not avoid confrontations or controversy. He told one political leader, ‘Life is a battle. I have often battled others. It is very natural that they would battle against me.’

Yet, Clemenceau was not an easy choice. A month before the short-lived Painlevé government fell, Poincaré (as President of the Third Republic) began considering the possibility of Clemenceau’s becoming the President of the Council of Ministers. For much of the war the ‘Tiger’ had denounced not only defeatists but also the leaders of France, and his unrelenting attacks made Poincaré reluctant to give Clemenceau real power. Yet, the only real alternative was Joseph Caillaux, whom Poincaré considered ‘the centre of all defeatist propaganda’. It was clear that under Caillaux’s leadership France would seek a negotiated end to the war and under Clemenceau’s leadership France would fight to the bitter end. One political leader advised Poincaré that choosing Clemenceau would incite ‘civil war’. In some ways Poincaré’s choice of Clemenceau was made as reluctantly as that of the soldiers to stay in the trenches and the French people to continue working in the factories and send their sons to the army. He was not an attractive option, but he was better than the alternative. Yet, in choosing Clemenceau Poincaré placed the man in power who would take bold steps to root out defeatism and scandals and keep France in the war.

As Gordon Wright has noted, with Clemenceau’s rise to power France entered upon ‘a kind of civilian dictatorship, or the nearest thing to it that the republic had known since the days of [Léon] Gambetta in 1870’. Prior to becoming President of the Council of Ministers, Clemenceau’s caustic denunciation of defeatists, incompetent commanders, and irresponsible politicians had made him unpopular with those he criticised but popular with soldiers and citizens. The French people knew he was completely committed to achieving victory, and they were not disappointed with his actions when he became Premier. As J.F.V. Keiger has noted, Clemenceau’s popularity ‘conferred’ on him a ‘legitimacy’ that his opponents ‘dare[d] not contest’. Clemenceau revealed his goals and methods in his first speech before the Chamber of Deputies. He said: ‘Neither personal considerations, nor political passions will turn us from our duty … No more pacifist campaigns, no more German intrigues. Neither treason, nor half treason. War. Nothing but war.’

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64. Quoted in Bonnefous, *La grande guerre*, 346.
Just as Pétain had healed the military, Clemenceau ‘healed’ the body politic by refusing to consider peace, ending defeatist efforts, and restoring order to the political scene. At the first meeting of the War Committee after he became President of the Council, he emphasised he had been named to the premiership ‘not to make peace’. Additionally, he silenced advocates of a compromise peace by arresting Caillaux and bringing Malvy to trial before the Senate. Other important political leaders such as the former premier Briand came under suspicion and scrutiny. He also cracked down on those accused of spying and executed several. And to reduce the political squabbling in Paris, he ended secret sessions in the Chamber of Deputies and limited cabinet meetings to one a week. To strengthen the will of soldiers, he spent almost a third of his time visiting units and talking to commanders. Not one to avoid danger, he frequently went into the trenches and at one point was only 200 metres from the enemy. These actions clearly demonstrated Clemenceau’s determination to continue the war and his refusal to accept anything other than victory. At a time when French soldiers and citizens were faltering, the Tiger’s fierce determination proved invaluable to sustaining their confidence and reviving their hopes of victory.

In conclusion, the French Army did not collapse in 1917, the government did not negotiate a compromise peace, and the people continued to support the war. Each in their own way, soldiers in the trenches, politicians in Paris, and workers in the factories considered ending the war and made the hard choice to stay in the war. A different choice by any one of them would have ended the war for France. Yet, the army and nation remained fragile. By mid-December 1917, the French High Command noted a ‘crisis of pessimism’ among soldiers, and political leaders had grave doubts about France’s achieving victory in the war. Despite the pessimism and uncertainty, France had weathered the storm of 1917 and had enhanced its ability to remain in the war. With Clemenceau providing strong leadership and quelling internecine fights in Paris, with Pétain and Foch leading the French armed forces and developing realistic strategy and doctrine, with the addition of many new weapons (especially tanks, aircraft, and heavy artillery), with the British assuming a larger role in the war, and with the Americans entering the war, the French would endure the even larger storm of 1918.

65. Poincaré, L’Année trouble, 413.
67. État-Major Général, Bureau des Services Spéciaux (Contrôle Postal), Rapport sur le pessimisme dans le corps de troupes, 15 décembre 1917, SHAT 16N1485.
68. Duroselle, Clemenceau, 671.
For three years since this war was declared, we have had the time to learn what true misery is. It will be good for this miserable killing to end soon and for everyone to find their families and some happiness once again, although it will not be like before the war because almost the entire world is in mourning.

Eleven year-old Rose, in a letter to her father at the front, 1917.¹

Here everyone is disgusted with the war, and I foresee a revolution in France soon. The French soldiers are discouraged, and no one among them believes that Germany will be beaten. They continue the war just like they continue to go to church or a wedding or to any other old institution.

An American observer in France, August, 1917.²

The suffering of the French people and the French Army in 1917 has led many historians, most notably the eminent Jean-Jacques Becker, to call the year the time of crisis.³ Military historians have picked up on Becker’s themes, and Henri-Philippe Pétain’s famous pledge to wait for tanks and the Americans has become a standard staple of treatments of 1917. Nevertheless, Becker also argued that the image of crisis ought not to be carried too far, and that the crisis of morale reflected a frustration with the French government’s incompetent prosecution of the war more than a desire for peace at any price. More recently, excellent historical work by Leonard V. Smith, Robert Doughty, and Michel Goya has done a great deal to help us understand the mutinies that followed the disastrous Nivelle Offensive within the general context of the development of the French Army from 1914 to 1918.⁴

¹. 1914-1918: Mon papa en guerre: lettres de poilus, mots d’enfants (Paris: Librio, 2003), 19. All translations from the French are mine.
This paper has three goals. First, it seeks to place the mutinies in a much wider historical context than has thus far appeared in the scholarship. It will argue that the reasons for the mutinies and the larger morale crisis of 1917 were much broader than the immediate shockwaves that followed Nivelle's fiasco on the Chemin des Dames. Nivelle deserves a larger share of the blame than any other single individual for the crisis, and this paper most certainly does not seek to restore his reputation, nor does it seek to rationalise or justify his inexcusably ill-planned offensive. Still, it is time for historians to see beyond the heights of Craonne and understand the morale crisis of spring, 1917, as a response to events not just in the Aisne valley and not just on the Western Front, but across Europe. In doing so, this paper breaks down the binary distinction between home and fighting fronts. In recent years, scholars have emphasised the tight linkages between the men on the fighting front and their families at home. The crisis of 1917 hit both soldiers and civilians. The morale of one group necessarily affected the morale of the other. As the epigraph above demonstrates, even children recognised the depths to which morale had sunk.³

Second, this paper will explain why the mutinies were for all intents and purposes over by early August and the crisis of morale on the home front was over by the end of October at the latest. I do not intend to suggest that all of the grievances of French soldiers and civilians were addressed by October. Rather, I argue that by then few Frenchmen (and few foreign observers) spoke any longer of crisis. Instead, observers began to note that French determination to see the war to a successful conclusion had begun to rise. By the spring of 1918 the French Army looked markedly different from that of a year earlier. An explanation of this change, like one for the mutinies themselves, must be sought beyond the trenches.

Finally, this paper will demonstrate the relatively limited long-term effects of the morale crisis of 1917 by looking at the French Army’s performance at the turning point of 1918, the Second Battle of the Marne. The French Army on the Marne in July, 1918, looked nothing like the images of a force broken by its bloody setback on the Chemin des Dames a year earlier. Instead, it was a modern army fighting as part of a broad allied coalition. There were, moreover, few signs of the morale crisis of the previous year. I do not, of course, intend to argue that the French Army was in any kind of position to win

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³ It is worth noting that censorship in France was relatively light. The French never employed more than 2000 censors and their principal job was to monitor morale, not to influence it. That job went to propagandists. As Martha Hanna and others have shown, the correspondence between soldiers and their families could be quite frank. It is also noteworthy that the French never resorted to anything like the British Field Service Postcard for controlling the methods of communication to and from the western front. The French even permitted the publication of Henri Barbusse’s frank critique of the war, Le Feu, in 1916.
the war without its alliance partners, the United Kingdom, its Dominions, and the United States. It is nevertheless important to correct still prevalent images of a French Army so badly broken that it played only secondary roles in the final victory of 1918.

THE CRISIS OF MORALE

Leonard Smith’s path-breaking study of the mutinies of 1917 understood the soldiers as seeking a redress of their grievances. Smith argued that the men were looking for an alternative to the carnage of the western front that offensives à outrance like that of Nivelle on the Chemin des Dames had revealed to be criminal folly. On the other hand, French poilus were unwilling to face what Smith described as the indefinite incarceration that perpetual defensive operations in the trenches represented. The mutinies were therefore statements by the men that neither suicidal charges for no larger purpose nor a continuation of senseless trench warfare would be acceptable. The mutinies were, Smith concludes, not an anti-war statement because few soldiers demanded an immediate end to the war under any circumstances. They were, however, an anti-military statement in that the poilus demanded better treatment for themselves and better conduct of the war for their country. Men were willing to die for France, but were unwilling to throw their lives away for no larger purpose. Thus does Smith conclude that the mutinies were in the end an essentially patriotic statement. They represented a demand not for surrender, but for a more efficient and sensible prosecution of the war.

As many scholars have noted, the mutineers did not abandon their posts in most cases, took great care not to let the Germans learn about their protests, and only a few committed acts of violence. Still, men from dozens of units refused to go back into the line and even a few soldiers singing the Internationale could throw French staff officers into paroxysms of fear. Outside observers rarely spoke of revolution, but they were quick to see how serious the crisis was. British General Henry Wilson, always a keen observer of the French Army and its moods, toured the French lines in June and saw ‘signs of French demoralisation’ everywhere he went and noted that the French army ‘wants very careful handling if she is to carry on to next year’. Still, even Wilson acknowledged that the morale problems of the French Army were due less to losses than to ‘disappointment’ at the failure of the French to make those losses worthwhile by bringing France closer to victory.6 Waves of strikes in French industry showed that the frustrations of soldiers were also felt by their families at home.

The most severe period of the morale crisis began in mid-April and ended in early August, although French staff officers kept a nervous eye on the situation at the front until the end of October. The beginning of the crisis obviously coincides with the disenchantment that followed the disaster on the Chemin des Dames, in part because the attack had been accompanied by such unrealistically high hopes. Few studies of the mutinies and the wave of strikes in French cities that spring and summer have sought to address the question of why they began to fizzle out as early as July, caused little concern at the Grand Quartier Général (Supreme Headquarters) by August, and were a non-issue two months later. One of the central arguments of this paper is that French morale improved, paradoxically, in large part because the international situation seemed to deteriorate so badly.

Most military studies credit the reforms instituted by Nivelle’s replacement, General Henri-Philippe Pétain, for quelling the mutinies in the ranks. To be sure, Pétain improved leave arrangements, made sure that officers better understood their men, and oversaw improvements to the quality of the daily life of poilus. It is not, however, true, that Pétain simply waited for the tanks and the Americans as he famously pledged. While he did advocate a strategy of ‘healing and defence’, he nevertheless conducted a number of important, if limited, offensives. Nor did Pétain necessarily support staying on the perpetual defensive. As early as June, Pétain had advised the French government and BEF commander Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig that the French Army could conduct an offensive within a month if needed, although he urged that such an offensive not be conducted until he could supervise important doctrinal reforms. It may be worth noting that Pétain’s caution came not from a fear that French soldiers would disobey orders to attack, but because he wanted time to purge the offensive mentalities of his predecessors.

Pétain did, in fact, conduct two offensives of his own in 1917. One of these retook strategic positions at Verdun in August. Limiting the offensive to just 48 hours, the French took the critical Hill 304 position, which had been lost to the Germans the previous year. The other offensive targeted the Fort de Malmaison, a strongpoint on the very Chemin des Dames where the mutinies had begun earlier in the year. Pétain resisted strident calls from subordinates and politicians alike to aim for a rupture of the German lines. Instead, he both moderated the offensive’s goals and brought in massive amounts of artillery and armour to support advancing French infantry. As a result, the October, 1917 attack on the Chemin des Dames, although largely forgotten, captured more ground than Nivelle’s

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offensive had, and at a fraction of the human cost. Both of these offensives had limited objectives and were examples of Pétain’s new, more scientific approach to war. Both succeeded.

Pétain thus differed from Nivelle and others in the French Army not so much in his opposition to the offensive as the best way to win the war, but in his vision of the nature of the offensive within the larger allied strategy of the war. He instituted changes in French operations and tactics that placed the emphasis on machines, not men. Pétain sought to install a French doctrine based not around the bayonet, but on large numbers of airplanes, heavy (155mm or larger) cannon, and tanks. Pétain remained pessimistic and gloomy (especially when compared to generals like Nivelle and Foch), but he shared the overall allied goal of attacking the German Army on the Western Front as a necessary precondition to forcing the Germans from French soil, the clear sine qua non of victory.

In contrast to most other allied commanders, however, Pétain advocated a series of smaller operations with more limited objectives. For that reason, he opposed the ambitious British plans for clearing the Belgian coastline, although in the end he did promise six French divisions to support the operation. Pétain therefore deserves credit for his new approach to war and for his understanding that the French Army could no longer be so cavalier about how it handled its men, but it is inaccurate to depict him as constitutionally opposed to attacking until the Americans arrived. Pétain ordered offensives when and where he believed that he had the needed material support and a goal existed that was worth the anticipated cost in French lives.

Pétain’s most important reform may well have been his institution of changes to the French leave system. A September 1916 policy theoretically had allowed each man seven days of home leave every four months. The policy, however, counted home leave as any day that a soldier did not spend in his unit. Therefore, time in transit to home counted against leave. The policy also left a great deal of discretion in the hands of local commanders, many of whom ‘ignored the leave roster, administered it unfairly, or even abandoned it altogether’. Pétain oversaw a more generous system which forced commanders to stay more faithfully to the leave roster and increased the total amount of leave to seven days every three months. It also granted extra leave for men who lived far from the front lines.

Pétain, himself from a peasant background, may have understood how much more important leave was in summer, 1917, than it had been in previous years. With the fourth winter of the war approaching, men were understandably concerned for the safety of the

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food supply in their home districts. They wanted leave not only to rest and enjoy the company of their families but to help their families prepare for the critical harvest. Postal censors noted that soldiers from farming communities were especially angry ‘to see men with no knowledge of farming’ going home to the cities at a time when farmers were most needed. Urban soldiers, they believed, were abusing the policy, often by falsely listing a rural address. Fears that the government was mismanaging the new leave policy led to great anxieties, not just because soldiers wanted to go home, but because they were afraid for the futures of their families. As one wife of a soldier noted, ‘If they had put all the farmers where they belong then we wouldn’t soon be needing ration cards for bread’. This concern for the ability of their families to feed themselves through an extremely uncertain winter added greatly to the anxieties France was experiencing during the period of the morale crisis both at home and in the trenches.

Pétain’s new leave system helped to ease the crisis somewhat. It not only gave the men more leave, it gave at least some of the lucky ones leave when they most needed it. French soldier Paul Pireaud gently admonished his wife for suggesting that he try to arrange to come home in August, after the wheat harvest had been collected, so he could spend his leave relaxing. ‘If I can I would rather go now’, he told her in early July, ‘because it makes me heartsick to see that you are obliged to do everything.’ Paul got his desire to come home in late July where he, like many other soldiers on leave who were from his native Dordogne, spent most of his leave week helping to bring in the wheat harvest in time to assure himself that his family would have sufficient food through the winter. Thus by August, when the last rumbles of the mutinies were fading away into echoes, at least some of the men of the French Army had had their long overdue chance to go home and be at least a bit reassured that their families would be alright in their absence. Of course, not all men got that golden opportunity and some no doubt grew more bitter as a consequence.

But Pétain’s reforms are not the whole story. The crisis of morale in 1917 was also linked to three events outside France that contributed greatly to the fear in France that the war would not only continue, but might lead to a French defeat. Arguably the most important was the first Russian revolution which replaced the incompetent tsarist regime of Nicholas II with a provisional government headed by Alexander Kerensky. At first, most Frenchmen welcomed the change because Kerensky had pledged to keep Russia in the war, reassuring the French that the eastern front would not collapse. The French hoped

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9. Ibid., 219. She may have had a point. The harvest of 1917 was the thinnest in half a century, as were the harvests in almost all of the belligerent states.

10. Ibid., 220.
that if democracy replaced dictatorship, a new martial spirit might infuse the Russian people just as the end of absolute monarchy had inspired the French *sans culottes* at Valmy in 1792. Indeed, initial signs seemed to indicate that the Russians might indeed fight much better without the tsar. At the same time, however, the Kerensky government was coming under increased pressure from the revolutionary left, which advocated a separate peace with Germany. Although many Frenchmen sympathised with much of the Russian left's ideology, a separate peace, they knew, would leave Germany free to devote the vast majority of its military assets against France, a nightmarish scenario for Frenchmen of all political stripes.

Initial optimism about Kerensky soon gave way to deep pessimism. The failure of the provisional government's offensive (known either as the Kerensky Offensive or the Second Brusilov Offensive) in early July underscored the abiding fragility of Russia and changed the views of many Frenchmen. French postal censors began to detect increasingly critical views of what one Frenchman called ‘this gross, brutish, spineless, inwardly cowardly nation’. Another noted that the Russians had proved themselves to be ‘a steam roller that cannot crush a nut’. The number of Frenchmen who believed that the Russians would be beaten and get out of the war by signing a separate peace rose, leading to a growing sense of unease in the army and on the home front. That unease no doubt reflected anxiety about France's chances to withstand the full force of German military might. Frenchmen turned bitter against their erstwhile allies and blamed the outbreak of the war on the Russians, accusing their ally of having dragged them into a conflict that did not affect France's central interests.11 The Russians, they feared, would soon get out of the war and leave the French to deal with the consequences of Russian incompetence and treachery.

Throughout the summer of 1917, as the British offensive in Flanders ground on inconclusively, the military situation looked increasingly perilous, contributing to the sense of crisis in France. Fears of a separate peace between the Russians and the Germans thus came on top of the anxieties of French incompetence that the Nivelle offensive had highlighted. The second Russian revolution replaced Kerensky with the Bolsheviks, a party that advocated a separate peace to end Russian participation in the war. Ironically, as we will see below, that revolution would have salutary impacts on French morale.

The second event outside of France involved the much anticipated Papal Peace Note. French Catholics had hoped that the note might set the conditions for a reasonable peace that could restore some or all of France's lost territories. Most of the key belligerents had sizable Catholic populations that might be expected to be receptive to the pope’s overture.

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Rumours of a papal peace note had been commonplace inside France long before the official issuance of the note on 1 August 1917. As soon became obvious, the terms of the note did not even come close to matching the needs and desires of the French people. What is more significant is that even before the note became public, the French government had made clear its opposition to any diplomatic overtures from the Vatican, with which the Third Republic had notoriously poor relations. French diplomats believed, with some justification, that the real purpose of the note was to prevent the dissolution of the only solidly pro-Vatican belligerent, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The imminence of the peace note, combined with the near certain rejection of it no matter its terms by the French government, shut off one of the few even remotely promising possibilities for a peaceful end to the war.

Much the same was true of an international meeting of socialists scheduled to take place in neutral Stockholm. The idea first originated in Russia in February and picked up steam throughout the spring. In April, in the wake of the Nivelle disaster, Dutch socialists issued a statement of aims for the conference that called for a peace without annexations and the application of the principle of national self-determination for disputed territories. Many French socialists originally voiced their support for the conference, with a young socialist deputy (and future prime minister of Vichy France) Pierre Laval calling it ‘the way to give hope to the troops and confidence to the workers’.

In June, formal invitations went out to leading socialists in all of the belligerent countries. President Raymond Poincaré had, however, already decided to ban French socialists from attending by denying them passports, on the belief that the conference would pose a threat to French morale. He also suspected that the gathering might lead to talk of a premature peace, which to him meant a peace without France regaining Alsace and Lorraine. Many French socialists generally supported a definition of ‘peace without annexations’ that included the return of Alsace and Lorraine to France. In their eyes (as well as the eyes of French nationalists), Alsace and Lorraine had been illegally seized from France by the Germans in 1871 and therefore their return did not constitute an annexation but a redress of a long-standing legitimate grievance. More importantly, the French government opposed the socialist gathering because it knew that France had nothing with which it could negotiate, nor could it authorise a minority party to go to a neutral nation claiming either the power to negotiate for the government or to speak on behalf of the entire nation.

12. Laval quoted in Smith et al., *France and the Great War, 1914-1918*, 139. It should be noted that many French socialists opposed going to Stockholm unless the German delegation agreed in advance to support the return of all occupied territory.

13. Not surprisingly, Pétain fully supported the president’s decision.
The joint failures of the Papal Peace Note and the Stockholm conference contributed to the sour and anxious mood that permeated France in the spring and summer of 1917. Although Frenchmen understood that both initiatives were problematic to say the least, their failures shut off the only two remotely promising alternatives to another year of war. As late as mid-September French Army analysts were still noting that the failure of the Vatican and Stockholm initiatives remained two of the most important issues in the letters of soldiers read by censors, alongside the future of Russia and the assignment of blame for the prolongation of the war.\(^{14}\)

Through the spring and summer, 1917 the French Army appeared to be stuck in the dilemma Len Smith described. To attack was to invite more bloody reverses like that on the Chemin des Dames, but to remain on the strategic defensive was not only to sit in incarceration for another year, but to cede the primary responsibility for the liberation of France to foreigners, even if they were allies. The general state of affairs in Europe also seemed to augur a difficult future with all possible avenues of a peaceful end to the war exhausted. Only the thin hope that the Americans might make a difference gave the French reason to be optimistic, although in spring, 1917 few Frenchmen expected the small American Army to compensate for the impending collapse of the Russian giant. Given this serious state of morale, it is remarkable that France, a nation that all observers recognised as war weary, recovered as quickly as it did. Paradoxically, these international events had the effect of setting the conditions for French recovery as throughout 1917 and 1918 it became increasingly obvious to French soldiers and civilians alike that France had no choice but to fight on, alone if necessary.

**COMING BACK FROM THE BRINK**

On 3 August 1917 300 men from the 18th Battalion refused orders to go back into line. The incident surprised French intelligence officers because the battalion had been trouble-free for two months. Moreover, it was an unusually large demonstration, especially given the general lack of incidents of this size over the previous few weeks. Strikes, too, had become fewer in number and smaller in size in July. Soldiers’ letters still showed a general ‘fatigue’ and concern over consequences for France of Kerensky’s failure. Still, the intelligence officers were content to conclude that the incident in the 18th Battalion was an isolated event sparked by the spread of pacifist propaganda and the desires of a few men to lead

an anti-war march on the anniversary of the start of the war. While the agents noted that ‘we would be wrong (on aurait tort) to consider all manifestations a thing of the past’, they concluded that the crisis had passed and no special action was needed.15

The reduction in industrial strikes provided another indication that while the situation remained anxious, it had improved considerably. French officials had determined that the strikes themselves had not been part of any coordinated effort to undermine French industry. French postal censors in Bordeaux had also seen a sharp drop in the percentage of letters demanding peace at any price from 5.3% of all letters analysed in June to 3.1% of letters analysed in August. The small number of such letters was itself reassuring. In the same time period, the percentage of letters demanding peace only if achieved through an allied victory on the battlefield had climbed from 34.4% to 41.3%.16

This change of mood was also reflected in the return to national prominence of Georges Clemenceau, who had thus far spent the war jabbing successive French governments from the outside. In July, however, he began to show a determination to become more directly involved as a result of a scandal involving the Minister of the Interior, Louis Malvy, whom Clemenceau accused of acquiescing in the spread of defeatism. The scandal involved Malvy’s decision not to shut down the socialist newspaper Le Bonnet Rouge. Malvy allowed the paper to publish even after the revelation that a cheque to the publisher for 150,000 francs had come from German agents based in Switzerland. Malvy’s decision to allow the publishers to keep the money and keep publishing drove Clemenceau back into the centre of the political maelstrom with a blistering public attack on Malvy that marked the start of Clemenceau’s ‘rise to power’.17 By the end of August, Malvy had resigned and the Ribot government of which he had been a part had collapsed in disgrace. By November, Clemenceau had become prime minister and named himself war minister as well.

Clemenceau’s rise was enormously popular inside the army, as were his policies of attacking defeatists and suspected traitors. With Clemenceau back in the centre of French politics, the embusqués (shirkers and war profiteers) that most French soldiers hated more than they hated the Germans had at long last met their match. Clemenceau was also willing to take on incompetent generals, encapsulated in his famous maxim that war is too important a business to leave to generals. As his rise to power became more and more certain throughout the summer, even Frenchmen who despised him came to see him as the right man for the troubled times France was experiencing. Clemenceau’s bitter rival,

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17. Smith et al., *France and the Great War*, 141.
French President Raymond Poincaré, saw Clemenceau as a ‘diable d’homme’ but admired The Tiger’s ‘legendary strength’ and acknowledged that no French cabinet was likely to survive for long without him at the head.\textsuperscript{18}

As scholars like Robert Bruce have noted, the entry of the Americans into the war served to boost French morale far out of proportion to their early numbers.\textsuperscript{19} Although French strategists sometimes fretted over the quality of the American Army, the American entry was the only solidly positive news France received during the trying spring and summer of 1917. The new American commander, General John Pershing, arrived in France with his small staff in mid-June. Although his relations with his French counterparts were not always smooth and his ideas about the uses of American soldiers contrasted sharply with those of French leaders, Pershing quickly developed some strategic friendships, most notably with Pétain. Massive crowds evincing what Pershing called a ‘wildly enthusiastic reception’ greeted Americans wherever they went. Brigadier General James Harbord noted that Parisians (normally understood to be among those most susceptible to pessimism) ‘cheered and shouted and wept as only a French crowd can do’.\textsuperscript{20}

More than 14,000 American soldiers arrived in France in late June, and while the French government complained about the slow pace of the Americans’ arrival, French civilians and soldiers alike greeted them as the advanced guard of an anticipated wave of more than a million men who had come from across the Atlantic to help save France. The Yanks were big, enthusiastic, and extremely anxious for combat, even if at the same time they were inexperienced and blissfully ignorant of what they were about to face. The Yanks also proved that they knew something of the value of symbols. At a very high level gathering of French dignitaries (that included President Poincaré, Prime Minister Alexandre Ribot, Marshal Joseph Joffre, and General Ferdinand Foch), American Colonel Charles Stanton stood over the grave of the Marquis de Lafayette and delivered a speech in fluent French that enraptured his audience, bringing them to thunderous applause with his final words, ‘Lafayette, nous voici’.

As Bruce has argued, the arrival of even a relatively small number of Americans created a marked change in the attitude on the streets of French cities. Whereas in April, Parisian crowds had ‘hurled paving stones at gendarmes and shouted “Vive la paix” and “A bas la guerre”, in June they greeted the newly arrived Americans with hysterical displays of

\textsuperscript{18} Quoted in Smith et al., \textit{France and the Great War}, 143.
\textsuperscript{19} Robert Bruce, \textit{A Fraternity of arms: America and France in the Great War} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).
\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in ibid., 68-9.
patriotism and affection that defied description'. This greeting reassured French officials and contributed to the conclusion that the French people did not so much want peace as peace on favourable and honourable terms. The Americans might just help to make that goal possible after all.

More sober analysts knew that salvation from the Germans at the hands of the Americans was still a long way off, if it came at all. The most important event in bolstering French morale was the collapse of the Kerensky government, an event that culminated in the Bolshevik revolution that took place in November. The end of the Kerensky government virtually guaranteed that the Russians would leave the war and that the Germans would be able to use the winter of 1917-18 to move hundreds of thousands of men from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. The anger in France was palpable. Even before the Bolshevik revolution, some French schools stopped teaching Russian and other schools noted that students enrolled in Russian courses were no longer going to class. Postal censors reported that most Frenchmen who mentioned the Bolshevik revolution referred to it as a ‘defection’ (a term Foch also used in his memoirs) and they noted that Russia’s exit from the war produced a ‘very painful impression’ on the French people. Parisian prefecture reports concluded that in the capital there was ‘a feeling of hostility towards everything Russian’, even the anti-Bolshevik Russians then in the city. The anger is easy to understand. The Franco-Russian alliance, which had been so carefully nursed and on which all French security presumptions had been based for decades, was gone. The implications for France’s strategic position in 1918 were both obvious and ominous.

At about the same time, another French ally, Italy, also appeared on the verge of collapse as a result of the Caporetto debacle. In order to prevent Italy’s disintegration the French had to send precious reserves of men and artillery pieces to the Italian front at the very moment when those resources were most needed at home. Even the British were appearing a less steadfast ally in the face of their large losses in Flanders and the failure of new and innovative (if still immature) armored tactics at Cambrai. The British government under David Lloyd George, moreover, had decided to divert some of Britain’s remaining resources away from the Western Front to Palestine, a decision that French officials thought was extremely unwise.

Paradoxically, however, this depressing state of affairs coincided with a noticeable rise in French morale. Just as the situation appeared to be about as bleak as it could get, all indicators showed that the period of crisis had passed. A French report on 9 October on soldier morale indicated that there were no indications of indiscipline in the army and that

21. Ibid., 96.
23. Ibid., 243.
none were expected in the foreseeable future. At the same time, the monthly Confidential Bulletin on Internal Morale noted on 15 October that soldiers were displaying a ‘more correct’ military bearing, that discipline was improving, and drunkenness was declining. One month later the Bulletin reported that ‘all signs of despondency have disappeared’. The December report even claimed that soldier morale was ‘high’, a conclusion reinforced by a succession of reports throughout spring, 1918.

These reports did not reflect any newfound French enthusiasm for the war. Rather, France was experiencing a surge in morale faute de mieux. It became increasingly apparent to Frenchmen in and out of the army that France was on its own. The British seemed to be worn out from Passchendaele and turning their attention elsewhere, the Russians were traitors to the alliance, the Italians were in need of rescuing, and the Americans were still training and trying to form an army. If France was to survive the expected German spring onslaught, it would need to rely first and foremost on itself. Thus could the French poilu ‘curse the war as morally bankrupt in one sentence and insist it be fought to the finish in the next’. France simply had no choice. Soldiers could curse their generals, their government, or the Germans all they liked. What could they not do was stop fighting. It may well be that Leonard Smith has it right when he argues that ‘The more ghastly the war became, the more committed the protagonists became to prevailing in it’.

A sampling of the letters read by French censors in this time period makes clear the new sense of determination. ‘Public opinion is standing up well’, read one censor’s report in December, ‘It is not keen on a sudden peace, but wants one that will ensure the triumph of right and justice’. The censors also noted a letter from a Parisian that they felt represented the general mood: ‘Russian treachery will mean greater sacrifices, but if our leaders are strong it will not mean a precipitate peace.’

Strong leaders they got. Clemenceau completed his rise to power on November 16 and immediately turned on ‘defeatists’ like Malvy and Joseph Caillaux, both of whom he ordered arrested. He also gave fiery speeches, including one he had given on numerous occasions since the spring that made a determined pledge about what he would do even if

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27. Ibid., 106.
29. Malvy anticipated that he would be arrested and decided to demand a Senate investigation of the charges against him to preempt a civil trial. The Senate found him innocent of treason, but banned him from France for five years for ‘negligence’. Caillaux spent two years in jail with no formal charges filed against him; his sentence was later commuted to time served and he was banned from all French cities (with the exception of Toulouse) for five years, one of the oddest sentences in French history. Both men were back in the French government by the mid 1920s.
Paris fell: ‘After Paris, we’ll fight on the Loire; after the Loire, on the Garonne, and after the Garonne, on the Pyrenees; finally, if there is no more land, we will go fight on the high seas.’ Clemenceau’s initial months in office were met with widespread enthusiasm and support, even from his many traditional enemies on the left and the right. A French war loan was launched to coincide with the new government and it subscribed well ahead of schedule.

News out of Russia gave further impetus to the French. The German delegation at the armistice negotiations with the Russians had dismissed Russian requests out of hand and at one point had even ordered a resumed offensive to force Russia’s hand. There would be no German negotiations with defeated enemies; rather, Germany would dictate terms to the vanquished. The final Treaty of Brest-Litovsk resulted in Russia’s loss of 1.3 million square miles, 62 million people, one-third of its arable land, almost all of its coal and iron, and one-fourth of its railroads. Brest-Litovsk reinforced the message that came from the equally harsh terms Germany had imposed on Romania: win or face a Carthaginian peace.

The consequences of defeat had thus been revealed in the starkest terms possible. French censors continued to report that what people most wanted was an end to the war on grounds that might make future wars much less likely. With the Papal and Stockholm initiatives both dead in the water, there was no hope of a compromise or negotiated peace. A consensus had built that France had to keep fighting and refuse to accept defeat. The only alternative remaining to France was to fight the war to the end because the consequences of war, however awful they might be, were still preferable to whatever peace a victorious Germany would impose on a defeated France.

**FRANCE VICTORIOUS**

France certainly benefited from the fact that most of the initial German blows in spring, 1918 were directed against the British, who had to bear the brunt. David Zabecki has recently argued that even the heavy German assault on French forces in the Aisne valley in May (codenamed Blücher) was ultimately directed against the British. The operational goal, he concludes, was to break French morale and hold French reserves in place in the south so that the Germans could make another push on the presumably exhausted British in Flanders. Both goals, however, failed. The movement of French reserves to the north may have come more slowly and in smaller numbers than the British Expeditionary Force

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30. There are many versions of this speech. This one comes from Mordacq to Clemenceau, 9 October 1918, Fonds Clemenceau 6N55, SHAT.
staff wanted, but they proved to be central to the BEF’s recovery from the initial German blows, as did the new inter-allied command structure, discussed below. The mere size of the French Army gave the allies some strategic space, and it is important to recall that the French were still by far the largest of the allied armies. In May, 1918, the French Army held 72% of the Western Front. By the time of the German Marne offensive in July, the French had 103 divisions, compared to 56 British divisions and 17 (double-strength) American divisions on the Western Front.33

But it was not only the size of the French Army in summer, 1918, that made the difference. The army that fought on the Marne (and eventually on the Aisne once again) in 1918 was different from that of a year earlier in three crucial ways. First, its morale had recovered almost completely from the crisis of the previous year. French soldiers were no less sick of the war than they had been in 1917 nor did they necessarily have much more faith in their officers than they had had a year before, but they had come to realise that they had no choice but to fight to the end to defeat the Germans. Second, the new command structure of the French Army had begun to prove itself, with Pétain’s careful management of the army giving it the resources and the doctrine it need. The new system of naming Ferdinand Foch to coordinate allied military effort along the western front was also paying dividends. Finally, the French Army of 1918 was more technologically efficient and better able to fight a modern war of machines than the one Nivelle had slaughtered the previous April.

By March 1918 there were few traces of the morale crisis of the previous spring. The monthly Confidential Bulletin on Internal Morale reported morale to be ‘very satisfactory indeed’ in January and ‘excellent’ in March, even if the analysts also noted that the men’s desire for peace was ‘great’.34 The powerful German offensives that began in March 1918, and their tremendous successes had created a sense of panic, fear, and crisis that bound French soldiers together and gave them new reasons to fight even harder. To cite one statistic among many, in 1918 only 0.88% of French conscripts refused to answer the call to serve, by far the lowest figure for any year of the war.35 The German attacks also created a sense of ‘shame and humiliation’ in soldiers unable to prevent more civilian suffering and the abandonment of the capital for the second time in the war.36

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32. David Zabecki, The German 1918 offensives: A case study in the operational level of war (London: Routledge Press, 2006), 210-13. It is also perhaps worth noting that the American intelligence staff, usually derided for its inexperience, had predicted a German attack on the Aisne, but both the British and French staffs ignored the prediction.
34. Becker, Great War, 243.
35. Doughty, Pyrrhic Victory, 510.
36. Smith et al., France and the Great War, 108.
Impressions from British soldiers who fought alongside the French in 1918 underscore the renewed determination and spirit in the French Army. One veteran noted that ‘my general impression of these Frenchmen was that they were first-class troops, steady and reliable’. The official history of the 51st (Highland) Division concurred as well, noting ‘what magnificent men they are, and what a false impression of them is obtained from the odd and rather bedraggled French soldiers that were occasionally seen on leave in the zone of the British armies’. To cite one more example, the history of the 15th (Scottish) Division remembers the French soldiers on the Marne in 1918 as ‘an inspiring spectacle’. Their commanding officer was ‘the very type an artist would select as a perfect soldier’.

The transformation in the face of a new threat (the most serious one France had yet faced) should not come as too much of a surprise. French soldiers were fighting to defend their own land against a hated invader. They understood how important it was to meet the new German offensives and avoid the fate of Russia, Romania, and Belgium before them. They also saw that ‘France would no longer be France if it failed to prevail’. The men of the 74th Regiment therefore marched toward the Marne in July, 1918 understanding that the time had come to stop the Germans or lose the war, and they were determined to do the former. Their *journal de marche* noted: ‘We all know that the Boches cannot pass. Confidence! The hour of the great revenge is upon us.’

French soldiers had also had the time to build (and rebuild) the kinds of small unit dynamics that have always impelled soldiers to fight. As one reader of André Pézard’s 1918 memoir, *Nous Autres à Vauquois*, concluded, ‘the more Pézard and his comrades suffered, the more they considered themselves committed to one another and through one another to the war … They could no more yield in their commitment to the war than yield in their commitment to one another.’ The war had, in effect, come to belong to the men who fought it whether they agreed with the ‘affective dystopia’ it had become or not. Moreover, the French replacement system had long given up trying to maintain the army’s local identities, integrating units by region and fostering a shared sense of sacrifice.

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43. This decision caused none of the concern about the diminution of local identities that a similar process raised in Britain, indicating the more thoroughly national character of the French war effort. I am grateful to Dennis Showalter for suggesting this comparison about Europeans over an Indian meal eaten by Americans in Israel.
The French Army that fought on the Marne in July also benefited from the new allied leadership structure. The German attacks in March had led to the belated creation of a generalissimo to take charge of the allied war effort. In reality, most of what Ferdinand Foch did in March, April, May, and June was to oversee the movement of men from the general reserve to meet various crises while waiting for the chance to strike back at the Germans. He made no attempt to control the operations of the national armies and therefore assuaged the greatest fear the British and the Americans had about his appointment. Troops remained under national commanders at least up to the division level, and often all the way to army level.

In fact, Foch had more friction with the French national commander, Pétain, than he did with either Haig or Pershing. The same 3 April Beauvais agreement that gave Foch his authority to coordinate the ‘strategic direction of military operations’, also gave national commanders the right to appeal any of Foch’s decisions to their government. Neither Haig nor Pershing ever exercised that right, although they often disagreed with Foch’s decisions. Pétain, however, formally disagreed so often with Foch that Clemenceau eventually took away Pétain’s right of appeal.

Foch’s system proved to be effective on the Marne, where 45 divisions of the French army fought alongside four British and eight American divisions. Pershing’s concerns about amalgamation of the American army notwithstanding, all of the divisions, regardless of nationality, were administered by French Army and army group staffs. With the single exception of the British XXI Corps, all the corps commands were French as well. The Second Battle of the Marne was a true coalition battle, a credit both to Foch’s leadership and decisions by Haig and Pershing to subordinate their national concerns to the interests of pursuing a larger alliance victory. The role of the French Army in winning this battle that turned the tide of 1918 cannot, however, be denied. To paraphrase Churchill’s famous statement about Alamein, before the Second Marne there were no victories (in 1918); after the Second Marne, there were no defeats.

The disagreements between the two men most responsible for the French Army on the Marne shaped the nature and role of the French Army in summer, 1918. Pétain’s strengths lay in his recognition of the importance of modern technology and his natural caution about conducting offensives he thought unlikely to yield gains worth the costs. As such, he balanced out Foch’s natural aggression and desire to resume the offensive as early as possible. Whereas in his first few weeks on the job, Foch consistently urged French units to conduct ‘foot by foot’ defences of French soil, Pétain oversaw the creation of intricate and powerful defence in depth systems that proved their utility all along the front. Notably, the

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great French disaster along the Aisne in May had occurred in one of the few major French sectors where no such system had yet been implemented. But if Pétain was careful and cautious, he occasionally needed Foch to force the French Army back on to the offensive. Twice on the Marne, Foch overrode orders Pétain had issued for French forces to remain on the defensive. Both times the offensive Foch had urged succeeded.

Thus although Pétain and Foch were very different men who often quarreled, the French Army needed both of them on the Marne in 1918. Under Pétain and disciples like Henri Gouraud, the French Army built powerful defence in depth networks that broke the fifth German offensive around Reims. The French system featured first-line ‘sacrificial’ trenches that were lightly held. Their goal was to break up the careful choreography of the rolling barrages that protected advancing German infantry. Once it became obvious to the men in the sacrificial trenches (all of whom were volunteers) that they had done their job and disrupted the timing of an enemy attack, they destroyed their heavy weapons to prevent them falling into the hands of the enemy, then withdrew to fight alongside their comrades in carefully-prepared positions in the rear. Second-line troops several kilometres behind the front line formed the bulk of the defence. These troops were largely out of range of German field artillery and thus harder for the enemy to reconnoitre and target. The main combat line was supported by both heavy and light weapons kept safely away from even German heavy guns.

This system worked nearly to perfection on the Marne. Gouraud could rightly boast that his Fourth Army defending Reims had not had a single man taken prisoner nor had it lost a single artillery piece on the entire first day of the battle, a remarkable achievement in and of itself. German soldier Rudolph Binding saw the power of the new French system as he and his men moved forward. ‘I have lived through the most disheartening day of the war’, he wrote. ‘The French deliberately lured us. They put up no resistance in front … Our guns bombarded empty trenches; our gas shells gassed empty artillery positions.’ As he moved through the sacrificial trench area, he understood that he was entering the main French defensive zone, but without the support or help of the now impotent German artillery. ‘We did not see a single dead Frenchman, let alone a captured [artillery] gun or machine gun, and we had suffered heavy losses … Everything seemed to go wrong.’ Another German soldier, Kurt Hesse, agreed calling the failure of the Reims offensive on 15 July ‘the most severe defeat of the war’ for Germany.

Still, the defence in depth was only one part of the plan on the Marne. The second part was a massive counter-offensive to begin by smashing in the western flank of the Marne salient near Soissons. Although the allied defence had worked exactly as planned, Pétain initially wanted to remain on the defensive. He sent orders to the French armies canceling the offensive in favor of new defence preparations. These orders reached Marie-Émile Fayolle’s Groupe d’armées de reserve (GAR) headquarters at 10:00am on 15 July. By coincidence, Foch arrived at GAR headquarters to meet with Fayolle shortly after the orders had arrived. Foch immediately countermanded them, or, in Foch’s words, ‘I at once sent a message to [Pétain’s] General Headquarters which ensured the necessary corrections, and the preparations for the counter attack were pursued without any delay being occasioned’. Foch’s disciples, most notably the aggressive Charles Mangin, were ready with a mechanised counter-offensive that the Germans neither expected nor knew how to confront. The great allied offensive that resulted changed the course of the war and made victory in 1918 possible.

Combat on the Marne in 1918 looked nothing like combat along this same river valley four years earlier. Bayonet charges supported by field artillery pieces were a distant memory. In their place came a more methodical battle of machines. By the time of the Second Battle of the Marne, each French division had nine 75mm artillery batteries and one 155mm group under its direct command, in addition to much more powerful artillery reserves controlled at higher headquarters, which amounted to 5933 field and 5355 heavy guns in all. Each French corps had at its disposal between four and six air squadrons, and a massive fleet of tanks, 540 light and 240 medium of which were made available to fight on the Marne in 1918. France was also able to supply the Americans with machine-guns, air frames, tanks, and a wide variety of other materiel to provide overwhelming fire support to the inexperienced Yanks.

CONCLUSION

While the reforms instituted by Pétain in the wake of the mutinies were important, we need to cast a wider lens onto the morale crisis of 1917 and France’s recovery from it. Pétain surely improved the daily conditions of French soldiers and helped to change the mentality of GQG from offensive à outrance to what Michel Goya has called combat en
Nevertheless, Pétain was not the only agent of change. The crisis of 1917 must be placed into a much larger historical context to include events like the two Russian revolutions, the socialist initiative at Stockholm, and the Papal Peace Note.

Second, the French deserve more credit than they usually receive for the defeat of the Germans in 1918. We rightly celebrate the British victory at Amiens and the feats of the Australians and Canadians during the Hundred Days. We also recognise the importance of the gruesome and bloody attrition of the American offensive in the Meuse-Argonne. The French, however, have largely disappeared from discussions of 1918. Indeed, in one sense this is appropriate as many French officers, Foch included, saw themselves by the summer of 1918 as one part (albeit the largest part) of a wider coalition effort. Maybe it is time we change the ‘Hundred Days to Victory’ to a less neat ‘119 Days to Victory’ to acknowledge both the alliance nature of the war by July, 1918 and the critical role the French played, despite the morale crisis of 1917.

Finally, the most obvious conclusion to reach from this presentation is that the French Army did not disappear after Verdun as Alistair Horne implies, nor did it die on the Chemin des Dames as so many popular and academic histories suggest, as much by their omission of the French as by their criticism. The French Army was surely a different force by 1918 than it was in 1914 or even 1917, but the same could be said for all of the belligerents. Nevertheless, it has become almost standard operating procedure for books on the defeat of Germany to omit the French Army or reduce it to supporting roles only. New research by Robert Doughty, Michel Goya, and others should go a long way to resurrect the French Army of 1918, but clearly there is much work still to do.

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52. Martin Middlebrook’s *The Kaiser’s Battle* (New York: Viking, 1978) has just four references to the French Army, but four pages of references to British military units. Perhaps the guiltiest party is Rod Paschall’s, *The Defeat of Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1989), which has almost 70 references to American units, but just four references to French units, to say nothing of amateurs like John Mosier: see his *The Myth of the Great War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).
The British High Command at Passchendaele

Robin Prior

On 12 October 1917 the following event took place about three miles from Passchendaele Ridge in Belgium: A soldier who had been slightly wounded in the fighting earlier that day left the line to find the nearest casualty clearing station. In the gloom, he deviated from the wooden duckboard path which snaked its way through the mire. Later he was discovered stuck fast in a shell hole. He was only a few yards from where he had started some hours before. Men were called up. Ropes and spades were brought forward. Repeated efforts were made to dig or pull him out. At one moment there were sixteen men working on this task. When his battalion was relieved the following night he was still stuck fast. His fate is unknown. But the probability that he drowned in the mud is very high.

What I want to investigate is:
• why men were sent to fight in such conditions?
• did this have to be so?
• who was responsible for this state of affairs?

The Passchendaele campaign had been designed with the same aim as all the other allied offensives that had taken place since 1914, namely, to drive the German invaders from the soil of France and Belgium in a single operation. The French tried this twice and the British once in 1915. The British tried mightily in 1916 at the Battle of the Somme. The French and British tried again in the spring of 1917. These offensives had one thing in common—they all failed and in some cases failed catastrophically.

Why did all these offensives come to nothing? Were all the generals who conducted them suffused with stupidity, or were there other factors? Stupidity was not absent. However, in this war another factor was crucial—there had been a remarkable shift between the power of defence versus the power of attack. It was now relatively easy to defend a piece of ground already won and very expensive to wrest it from those who defended it.

1. 7 Seaforth Highlanders, ‘Narrative: 10 to 14th October 1917’, Australian War Memorial 26/7/16/8.
This needs further expansion. From the end of 1914 through 1915, 1916 and 1917, each side had dug a series of increasingly sophisticated trench systems that offered significant protection to the troops who sheltered there. Only a direct hit from a heavy artillery shell could cause death or injury. Moreover from 1915 both sides hit on the expedient of placing ever larger rolls of barbed wire in front of their trenches—formidable obstacles to any would be attacker.

What this meant for those soldiers who were making an attack was dire. They ‘went over the top’ leaving the safety of their trench for No Man’s Land armed only with a bolt action rifle—with bayonet attached—and, early in the war if they were unlucky, a primitive hand grenade.

In contrast the defenders would be concealed in their trench, behind their belts of barbed wire. At various intervals along their trench would be machine-guns which fired 600 rounds per minute and which were pre-aimed at gaps deliberately left in the wire. In addition—for some miles behind the front—masses of enemy artillery would have calibrated their guns on No Man’s Land—the very area that the hapless attackers were attempting to traverse. Thus was established what we can call the fire power imbalance. It was to plague attacking armies for most of the war. The attackers could not bring to bear on the defenders sufficient fire power—either to cave in their trenches—or to kill and incapacitate enough trench dwellers to allow an attack to progress.

The only possible way of redressing this fire power imbalance lay in the utilisation of huge amounts artillery by the attackers. And until 1917 there were a number of obstacles to doing this.

First, the artillery bombardment had to be huge to be effective. Yet in the first year of the war, no army—German, French or British—had sufficient guns to destroy trench systems. They were particularly lacking in the heavier calibres. (This had come about because all armies had expected to fight a war of movement on Napoleonic lines: none had foreseen the growth of defensive trenches.)

Second, there was the problem that on most occasions when the artillery fired at a target, they missed. There were a number of factors involved here. One was that that no gun could deliver all the shells it fired to exactly the same spot. Instead the shells fell in quite a large area—the so-called 100% zone of the gun. And the targets that the artillery would be trying to hit—in most cases trenches or guns—were very small. In the case of the hostile guns they were also out of direct sight of the attacking artillery. So the percentage of hits was very low—you might expect to hit a trench three or four times for every 100 shells fired under ideal conditions. The percentage of hits on distant guns would be even lower than that.
In an actual battle, of course, conditions—especially of weather—were often far from ideal and could change quite rapidly. And as the battle progressed, the gun barrels became increasingly worn and their accuracy lessened.²

In 1915 and for most of 1916 these factors effecting artillery accuracy were only partially recognised. So a typical battle would commence with an enormous bombardment during which the artillery would aim to destroy all the enemy trenches and take out most of the hostile artillery. The soldiers would then ‘go over the top’ only to find that neither of these things had happened; that enemy machine-guns and shells were coming at them in such numbers as to stop any attack in its tracks. The most famous, or infamous example of this situation happened on the first day of the battle of the Somme. The enemy artillery and trenches were virtually untouched by the allied preliminary bombardment. As a result the attacking British suffered 20,000 dead and 37,000 wounded in one day. Many of these casualties actually occurred behind the British front line as the un-subdued hostile guns lobbed shells in the area they knew the attacking infantry must pass through to deploy for an attack.

Gradually, however, new artillery techniques were being developed and applied by the British. During 1916 it was discovered that if a curtain of light artillery shells was fired in front of the advancing infantry—and if that curtain was of sufficient depth to fall on the enemy front line as well—then the enemy trench dwellers would generally not risk manning their machine-guns during the barrage. The attacking soldiers advancing just behind the barrage could then jump the enemy in the trench. The curtain of shells was called a ‘creeping barrage’ and was the surest method of infantry protection discovered in the First World War.

At the same time another technique called sound-ranging was being developed to assist the artillery firing at distant enemy guns. It was found that when an enemy gun fired, microphones placed across the front could detect the noise and trace—with some accuracy—the source of the sound back to its origin.

The artillery regiments also improved their approaches to correcting the guns for different types of weather and varying amounts of wear. So that taken together, there was by 1917 a reasonable chance that their shells would find the target and sufficient enemy guns destroyed or neutralised to allow an attack to get forward.

There remained, however, conditions in which these techniques would not work.

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² For an elaboration on these technical artillery points see Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-18 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), ch. 4.
If the ground was boggy it was soon discovered that the troops could not keep up with the creeping barrage. For maximum protection of the infantry this had to be fired at a pre-determined rate—it would advance say at two or three minutes per 100 yards. But in a bog the men would ‘lose’ the barrage and become vulnerable to machine-gun and rifle fire from the enemy front line.

Weather also interfered with the reliability of the sound detecting microphones. Worse, it meant that aircraft could not check on the accuracy of the firing, either by taking photographs or reporting back to the guns by radio. So in bad weather the artillery’s ‘eye in the sky’ would be blinded.

There was another limitation. The guns could only fire so far. If the advance attempted was much beyond 3000 yards men would lose the protection of the creeping barrage. And at about the same time they would arrive within the range of enemy artillery and reserve divisions which were usually kept well back. The result in this case could well be a slaughter of Somme proportions.

Yet another limitation was imposed by the enemy. In an endeavour to counter the new tactics, the Germans had begun in 1916 and early 1917, to construct defences of much greater complexity. The British would now be confronted, not by one or two defensive lines, but by entire defensive zones, consisting not just of trench lines but containing concreted machine-gun posts and pillboxes. The latter kept a garrison of about 40 men safe from the light shells of the creeping barrage. At Third Ypres there were hundreds of them.3

The limitations meant two things:

• that attacks should not be mounted in bad weather; and
• that attacks should have limited objectives.

There were, however, some disturbing signs that General Headquarters were not taking these limitations seriously. At the Somme in October, after the general implementation of the creeping barrage, Haig attempted to drive his troops forward in such foul weather conditions that men could not keep pace with the barrage. Nor in conditions of low cloud and rain, could the new counter-battery techniques be applied.

Moreover, on the Somme in 1916 and Arras in 1917, Haig consistently set distant objectives for his troops. As a consequence there were many occasions—1 July only being the most notorious—where his artillery was spread too thinly and often failed to

3. For German defensive arrangements at Third Ypres see G. C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The battle in depth in the west* (London: Faber, 1940), ch. XII.
destroy even the front line enemy defences. The inevitable result was heavy casualties for little gain.

There were exceptions to these disasters. On the Somme on 14 April and 25 September and at Vimy Ridge on 9 April 1917, modest gains were made at modest cost. The reason for these successes was plain. On each occasion the weather was good and an enormous amount of artillery shells had fallen on a limited expanse of enemy defences. Had the High Command cast a critical eye over these successes they might have identified the limited ‘bite-and-hold’ offensive as the one tactical method offering success.

Admittedly, this was a very cautious way of making war. But it was practical, and in mid 1917 there were factors that warranted extreme caution in the handling of the British Army.

The main factor was the state of Britain's allies. From January 1917, Russia had rapidly descended into revolution. The final straw was the Kerensky offensive conducted by the Provisional Government following the fall of the Czar. It started on 18 June and ended on 1 July, during which time the Russian forces suffered 400,000 casualties. This gave a great boost to the Bolsheviks. It was only a matter of time before Russia left the war.

With the French the situation was hardly of this order but there was cause for great concern. The Nivelle offensive in April, which the commander had promised would deliver a great victory, resulted in mutiny. French divisions would hold the line and participate in limited offensives but nothing more. The days when the French Army could be regarded as a strike force were over.

What of the other Allies? The Italians had been shattered by the Austro-Hungarians in May in 1916 on the Trentino. Italian losses amounted to 400,000 men, an alarming number of whom were prisoners. Nothing more could be expected from that quarter. What of the Great Democracy which had finally been provoked into the war in 1917? Pershing had landed in France but no great American army accompanied him and none could be expected until the spring of 1918.

What all this meant was that the BEF in 1917 was the last allied army standing. There was every reason to treat it with extreme care. Its demise might mean the demise of the allied cause before American intervention amounted to much. In short, there was every reason to avoid the blood-letting of 1916 and early 1917; every reason to avoid the all-out offensive.

None of this deterred Haig from bringing forth a scheme for the 1917 campaign with similar cosmic ambitions to his earlier efforts. This time he would attack out of the
salient around the ruined city of Ypres, advance 50 or so miles to the Belgian coast, cut the German railway system, and again, if the Germans did not immediately surrender, he would have at least forced a major retreat on them and loosened their hold on much of Belgium.

Such a plan was fraught with danger for his troops. For if Haig was to obtain the spectacular results forecast, his advance would need to be swift—or the Germans would bring up reinforcements to block it. And to obtain a swift advance he needed in a series of rapid blows to overcome the entire German defensive zone in front of Ypres. This zone was 10,000 yards deep and to overcome it speedily Haig had to spread the fire of his guns across as much of it as possible. It is true that Haig had at his disposal guns in unprecedented numbers—1400 field and 750 heavy guns. But he was attempting an unprecedented task—the capture a defensive zone 10,000 yards in depth on a front of attack of 13,000 yards. The great danger was that in attempting to destroy all the German defences in this area he had to spread his artillery so thin that he risked destroying none.

Yet the decision to put this plan into operation was not Haig’s to make. Britain was a liberal democracy. Ultimate power lay with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. And David Lloyd George had been fulminating against the ambitious and futile offensives conducted on the Western Front for some time. Indeed regarding Haig’s 1917 plan he commented to the Cabinet Secretary:

The extent of the advance required in order to secure tangible results (Ostend and Zeebrugge) was too great in his opinion to justify the great losses which must be involved, losses which he thinks will jeopardise our chance next year & cause great depression.4

What then was Lloyd George proposing as an alternative? As it happened he did not favour the limited offensive. Indeed he would speak with much derision about Plumer’s ‘successes’ later in the year. He had become prime minister on the promise of the ‘knock out blow’ against Germany. He was in that sense at one with Haig. It was just that he wanted that blow delivered away from the Western Front by an army that was not British. Incredibly, in the light of recent events, he elected the Italian Army to deliver it.5 This was pure fantasy. The Italian command had neither the will nor the means of assuming the main burden of the war.

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5. Ibid.
So, however reluctantly, Lloyd George acquiesced in the Flanders campaign. But he insisted that only Haig’s first step be approved; any subsequent operations must be referred back to the War Cabinet in London.  

The Third Battle of Ypres commenced on 31 July 1917. It immediately became clear that yet another attempt to overwhelm an entire German defensive system had failed. In attempting to go so far in the first instance Haig and his Army Commander Gough had overreached themselves. The artillery resources, although unprecedented, had proved inadequate. Most of the defences on the right—on the crucial high ground of the Gheluvelt Plateau—which gave the defenders such excellent views of the battlefield, were missed or inadequately bombarded. On the left some British assault divisions did capture some ground—the advance reached as far as 3000 yards into the German defences. But this advance hardly amounted to a breakthrough of the German defensive zone. And the whole effort cost them 27,000 casualties, about 25% of the force that attacked.

And the first day of the campaign was relatively benign in view of what followed in August. On the night of 31 July light rain began to fall. By the next day it had become a deluge. During August there were 15 days out of the 31 when it rained—a total of 123 mm for the month. The battlefield became a swamp. And the British had actually aided and abetted the forces of nature. If their enormous bombardment of 4.3 million shells had not destroyed the German army, it had certainly destroyed the drainage system in this low-lying area of Flanders. Now the rain had nowhere to go, so the entire battlefield became a huge inland sea.

What this meant for the soldiers is described by Sergeant McKay, a member of a field ambulance:

Bringing down the wounded from the front line today. Conditions terrible. The ground between the [rear] and where the infantry are is simply a quagmire, and shell holes filled with water. Every place is in full view of the enemy who are on the ridge. There is neither the appearance of a road or a path and it requires six men to every stretcher, two of those being constantly employed helping the others out of the holes; the mud in some cases is up to our waists. A couple of journeys … and the strongest men are ready to collapse.

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6. See War Policy Committee Minutes 21/6/17, CAB 27, National Archives, Kew (hereafter NA).
7. Statistics compiled from GHQ War Diary, August 1917, WO 95/14, in ibid.
Everything that Haig should have learned since taking over command of the British army in December 1915 should have revealed to him that military operations in these conditions were impossible. The artillery was blinded. The men could not follow the ‘creeping barrage’. Airplanes could not fly (or see anything when they did). Logic and experience cried out to halt the battle.

The battle was not halted. Haig, as ever, saw German morale on the brink of collapse. Of the morale of his own troops, wading through the mire, he was silent. They would cope. Indeed they did. But in the whole of August they gained just 1200 yards on the left of their front where it did not matter and none whatsoever on the right where it did. The cost: 50,000 casualties.

What of Lloyd George and his promise (or threat) to review the operation after the first step? Nothing came of it. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Robertson) tried on many occasions to draw the attention of the war Cabinet to the meagre progress made by Haig. The civilians would not attend. Only the prospect of operations in far-flung theatres—Italy or Palestine—excited them. Haig’s operations would continue without civilian scrutiny, or as it appeared, even interest.9

Eventually it was Haig who called a halt. Indeed, he had to act or he would have had no army with which to conduct operations. He sidelined General Gough who had presided over the August debacle. General Plumer was brought in to see if he could gain any ground across the high ground of the Gheluvelt Plateau. Plumer thought he could but demanded three weeks to prepare his attack.

Plumer also insisted on fresh troops to replace the shattered British divisions. He got them in the shape of two new corps—the 5th British Corps and 1 Anzac Corps. Australian (and later New Zealand) troops had entered the 3rd Ypres campaign.

We now arrive at the successful phase of the campaign, the moment when method was brought to bear on the planning process. This phase lasted from 20 September to 4 October. In three battles, Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde, Plumer captured the high ground that had defied the efforts of the troops in the August bog. A number of factors contributed to his success:

- Weather conditions were good. The artillery could therefore be used to maximum advantage. Air spotters could now signal back the accuracy of fire. The dry weather also meant that the sound detecting microphones could be used.

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9. See the War Policy Committee Minutes for August and those of the War Cabinet for the same period, CAB 23, NA.
• Plumer ensured that the ferocity of the artillery barrage would be maximised by:
  (a) reducing the front over which he attacked. So while on the first day of battle that front was 13,000 yards, Plumer did not attack over more than 5000 yards. Thus the concentration of his artillery fire was more than doubled.
  (b) Plumer also refused to advance a greater distance than his guns could support. His three steps across the Plateau were each not much more than 1500 yards in depth. This factor quadrupled the artillery concentration, so in combination with point (a) Plumer threw eight-fold the amount of shells into the area he was attacking than had been done on the first day.

• Plumer ensured that the gains he made would be protected by placing a standing barrage—often to a depth of 3000 yards—in front of the position reached by his forward troops. Any reserve divisions that the Germans had held back would have to pass through this wall of fire before they reached the new British positions. Enemy formations which attempted this feat found that their units were shattered by the barrage of shells before they came within hailing distance of the new line. On the other side the British, Australian and New Zealand troops, were on many occasions not even aware that a counter-attack was being mounted because no Germans got close enough to fire on them.10

But as Broodseinde drew to a close so did the unprecedented spell of dry weather. On 4 October, rain started to fall. It did not cease in the days that followed. This turned the devastated, drainage-deprived battlefield into a lake. An observer commented:

  Seldom has the supply of ammunition, food and water to guns in action presented greater difficulties. The journey by pack animals, the only possible form of transport, from the wagon lines to the guns, instead of taking the normal hour, might require anything from six to sixteen hours. If animals slipped off the planks into the quagmires alongside, they often sank out of sight. On arrival shells had to be cleaned of the slime coating before they could be used.11

  Under these conditions artillery accuracy—or even bringing forward an adequate supply of shells—was out of the question. Without sufficient shells an appropriate creeping barrage was impossible, even supposing the troops could have kept pace with it as they waded through the morass. After three successes this was surely the time for Haig and Plumer to call off the battle.

10. For a typical Plumer plan of battle (Menin Road) see Plumer to GHQ, 29 January 1917, AWM 45/33/1.
The battle was not called off. Haig declared that his aim was now not the capture of the Belgian coast but merely the reduced one of capturing the Passchendaele Ridge. But that was still four miles away. In the prevailing conditions an announcement to capture the Sea of Tranquility on the Moon would have been just as sensible.

And what action was taken by Britain's civilian ‘high command’ while the third disastrous phase of the campaign was being played out? As it happened, no action at all. In early October Lloyd George actually warned his Cabinet colleagues that the impending operations would fail and that in three weeks’ time he would remind them of that prophecy. In one sense this statement amounted to the most decisive of actions, for it sanctioned the continuation of the battle. This, it must be emphasised, need not have been the case. Haig might have had many faults but he was a good constitutionalist. One word from the politicians to stop the campaign and it would have ceased. The fact that no such instruction eventuated, despite the Cabinet’s view that operations would fail, represents perhaps the ultimate madness of the Flanders campaign.

So, with no civilian restraint and no military logic, the battle resumed on 9 October. The soldiers attempted to struggle forward in the mire in what became known as the Battle of Poelcappelle. They gained not an inch of mud.

Undeterred, Haig determined to try again on the 12th. The II Anzac Corps were gathered for the new attempt.

Back in London the chief of Military Intelligence at the War Office, General McDonagh, tried to advise Haig that his efforts would be futile. Their information was that German morale was holding up. Haig dismissed this assessment. He claimed that the chief of War Office Intelligence was a Roman Catholic. His sources concerning the Germans therefore reached him from ‘tainted’ (i.e. Catholic) sources. Self-deception could go no further. Neither could the troops but Haig—despite the best efforts of the Vatican disinformation Service to warn him—insisted the attack stood a good chance. So on 12 October 1917 the action known to history as the First Battle of Passchendaele would go ahead.

The battle was doomed from the start. Few guns could be brought forward through the swamp to support the troops. Those guns that could fire sank into the slime after every shot they fired. They would then have to be dug out before they could fire again. When zero hour arrived so feeble was the creeping barrage that the troops could not even detect it. In some cases they mistook enemy artillery fire for their own. The Germans were now also using a new and deadly form of gas—mustard—with which many of the troops were...

12. War Cabinet Minutes, October 1917, CAB 23, NA.
deluged before they went over the top. A feeble barrage was actually fired. But its rate of advance of 100 yards in eight minutes was much too fast. 14

So without effective artillery protection the troops set off for the Passchendaele Ridge. They did not get far. Massed machine-guns cut them down in swaths. Some of the 9 Division literally became stuck in the mud and became sitting, or rather standing, ducks for the enemy machine-gunners. 15 As for the New Zealanders, they could see the barbed wire—completely missed by the creeping barrage—glistening on the spur in front of them as they left their trenches. Those few troops who had not succumbed to machine-gun fire were forced back by this uncut wire. The Australians got a little further but then were also hit by concentrated machine-gun fire. 16 At the level of the divisional command no one knew that these catastrophes were enveloping their troops. As one observer noted:

Communications [with the front] were worse than I have ever known them; [telephone wires were out and visual [signaling] was difficult. Pigeons could not fly against the wind, and the men with the [messenger] dogs became casualties. The dogs themselves got loose and started a battle of their own. 17

The sorry fiasco of this battle was surely one of the low points of the Third Ypres campaign. Thirteen thousand casualties (the equivalent of an entire division of infantry) had been suffered for no gains worth the mention.

But this was not the end of the story. The Canadian Corps replaced the Anzacs and struggled towards the Passchendaele Ridge for the next six weeks. Eventually they gained a toe-hold in the village but by that time (17 November) they too had suffered 13,000 casualties and were exhausted. In this phase men literally could not stand as they went into battle. We therefore have the awful spectacle of troops crawling into battle across No Man’s Land so that their weight would be more evenly distributed to prevent them sinking into the mud.

Let one final witness sum up the scene:

The conditions are awful beyond description, nothing we’ve had yet has come up to it, the whole trouble is the weather … Figure to yourself a desolate wilderness of water-filled shell craters, crater after crater, whose lips form narrow peninsulas along which one can at

17. 9 Scottish Division, ‘Comments’ in their War Diary October 1917, WO 95/1740, NA.
best pick but a slow and precarious way. Here a shattered tree trunk, there a ‘wrecked’ pill box sole remaining evidence that this was once a human and inhabited land. Dante would never have condemned lost souls to wander so terrible a purgatory. Here a shattered wagon, there a gun mired to the muzzle in mud which grips like glue, even the birds and rats have forsaken so unnatural spot. Mile after mile of the same unending dreariness, landmarks are gone, of whole villages barely a pile of bricks amongst the mud marks the site. You see it best under a leaden sky with a chill drizzle falling, each hour an eternity, each dragging step a nightmare. How weirdly it recalls some half formed horror of childish nightmare.¹⁸

In conclusion, what are we to make of the Third battle of Ypres? Let us concede immediately that the middle phase, under Plumer, represented an advance on any British tactics so far employed. The artillery tactics in particular reached new levels of sophistication that would be used to good effect in 1918. However, these methods could have been implemented at the very beginning of the campaign and broken off when conditions made them inappropriate. By acting as they did Haig and Gough (and inexplicably in the last phase, Plumer), risked the last army capable of sustained offensive action. And the conditions under which most of the battle was fought were so ghastly that the commanders had no right to expect that the British Army would emerge intact from it. Had the British Army mutinied in October 1917 it would have been no cause for wonder. That it did not do so owed nothing to its commanders. As it was, by conducting the campaign in the manner in which he did Haig ran the greatest of risks. When the Germans attacked in March 1918, the twelve or so divisions that might have stopped them in the Fifth Army area were not present. They had been consumed in a battle that cost 50,000 men for every mile gained. In the end the British, with help from the French, hung on. But this crisis was eminently preventable. And the men who could have prevented it were the men of the chimerical knock-out blow—Sir Douglas Haig and David Lloyd George.

¹⁸ Diary of Lt-Colonel C E I Lyne, 4 November 1917, Imperial War Museum.
Preferring to Learn from Experience: The American Expeditionary Force in 1917

Andrew Wiest

While many within the United States upon the nation’s declaration of war on 6 April 1917 looked forward to setting Europe to right through force of American arms, British and French leaders correctly forecast that the United States’ military would have great difficulty in adapting to the reality of war on the Western Front. Although the European Allies offered the Americans training, logistical and doctrinal support, albeit more out of necessity than a sense of military charity, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) and its commander, General John Pershing, remained stubbornly independent and chose instead to learn through brutal experience.

The AEF’s decision to ignore the advice of its European allies in favour of reliance on its own outdated military doctrine famously left Pershing’s men to suffer the consequences, especially during the ill-fated Meuse-Argonne Offensive of 1918. Blundering its way through unnecessarily difficult on-the-job training, the difficulties faced by the AEF in the Meuse-Argonne were indeed so severe that they threatened to unhinge the entire Allied offensive strategy as orchestrated by Supreme Allied Commander, Marshal Ferdinand Foch. Incensed that the Americans had rejected its earlier offers of advice and aid, the Allied leadership was merciless in its criticism of the AEF and its commander. In a diary entry on 1 October 1918, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), commented:

Reports from Americans (west of Meuse) … state that their roads and communications are so blocked that the offensive has had to stop and cannot be recommenced for four or five days. What very valuable days are being lost! All this is the result of inexperience and ignorance on the part of … [the American staff] of the needs of a modern attacking force.¹

For his part British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Henry Wilson, made his feelings clear regarding American failings by writing in a diary entry: ‘The state of chaos the fool [Pershing] has got his troops into down in the Argonne is indescribable.’ In a later entry, Wilson even went so far as to call Pershing a ‘vain, ignorant, weak ASS’.  

It fell, though, to the fiery French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, to launch the clearest attack on Pershing and the failures of the leadership of the AEF. Believing that his fellow citizens were paying the price for American intransigence, Clemenceau wrote to Foch urging that he relieve Pershing of command:

You have watched at close range the development of General Pershing’s extractions. Unfortunately, thanks to his invincible obstinacy he has won against you as well as your immediate subordinates. The French Army and the British Army, without a moment’s respite, have been daily fighting for the past three months … but our worthy American allies, who thirst to get into action and who are unanimously acknowledged to be great soldiers, have been marking time ever since their forward jump on the first day, and in spite of heavy losses, they have failed to conquer the ground assigned to them as their objective. No one can maintain that these troops are unusable; they are merely unused … If General Pershing finally resigns himself to obedience, if he accepts the advice of capable generals, whose presence at his side he has until now permitted only that he might reject their councils, I shall be wholly delighted.

While the tide of Allied victory quickly muted Allied criticism of the AEF and saved Pershing’s career, the question remains, why had American forces comparatively fared so poorly on the Western Front? The shortcomings of the AEF seem all the more difficult to understand in light of the fact that Pershing and his command cohort had failed to take advantage of an opportunity almost unparalleled in the history of warfare. While the British and French had to learn the bitter realities of the Great War in the crucible of battle, the Americans theoretically had the luxury of watching the war from afar for over three years, while receiving accurate reports from the battlefronts on the revolutionary developments taking place in both technology and tactics. After the American declaration of war, the military leadership of the AEF had a second chance to learn from the experience of the British and French, because no American units saw significant fighting on the continent for the next thirteen months. Stubbornly, though, in both cases the AEF failed to adapt its outdated, pre-war doctrine of reliance on open warfare,\(^3\) dooming the American soldiers to face their own version of the Somme.

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Although the failures of American military imagination and field command in the Great War were legion, the historical context of the American experience of the war must inform any judgments concerning the performance of the AEF. Both the intellectual intransigence and relative lack of preparedness of the United States military for service in the Great War actually must be understood in light of a deeply ingrained American cultural aversion to ‘European’ styles of conflict. The American tradition of arms, which stretched back to the foundation of the Republic, lauded the ideal of an army of citizen soldiers, rugged frontiersmen with their Kentucky long rifles in hand, and envisioned a professional military as somehow un-American. The historian Russell Weigley put the American military ethos well in his *History of the United States Army*, contending that it was not the victories of the professional military of the United States that had mattered to history, instead it was:

Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans [that] came to symbolize the new egalitarian attitudes. New Orleans was interpreted as a triumph of the natural American—strong precisely because he was unschooled and therefore natural—over the trained and disciplined but therefore artificial and effete European. [Jackson stated concerning his victory] ‘Reasoning always from false principles [the British] expected little opposition from men whose officers were not in uniform, who were ignorant of the rules of dress, and who had never been caned into discipline. Fatal mistake!’

The American culture of armed democracy and faith in citizen soldiers was at its height between the American Civil War and World War I, and held that the rough and resourceful American frontiersman was superior to the overly-trained automatons of the old world. This uniquely American martial culture, in general terms, led to a US tendency to ignore the European experience of World War I. It was, indeed, in the minds of many, the ‘European-ness’ of the militaries involved that had led to the stagnation of the Great War in 1915. During the first three years of the Great War, then, to most American observers the distant conflict seemed to involve archaic European modes of battle that harboured no lessons for the American military except negative ones. If anything, most US citizens believed that the American military should instruct the Europeans in the nature of modern, democratic war. Because of the collision of these cultural factors, although sage reports came in from military missions to European nations, the upper echelon of the US military command structure could believe neither that it had anything to learn from

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While Americans have followed carefully the course of the war, they have not dreamed until recently that they will be closely affected. As a consequence not only have they taken no steps towards the establishment of the elaborate machinery essential to the formation and maintenance of a modern army in the field, but they are frankly amazed at the vastness and complexity of that machinery as now disclosed to them by our military mission.\(^6\)

The American martial culture, and rejection of ‘European-ness’, was also central in making another strategic decision that could have altered the war. Facing obvious difficulties in raising, training and equipping its own army, upon formal entry into the conflict, the United States faced immediate pressure to send individual soldiers to Europe to make good the losses of existing British and French units, a proposal dubbed amalgamation. Expecting a massive German assault on the Western Front in early 1918, the British and French feared that the formation of an independent American force would take too long, even into 1920, to aid in stemming the German tide. Then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, made his fears clear to Pershing, stating, ‘The Germans had been able to cripple one or other of the Allies each year. Russia in 1915, France in 1916, Italy in 1917. In 1918 it might be the British if America could not help in the way suggested [amalgamation].’\(^7\)

There were several reasons why the United States resisted amalgamation, including President Woodrow Wilson’s famous desire to have an independent AEF in an effort to strengthen his hand in eventual peace talks. However, Pershing and the AEF command structure also had tactical reasons to stand against amalgamation. While it is certain that Pershing believed that American soldiers would fight with more tenacity under their own officers rather than foreigners, he also believed that the presence on the Western Front of an independent AEF, with its democratic frontier traditions, was a needed corrective to the ‘European-ness’ that so plagued the war. If divided piecemeal into the Allied armies, the AEF would lose its curative potential. An independent AEF, though, was just the tonic that Europe required to shake off its military malaise. On 16 April 1918 Pershing made the cultural connection clear when he addressed the officers of the American 1st Division as they readied to enter the lines near Cantigny, stating: ‘You have behind you

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7. Minutes of a Meeting between Pershing and Robertson, 10 January 1918, WO 106/466, NA.
your own national traditions that should make you the finest soldiers in Europe to-day. We come from a young and aggressive nation.’ America stood for democracy and liberty; ‘we now return to Europe, the home of our ancestors, to help defend the same principles upon European soil’.  

Because of cultural inflexibility and strategic hubris, the United States notoriously had chosen to ‘go it alone’, and, as a result, the AEF faced a crisis of preparedness in 1917 that was analogous to the situation Britain had faced in 1914, but the two cases have received very different historiographical treatment. As regards the wartime experience of the BEF, there exists a quite vibrant historiography that, while it recognises BEF failings and mistakes, correctly views the British military history of the conflict as a steady learning curve, during which the BEF became masters of modern war. While the BEF’s lauded learning curve took five difficult years of combat to reach its eventual fruition, the American combat experience of the Great War lasted for a total of six months. Is it any wonder, then, that the AEF, regardless of the advantages to be gained by learning from the experience of its allies, had difficulties? Contrary to accepted opinion, the American military experience in the Great War can be seen as a leading example of lightning-fast military innovation. Although the process arguably was hampered by stubbornness, from a standing start, the AEF in six months went from an untested military to being able to best the vaunted Germans in battle.

The time constraints under which United States military leaders laboured were indeed daunting. Upon the American declaration of war in April 1917, the Regular Army numbered only 133,000 men and 5800 officers, while the National Guard consisted of 67,000 men and 3200 officers. By the end of the war, the enlisted strengths of the Regular Army and the National Guard had swelled to 527,000 and 382,000 respectively, all while the US also constructed a new National Army of three million men—an astounding feat accomplished in just nineteen months. 

While its unique military culture played a critical role in forming America’s blinkered and flawed strategic vision, the effects of that culture were most obvious on the tactical level. The task of translating American democratic visions of warfare into battlefield reality fell to the small and relatively inexperienced US officer corps. Many of the officers who eventually became senior leaders in the AEF had seen action in the Philippines or in the hunt for Pancho Villa, but those open, sweeping campaigns had limited relevance to the reality of warfare on the Western Front. Making matters worse, thousands of

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officers who eventually saw significant combat in the Great War, had until very recently been civilians, and received only rudimentary training before assuming their command duties.\textsuperscript{11} Having suffered through a difficult wartime expansion of their own military, British military liaisons were especially sensitive observers of the American officer corps, with one representative reporting to Whitehall that, ‘The American commanders and staffs are almost wholly untrained, and without military experience’.\textsuperscript{12} While visiting a training camp in New York another British representative commented that, while the training of individual soldiers was excellent:

There are no non-commissioned officers of any value, and that while the subalterns from the reserve officers schools show keenness and enthusiasm, the company and battalion commanders are entirely inexperienced and badly in need of acquiring the habit of command. The staffs consist of intelligent and energetic officers, who are, however, as yet ignorant of the conditions of modern war.\textsuperscript{13}

Pershing and his inexperienced officer corps were the products of an American training system designed to produce a pure tactical expression of the American frontier spirit. Having chosen for years to ignore the European experience of war regarding the tactical dominance of modern firepower, the American military remained the last worshiper at the altar of the cult of the offensive. Best typified by the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, during the course of the Great War the officer training schools of the US Army continued to downplay the use of firepower as the method by which to overcome enemy entrenchments in favour of the tactics of open warfare, and the dominance of morale, the rifle and the bayonet.\textsuperscript{14}

A survey of the most influential doctrinal journals of the time also indicates the American tendency to reject the tactical lessons of the Great War, in favour of stubborn support of the army’s pre-war \textit{Field Service Regulations} and the power of the offensive. The process of de-emphasising European tactical developments began in late 1914, when, in the face of contrary evidence from a stagnating Western Front, an editorial in the \textit{Infantry Journal} contended that the lessons of the Great War meant that in modern combat American infantry could expect to:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Timothy Nenninger, ‘Tactical Dysfunction in the AEF, 1917-1918’, \textit{Military Affairs} 51:4 (October, 1987), 179.
\item \textsuperscript{12} E.T. Dawnay, Report on Command in the AEF, 28 May 1918, WO 106/513, NA.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Chief of the Imperial General Staff Report on American Training, WO 106/474, NA.
\end{itemize}
PREFERRING TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

leap up, come together and form a long line which is lit up [with fire] from end to end. A last volley from the troops, a last rush pellmell of the men in a crowd, a rapid making ready of the bayonet for its thrusts, a simultaneous roar from the artillery ... a dash of the cavalry from cover emitting the wild yell of victory—and the assault is delivered. The brave men spared by the shot and shell will plant their tattered flag on the ground covered with the corpses of the defeated enemy. Such is the part played by infantry on the field of battle today.  

Perhaps one can forgive an American rendition of the anthem in praise of the cult of the offensive so early in the conflict. However, for the next three years the editorial department of the *Infantry Journal* continued to emphasise the moral element of war and the offensive and reject the dominance of firepower. In 1915, the editors approvingly quoted a French colonel who stated, 'It is the infantry which we have to proclaim today. It is vain to speak of ballistics and pyrotechnics. The soul stands very much above them. And in battle it is the most resisting soul that triumphs.' For the next year, articles and letters in the journal continued to stress the offensive and even openly denied that the Great War had become an ‘artillery war’, which correspondingly diminished the ‘human element’ of combat.

The official doctrine of the American military, as expressed by US Army’s *Infantry Drill Regulations (IDR)* of 1917, best demonstrates the American failure to come to grips with the reality of the Western Front in the window of time before the nation’s entry into the Great War. According to the *IDR*, bravery and the infantry charge over open ground remained the key to success in battle. Artillery fire would ‘aid ... the infantry in gaining fire superiority’, but ‘in the advance by rushes, sufficient rifles must be kept constantly in action to keep down the enemy’s fire’. After the infantry charge had routed the enemy position the *IDR* contended that formed bodies of troops following the assaulting force would engage in a ‘vigorous’ pursuit in order to ‘reap the full benefits of victory’.

The *IDR* also evinced a failure to understand the worth of the machine-gun, stating that, ‘machine-guns must be considered as weapons of emergency ... of great value at critical, though infrequent, periods of an engagement’. Attacking units were advised not to employ them ‘until the attack is well advanced. Machine-guns should not be assigned to the firing line of an attack.’ Most surprisingly, though, the *IDR* downplayed the killing power of machine-guns as part of defensive systems, and contended that

infantry employing concentrated rifle fire could overcome the entrenched machine-guns of a defending enemy force.17

Upon American entry into the conflict, the command structure of the AEF journeyed to the Western Front, where it again proved equally culturally predisposed to reject British and French tactical advice regarding the changing nature of war. To Pershing especially it was neither new technology nor advanced defensive techniques that had caused the Great War to stagnate—it was the ‘European-ness’ of the conflict. In his post-war memoirs, Pershing recalled:

In the situation that followed the first battle of the Marne, the great armies on the Western Front were entrenched against each other and neither had been able to make more than local gains. The long period during which this condition had prevailed, with its resultant psychological effect, together with the natural leaning of the French toward the defensive … had apparently combined to obscure the principles of open warfare.18

Conflating culture and tactics, Pershing believed that the British and French had become overly enamoured of firepower and had lost their offensive spirit. What they needed more than anything else was the stirring example of the citizen soldiers of an independent AEF, fighting war the way it was meant to be fought, with rifles in the open. After visiting the trenches, it all became clear, causing Pershing to remark:

The armies on the Western Front in the recent battles that I had witnessed had all but given up the use of the rifle. Machine guns, grenades, Stokes mortars, and one-pounders had become the main reliance of the average Allied soldier. These were all valuable weapons for specific purposes but they could not replace the combination of an efficient soldier and his rifle.19

Far from moving the US Army toward doctrinal change, Pershing’s initial experiences in France led to a retrenchment of the open warfare, infantry-heavy offensive as described in the *Infantry Drill Regulations*. To ensure that American forces sent to Europe would not be infected with the heretical ideas of the British and the French, Pershing sent a flurry of messages back to Washington regarding mobile warfare and the pre-eminent value of the rifle and bayonet. He insisted that all soldiers be taught that ‘the rifle and the bayonet remain the supreme weapons of the infantry soldier’, and that, ‘the ultimate success of the army depends on their proper use in open warfare’.20

19. Ibid., 153.
Although American doctrine appeared to be settled, there remained at least one dissenting opinion as the AEF lurched toward combat. The War Department had ordered a special fact-finding team, known as the Baker Mission, to visit French and British commands on the Western Front, to learn all it could about Allied methods of war, and to report its findings to both Pershing and the War Department. Colonel Charles Summerall, future commander of the 1st Division and future Chief of Staff, served as the senior artillery officer with the Baker Mission, and was blunt in his report to Pershing and his staff at AEF headquarters. In July 1917, Summerall warned that the American reliance on infantry firepower was misguided, and that the AEF needed to increase its artillery support in plans for battle, ‘without which the experience of the present war shows positively that it is impossible for the infantry to advance’. Taken aback by the report, members of Pershing’s staff attacked Summerall as ‘arrogant’ and rejected his artillery heavy form of warfare.

Just a month later, Lieutenant-Colonel John Parker, an expert in the use of the machine-gun, conducted a tour of a French automatic weapons training center. In a report submitted to Pershing’s staff after the visit, Parker concluded that, ‘the day of the rifleman is done. He was a good horse while he lasted, but his day is over … The rifleman is passing out and the bayonet is fast becoming as obsolete as the crossbow.’ Like Summerall before him, Parker did not get a warm reception at AEF headquarters. Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Malone, then heading the AEF training section, wrote on his copy of Parker’s report, ‘speak for yourself, John!’

Debate, such as it was, within the AEF structure concerning doctrine had ended. There remained, however, one alternate source by which heretical ideas could contaminate the American military. The fledgling AEF had to rely on experienced British and French officers for much of its training. The dangerous situation involved Allied units performing demonstrations and manoeuvres for AEF units once they arrived in France, while British and French officers served as instructors and advisers to American commanders at all levels, and taught courses at the AEF staff school at Langres. Additionally, as the war progressed, several American units served in battle alongside and under the command of the French Army or the BEF. Although American units, especially those brigaded within the French or British military structures, doubtless absorbed some aspects of Allied military doctrine, Pershing and his staff did their best to guard their forces from the baleful influence of ‘European-ness’.

22. Ibid., 40.
Colonel Harold Fiske, who later became head of the AEF training section, further demonstrated the American tendency to confuse culture and tactics in summing up the danger posed by Allied training of American units:

The offensive spirit of the French and British Armies has largely disappeared as a result of their severe losses ... Our young officers and men are prone to take the tone and tactics of those with whom they are associated, and whatever they are now learning that is false or unsuited for us will be hard to eradicate later. In many respects, the tactics and technique of our Allies are not suited to American characteristics or the American mission in this war. The French do not like the rifle, do not know how to use it, and their infantry is consequently too entirely dependent upon a powerful artillery support. Their infantry lacks aggressiveness and discipline. The British infantry lacks initiative and resource.  

Concurring with Fiske’s conclusion that ‘Berlin cannot be taken by the French or the British ... It can only be taken by a thoroughly trained, entirely homogeneous American Army’, Pershing made it very clear to his subordinates that they were to reject British and French training methods in favour of concentration on musketry and techniques of open warfare. Pershing informed the commander of the 42nd Division:

The training of American troops must remain in the hands of American officers. Neither the French officers sent to your division nor the French battalion commanders will be permitted by you to dictate methods of training, substitute programs for those contemplated by these headquarters, or relieve American officers in any way from the responsibility for the training of their units as prescribed by these headquarters.

Believing, then, in the word of one of his senior staff officers, that ‘An American army cannot be made by Frenchmen or Englishmen’, Pershing and the AEF again rejected the valuable military experience of their European allies. Since, in his mind, British and French cultural weakness, over-reliance on firepower and tactical fixation on the defensive were the root causes of the stagnation of the Great War, only a truly American force, full of native frontier spirit and ready to fight in the open, could put the war to right again.

Aided by the obstinacy of its commander-in-chief, but abetted by very nearly the entirety of its command structure, the AEF had quashed internal doctrinal debate and had rejected the advice and training of its British and French mentors, the sum total of

23. Memorandum for [AEF] chief of staff from Colonel Harold B. Fiske, 4 July 1918, quoted in Bruce, Fraternity of Arms, 120.
25. The preceding two quotations are from Farwell, Over There, 100-01.
Allied tactical knowledge gained in four years of grinding battle. The Americans would not, in the view of General Robert Lee Bullard, be like a French soldier ‘who never rests until he has dug a hole, and after that he never rests anywhere but in the hole’. In a war in which their European allies had learned long before that gains could be made only through the utilisation of devastating levels of firepower, the Americans courted disaster by preparing for open warfare. America had remained true to its frontier soul, scoring a victory over ‘European-ness’ that caused General Robert Alexander proudly to claim:

> In all instruction one dominating principle was insisted upon—that training for the open was of primary value and of that training the utilization of the rifle as a firearm was indispensable to success ... Instruction was of course also given in the use of the bayonet, hand and rifle grenades, the automatic rifle ... and other auxiliaries, but that they were merely auxiliaries and could never replace the ability to maneuver, which in turn must be accompanied by the ability to use the firepower of the rifle, was always insisted upon.

Even while Pershing and his staff laboured to create an outmoded and uniquely American military force, the effectiveness of the AEF was further compromised by practical problems of readying millions of volunteer and draftee civilians for combat. To create and train oversized 25,000-man-strong divisions for battle, a divisional strength meant to make the AEF better in open warfare, upon American entry into the conflict the War Department opted to break up what trained units were on hand to create the skeletons of new divisions. On numerous occasions during their training cycle, the composite divisions received batches of new recruits, necessitating a halt in unit training in order to absorb and provide basic infantry training to the fresh intake of civilians. The start-and-stop training schedule, which made for divisions of very uneven quality, was complicated even further by the practice of splitting divisions up to accommodate the rigid embarkation schedule for shipping troops to France.

The German offensive of 1918 further disrupted the already chaotic AEF shipment and training schedule. Fearing that the war would end while the AEF dawdled on the sidelines, both France and Britain renewed calls for the immediate amalgamation of US forces into Allied military units. Initially Pershing stood firm in opposition to the plan, but did agree to rush American military manpower to Europe as quickly as possible by shipping only infantry and machine-gun units to France. The change in shipping priority meant that many units arrived in France without their command, staff or supporting structures.

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26. Ibid., 101.
The response to the crisis on the Western Front, combined with faulty War Office policy, left the training system of the AEF in near total disarray. Pershing commented on the sad end result:

The practice was carried to such an extent that divisions of 25,000 men, which should have been held intact, and each one perfected as an organized team, were constantly called upon to send large groups of their trained soldiers to other duties … As green men were substituted, the result was that training had to be practically started all over again with each such reduction … All this was discouraging to their officers, disastrous to morale, threw upon the A.E.F an extra burden of training, and resulted in our having a number of divisions only partially trained when the time came to use them.²⁹

The 32nd Division, under the command of General William Haan, stood as perhaps the best example of the weaknesses of the US training system. The 32nd arrived in France in February 1918, only to be broken up as fillers for other divisions and as labourers for the Services of Supply (SOS). Without a division to command, on 31 March, Haan was stunned to learn that, in response to the German attack, his regiments that had been on supply duty were being returned, and that the shattered and untrained division was soon to enter the line. Haan wrote in his diary:

The division has been torn to pieces by the SOS and replacements … And suddenly it is to be made ready for the front line … The division now has: no artillery, no engineers, shortage in signal troops, shortage in machine-gun troops, shortage in officers. For proper training there should be artillery and engineers present.³⁰

Although Pershing remained supremely confident that the AEF would set the war right, rushed and chaotic training, combined with American insistence on open warfare doctrine, meant that the AEF was preparing, and poorly, to fight the wrong war. Many British and French military observers recognised that Pershing’s rejection of Allied military methods meant that the AEF would face its own Battle of the Somme, but knew that they were powerless to alter Pershing’s chosen course. In a report to his superiors in Whitehall, Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General W. Kirke, observed:

The Americans … [believe] that their untrained troops have more fighting value than veteran French divisions, and they have formed the opinion that their staff arrangements also are as good, if not better, than those of their mentors … It is no more use our trying to keep them back … than it would be trying to prevent a young man of independent means from

getting married when he has made up his mind to do so … It is quite possible that a little later on the Americans may find that they want some help from us again in training, but the request must come from them.\textsuperscript{31}

The ultimate proof of US training and doctrine came with the test of battle. Complicating any effort to generalise concerning the American experience in the Great War, in March 1918 Pershing finally overcame his aversion to amalgamation and informed Foch, ‘I have come to tell you that the American people would consider it a great honor for our troops to be engaged in the present battle … At this moment there are no other questions than fighting. Infantry, artillery, aviation, all that we have are yours; use them as you wish.’\textsuperscript{32} Pershing’s decision meant that American forces would enter the line in dribs and drabs and initially be engaged in small battles, including Cantigny and Belleau Wood, under the command of Allied forces, instead of as a part of an independent American force meant to alter the nature of the war.

The American units, of up to divisional size, that served under the command of the French Army or the BEF generally acquitted themselves well. The claim of the 1st and 2nd Divisions to making the greatest Allied advance during the Second Battle of the Marne and the 30th Division’s critical role in breaking the Hindenburg Line along the St Quentin Canal stand as just two examples of the exemplary record of American units brigaded to Allied formations. However, as part of Allied forces, under Allied command and utilising Allied tactics and firepower, the experience of such brigaded divisions did not stand as a true test of American training or doctrine. Even so, Allied commanders often noticed that their American charges in brigaded units fought in a manner ill-suited to the reality of the Western Front.

During the attack toward Soissons during the Second Battle of the Marne, the 1st and 2nd Divisions gained fame for achieving an advance of nearly seven miles, but at a cost of 12,000 casualties. The 26th Infantry Regiment alone lost 3000 men. In a scene reminiscent of the Somme, the Americans had made the mistake of advancing in steady lines across open wheat fields in the face of entrenched German machine-guns. While fighting with passion and courage the Americans made little use of either fire or manoeuvre and advanced in formations that were too dense, mistakes that one French observer remarked were ‘too apt to get them killed’.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} General W. Kirke to the CIGS, 28 June 1918, WO 106/513, NA.
\textsuperscript{32} Pershing, \textit{My Experiences}, I: 364-5.
\textsuperscript{33} Nenninger, ‘Tactical Dysfunction’, 178.
Pershing was also quite critical of the performance of the 1st and 2nd Divisions in the Second Battle of the Marne and remarked that formations ‘everywhere were too dense … Waves are too close together … Lines are frequently seen with men almost elbow to elbow … All formations are habitually lacking in elasticity; there is almost never any attempt to maneuver.’ Instead of blaming the tactical problems, and their corresponding high losses, on the AEF’s open warfare doctrine, though, Pershing disastrously concluded that the fault instead lay with ‘the attempt by assaulting infantry to use trench warfare methods in open warfare combat’.34 After the Second Battle of the Marne, Pershing was perhaps thus more convinced than ever that open warfare tactics, combined with the superior morale of the American fighting man, was the solution to the riddle of the Great War. To succeed, his forces only had to shed the taint of ‘European-ness’ that had been the result of serving alongside their Allies in a time of need. All that Pershing required to make his point, and to set the war to right, was an American sector of the front and an American offensive.

Since as early as June 1917, Pershing had pushed to concentrate an independent American force in Lorraine, near St Mihel. Thinking in grandiose terms long before he even had an army to command, Pershing planned first to reduce the German positions within the St Mihel salient, and then launch a general attack toward Metz, which he hoped would decide the war.35 After a delay imposed by the German spring offensives, in August 1918 Pershing achieved the first of his goals with the activation of the American First Army. However, Pershing soon learned that Foch’s plans involved an Allied offensive further north, near the Meuse River, rather than against St Mihel. Incensed, Pershing confronted the Allied supreme commander, and, after a testy exchange, Foch agreed to allow Pershing to move forward with the American attack at St Mihel, even promising six French divisions to aid in the operation. For his part, Pershing promised that after the reduction of the St Mihel salient he would rapidly transfer the bulk of his forces northward for offensive operations in the Meuse-Argonne, a complex manoeuvre certain to tax the capabilities of the American logisticians to their very limits.

Fearing an imminent attack in the area, the Germans had ordered the evacuation of the St Mihel salient, a process not yet complete when, on 12 September 1918, sixteen divisions of the First American Army moved forward into the assault. Although some Germans resisted the advance, many simply attempted to complete their withdrawal before being surrounded by the advancing Americans. By 16 September, the American

First Army had scored what seemed to be a remarkable victory, reducing the St Mihiel salient and capturing 15,000 German prisoners and 450 artillery pieces at the cost of only 7000 US casualties.

To Pershing the results of the offensive proved that the British and French had been overly reliant on trench warfare, commenting:

The material results of the victory achieved were very important. An American army was an accomplished fact, and the enemy had felt its power. No form of propaganda could overcome the depressing effect on the morale of the enemy of this demonstration of our ability to organize a large American force and drive it successfully through his defenses. For the first time wire entanglements ceased to be regarded as impassable barriers and open warfare training, which had been so urgently insisted upon, proved to be the correct doctrine. 36

While Pershing saw St Mihiel as a vindication of American training and dogma, others within the Allied camp viewed the situation differently. General Robert Lee Bullard, eventually promoted to command the American Second Army, remarked:

St. Mihiel was given an importance which posterity will not concede it. Germany had begun to withdraw. She had her weaker divisions, young men and old and Austro-Hungarians. The operation fell short of expectations. 37

In a blistering appraisal of the American performance at St Mihiel, British liaison officer General J.P. Du Cane reported to the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff that the American attack had succeeded largely as a matter of chance, for their ‘bombardment did not cut the wire and the Americans had to stamp it down or cut it by hand. Fortunately there was practically no resistance.’ Regardless, though, of poor staff work and artillery fire, catching the Germans in the middle of their withdrawal had still provided the Americans with an opportunity to secure a great victory, but Du Cane reported:

The American attack from the South reached the neighbourhood of Vigneulles just about the same time as the Northern [American] attack was approaching it, and the two appear to have engaged each other, both reporting that they could not get on on account of intense machine-gun fire ... The Germans appear to have got clear away, owing to the great confusion existing in the American lines.

36. Quoted in Trask, The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 113; and Farwell, Over There, 216.
37. Farwell, Over There, 217.
In light of later American struggles in the Meuse-Argonne, Du Cane’s report stressed the detrimental effects that the easy victory at St Mihiel had on Pershing:

The most unfortunate part of an otherwise successful operation was that it confirmed the American High Command in an exaggerated estimate of the efficiency of the American military machine, and of their ability to control it. This has been paid for dearly since.\(^{38}\)

On 26 September, the opening of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive formed the first true test of Pershing’s belief in American military exceptionalism and reliance on the tactics of open warfare. Although the American commanders, even in their post-war memoirs, were loath to admit their mistakes, a cursory glance at the American operations in the Meuse-Argonne makes clear that US training had been ineffective, and that Pershing’s stubborn reliance on open warfare tactics had been sadly mistaken. After making initial gains of nearly eleven kilometres, the AEF attack quickly bogged down amid logistical chaos, command confusion and stiffening German resistance. The staff work for the offensive fell apart so completely, that, instead of sturdy American infantrymen advancing over open ground to victory, traffic jams behind the American lines, some lasting over twelve hours, resulted in front-line soldiers not receiving food or ammunition. Some American divisions had no idea where they were, or where they should be going, and the roads were full of scattered groups of American soldiers attempting to discern their orders. Amid the confusion, the Americans who were able to continue the attack paid a high price. A German officer of the 5th Reserve Corps commenting on American losses wrote:

American infantry is very unskillful in attack. It attacks with closed ranks in numerous and deep waves, at the head of which come the tanks. Such forms of attack form excellent targets for the activity of our artillery, if only the infantry does not get scared on account of the advancing masses and loses its nerve.\(^{39}\)

The failure of the American attack, which was the centrepiece of Foch’s overall plan to rupture the German lines, came as little surprise to many British and French observers, who just months earlier had seen their advice and training rejected. Commenting on the stalled offensive, Du Cane wrote:

The net result of all of this was that from the 27th of September to the 18th of October the [American] Army only gained another 5 kilometers, whilst wastage from wounds, sickness and straggling was very severe … From the 26th September to the 18th October,

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\(^{38}\) Lieutenant-General J.P. Du Cane, ‘Notes on American Offensive Operations,’ November, 1918, WO 106/528, NA.

\(^{39}\) Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking*, 128.
17 American divisions were employed, equivalent in strength to over 30 of the French, British or German divisions. These 17 divisions engaged 23 weak and tired enemy divisions and at the cost of heavy losses effected very little.  

Since the American divisions fighting as part of the French Army and the BEF had ‘done splendidly’, Du Cane did not fault the bravery or ability of the American soldier, but rather problems in the American command structure and commented:

The general impression is that, in spite of the gallantry and spirit of the individual, and owing to inexperience, particularly at the higher ranks, American divisions employed in large blocks under their own command, suffer wastage out of all proportion to results achieved, and generally do not pull more than a fraction of their weight.

It is felt that in insisting on the premature formation of large American Armies, General Pershing has not interpreted the altruistic wishes of the American Nation, and that he has incurred a grave responsibility both as regards unnecessary loss of life among his troops, and in the failure of the operations.

By late October the AEF, in spite of Pershing’s stubbornness, had learned to fight by fighting and had made good most of its logistic and staff problems. On 1 November the rejuvenated force launched an attack that finally broke the German resistance along the Kriemhilde Line, leading to a pursuit of a defeated enemy. With even the British admitting that the Americans had learned from past mistakes, US units swept toward Sedan. The improvements, though, had taken place because American officers on the tactical level had become more proficient in their craft, rather than due to any doctrinal shift at the upper echelons of command. Throughout the attritional battles of late September and October, Pershing and his staff had laboured under the delusion, outlined in the ‘Combat Instructions’ of September 1918, that ‘The principles [of open warfare doctrine previously] enunciated … are not yet receiving due application’. Indeed Pershing remained convinced that his belief in open warfare had been correct all along and had, in the end, carried the day, claiming in his memoirs that, ‘Ultimately, we had the satisfaction of hearing the French admit that we were right, both in emphasizing training for open warfare and insisting upon proficiency in the use of the rifle’.

41. Ibid.
42. Notes on the American Army, WO 106/513, NA.
Although Pershing, and the other purists of the American military ethos on his staff, continued to espouse the efficacy of open warfare long into the interwar period, their insistence on the primacy of the rifle and morale in combat during the Great War had led the United States into a tactical dead end and had resulted in needless losses and inefficiencies on the part of the AEF. Rejection of the collective military wisdom of its Allies resulted in an over-reliance in the AEF upon anachronistic military ideas, while fruitless attempts to fight in the open merely served to exaggerate the weakness of the unevenly trained American units. The result was that US commanders often ordered their untested units into battle without enough artillery covering fire, a tendency initially obscured by the ease of the American victory at St Mihiel. At the Meuse-Argonne, though, the combined weaknesses of American doctrine and training crashed together. Fired by the belief in American exceptionalism, and buoyed by his first significant victory, Pershing planned for his untested and tactically unsound units to achieve a breakthrough victory—a goal that neither the force nor the plan employed could ever hope to attain. Like their Allies before them, the Americans went to battle unprepared, but for the AEF the result was perhaps even more tragic, because instead of learning from the mistakes of their Allies, they preferred to learn from experience.

Germany’s effort in the First World War can be divided into two intermittent phases. The first of these is characterised by offensives designed to win the war decisively by success on the battlefield. The years 1914, 1916 and 1918 each saw offensives by German forces aimed at defeating the armies of the Western powers and thus winning the war: In 1914, there was the great invasion of France. In 1916, there was the Verdun offensive, and in 1918, there were the German spring offensives. The other phase of the war was one of rebuilding and reformation, both physically and intellectually, of the German Army in preparation for the ‘decisive’ phase. The year 1917 falls distinctly into this category.

THE NEW OBERSTE HEERESLEITUNG

Towards the end of 1916, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and Generalleutnant Erich Ludendorff, the former commanders on the Eastern Front, took over command of the German military effort, forming the Third Oberste Heeresleitung (OHL) on 29 August. For two years, Hindenburg and Ludendorff had fought a bitter battle with the head of the second OHL, Erich von Falkenhayn, for resources. 1 Focused on the Eastern Front, the two men could not comprehend why Falkenhayn was reluctant to give them the manpower reserves they felt would deal a death blow to Russia. Upon taking command of the entire German military effort, however, they quickly changed their tune. Although the crisis in the East was more pressing in September 1916 and demanded a transfer of reserves to face Rumania, Hindenburg and Ludendorff soon recognised that Germany’s strategic situation simply did not permit the wholesale transfer of reserves from one front to the other. Indeed, the two soon came round to Falkenhayn’s view that the war would be decided on Western Front, not the Eastern.

Shortly after taking up their new positions, Hindenburg and Ludendorff traveled to the Western Front to see for themselves the course of the war in the west. Once there, they met the chiefs of staff of the Westheer at a conference in Cambrai on 8 September. For Ludendorff, it was the first time he had seen the Western Front in two years. Hindenburg had never seen fighting there. For both men, the contrast with the Eastern Front was shocking. Not only were they surprised by the nature of trench warfare, but they were stunned by the state of the German forces there. The twin battles of Verdun and the Somme had hit the Westheer hard. For example, between 24 June and 28 August 1916, the German First and Second Armies had suffered 122,908 casualties, and during this time 29 divisions had rotated in and out of the battle.

Indeed, in early September on average a division needed to be rotated out of the Somme battle every day. Conditions at Verdun were not much better. All of this had put a severe strain on the German replacement system. The Chief of Staff of Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz reported that the recruit depots behind the front could only supply 50-60 per cent of the army's needs. On top of the manpower shortage, the Westheer faced serious shortfalls in munitions. For example, in July and August, the Westheer fired off the contents of some 587 munitions trains’ worth of field artillery munitions, but only received 470 to replace its reserves.

Against these deficiencies, the superiority of the enemy in the West in terms of material and numbers was clear. A report of 28 August on the situation of the First Army fighting on the Somme summed this up:

The complications of the entire battle lay only in part with the superiority in number of enemy divisions—12 or 13 enemy against 8 German on the battlefield—for our infantry feel completely superiority to the English and French in the close battle. The most difficult factor in the battle is the enemy’s superiority in munitions. This allows their artillery, which is excellently supported by aircraft, to level our trenches and to wear down our infantry systematically … The destruction of our positions is so thorough that our foremost line merely consists of occupied shell-holes.

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2. This conference is described in Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918: Band XI: Die Kriegführung im Herbst 1916 und im Winter 1916/17 (Berlin: Mittler, 1938), 10ff.
5. A ‘munitions train’ carried a specified number of rounds for a particular weapons system. A ‘field cannon’ train carried 26,880 77mm rounds, a ‘light field howitzer’ train 12,000 105mm rounds, and a ‘heavy howitzer’ train 6000 150mm rounds: Ludwig Wurtzbacher, ‘Die Versorgung des Heeres mit Waffen und Munition’, in Max Schwarte (ed.), Der Weltkampf um Ehre und Recht Bd.VI: Die Organisationen der Kriegführung: Teil.1: Die für den Kampf unmittelbar arbeitenden Organisationen (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1921), 92.
The introduction of conscription and the overall reordering of British manpower situation meant that the British army was not wanting for replacements, even after its terrible battering on the Somme.\(^7\) In late August, German intelligence calculated that of the 58 British divisions on the Western Front, eighteen were fully fresh.\(^8\) The French were relatively worse off, but German intelligence believed that through combing out rear areas and through using more colonial troops that the French army would be able to continue to cover its losses until the 1918 class reached the army in summer 1917.\(^9\) Moreover, they could still draw on strong reserves. German intelligence had recently reported that sixteen of the 110 French divisions on the Western Front were held in reserve and ready for offensive action. Moreover, they believed that the French could raise another ten or eleven divisions by replacing fresh divisions with tired divisions in different sectors of the Western Front.\(^10\)

Ludendorff was so shaken by the strategic situation that he seems to have lost, for a moment at least, his confidence that Germany could win the war. In a private conversation after the Cambrai conference with Hermann von Kuhl, at the time Chief of Staff to Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht, Ludendorff expressed his reservations. Kuhl recorded the conversation in his diary:

I spoke … with Ludendorff alone (about the overall situation). We were in agreement that a large-scale, positive outcome is now no longer possible. We can only hold on and take the best opportunity for peace. We made too many serious errors this year.\(^11\)

If the German Army were to have any prospect at all of winning the war, it was clear to the new OHL that it would have to be reformed and refitted. Some immediate changes could be made to ease the situation on the Western Front. On 29 August, Ludendorff had expanded the idea of *Heeresgruppen* (army groups) introduced by Falkenhayn. This made distribution of reserves of manpower and munitions easier.\(^12\) However, the more

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7. German intelligence calculated that the British army had almost two million replacements available to it in early 1917: Nachrichten-Abteilung, Nr. 2567a, ‘Der englische Ersatz’, 11 January 1917, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (HStA-D), Sächsische Militärbevollmächteter (SM), 4202.
12. The Seventh Army was placed under the command of Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht and the Third Army was placed under the command of Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz. Only the Fourth Army remained independent, ostensibly because its flank rested on the coast and thus it had ‘special tasks’ to perform. The reality was that it was commanded by Herzog Albrecht of Württemberg, and this made it difficult to place under another southern German prince: *Weltkrieg*, XI: 6-7; Ludendorff, *My War Memories 1914-1918*, 2 vols (London: Hutchinson, 1920), I: 265-6.
fundamental problem of German inferiority in numbers of men and increasingly in armaments and munitions would take longer to fix. New units would have to be raised. Manpower would have to be found from somewhere to fill these units and to make good the losses of 1916. This, however, could only take Germany so far. To make up for what would always be a deficiency in manpower vis-à-vis the Western Allies and to compete effectively in the Materialschlachten of the future, Hindenburg and Ludendorff called for a new industrial program. Borrowing ideals already developed by a relatively junior member of the OHL, then-Oberstleutnant Max Bauer, indeed borrowing a memorandum already written by Bauer, Hindenburg and Ludendorff devised what has become known as the 'Hindenburg Program'. This far-reaching industrial plan called for a doubling of munitions production and for a three-fold increase in artillery production, a three-fold increase in machinegun production and a doubling of trench mortar production.

NEW FORCE STRUCTURE AND ADDITIONAL COMBAT POWER

This dual goal of expanding the army and of increasing the weapons available to the army intensified the battle during 1917 between the army and industry over a commodity increasingly scarce in Germany—manpower. Prior to the battles of Verdun and the Somme, Germany had seemed to be doing well in terms of manpower. At the beginning of 1916, the army had some 900,000 in its recruit depots and could count on 300,000 more in March when the 1897 class was called to the colours. The situation was so good that plans were afoot to release the older classes of Landwehr from service. Further, during the summer of 1916, Falkenhayn had set in motion the formation of eighteen new infantry divisions, which would bring the German Army to 175 divisions.

The high casualties inflicted by Entente artillery in the battles of Verdun and the Somme had put great demands on German divisions. Ludendorff noted the situation shortly after taking his new position: “The strain on the physical and moral strength was tremendous and divisions could only be kept in the line for a few days at a time.” On average, a division lasted fourteen days fighting on the front line during the battle of the Somme before it needed to be withdrawn for a considerable rest period. An increase in

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17. Ludendorff, War Memories, I: 245.
the number of divisions seemed to offer a means of ameliorating the strain on the army during heavy defensive fighting and also appeared to offer the opportunity of creating new units to be used elsewhere for offensive action. Accordingly, on taking over the OHL, Hindenburg and Ludendorff ordered a further expansion of the German Army. The OHL set in motion the formation of an additional 22 infantry divisions. Their initial goal was to take the German Army up to 197 divisions by the spring of 1917.  

However, this decision was not without its drawbacks. Ernst von Wrisberg, head of the section of the Prussian Ministry of War responsible for raising new units, had serious reservations about the impact of forming these new units on the army. The manpower for the eighteen new divisions formed by Falkenhayn in 1916 had come mainly from removing an infantry regiment from those existing divisions made up of four infantry regiments. Thus, this expansion really just shifted manpower around and was largely cost neutral in manpower terms. While some of the troops necessary for Hindenburg and Ludendorff’s new divisions could be found by means of combing out rear areas for suitable manpower, much of the manpower for these new units would have to come from the replacement pool. The casualties of the battles of 1916 had severely reduced this manpower pool and had taken up the slack that had previously existed in the system. Although this pool would be refilled as younger classes became available, by dipping into this replacement pool to create new units, the numbers available to replace casualties in future battles would be limited. The only way that this could in any way be offset was to call up the 1898 class of recruits early, and it was only through this method that the replacement pool was able to be raised to 763,000 by February 1917.  

Thus, although the new divisions would provide additional units in the front line, the trade-off would be the long-term health of the army. Ludendorff, however, brushed Wrisberg’s doubts aside and insisted on the new divisions.  

One way that Ludendorff had hoped to make good the German structural deficiencies in manpower was to rely more heavily on munitions and heavy weapons. Technology was to take the place of numbers of troops and add to the combat power of German divisions. As the Hindenburg program stated: ‘Men … must be increasingly replaced by machines.’ Thus, the Hindenburg program had called for a massive increase in the amount of munitions and numbers of heavy weapons reaching the front line. The German Army had begun 1916 well provided in both munitions and artillery. In anticipation of the battle of Verdun, the Westheer had built up stock of some 8.5 million field artillery

20. Wrisberg, Heer und Heimat, 85-7. The 1898 class was called up in November 1916.
21. Ibid., 28.
22. Ludendorff, General Staff, 74.
rounds and some 2.7 million heavy artillery rounds. This, though, was rapidly fired off. Some four million rounds were fired in the first two weeks of the Verdun offensive, and the Fifth Army required an average daily re-supply of nearly 34 munitions trains to keep the battle of attrition going.

The battle of the Somme further reduced the German reserves of munitions, particularly once German troops had been forced from their prepared front-line positions. Without obstacles to hinder the advance of enemy forces, German defenders on the Somme were forced to rely ever more heavily on defensive barrages [Sperrfeuer].

The need for more munitions and more artillery was clear to all, and indeed was demanded by the Westheer’s commanders. However, this increase could not be so easily provided.

From the outbreak of the war, German munitions production had been hampered by limits on the amount of powder that could be produced. Prior to 1914, the manufacture of propellant was almost wholly dependent upon nitrates imported from abroad. That the Germans could produce any powder at all was thanks to the discovery of a procedure for making synthetic nitrates. It took time, however, for this procedure to be refined and for factories to be made to produce this synthetic nitrate in the vast quantities needed to supply the ever-increasing demand for artillery munitions. During Falkenhayn’s tenure as Chief of the General Staff, the German Army had subordinated its entire procurement schedule of finished munitions and even artillery pieces to the production of propellant, reasoning that if there was no propellant available, then finished rounds and numbers of guns would be useless.

When Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over, they abandoned this principle.

In order to match the large numbers of weapons demanded by Hindenburg program, as well as meet the increased demand for munitions for weapons already at the front, production of propellant would have to be greatly increased. At first glance, the Hindenburg program appeared to do this, as it called for 12,000 tons of powder to be produced per month, which it termed a ‘doubling’ of production. However, 12,000 tons was not a ‘doubling’ of production. In July 1916, the powder production target had been raised from 8000 tons to 10,000 tons, which the old OHL and the Ministry of War believed was necessary merely to cover existing munitions demand. The additional 2000 tons a month

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required by the Hindenburg program would hardly be sufficient to match the three-fold increase in artillery production, the three-fold increase in machine-gun production and the doubling of trench mortar production also demanded by the program. Thus, even if the new weapons could be produced, the German Army would always have difficulty keeping them supplied with the necessary munitions.

Regardless of these problems, Hindenburg and Ludendorff pressed on with their rearmament program, which had other unforeseen consequences for the German Army. At the same time the German manpower reserve was being squeezed by the formation of Ludendorff’s new divisions, the effects of the Hindenburg program were also becoming more apparent. In order to produce the large increases in weapons demanded by this program, industrial capacity had to be expanded. Moreover, to produced the numbers of weapons in the time scale required by the OHL, more skilled workers had to be found, and many of these were serving in the army or were about to be called up. The only way the armaments industry could get the skilled workers in the numbers required was to recall manpower from the army or to exempt those about to be called up. Exemptions for workers with crucial skills had existed since 1914. The Hindenburg program, however, caused their numbers to increase dramatically. In late 1916, there were some 1.2 million Zurückgestellte, or soldiers returned to industry for work, of whom some 740,000 were deemed fit for frontline service (kriegsverwendungsfähig or kv). By October 1917, this had increased to 1.64 million and by November, the number had reached more than two million, of whom some 1.16 million were judged kriegsverwendungsfähig.

On top of the manpower crisis engendered by Ludendorff’s organisational reforms and by the demands of the Hindenburg program, continued shortages of raw materials meant that its ambitious production targets could not always be met. Nonetheless, the program did increase the numbers of heavy weapons and munitions available to the Westheer for 1917. By the summer of 1917, the number of field guns available to the Westheer had increased to 6700 from 5300 in the summer of 1916. In the same period, the number of heavy guns increased from 3700 to 4300. In addition, increasing numbers of these were newer versions of field guns and field howitzers with significantly better ranges. Moreover, the Hindenburg program had resulted in many more machine-guns available for frontline

29. Weltkrieg, X: 626.
use. Each division was now equipped with 54 heavy and 108 light machine-guns, and special ‘machine-gun sharpshooter detachments’ could be assigned to threatened sectors of front further raising the numbers available.\(^{32}\)

As good as this was, there were still significant weaknesses in the Westheer. Despite the impressive increase in artillery numbers, it was not enough to provide the new divisions with the required artillery and to provide a reserve of artillery for the OHL. Consequently, those divisions that still possessed artillery brigades of two regiments found one regiment removed and the brigade dissolved. Artillery regiments of three battalions took their place. Further, although German divisions now commanded significantly more machine-guns, the Entente was still far ahead in this weapon. In early 1917, British division could count 64 heavy and 192 light machine-guns, while a French division had a staggering 88 heavy and 432 light machine-guns.\(^{33}\)

**NEW TACTICAL IDEAS**

Ludendorff recognised that the increase in units and in armaments could only go so far towards creating an army capable of winning the war. To match the physical reform of the army, he set about recasting the way in which the German Army thought about warfare. However, Ludendorff did not start with a blank doctrinal slate. Before he had resigned as Chief of the General Staff, Falkenhayn had set about formalising German trench warfare doctrine. He envisioned a series of manuals covering various arms and weapons, together titled ‘Voschriften für den Stellungskrieg für alle Waffen’ (‘Instructions for Position Warfare for All Arms’). By the time Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over, six of these manuals had already been written and distributed and another eight were in various stages of completion. Ludendorff picked up on Falkenhayn’s idea and moulded the concepts to fit his ideas about trench warfare.\(^{34}\)

Perhaps one of the biggest differences between Falkenhayn and Ludendorff’s visions of trench warfare came in the defence. The battle over instituting defence in depth had already been won during the course of 1915, and the idea had been instituted across the Western Front prior to Ludendorff’s arrival at the OHL.\(^{35}\) Where Ludendorff departed from Falkenhayn was in his acceptance of the ideas of younger members of the OHL.

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33. Ibid.
such as then-Hauptmann Hermann Geyer and then-Oberleutnant Max Bauer. These ‘Young Turks’ wanted to break German defence away from the deeply engrained tradition of holding ground at all costs. Instead, they wanted local commanders to have the flexibility of being allowed to surrender territory temporarily when under severe pressure. Indeed, this group advocated a defensive position based not on lines, but rather on a loose collection of fortified points. A flexible ‘area defence’ would replace an inflexible ‘linier defence.’ Lost territory would be retaken either with local forces in a rapid ‘counter-strike’ (Gegenstoss) or if necessary with reserves from a higher command by means of a deliberately planned and prepared ‘counter-attack’ (Gegenangriff). By severing the tie to territory, this group believed German casualties could be significantly reduced.

On top of this radical reassessment of how positions were to be defended, the battle of the Somme had caused a fundamental rethink in the way in which units were commanded in the defensive battle. Prior to the battle, the idea of a Kampfruppenkommandeur (KTK) had been instituted. The KTK was the officer in the frontline, normally a battalion commander, who commanded the defensive battle. The KTK would command all units that were sent into the front line battle. These included the other battalions of his regiment as well as additional units transported into his sector. The KTK’s sole task was to fight the defensive battle. Commands behind him, most notably the regimental commander, would deal with issues like supply, evacuation of the wounded, etc. This had worked extremely well during the battle of the Somme, and now the Young Turks in the OHL wanted to expand this idea up the chain of command. While they wanted to retain the KTK to fight the forward tactical battle, they wanted to concentrate the command of the higher levels of the defensive battle in the hands of divisional commanders. As Martin Samuels has noted, the chain of command would be ‘simplified from five stages (corps to division to brigade to regiment to front battalion) to only two (division to front battalion), each with full control over its sector’.

These new ideas were not readily accepted by all within the army. Different groups opposed different aspects of the new doctrine. Unsurprisingly, senior officers, in particular army corps commanders, objected to losing command authority to junior divisional commanders. A more significant challenge to the new doctrinal ideas came from Oberst Fritz von Loßberg. Loßberg had been central to the defensive victories of 1915 and 1916, first as chief of staff to the Third Army during the Winterschlacht in the Champagne and then as chief of staff to the First Army during the battle of the Somme. Given his experiences...

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and his successes, Loßberg’s views carried a considerable weight within the wider army, and his ideas had been incorporated into previous changes to German doctrine. Prior to taking up his positions at the front, Loßberg had been on the Operationsabteilung of the OHL and was thus familiar with the ideas of Bauer and Geyer. He had rejected the idea of a voluntary surrendering of terrain when part of the OHL, and his experience at the front confirmed his belief that the front line should be held inflexibly. Loßberg used the report he was writing on the experience of the battle of the Somme to emphasise the importance of holding the front line firmly. In ‘Erfahrungen der 1. Armee in der Sommeschlacht,’ he wrote:

Categorically, every unit must fight in that section of the foremost position that it is assigned to defend. The voluntary surrendering of a position or of parts of a position can lead to the most disastrous results for neighbouring units. Therefore, the voluntary surrendering of a position should only take place with the permission of a higher commander, who is in a position to determine its effects on neighboring units and on other arms (artillery).

Loßberg went on argue that it was only this steadfast refusal to give ground that allowed the First Army to withstand the overwhelming enemy attacks on the Somme:

During the battle of the Somme … everyman had to fight where he was stationed. Only over his dead body could the enemy advance. The [Armeeoberkommando] believes that it was due to this determination to fight, a determination with which every leader was imbued, that the enemy, despite his superior numbers, was bled to death by the closely knit ranks of our fighters.

Despite the resistance of key individuals like Loßberg, the ideas of the Young Turks in the OHL prevailed. The concepts of flexible area defence and the centrality of the division were incorporated into the new doctrinal manual, ‘Grundsätze für die Führung in der Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskrieg’ (‘Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare’), issued on 1 December 1916, and into ‘Allgemeines über Stellungsbau’ (‘Principles of the Construction of Positions’), issued on 15 December 1916. These two

38. Friedrich von Loßberg, Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkriege (Berlin: Mittler, 1939), 249ff.
39. Samuels, Command or Control, 170-4.
41. Ibid., 12. Cf. Samuels, Command or Control, 173.
42. Later editions of these documents are reproduced in Erich Ludendorff, Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916/18 (Berlin: Mittler, 1921), 594-640. They were not translated for the English edition of this book, but were translated during the war and released by the British as SS 561: ‘The Principles of Command in Position Warfare’, 1 March 1917, and SS 621: ‘General Principles of Construction of Field Positions’, 15 August 1917.
manuals, together the new doctrine for defensive warfare, enshrined the ideas of an elastic area defence. The ‘Principles of Command’ stated:

The higher command should not make it a rigid and unconditional rule that the ground cannot be abandoned. It should so conduct the defence that its own troops are on favourable ground, while the attacking force is only left on ground unfavorable for its operations.\(^{43}\)

In addition, they rested on the OHL’s increasing emphasis on armament to provide the backbone of defence rather than simply manpower. The ‘Principles of Command’ stated: ‘The defence should not be based on the employment of the largest possible number of men, but must rely principally on its armament (artillery, trench mortars, machine-guns, etc.).’\(^{44}\)

The new doctrine also introduced the concept of ‘defensive zones’ as a means of breaking away from a linear defence. The ‘General Principles of the Construction of Field Positions’ said:

Distribution of the defence in depth and the conduct in general of fighting not in lines but in defensive zones. A defensive zone of this nature includes works for the infantry and the artillery defensive, for command and intelligence communications, as well as for the care of the troops and for favourable conditions of living. It consists of a system of defensive works, obstacles and particularly dug-outs for men and ammunition, and is developed, as regards the infantry defence—the infantry position—into a network of trenches composed of many continuous lines, irregularly traced 150 to 400 yards apart, with numerous communication trenches connecting them together, with approach trenches leading rearwards and with supporting points, holding on points, and groups of dug-outs.

Utilising all the natural advantages offered (villages, woods, quarries, sunken roads, etc.) the whole of the ground that the defender is to hold should be so organised for an obstinate defence, sector by sector, that one or more deep fortified zones are created, into which the farther the enemy penetrates the more difficulties and the more surprises will he meet. The loss or abandonment of any part should not endanger the defence as a whole.\(^{45}\)

According to these new manuals, German defences were to consist of two zones, a Vorfeldzone (forward zone) and a Grosskampfzone (battle zone). The Vorfeldzone, which would vary in depth anywhere from 400 to 3000 metres, was to be lightly held. It was to stand in front of the Hauptwiderstandslinie (main line of resistance), which formed part of the forward area of the Grosskampfzone, itself up to two kilometres deep. Behind the

\(^{43}\) SS 561, ‘Principles of Command’, para. 6b.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., para. 6a.

\(^{45}\) SS 621, ‘General Principles of the Construction of Field Positions’, para. 2.
forward zone of the *Grosskampfzone* was to be sited at least one 'rearward' battle zone. This was to be a duplicate of the first two sections and was to be at least three kilometres behind the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*. Wherever possible, trenches in all zones were to take advantage of reverse-slope positions out of direct sight of enemy artillery observation.

The new doctrine envisioned that the *Vorfeldzone* would stand up to 'ordinary' trench warfare. In other words, it would have enough strength to resist raids and small-scale attacks. In large-scale offensives, the new manual stated that the main battle would be fought across the *Grosskampfzone*. Although trenches still had a role in this new system, especially in the *Hauptwiderstandslinie*, machine-gun nests and other fortified points were to be arrayed behind and around trenches, creating a defensive system arrayed in depth. Within this system would also be special artillery batteries (*Nahkampfbatterien*) and artillery observers. Special 'strong points' and 'rallying points' between trench lines were to be constructed. These would provide shelter for troops forced to withdraw from forward positions and would have a small garrison of their own, which would launch quick counter-attacks to retake lost forward positions. The idea was that any enemy who broke into the *Grosskampfzone* would be met by a confusion of different trenches and other obstacles and by fire and counter-attack from all different directions. A later edition of 'General Principles of the Construction of Field Positions' stated: 'An enemy who has broken in should find himself enclosed to the front and flanks by trenches and obstacles and shot down by well-concealed machine-guns and trench mortars, as well as by his own artillery firing into the battle area.'

There has been a tendency in the historiography to introduce a linearity to the new defensive system that was not the doctrine's intention. Although the doctrine discusses two separate combat zones, these were not necessarily designed to be completely separate areas. The new doctrine emphasised that the size and location of the *Vorfeldzone* and the *Grosskampfzone* were dependent on the particular terrain of a sector and could actually overlap. In other words, the two zones did not have to be two completely separate areas. In many respects, the difference between the zones was in function. The *Vorfeldzone*, which would be more exposed to enemy observation and hence knowledge, was designed to be strong enough for 'ordinary trench warfare'. It also prevented the enemy from seeing and knowing the features further behind this forward zone. The new doctrine recognised that

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47. This is particularly prominent in Timothy T. Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine: The changes in German tactical doctrine during the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1981).
to hold this zone in the face of a determined large-scale offensive would be prohibitively costly in manpower terms. In the face of such an attack, the Grosskampfzone was to be the area in which the battle would be fought. This area would be unfamiliar terrain to an enemy, who prior to the large-scale attack would not have been able to penetrate the Vorfeldzone. Thus, it was ideal terrain in which to engage large enemy forces. In many respects, it would have been clearer if the ‘Vorfeldzone’ had been termed something like the ‘Kleinkampfzone’ or the ‘Gewöhnlichkampfzone’ to reflect its function rather than its position.

The new doctrine also enshrined the division as the main unit that would fight the defensive battle: ‘The infantry division in the forward line (Stellungsdivision) conducts the battle. In its sector… it is to be allowed the necessary independence of action. Its task is to direct the immediate battle and to ensure close cooperation between all arms for both the close and the distant battle by means of directives [Weisungen].’ The commander of the Stellungsdivision would use his own resources and other reinforcements from outside to conduct counter-attacks to destroy the enemy within the Grosskampfzone. He would command all reinforcement that entered his sector. These outside reinforcements would primarily come from Eingreifdivisionen (counter-attack divisions) held in readiness behind the fighting positions. These could be committed as a complete unit or broken down into smaller tactical units depending on the situation. Even if they were committed as a full division, they still came under the command of the Stellungsdivision commander.

Stellungsdivisionen were to be arrayed in depth. As each infantry division was made up of three regiments by 1917, the new doctrine recommended that these regiments be deployed in line. Each regiment, in turn, was expected to deploy its three battalions one behind the other. Thus, a division would have a front and a depth of three battalions. The battalion in the front line would obviously occupy the Vorfeldzone and the Hauptwiderstandslinie. The second battalion, the support battalion, would occupy the forward area of the Grosskampfzone and would provide reinforcement for the first battalion. The third battalion, the reserve battalion, would be held in the rearward battle zone and would only intervene in the battle if required.

The commander of the Stellungsdivision was assisted by a newly created divisional artillery commander. Prior to the new doctrine, artillery was primarily a corps-level asset, and the corps had an artillery commander. With the shift to the division as the primary

49. Ibid., paras 8-9.
50. ‘Abwehr in Stellungskriege’, para. 9, p. 608.
51. Ibid., para. 9, pp. 608-09; Lupfer, Dynamics, 19.
tactical unit, came a redistribution of artillery assets. Although existing divisions lost some artillery as the formation of new divisions increased the demand of artillery pieces and units, they gained a battalion of heavy artillery, which had been a corps-asset, to make good this loss. By 1917, divisions now had a field artillery regiment of three battalions of a mixture of field cannon (77mm) and light field howitzers (105mm) and a heavy artillery battalion made up of heavy field howitzers (150mm) and heavy cannon (100mm).52 These field and heavy batteries, previously separate assets, came under the command of this new divisional artillery commander, who regulated most artillery activity within the divisional sector and whose headquarters was co-located with the divisional commander.53 This change in command structure was designed to help cooperation between the infantry and artillery and make the all-arms battle easier to fight.

All and all, the new doctrine was a major departure from previous approaches to the defensive battle. The OHL recognised that it needed to be tested prior to its full application and also that officer and men needed to be trained to apply its principles properly. Accordingly, the OHL ordered the 5th Bavarian Division removed from the line and re-designated a ‘training division’ behind the Western Front in early 1917.54 Further, on the recommendation of Hermann von Kuhl, a course for divisional commanders and staff officers was set up under the direction of an experienced divisional commander, Otto von Moser, to educate officers long accustomed to the old style of the defensive. Moser used this training division to construct a full divisional trench system, complete with supporting artillery positions, at a former artillery range near Solesmes. In February, the first week-long course began with 80 participants, including Major von Bockelberg and Hauptmann Hermann Geyer from the OHL. The course consisted of morning lectures on different aspects of the new doctrine, followed by practical sessions in the field in the afternoon. Further courses followed, providing training for a wider range of officers from the Westheer, Ostheer and even from the Austro-Hungarian army. The courses proved a great success. Not only did they introduce commanders to the new forms of the defensive battle, but they tested these new ideas and brought together large numbers of experienced officers, who were encouraged to share their experiences and to comment on the development of the new doctrine. Indeed, the courses did much to overcome the resistance to these new ideas innate in these men.55

52. Wrisberg, Heer und Heimat, 38ff.
54. Weltkrieg, XII: 58.
THE PRACTICE

By the time 1917 began, Ludendorff’s material and doctrinal reforms were well underway. Despite this, however, he recognised, like his arch-rival Falkenhayn had before, that German strength would not suffice for a decision in the West in 1917. German intelligence calculated in early January 1917 that there were 175 Entente divisions on the Western Front, of which 60 were in reserve. This was expected to grow as ten additional divisions arrived from Britain and as the French divisional reorganization was complete.56 At the same time, the Westheer amounted to 134 divisions with another fourteen in the process of formation. Against the Entente reserve of 60 divisions, the Germans could only count 22.57 Moreover, German intelligence expected the Entente to launch offensives just as intense as the Somme in 1916. Given this, as much as Ludendorff wished to take the offensive on the Western Front in 1917, he concluded that the Westheer would have to spend another year purely on the defensive.58

At the same time, Ludendorff looked for ways in which more divisions could be made available for a future offensive in the West. This could be accomplished in two ways: First, the Western Front could be shortened. On 28 January 1917, Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht sent a memorandum to the OHL advocating a withdrawal to the Siegfried Stellung, a fall-back position the construction of which had been begun behind the Western Front in September 1916. One reason the Heeresgruppe advocated the withdrawal was the poor condition of both its troops and their defensive positions.

They wrote: ‘The question arises … of whether or not the troops are practically worn out and whether or not they are capable of withstanding another defensive battle like that of the Somme in 1916. Some experienced and very discerning commanders, who are no pessimists, have their doubts.’59 A withdrawal to the Siegfried Stellung would move the tired troops into well-constructed positions and improve considerably the defensive positions of the Heeresgruppe, particularly those of the Sixth and First Armies.60

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56. The French were in the process of reducing each battalion from four to three companies.
57. Weltkrieg, XI: 502. There were three fewer divisions in reserve on the Western Front than had been the case in February 1916 when Falkenhayn launched his campaign against Verdun, although this number would rise as newly formed divisions became available.
60. The term ‘Siegfried Stellung’ was used by many Germans to cover a number of different positions to the rear of the German 1916 line, of which the ‘Siegfried Stellung’ was the most significant. It also included the ‘Flandern Stellung,’ the ‘Wotan Stellung,’ the ‘Hunding Stellung,’ and the ‘Michel Stellung.’ Anglophone readers will know this as the ‘Hindenburg Line’. See G.C. Wynne, ‘The Hindenburg Position’, Army Quarterly XXXVIII (1938-39): 205-28.
OHL initially rejected this idea. However, Ludendorff soon rethought his position. A study by Oberst Georg Wetzell, the head of the Operationsabteilung in the OHL, showed that the withdrawal could free up thirteen divisions and 50 heavy artillery batteries, as well as throw the enemy off balance and offer opportunities of at least local offensives. This appealed to Ludendorff and convinced him that the merits of the idea outweighed the negatives, and on 4 February, he ordered the withdrawal to the Siegfried Stellung by the Sixth, First, Second, and Seventh Armies.\textsuperscript{61}

The other way in which sufficient reserves for a decisive offensive on the Western Front could be found would be to free up troops from other fronts. In February 1917, there were 75 German divisions across the Eastern Front.\textsuperscript{62} If the Russians could be defeated or at least beaten further back, then some of these divisions might be free for use on the West. Also, if the Italians could be knocked out of the war, then the 46 Austro-Hungarian divisions tied up on this front would be released for service on the Eastern Front and more German divisions could be withdrawn. However, in early 1917, the tense situation on the Western and the Italian Fronts, as well as the relative strength of the Russians meant, meant that only small-scale offensives in the East or in Italy could be considered. A more far-reaching offensive would have to wait.\textsuperscript{63}

The Westheer did not have long to wait to test its new defensive ideas and its new command structures. On 9 April, it faced its first serious offensive of the year when the British attacked the Sixth Army on Vimy Ridge. The result was a disaster for the German defenders and made them seriously question the new defensive tactics.\textsuperscript{64} In the end, the command team of the Sixth Army, rather than the new doctrine, was found responsible for the severe setback. A report by Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht highlighted several ways in which the Sixth Army’s command had failed. First, they concluded that the Sixth Army’s artillery had not been active enough in attempting to disrupt the British attack before it was launched and that they did not provide enough support to the front line troops once the attack was underway. Further, they noted that the defensive positions of the Sixth Army were in bad repair. Too much labour had been taken away to construct the Siegfried Stellung. Worryingly, they also noted that the 14th Bavarian Infantry Division, which two days before the attack had been deemed fully capable of fighting a large-scale battle, had seemed to collapse for no good reason. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Heeresgruppe reported that the Sixth Army had not moved its Eingreifdivisionen close

\textsuperscript{61} Weltkrieg, XII: 513-16.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 477. In addition, there were 45 Austro-Hungarian divisions, three Bulgarian and five Turkish, for a total of 128 Central Power divisions.
\textsuperscript{63} Kuhl, Weltkrieg, II: 37.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 85-6.
enough to the front for them to be effective despite repeated orders from the Heeresgruppe and the OHL to do so.\textsuperscript{65}

The capture of Vimy Ridge was merely the opening salvo in the Entente’s 1917 spring offensives. The British attacks near Arras were designed to distract German attention and reserves away from the main Entente offensive to be carried out by the French in Chemin des Dames. It failed in this task, in large part due to the reorganisation of the Westheer into three major Heeresgruppe by spring 1917. Each was designed to be large enough to deal with a large-scale offensive with its own resources, at least until it was clear where the main enemy offensive on the Western Front might fall. The process seemed to work well during the spring. For example, on 21 April, Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht reported to the OHL on its divisional rotation policy. Its subordinate unit, the Sixth Army, had eleven divisions in battle with the British near Arras. The Heeresgruppe placed seven divisions behind the Sixth Army’s front to serve as replacements when the eleven fighting divisions were worn out. These seven divisions also served as \textit{Eingreifdivisionen} for use in case the \textit{Stellungsdivisionen} could not manage the battle with their own resources. Based on the experience of the battle of the Somme, the Heeresgruppe calculated that each division could remain in line for fourteen days before being too worn down to fight. It also felt, again based on its experiences during 1916, that divisions could be used at least twice in the front line within a fairly short space of time without much concern. Based on these factors, the Heeresgruppe calculated that it had enough combat power to last until the middle of August without need for reinforcement from outside.\textsuperscript{66}

In both the British secondary attack and the main Entente offensive against Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz at Chemin des Dames, the new German defensive system and doctrine worked quite well. After a 10 day preparatory bombardment by more than 5000 French artillery pieces, the French 5th and 6th Armies attacked on 16 April. Hoping to reproduce his successes at Verdun on a larger scale, the French commander, Robert Nivelle, anticipated a rapid collapse of the German lines and a strategic breakthrough. Behind the two attacking armies, Nivelle had arrayed two further armies to exploit the anticipated breakthrough and rout of the German forces. He told his troops: ‘The objective remains the destruction of the principal mass of the enemy’s forces on the Western Front.’\textsuperscript{67}

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The French attack tactics played right into the hands of the new German defensive tactics. The decision to throw waves of troops at the German defensive system in an attempt to use mass to break through merely sacrificed French manpower to no end. Situated on a reverse slope, most German defensive positions could not be seen by French artillery observers. Moreover, poor weather and German airpower kept the French aerial artillery observers largely at bay. Thus, the German defensive system could not be properly prepared by French artillery, and the French troops that entered the Grosskampfzone did so blind. Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz had thinned out their front line and withdrawn as many division as possible to behind the Grosskampfzone to be used as Eingreifdivisionen, and, as the situation demanded, these fourteen divisions were thrown in to beat back French break-ins. Some of these break-ins were difficult to destroy, and on the night of 17/18 April, the Germans withdrew from the threatened salient at Vailly to a shorter pre-prepared position. Despite this, by this stage, the French offensive had failed. Hermann von Kuhl later wrote: ‘The first two days had decided the fate of the offensive. Since the breakthrough had not occurred immediately, it would never occur.’

The offensive deteriorated into a series of small-scale attritional attacks that were costly to both sides, but with which the Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz could easily deal. French casualties in the offensive’s first few weeks had been severe. The French admitted to 134,000 casualties. As Robert Doughty noted: ‘Though more casualties had died in Joffre’s offensives in 1915, the casualties in Nivelle’s offensive occurred over a relatively brief period and exceeded those of any month since November 1914.’

For the Germans, the successful defence against this major French offensive was proof of the validity of their new doctrine. Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz wrote a lengthy their after-action report on the battle. It began by saying: ‘The ‘Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare’ has stood the test. The failure of the French spring offensive was due in no small part to their outstanding merit. [The doctrine] insured uniform actions during the preparation and in the course of the defensive battle. At the same time, in no way did it hamstring initiative.’

The new doctrine and indeed the Westheer were put to a much greater test later in the year, when the British launched their next major offensive against the German positions around Ypres. The offensive began in early June with another spectacular success, the capture of the German positions on the Messines Ridge. This offensive was designed to

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68. Kuhl, Weltkrieg, II: 90.
69. Doughty, Pyrrhic Victory, 354.
70. Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz, k Nr.2880, ‘Zusammenstellung einiger Lehren aus der Doppelschlacht Aisne – Champagne’, 8 July 1917, NARA, RG120, Case 13-2, Folder 12.
push the Germans from the commanding positions they held on the ridge and to draw in
German reserves away from where the main offensive would fall to the north.\textsuperscript{71} Accordingly,
the British Second Army did nothing to exploit their success, which was fortunate for the
Germans. The German Fourth Army had been pushed back into an incomplete defensive
system, one that Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht seriously feared would not hold a
concerted British attack.\textsuperscript{72}

Despite the fact that the British had launched their offensive at Messines, Heeresgruppe
Kronprinz Rupprecht was convinced that the main British offensive would fall further
north and would have as its objectives the German U-boat bases on the Flanders coast.
Kuhl, the chief of staff of the Heeresgruppe, rushed reserves of manpower and artillery
from the other sectors of its front to prepare for the main British offensive. By the start
of the offensive, the Fourth Army had deployed eighteen divisions, which were supported
by 1162 artillery pieces, in the front and in reserve to face the coming attack.\textsuperscript{73} Moreover,
the Fourth Army’s chief of staff was relieved and Fritz von Loßberg, the officer in the
German Army with the most experience in defensive warfare, put in his place. The pause
in British action between the capture of Messines on 7 June and the launching of the
main offensive at the end of July made the Germans question their conclusions, but Kuhl
remained firm in his conviction that the British would attack around Ypres.

Finally, on 16 July, the British Fifth Army began its preparatory bombardment. Over the
next 15 days, 2300 guns British and French guns delivered some 4.3 million rounds against
the German defences.\textsuperscript{74} Thanks to the new German defensive doctrine, most of these fell
within the thinly held \textit{Vorfeldzone}. The \textit{Grosskampfzzone} was beyond British ground-based
artillery observation and out of the range of many of the British guns. Thus, while the
massive bombardment did a fine job of destroying German defences in the \textit{Vorfeldzone},
it left the main defensive areas largely intact. Nonetheless, the bombardment did take
its toll on the German \textit{Stellungsdivisionen}. Kuhl later wrote: “The weeks long heavy fire
brought the defenders heavy and increasing losses. Some of the front divisions had to be
relieved before the infantry attack, since their strength was worn out.”\textsuperscript{75}

On 31 July, the infantry of the French First Army and the British Fifth Army finally
attacked. The first attack wave easily took most of their initial objectives. The German
defenders had largely withdrawn from the \textit{Vorfeldzone} to minimise losses from the artillery

\textsuperscript{72} Kuhl, \textit{Weltkrieg}, II: 115.
\textsuperscript{73} Weltkrieg, XIII: 63.
\textsuperscript{74} Prior & Wilson, \textit{Passchendaele}, 84-7.
\textsuperscript{75} Kuhl, \textit{Weltkrieg}, II: 121.
fire. Even in the *Grosskampfzone*, the strength of British artillery fire made coordination of *Gegenstosse* and even *Gegenangriffe* difficult. However, the Fourth Army was able to contain the British offensive, even if it had lost most of its *Vorfeldzone*. Over the next weeks of British attacks, *Eingreifdivisionen* were repeatedly called upon to help contain British break-ins, and manpower losses, which the Germans could ill-afford, mounted. In the battle’s first phase, between 31 July and 20 August, Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht ‘used up’ (*verbraucht*) seventeen of its divisions, costing the Heeresgruppe some 2000 officers and 83,000 men.76 Ludendorff wrote that the fighting on the Western Front in July 1917 was ‘more severe and costly than any the German Army had yet experienced’.77

The German situation had become more difficult due to a change in British tactics. The British were increasingly employing what the Germans termed ‘small-scale attacks with limited objectives’.78 These were very difficult for the Germans to deal with. These small-scale offensives were too large to be dealt with by local counter-attacks by the *Stellungsdivisionen* and had to rely on support from the *Eingreifdivisionen*. This inevitably caused higher casualties, and as had happened earlier in the year, the Germans were finding it difficult to use *Eingreifdivisionen* effectively. In order to deal with these British attacks, they needed to be deployed far forward. However, when deployed too far forward they suffered from British artillery fire. Too far back, and they could not reach the front line in time to launch the required *Gegenstoss*. The situation was not helped by the British artillery, which laid heavy standing barrages between the *Eingreifdivisionen* and the front lines.79

This led to a major reconsideration of German tactical doctrine. The chief of staff of the Fourth Army, Loßberg, had been an opponent of much of the new doctrine since its introduction. In an effort to deal with the British attacks with limited objectives, on 30 September he ordered that the *Vorfeldzone* be more heavily occupied and that the *Eingreifdivisionen* be held back only for major counter-attacks.80 This was quickly shown to result in even greater casualties, and Ludendorff intervened directly, ordering the Fourth Army on 7 October to give up the idea of holding the front line at all costs.81 By this point, even Loßberg gave up his opposition to a more flexible area defence. Instead, the Germans decided to defend the *Vorfeldzone* with even fewer troops. This light garrison was

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76. Kuhl, *Weltkrieg*, II: 130; and Rupprecht, *Kriegerinnerungen*, II: 247. The casualty figures cover the period 1 June to 10 August.
77. Ludendorff, *War Memories*, II: 476
80. Weltkrieg, XIII: 77ff.
to withdraw to the *Hauptwiderstandslnie* when attacked by enemy infantry and a heavy standing barrage was to be laid in front of the *Hauptwiderstandslnie*. This, it was hoped, would give the *Stellungsdivisionen* and the *Eingreifdivisionen* time to order their strength for a *Gegenstoss*. To give the defence even greater depth and strength, an *Eingreifdivision* was arrayed behind each *Stellungsdivision*. Of course, this required an even greater number of divisions to carry out.\(^{82}\)

By October, the German situation had become very grave. The relentless Entente offensives on the Western Front during the summer and autumn of 1917 put a great strain on the German replacement system. Between 15 June and 15 November, the Fourth Army received 77 divisions and gave up 63.\(^ {83}\) German divisions lasted an average of sixteen days at the front, and by the middle of October, the divisions within the Heeresgruppe had been rotated into the battle a number of times. The situation became so tense that in the middle of October, Rupprecht and Kuhl informed the OHL that they might not be able to hold the current front line. Kuhl later wrote: ‘Despite all the obvious misgivings, the Supreme Command of the Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht felt it necessary, in the event that its strength gave out, to consider a withdrawal of the front so far from the enemy that he would be forced to redeploy his artillery.’\(^ {84}\)

It is not surprising that Ludendorff wrote that October 1917 was ‘one of the hardest months of the war’.\(^ {85}\) The strain placed on the manpower situation by the formation of new division earlier in the year and by the loss of skilled workers to feed the Hindenburg program added to the pressure on the German replacement system caused by the high casualties being suffered in Flanders. On top of this, the OHL was determined to remain on the offensive in the east and in Italy, further straining the Westheer. It was increasingly difficult to maintain infantry battalions at full strength. By the end of November, the average fighting strength of German battalions on the Western Front had fallen from 750 to 640 rifles.\(^ {86}\) The 1898 class of recruits had already been called up in November 1916 and was at the front. In June, the 1899 class, in other words 18-year-olds, was called up early. However, it would take time to train these recruits to the point where they could be useful at the front. Also, once this pool of manpower was used up, there would be nothing left until the 1900 class could be conscripted.\(^ {87}\)

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In addition to the manpower problems, by October, Germany was experiencing yet more shortages brought on by congestion on the railways behind the Fourth Army. By this point, the Fourth Army had a ration strength of some 800,000 men and 200,000 horses, which alone required 52 35-wagon trains daily to be supplied with food and other materials.\(^8\) However, it was not just food that had to be transported. The decision to base the defence around armaments rather than manpower had increased the consumption of munitions considerably. On 28 July, the Fourth Army had fired the contents of nineteen munitions trains. (The record for the First and Second Armies together during the battle of the Somme the previous year had been sixteen trains.\(^9\)) By 9 October, the Fourth Army’s consumption of artillery ammunition had risen to 27 trains per day.\(^9\) Indeed, during the course of the battle in Flanders, the artillery of the Fourth Army fired a staggering eighteen million rounds.\(^9\) Having to compete with space on the railway with food and troops, it was extremely difficult for the Heeresgruppe to keep its forward artillery supplied with the massive amount of munitions trains required.

Despite these difficulties, the Fourth Army held on in the face of the heavy British attacks and the horrible conditions of the Flanders battlefield. By the middle of November, the Entente attacks had come to an end. Overall, the new German doctrine had again proved a success, after some trial and error during the course of the battle, at defeating the ever-improving Entente tactics and weight of material. However, the defence had been costly, the 73 German divisions that fought in the Flanders battle left behind around 35,000 dead and a further 48,000 missing. An additional 134,000 German soldiers were wounded during the fighting. Despite this, with the exception of the attrition of the German Army, Haig’s offensive did not meet any of his objectives, and the Germans rightly saw the battle as their victory. On 5 December, Kronprinz Rupprecht issued a proclamation to his troops that ran:

Despite an extreme use of men and material, the enemy achieved nothing. His entire gain was a narrow, completely destroyed cratered landscape. He purchased this gain with extraordinarily high casualties, while our casualties were far lower than in previous defensive battles. Thus, the battle of Flanders is a heavy defeat for our enemy and a great victory for us.\(^9\)

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89. Rupprecht, Kriegserinnerungen, II: 231.
90. Ibid., 270.
91. Weltkrieg, XIII: 95.
92. Quoted in Kuhl, Weltkrieg, II: 124.
CONCLUSION

During the course of 1917, the ‘iron wall’ of the Westheer had once again managed to absorb the heavy blows of Entente offensives and to allow German forces to operate offensively in the east and in Italy. In many respects, this represented a remarkable achievement. In 1916, the German Army had reached the height of manpower strength, and from this point onwards was facing increasing shortages of troops. The Hindenburg program, which was designed to shift the burden of fighting onto machines rather than men, had limited successes. It did increase the numbers of weapons available to German soldiers. However, the Entente forces increased their weapons even further. The industrial battle was one that the German Empire could not hope to win, despite all the 3rd OHL’s efforts. Indeed, the Hindenburg program exacerbated the growing shortages of manpower in 1917 by putting even greater demands on this scarce resource. The real answer to the question of how the Westheer was able to fend off far superior Entente attacks in 1917 has to lie in the realms of doctrine. There is no doubt that the British attacks in 1917 were far more tactically proficient than during the battle of the Somme in 1916. However, German defensive tactics had adapted, and continued to adapt, to meet these improvements. The battle of the Somme had cost the Westheer some 500,000 casualties. The two main defensive battles of 1917 at Chemin des Dames in April and in Flanders from July to November had cost ‘only’ 163,000 and 217,000 casualties, respectively. Additionally, divisions fighting on the Somme in 1916 had lasted an average of fourteen days at the front. During the battles in Flanders in 1917, the average was sixteen days. This is all the more impressive when one considers that many of the divisions on the Somme would have had four infantry regiments, while in 1917 all the divisions engaged in fighting in Flanders had only three infantry regiments. A flexible area defence supported by counter-attack divisions and more numerous and better-supplied artillery clearly allowed the Westheer to do more with less. The results of this new tactical doctrine in 1917 convinced even its greatest sceptics of its efficacy.

However, the new doctrine not only allowed the Westheer to emerge victorious in its defensive battle against a superior enemy, but it also set the stages for a tactically successful offensive in 1918. German defences in 1917 were active defences. By the end of the Flanders battle, each Stellungsdvision had an Eingreifdivision stationed behind it for counter-attacks. These constant counter-attacks allowed the Westheer to practise attacking in the harsh conditions of the Western Front. Thus, when the Second Army carried out

its counter-offensive at Cambrai in early December, it did not look towards the recent successful offensives in Russian and Italy for its techniques. To the commanders of the Second Army, the conditions in the east and in Italy were just too different from those of the Western Front to be readily translated into combat in the west. Rather, the units of the Second Army built on their own experiences of fighting on the Western Front to conduct a rapid and successful counter-offensive that took back most of ground lost to the earlier British tank attack.\textsuperscript{94} The lessons learned in this counter-offensive, as well as the more general lessons on offensive action in trench warfare gained in 1917, were incorporated directly into the offensive doctrine that guided the German tactical successes in spring 1918.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 143ff. for the planning of this counter-offensive.
\textsuperscript{95} Bruce Gudmundsson, \textit{Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918} (New York: Praeger, 1989), remains the best on the development of this offensive doctrine.
Third Ypres: Fact and Fiction

Dan Todman

In September 2003, the British heavy metal band Iron Maiden released their twenty-sixth album, *Dance of Death*, including the eight-and-a-half-minute epic ‘Paschendale’ [sic]:

Whistles, shouts and more gun fire
Lifeless bodies hang on barbed wire
Battlefield nothing but a bloody tomb
Be reunited with my dead friends soon
Many soldiers eighteen year
Drown in mud, no more tears
Surely a war no-one can win,
Killing time about to begin.¹

Hailed by the band's own tour booklet as ‘undoubtedly a masterpiece in modern progressive hard rock’, ‘Paschendale’ grew out of guitarist Adrian Smith's visit to a library to seek musical inspiration. ‘The first book I saw was on the battle of Paschendale … The title alone just captured my imagination.’ Producer Kevin Shirley felt that the track managed to capture ‘a sense of poignancy over the magnitude of loss and the sheer pointlessness of it all … I’ve had emails from fans telling me that they have actually wept after hearing Paschendale for the first time—that’s pretty amazing.’²

This paper will explore the ways in which the Third Battle of Ypres has been represented in English-speaking culture, focussing particularly on the United Kingdom and Australia. Iron Maiden’s effort to commemorate the battle is a useful place to start for two reasons. First, it suggests that the name of the village that became the endpoint of the offensive retains a resonance, not least because of its allusive quality. That, 86 years after Third Ypres, middle-aged musicians composed an epic in its memory that made their fans weep, is worthy of remark. Second, however, ‘Paschendale’ indicates some of the shortfalls of such modern remembrance. While the lyrics mention mud, death and pointlessness, there is no room for the idea of a necessary war, let alone for improved training, tactics or technology.

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² Ibid.
It seems likely that these omissions were caused by more than the sheer difficulty in finding a rhyme for ‘SS143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action’.

This is an example of a broader paradox about the position of Passchendaele—and of 1917—in modern collective remembrance of the First World War. At one level, it is central to how the Western Front is imagined. For example, it was the location for some of the defining images of the war. Frank Hurley’s picture of Australians in a shattered wood (IWM E (AUS) 1220, 1911-0), John Warwick Brooke’s photograph of a stretcher party up to their knees in mud (IWM Q5935), and William Rider-Rider’s photograph of Canadian machine-gunners (IWM CO2246) are frequently used as newspaper and book illustrations, for still or rostrum camerawork. At another level, however, Third Ypres is relatively unknown. Most of those for whom the events of 1917 have an emotional resonance refer to a very partial version that misses out tactical and technological developments in favour of mud and gore.

The three-and-a-half months that the BEF spent fighting its way deeper into the Salient contained a varied mix, at different levels and at different times, of disaster and triumph, grief and relief, futility and purpose, such that any attempt to sum it up in a single word is inadequate. Some historians interpret the campaign in terms of the failures of British politicians and generals. Others have argued that if we can bear to look beyond the horror, the wearing down of the German army, particularly in the battles fought by Plumer in September and early October, made Third Ypres a success that contributed significantly to victory in 1918.3

Neither side in this debate would deny that the way that the BEF fought at the tactical level over the summer and autumn demonstrated major progress since the previous year. Contrary to its backward reputation, this was an army that made extensive use of cutting-edge technology in order to inflict casualties on the enemy and protect its own troops. If the Somme was where the new model imperial army was first tested, Third Ypres was where it came of age before it demonstrated its mature abilities in the following year.4 Whatever we might make of the strategic and operational choices, the army in general had improved its ability to fight trench warfare. Why is this not part of the generally accepted


image of Passchendaele? This paper therefore seeks to explain the campaign’s iconic, but poorly understood, status.

A broadly chronological approach has been adopted in an effort to emphasise that contemporary notions are seldom fabrications, completely divorced from attitudes at the time. Rather, they represent a limited portion of what was once a much more diverse set of experiences and understandings. A choir that once sang many different tunes with different voices has become increasingly univocal, to the point that those who choose a separate song cannot always make their notes heard. To understand this process four areas need to be considered: the experience of the battle, the way it was recorded and represented at the time, the efforts to come to terms with the war in memory and history in the 1920s and 1930s, and the uses to which the war could subsequently be put from the 1940s onwards.

**EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE**

Were combatants at the time conscious that the way the army as a whole was fighting had changed? Some evidently were. Ashley Ekins, in his chapter on the Australians at Passchendaele, quotes a letter home from an engineer officer in the 12th Field Company of the Australian Imperial Force on 9 October 1917:

> We have been in again though the recent fighting is entirely different to the Somme last year. There the Germans fought hand to hand and the assault was only the beginning of a swaying bayonet and bomb fight lasting with intervals for a couple of days. Now our artillery is so perfect and so tremendous that we practically catch all the Germans who surrender at once or are too dead to do so.

Others—although we might in retrospect identify their involvement in improved tactics and training—were either not moved to comment on those changes or were not aware of them. Lieutenant Edwin Campion Vaughan, serving with the 8th Royal Warwicks, for example, prepared for and fought the battle in ways that bore out the BEF’s development over the previous two years. He came out of the line with his unit in mid-July to practise

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an assault coordinated with aircraft and tanks. Just before they attacked in August, he briefed his platoon in detail over their objectives and put on the private’s uniform with which he had been issued so he would not be picked out by German snipers. After they went over the top, his men tried to hug the barrage carrying them onto the enemy. But Campion Vaughan, who arrived with his unit in France at the start of 1917, does not seem to have been aware that this marked any departure from previous practice. He did not, in any case, give the impression of having taken battle training particularly seriously:

After a couple of day’s drill and discipline, we started practising attacks and sectional rushes by companies. We rather liked this training but we organised it so that our rushes took us to the fields of potatoes and root crops. The troops were very careful to assume the prone position and lie completely doggo. The vegetable rations during this period were exceptionally good.  

Much more important than improved tactics and technology to Campion Vaughan were the disastrous losses that his unit suffered in battle. On 28 August, after his unit had returned from the trenches, he inspected the men who remained:

Standing near the cookers were four small groups of bedraggled, unshaven men from whom the quartermaster sergeants were gathering information concerning any of their pals they had seen killed or wounded … Poor old Pepper had gone—hit in the back by a chunk of shell; twice buried as he lay dying in a hole, his dead body blow up and lost after Willis had carried it back to Vanheule Farm. Ewing hit by machine gun bullets had lain beside him for a while and taken messages for his girl at home.

Chalk, our little treasure, had been seen to fall riddled with bullets; then he too had been hit by a shell. Sergeant Wheeldon, DCM and bar, MM and bar, was killed and Foster. Also Corporals Harrison, Oldham, Mucklow and the imperturbable Mckay. My black sheep—Dawson and Taylor—had died together, and out of our happy little band of 90 men, only 15 remained.  

Improved tactics and technology did not necessarily ameliorate the experience of the infantryman. On the contrary, the key weapon in allowing BEF success in autumn 1917, the enormous weight of artillery fire now deployed, made battlefield conditions worse, not better, and in the process made the conversion of tactical success in to operational victory

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8. Ibid., 232.
even harder. Even when everything went well, the materialschlacht devoured men. The 20 September Battle of the Menin Road, for example—the first of Second Army’s great successes at Ypres—cost 21,000 British casualties, including 5000 Australians. While the average daily rate of loss at Ypres was below that of the Somme and well below that of Arras, units did not experience casualties in terms of averages. Taking part in the Battle of Broodseinde on 4 October—a battle that supposedly pushed the German Army close to breaking point—1st Battalion AIF was hit by artillery fire as it was forming up and suffered 299 casualties from the 500 men who took part. Partnered with the deliberately limited advance made by Plumer’s Army, this sort of loss made the survivors question the purpose of what they had done. When technology or tactics broke down or proved inadequate—as they had done for the Australians with tanks at Bullecourt, for example, or when the barrages of September could not be maintained in the assaults of October—the reliance placed upon them could accentuate disaster. When things went wrong, huge losses and horrific injuries were suffered in a very short space of time.

This is the essential duality to grasp about Third Ypres, which continues to challenge historians in their efforts to understand and explain the battle. It was not that the BEF either got better or experienced huge losses and appalling conditions—rather, both took place at the same time. Given the succession of success and failure that marked the outset of the battle and its continuation, many soldiers experienced both. For some veterans, at the time and in retrospect, the horrors outweighed improvements. Furthermore, while the attritional success of the campaign as a whole can be debated, it also lacked a definite result clearly visible to men on the ground. To the degree that soldiers were interested in wider strategy, there was no equivalent of the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line after the Somme, or the final victory of 1918. This contributed to a developing belief that the campaign had been without purpose which would gather strength in the years after the war.

RECORD AND REPRESENTATION

How was Third Ypres represented at the time to those who were not there in person? Philip Taylor and Stephen Badsey have pointed out that the campaign went relatively under-reported. They are forced to conclude that ‘the lasting image of Passchendaele as an event of tragic human suffering could not have come from the contemporary media

Third Ypres did not dominate the front pages of the popular press in the way that might in retrospect be expected. In part, this was because there were competing news stories—including the collapse of the Russian army, riots in Petrograd, rumours of strikes in the German navy and the taking of Beersheba. Above all, reporting of the campaign reflected the particular position of the British propaganda effort at this time. With America having declared war, the principal aim of British propagandists had been achieved, and they now concentrated on bolstering the morale of the home front. The limited number of war correspondents on the Western Front—and even more limited number of film and still photographers—also found it difficult to report on the activities of the greatly-expanded BEF. Newspaper reporting was therefore inconsistent in coverage, but generally positive and refrained from describing the worst horrors or failures.

As an example, we might examine the most popular British national newspaper at the time, the *Daily Mirror*. In August, the front-page coverage of the Western Front concentrated on the subsidiary Canadian attack around Lens rather than on Gough’s grinding in the mud outside Ypres. Quite aside from any propagandistic intent, this may have been because photographs of the Canadians were available: the *Mirror*’s initial reporting of the 31 July offensive had been illustrated with images from previous battles. It was not until 6 September that it was able to fill its front page with dramatic photographs of the conditions in which the BEF was fighting, including Warwick Brooke’s iconic image of stretcher bearers. Even these were undercut by the *Mirror*’s captions:

> Everybody’s floundering in Flanders, and the man who whispers ‘mud’ to the British soldier will soon endanger his popularity. There is no getting away from the horrible stuff. Horses, men and mules have to fight their way through it, and nowadays it is a greater enemy than Hindenburg. Its adhesive properties are superior to any glue on the market. It sticks to uniforms and the coats of horses, and produces wonderful eloquence on the part of the grooms. But our men don’t despair.\(^1\)

Where the *Mirror* did show something of the awfulness of conditions, therefore, it was matched with a jovial approach that now leaves a confused impression. The modern analyst can discern some indications of the changes in the nature of the battlefield, but to what degree these were apparent to contemporary readers must be open to question. For example, the *Mirror*’s principal correspondent, William Beach Thomas (parodied by the *Ypres Times* as ‘Teach Bombast’), described the state of the ground over which the BEF had to advance in terms of novelty:


\(^1\) ‘That Eternal Mud—Flanders One Vast Quagmire’, *Daily Mirror*, 6 September 1917, 1.
All battlefields in these days are scooped, dented, embossed into some general likeness, and what I may call the ‘clinkers of hate’ lie about in similar random profusion in the shape of empty shell cases from which the heat has gone. But this battlefield gave new experiences. It was new to cross swaying bridges over a canal confused into a rectilinear marsh by much shelling. It was new to find the complete absence of regular trenches, and to walk from blockhouse to blockhouse, standing like squat toads on a moorland waste.

Yet this was from a mid-August article whose headline described Langemarck as the ‘Battle of Delight’—a title that hardly matched the experience of those fighting.\(^{13}\)

Nor was Third Ypres well covered by British cinematographers. Here, commercial and propaganda factors affected the record of the battle. While the film *The Battle of the Somme* had been a major success in 1916, subsequent productions had not proved as popular. Under instruction from Ministry of Information to reduce the number of casualties depicted, British film-makers concentrated on short features on regiments marching behind the lines. As a result, with the exception of that footage produced by the Australian official photographer during the Menin Road battle, there is remarkably little footage taken close to the front line.

This was an aesthetic and technical as much as a commercial or a propaganda problem. The dangers of the battlefield, the limitations of contemporary technology and the sheer scope of the offensive made this a very hard battle to represent. It was in an effort to solve this problem that Frank Hurley patched together separate images—a technique he thought was legitimated by his ultimate purpose of getting closer to the reality of war. The size of the Allied offensive and the attritional purpose it developed both defied what were already established traditions of cinematic depiction and narrative. As D.W. Griffith—not a man afraid of the epic in film-making—put it when he visited the Western Front: ‘It is too colossal to be dramatic. You might as well try to describe the ocean or the Milky Way. A very great writer could describe Waterloo. But who could describe the advance of Haig? No one saw it. No one was a thousandth part of it.’\(^{14}\)

Industrialised modern warfare therefore not only challenged soldiers’ ability to endure the outermost extremities of human experience, nations’ willingness to sustain the titanic efforts involved, and generals’ capacity to achieve victory, but also posed profound problems of representation, artistic and documentary, and understanding. These tensions all remained apparent after the war’s end and would shape the representation of the battle through to the present day.

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COMING TO TERMS

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed two connected developments that together affected popular perceptions of Passchendaele. The first was the desperate need on the part of the bereaved to find meaning in their loss. This took many forms—the building of memorials, political movements, the writing of testimony and the making of pilgrimages to the battlefields. While the war had encouraged new modes of expression, more frequently solace seems to have been found in the reassurances of tradition. Fighting back, conceptually, against the randomness and anonymity of death in war, both veterans and the bereaved stressed the possibilities of individual heroic action, the affirmation of national values and the rhetoric of Christian sacrifice. The nature of the campaign, however, and its apparent lack of strategic outcome, made this difficult to do while also acknowledging the true nature of Third Ypres.

Given the history of conflict between cultural and military historians of the First World War, it is important to note that in some ways the tactical developments of 1916-17 in fact allowed individuals more influence over the battlefield. Artillery observers could decisively affect the fates of friend and foe. The devolution of automatic and indirect fire weapons allowed some junior leaders to restore mobility at the lowest level of command, suppressing enemy positions while endeavouring to outflank them. These changes were, however, potentially difficult for non-combatants to understand, and did not necessarily fit with traditional ideas of military heroism. As importantly, they were hard to relate to the overall success or failure of a campaign that had cost so many lives. Emphasising technology was no way to write individual humans back into the story of the battle.

Given its closeness to the Channel and the number of cemeteries close by, it should not surprise us that in the 1920s Ypres became a popular site for British tours to the Western Front, carried out by veterans, the bereaved and by those who wished simply to see some of the sites of the cataclysm that had recently engulfed the world. The opening in 1927 of the Menin Gate, and the establishment of the nightly Last Post ritual around it, created a focal point and a climax for many of these visits. Few of these visitors seem publicly to have shared the damnation heaped upon the memorial by Siegfried Sassoon, who derided it as a 'sepulchre of crime'. On the contrary, as Mark Connelly has shown, Ypres was constructed as a sacred space, one sanctified by the British blood that had been spilled there and where the dead were still present. Visitors to the city and its cemeteries both expected and were expected to behave with the restrained decorum of pilgrims.15

15. This and the subsequent paragraph owe much to Mark Connelly, ‘The Ypres League and the Commemoration of the Ypres Salient, 1914-1940’, forthcoming. I am extremely grateful to Professor Connelly for the chance to see this article before publication.
Even those who could not visit Ypres in person—both in the UK and the Dominions—could still visit it imaginatively, through newsreel presentations, newspaper descriptions and images such as Will Longstaff’s *The Menin Gate at Midnight*. Almost inevitably, however, this sanctified version of Ypres tended to focus more on the defensive battles around the city in 1914, 1915 and 1918 than on the offensive out of it in 1917. If meaning was to be found in British deaths, it was much easier to do so in the defence of Belgian sovereignty than in a controversial mechanised attempt to grind down the German army.

The popularity and success of Longstaff’s painting in Australia should remind us that at this time the Western Front played a larger part in Australian remembrance of the war than it would 30 years later, when Gallipoli became much more dominant. Those who had served and those who had lost would not allow the battlefields that had meant so much to them to be forgotten. Earlier struggles, however, either seemed to have provided greater opportunity for individual action, or had established a pre-existing claim to national pride or sorrow, or were simply more comprehensible in terms of established narrative tropes. As Jenny Macleod has pointed out, throughout this time the dominant approach to the description of Gallipoli, both in Australia and in the UK, was what she terms the ‘heroic-romantic’—a harking back to classical traditions, an emphasis on human tragedy and the ability of super-human individuals to make a difference. These attractive interpretations were much more easily applied to the smaller scale, less modern conflict on the Dardanelles than they were to Third Ypres.16

Third Ypres also suffered because it lacked significant for developing national identities. There was some debate in Canada about which of eight battle sites (not including Passchendaele) should be selected as the site for the national memorial, but the fact that Vimy had witnessed the first assault by the Canadian divisions fighting side by side gave it such unificatory value that it was always likely to be chosen even if other sites could make stronger claim to military importance. The erection of Walter Allward’s giant memorial contributed to the construction of Vimy as a piece of hallowed ground that would be guarded and celebrated by Canadian veterans and their descendants.17 Had Australian troops not fought on the Dardanelles, of course, then the battlefields of Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde, where their divisions first passed through each other and then fought in line for the first time, might have enjoyed similar status to Vimy or Gallipoli. Even in Britain, the colossal losses of the first day of the Somme made it a rival to Third Ypres. While the Somme was not at this time seen as the equivalent of Ypres in terms of horror, it did have the advantage of a narrative of lost innocence as the New

Armies went into battle and of a single, easily identifiable day on which the greatest disaster had occurred. It was possible to write romantically and tragically about the Somme in a way it was not about Passchendaele.

This might explain why Third Ypres was relatively poorly served by the wave of literature written about the First World War in the 1920s and early 1930s. As Hugh Cecil points out in his survey of war literature relating to Passchendaele, the battle never found an author who could combine personal experience and literary skill to write a definitive account of it alone. Instead, it appears more frequently as a few chapters in wider ranging novels and memoirs. Such works displayed some common features, particularly the greatly increased quantity of artillery fire and the terrible conditions that resulted, and some emphasised the campaign’s futility. More frequent than the latter, however, were descriptions of the powers of human endurance and a pride in the solidarity of soldiers. In attempting to find meaning in this modern battlefield, writers tended to concentrate on the human, rather than the technological.¹⁸

Simultaneous with this search for meaning, and feeding into it, came attempts to write the history of the war—to explain what had happened to those who had taken part, to analyse its course, and to apportion and avoid blame. The efforts to write Third Ypres into history varied widely in approach, intended audience and the quality of their analysis. Some of those who had seen the battlefield at first hand produced books that balanced the improvements and failures of the BEF with the horrors of war, and have stood the test of time. Cyril Falls, for example, in his 1922 History of the 36th Ulster Division, examined the means by which the Division had achieved success at Messines, and why its tactics had not worked later in the summer at Langemarck. Falls took a positive view on the British army’s wartime performance, but the sights of the battlefield were still clear before his mind’s eye:

Horrors were not new, nor did the sight of dead bodies affect men overmuch, but there was one vision upon one of these tracks, the mangled remains of a complete party of artillery carriers, six men and twelve horses, which burnt itself upon the brains of those who saw it.¹⁹

Others focussed on such horrors to the exclusion of other aspects of the battle. In his wartime despatches, the journalist Philip Gibbs had written patriotically about cheery Tommies overcoming the colossal weight of artillery arraigned on both sides of the lines.

Of the fight for Langemarck, he wrote on 17 August 1917 that 'there is something more thrilling in the way these boys fought to the death, some of them in the bitterness of retreat, than in the rapid and easy progress of men in successful attack'.\(^{20}\) In his 1922 volume *Realities of War*, Gibbs instead emphasised the horrors of 1917: ‘What our men had suffered in earlier battles was surpassed by what they were now called upon to endure. All the agonies of war which I have attempted to describe were piled up in those fields of Flanders. There was nothing missing in the list of war’s abominations.’ Gibbs placed the blame for the worst disasters of the campaign squarely on the staff, particularly of Fifth Army—but also quoted Ludendorff on the devastating effect on the Germans.\(^{21}\) Even so, he thought the costs of Third Ypres outweighed its benefits: ‘For the first time the British Army lost its spirit of optimism, and there was a sense of deadly depression among many officers and men with whom I came in touch. They saw no ending of the war, and nothing except continuous slaughter …’\(^{22}\) Gibbs may in part have been motivated by guilt over his wartime omissions, but his book also relied on its promises of revelation and explicit description for its commercial success.

A similar process of post-war development of wartime attitudes seems to have taken place for Basil Liddell Hart. Liddell Hart, a former infantry officer who had been wounded on the Somme and taken no part in Passchendaele, became in the later 1920s a military commentator and journalist. Although he had idolised Haig during the war, as he grew older he became increasingly anti-general and the chapter on Third Ypres in his bestselling *History of the First World War* did much to emplace the myths of staff idiocy. Liddell Hart began that chapter by noting the ‘futility of the purpose and result’. Even though he also commented on ‘the improved executive leadership which did much in the later stages to minimise their sufferings …’ he closed his chapter with a subsequently famous account of an unnamed staff officer crying in the mud.\(^{23}\)

The fact that this fable was so widely and easily believed indicated a sense that Passchendaele had broken the bonds of military trust. But for more sophisticated commentators it was plain that the awfulness of mid-October could not stand for the battle as a whole. Charles Bean, whose account of the penultimate fighting around Passchendaele contained some of the most vivid descriptions of the terrible conditions, also noted that:

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22. Ibid., 396.
Critics have tended to deal with Third Ypres as a whole, dismissing it as a tragic effort in the mud. But if such a critic had met some Anzac unit coming out of the line on October 5th, in bouncing spirits after repeated immersions in the battle, he would have recognised that the operation could not be adequately dealt with by one sweep of his pen.  

Perhaps the two most influential post-war contributions to the developing reputation of Third Ypres as an evil and pointless battle came in books written by wartime politicians, Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George. As Robin Prior has pointed out, Churchill in fact gave Third Ypres relatively little space in his *The World Crisis*. In his seventeen pages on the ‘Autumn Struggle’ of 1917, Churchill spent just three pages on Ypres, preferring to concentrate on the Battle of Cambrai. In the space of those pages, he concentrated his fire on Sir William Robertson, the CIGS, for his failure to stop a battle in which he did not believe. Churchill’s lack of attention to Passchendaele may be explained by his desire to avoid a condemnation of his ally Lloyd George’s vacillation over the battle—which matched or exceeded Robertson’s—but may be more clearly explained by an eagerness to concentrate on Cambrai, which he could use to emphasise his insight as a champion of the tank.  

Earlier in *The World Crisis*, however, Churchill had used Third Ypres as one of the key examples of the failure of attrition. In his chapter ‘The Blood Test’, he argued, based on research carried out for him in German and British archives, that none of the great British offensives of 1916-17 had achieved their purpose, in that the attackers had suffered far greater losses than the defenders. His statistical demolition of attrition was one of the points most remarked upon by reviewers of *The World Crisis*. Alongside the lack of territorial gain, it seemed to suggest that Third Ypres had been futile—although it is worth emphasising that, like most writers at this time, Churchill certainly did not believe that the war as a whole was similarly pointless. What he did not remark on was that, by his own calculations, there was a clear line of progression from the Somme to Passchendaele, with the ratio of British to German casualties far more favourable at the latter than the former. Such an interpretation would not, of course, have fitted Churchill’s overall purpose, which was to emphasise the opportunities that had been missed to win the war without resorting to attrition. *The World Crisis* was the non-fiction publishing

26. See, for example, Todman, *The Great War, Myth and Memory*, 89-90.  
success of the inter-war years, and Churchill’s condemnation of Third Ypres as a futile battle reached a large readership.\(^\text{28}\)

Former Prime Minister David Lloyd George published his *War Memoirs* from 1933-1936. His chapter on Ypres, evocatively, if inaccurately, titled ‘The Battle of the Mud’, was published as a separate pamphlet as well as forming the centrepiece of the newspaper serialisation of the memoirs. It accused Haig and Robertson of disguising from the War Policy Committee the nature and probable success of the campaign, of being obsessed with Flanders despite its unsuitability as a battlefield, and produced a series of reasons for the former Prime Minister’s failure to force his generals to call a halt. Third Ypres had been the biggest disaster of the war, and the fault for it lay with the High Command.

Much of this was either false or deliberately misleading. David French has argued that this chapter is a masterpiece of ‘sustained invective’, but that it is not history.\(^\text{29}\) As Andrew Suttie concludes:

> The Passchendaele chapters are the most polemical and therefore the most inaccurate in the memoirs and, perhaps because of this, were the most popular … What the *War Memoirs* reveal, however, is more Lloyd George’s sense of guilt at having allowed it all to happen than an accurate record of developments in the period May-November 1917.\(^\text{30}\)

Aside from his own sense of guilt, Lloyd George also felt that he had some scores to settle. Wartime disagreements lingered, but he had also been angered at attempted political interventions of some former British generals and their staffs in the early 1920s. His own sense of destiny and unfailing belief that he might return to high office also encouraged his efforts to shift the blame for the terrible losses at Passchendaele exclusively to Haig and Robertson.\(^\text{31}\)

The *War Memoirs* were hugely successful, reaching, in one form or another, an extremely large audience. But we should not necessarily believe that everyone who read these highly negative accounts accepted them at face value. My copy of Gibbs’ post war writings was owned by a former Major in the Machine Gun Corps, who has noted in the frontispages

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his opinion that Gibbs was ‘obviously paid by the word’, and that the only thing Gibbs got right was his criticism of the peace settlement. Amongst the readers’ reactions to Lloyd George’s recollections were letters telling the ‘foul, treacherous, loathsome Welsh reptile’ to ‘burn in Hell fires for ever, and that right soon’.32

In the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, Third Ypres became both a site of mourning and an example of futility, incompetence and horror. The continued presence of so many participants, of great and low estate sustained an atmosphere of debate. It is worth noting, however, the degree to which more complex—if not necessarily more positive—interpretations of the military effort were aimed at former soldiers, rather than at a wider audience. While some readers and reviewers protested about the excessive description of the battlefield grotesque in memoirs and novels of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the frequency with which such works came out seems to indicate that publishers and writers felt that a market for horror existed. The ongoing controversy may in fact have increased the emphasis on the horror of the battlefield. At a moment when there was still profound and unresolved disagreement about what the war had meant, it was much easier to come together over what it had been like. The dreadful conditions of trench warfare could be used by those with very different understandings of the war—since they could be held to demonstrate the tenacious, enduring bravery of the soldiers or the inhumanity of the generals. Churchill, for example, wrote of the BEF’s persistence in attack that ‘The willpower of the Commander and the discipline of the Army remained invincible’, and Liddell Hart remarked on ‘the inexhaustible powers of endurance and sacrifice shown by the combatants’.33 In subsequent years, no matter what else was said about the battle, celebrating the heroism of ordinary soldiers remained an important part of representations of Third Ypres.

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

Together, wartime experience and reporting and post-war memorialisation set the context and the terms in which Passchendaele would be discussed from the 1940s onwards. First, the concentration on horror and the lack of worthwhile result meant that it could be used as an example both of the terrible effects of war and of apparent military incompetence during subsequent conflicts. The use of the mythology of the First World War during the Second is a field still deserving of much study. It is plain that commonly shared beliefs about the war were, on occasion, summoned up to inspire the British war effort, as for

32. Quoted in ibid., 80.
example in references to Haig’s ‘Backs to the Wall’ order after Dunkirk. But for both soldiers and leaders, Passchendaele was a symbol of the difference between how the two wars should be fought. Churchill, for example, believed that Britain could not withstand the casualties of a Somme or a Passchendaele again. Ironically, even though many British battlefield successes bore some resemblance to the way the army had fought in 1917 and 1918, and daily casualty rates for infantry units were on occasion the same, the experience of the Second World War remained disconnected from that of the First. As Doria Haig, one of the Field Marshal’s children, put it to her brother when the family considered publication of his diaries in 1948: ‘There has been a bigger war since when people said we mustn’t make the same stupid mistakes as last time (nine times out of ten referring to Daddy and Passchendaele) …’.

This image was not dispelled by Sir James Edmonds’ volume of the Official History dealing with Third Ypres, which was finally published in 1948. As Andrew Green has argued, Edmonds produced a fairly balanced volume, often in line with more recent scholarship on the war, which drew on survivors’ testimony and was not afraid to criticise senior officers. At the time, however, Edmonds was accused by Liddell Hart of favouring Haig, not least in the much-disputed matter of casualty figures. What is perhaps more noteworthy is its relative lack of impact—produced too late to make an effective challenge to Lloyd George and at a moment when the reading market was still dominated by accounts of the more recent war, it did not create a public controversy that would have attended its publication twenty years earlier.

Certainly, the Official History had no effect on the presentation of Passchendaele in the key texts produced at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s that revivified popular interest in the First World War. The first was the American author Leon Wolff’s popular narrative of Third Ypres *In Flanders Fields*, which sought to explain how the battle happened, but it was in no way based on fresh primary research. Wolff was heavily influenced by Liddell Hart’s *The Real War*. Written by a journalist rather than a historian, at a moment when the British archives were still closed and the German presumed destroyed, it was a rehashing of the worst bits of the books published between the wars. Despite his title, Wolff actually spent very little of the book attempting to understand

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38. Leon Wolff to Basil Liddell Hart, 14 October 1959, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London (hereafter LHCMA), LH 1/760.
the battle at a tactical level. Much more often, his focus was on political and military
decision-making, and at times his narrative gives way before the challenge of describing
the battlefield:

So desolate, so meaningless were these August struggles that the record of them in histories
and memoirs fills one with a certain weariness … The men on both sides are lacerated and
punctured, bleed and die, in numbers that baffle imagination. Nameless new beings take
their place, but nothing else changes.39

Given its lack of primary material, it is surprising that Wolff’s book stood for so long as
a standard history of the battle—and one that has been republished as a ‘military history
classic’. At the time, it was not well received critically, although its commercial success
contributed to a boom in popular writing on the First World War. A.J.P. Taylor, no great
friend of generals, wrote in his review that: ‘As a serious work of history this is not a good
book’. He concluded even so that ‘Passchendaele was a particularly lunatic episode in a
war that was everywhere run with a good deal of blundering’—an interpretation that he
would repeat almost word for word in his 1963 Illustrated History of the First World War,
one of the great factual publishing successes of the decade.40

Rather more than Wolff, Taylor was motivated by a particular political stance towards
war in the nuclear age. He shared that stance with those to whom he dedicated that
Illustrated History, Joan Littlewood and the members of the Theatre Workshop company
who had together staged the 1963 hit ‘musical entertainment’ Oh What a Lovely War.
Since In Flanders Fields was used as source material for the Theatre Workshop’s ‘musical
entertainment’, it is unsurprising that the two share angry depiction of futility, although the
play makes the apparent lack of benefit for the terrible cost of attacks even more explicit.
In its very confused account of 1917, interspersed with supposed excerpts from Haig’s
diary and the songs of the soldiers, the play posted the ‘results’ of the Ypres battles on an
electronic newspanel (its place taken by a cricket scoreboard for Richard Attenborough’s
1968 film):

SEPT 20 … MENIN ROAD … BRITISH LOSS 22,000 MEN GAIN 800 YARDS
… SEPT 25 … POLYGON WOOD … BRITISH LOSS 17,000 MEN GAIN 1,000
YARDS…

OCT 12 … PASSCHENDAELE … BRITISH LOSS 13,000 MEN IN THREE HOURS
… GAIN 100 YARDS.41

For Littlewood and her associates there were powerful political reasons for using Ypres as a means to emphasise the costs and waste of war. Beyond her desire to tell the story of the war from below, using the songs of men at the time, Littlewood intended the play as a warning to the modern world of the risks of putting callous military leaders in control of terrible weapons.\textsuperscript{42}

The 1960s also saw the broadcast of the BBC/ABC/CBC collaboration \textit{The Great War}, a groundbreaking 26-part television series that sought to tell the history of the entire war. It attracted massive audiences in the UK when it was re-broadcast on BBC1 in 1964-65, with at points over twelve million people watching.\textsuperscript{43} The episode on Third Ypres described the strategy that had led to the battle, but far more striking was its combination of poetry, including Wilfred Owen’s ‘Mental Cases’ (although, ironically, Owen did not fight at Ypres), and image to emphasise the horror. It earned the producer the hearty congratulations of the Controller of Programmes on BBC2, who wrote to tell him how ‘The use of quotation to underline the horror of the mud and the sense of despair and futility which hung over the armies created a testament of overwhelming power’.\textsuperscript{44}

It might be tempting to see this as a further example of the anti-war ethos of the 1960s. But this would be misleading: the program was scripted by John Terraine, a passionate defender of the abilities of Britain’s First World War generals, and produced by Tony Essex, a man who described himself in a letter to a correspondent who had accused him of leftist tendencies as not pink but so blue as to be considered fascist by many of those with whom he worked. Given that Liddell Hart had been credited as military historical adviser, but had resigned in a fury over the episode on the Somme,\textsuperscript{45} we might also see \textit{The Great War} as a case of the personal battles of the inter-war years being perpetuated into the 1960s. But this too would mislead us as to the key factors influencing the program’s production.

Rather, the state of this program indicates both the structural problems of making an archive documentary about Third Ypres and the specific difficulties faced by \textit{The Great War} in particular. The lack of an Ypres equivalent to the 1916 film \textit{The Battle of the Somme} made, and makes, it extremely difficult for television producers to depict its action, let alone

\textsuperscript{42} Todman, \textit{Great War, Myth and Memory}, 61-5, 137-9.
\textsuperscript{43} The reception of this series in Australia and Canada would be a fruitful topic of research, but is beyond the scope of this paper.
\textsuperscript{44} BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Berkshire, Michael Peacock to Tony Essex, 23 September 1964, Post Production Correspondence A-D, T35/1145/1. Peacock—who was born in 1929— is otherwise remembered as the \textit{Panorama} producer who perpetuated the 1957 April Fool’s Day ‘spaghetti tree’ hoax.
the strategic decisions that led to it being fought. It is all too easy to fall back on padding that is visually and emotionally striking, but may be historically incomplete. This was even more so than usual the case with *The Great War*. As a result of its innovatory nature, the BBC completely underestimated how much time would be required to prepare film stock to match scripts. Instead of Essex’s original plan, which had been for the careful selection of accurate footage by expert historians, by the middle of the series he had totally run out of lead time, was preparing programs right up to the point they went out, and as a result was selecting and editing film himself with no historical oversight. Despite its claim to use original footage, in fact the series persistently misused film, including taking images from other points of the war and from post-war feature films. While Liddell Hart congratulated himself that his resignation had ensured that the Third Ypres episode was more to his liking than its predecessor, in fact there was simply no time for this intervention to have had any influence. It is by no means a discredit to a man with a remarkable sense of the need to present the past to the public to suggest that Essex tended towards the visually striking in his choices. Episode 17 of *The Great War* therefore indicates the structural and practical issues that encourage popular representation of Third Ypres in terms primarily of horror.\(^{46}\)

Amongst the most enthusiastic viewers of *The Great War* were veterans themselves, still alive in large numbers at the start of the 1960s, sometimes keen to preserve the memory of their war and to dispute with those who they felt had got it wrong. Ernest Gold, for example, the meteorologist who had advised GHQ, wrote to the *Spectator* in 1958 to clarify what could reasonably have been expected of the weather in 1917.\(^{47}\) Cyril Falls, writer of the 36th Division and some of the Official Histories, published his history of the war as a whole in 1960. In it he argued that:

> The weather in August and still more in October and early November is the chief factor in the horrible reputation that hangs over Third Ypres. The second is a belief that the offensive was mere blind bashing. This is not the case. Tactics were seldom more skilful ...\(^{48}\)

The former Guards officer, Oliver Lytton, Lord Chandos, reacted critically to *The Great War* in his memoirs:

> I admired it greatly, in almost every respect, as an historical work … Looking at the BBC production with the eyes of a regimental officer I had many times to exclaim: ‘No, it wasn’t quite like that.’ We, by which I mean both officers and men, did not feel quite so doom laden, so utterly disenchanted. We thought we were fighting in a worthy cause …

\(^{46}\) Todman, *Great War Myth and Memory*, 29-35.

\(^{47}\) Green, *Writing the Great War*, 137-8.

The fiftieth anniversary of the battle, in 1967, saw an angry disagreement in the letters columns of the *Daily Telegraph* between veterans who disagreed about how well it had been fought, what it had meant and whether success had been achieved.\(^49\) To an extent, therefore, the continued presence of veterans preserved broader, or alternative, versions of the war, despite the structural and cultural pressure encouraging a more reductive interpretation. As a result of this and of the relative paucity of new academic research, this period is better seen as a continuation of inter-war disputes rather than a shift to new ground.

This was, however, the final spluttering of the flame. From the late 1960s on, the population of veterans in all countries rapidly decreased, as they reached an age at which they became increasingly vulnerable. Those who remained were no longer part of a veteran community that in some cases had commemorated a distinct version of the war in which there was space for pride in soldierly achievement. Instead, isolated, veterans became more likely than before to rehearse the uniquely negative stereotypes perpetuated by society around them. Ironically, this shift coincided almost exactly with a growing popular and academic interest in the evidence that could be provided by their oral testimony, and which was expressed by writers such as Lyn Macdonald, Martin Middlebrook and Patsy Adam Smith.

These efforts, and the general move towards ‘history from below’, dealt with Third Ypres less than might be expected, thereby indicating the continuing influence of wartime and inter-war mythology on writer’s interests and the preservation of records and memories. The campaign formed the basis for Macdonald’s first book, *They Called It Passchendaele*, but she made a deliberate effort, then and later, to avoid entering the lists of historical debate. Instead she aimed simply to tell the story. Given her background in radio journalism, it was perhaps unsurprising that she also chose the most striking accounts and did not consider the technicalities of how the campaign had been fought.\(^50\)

In Australia, the period from 1960 on saw an increasing focus on Gallipoli as the single defining experience of the First World War. If in some ways this was the logical outcome of a preponderance that was apparent in retrospect from the 1920s, it was also the result of contemporary political and international concerns and a recognition of the need to ensure that the remembrance of the war did not die out. This increased focus had its own influence on historical studies of the soldiers’ war in the 1970s. Patsy Adam Smith’s *The Anzacs* devotes only eight pages out of 360 to the whole of the Third Ypres

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50. See, for example, her introduction in Lyn Macdonald, *The Called It Passchendaele* (London: John Murray, 1978), i.
campaign, compared to the 85 she spent on Gallipoli. While she noted the damage to the German Army and some of the tactical changes necessary to inflict that, Adam Smith concluded that ‘Neither side knew exactly what it was fighting for, nor even the confines or the content of the contested territory. They just ranged backwards and forwards over the churned-up, sickened soil.’

In his more academic _The Broken Years_, Bill Gammage spent fourteen out of 282 on the whole of 1917, as opposed to 60 on Gallipoli. Gammage’s description of Third Ypres owed much to Bean although, as Jenny Macleod has pointed out, in a reflection of the times in which they wrote, Bean was able to find consolation in the heroism of the troops, whereas Gammage could see the war only in terms of its waste and tragedy.

In subsequent years, these bottom-up histories were used as source material for television documentaries (for example Channel Four’s 1985 _Lions led by Donkeys_, based heavily on Middlebrook’s account of 1 July 1916), dramas (Adam Smith was closely involved with the making of 9 Network’s 1985 mini-series _ANZACS_), and films (Gammage worked on the making of Peter Weir’s 1981 film _Gallipoli_). They therefore both demonstrated and contributed to a process whereby Third Ypres was sidelined in comparison to Gallipoli and the Somme. With the veterans who had experienced these battles now scarcer and scarcer, popular remembrance of the war became increasingly homogenised, concentrating on simpler interpretations of a smaller set of symbols, selected to fit contemporary needs rather than the complexities of personal experience.

The success enjoyed by writers such as Macdonald and Adam Smith was part of a resurgence of interest in the First World War that can be traced from the 1980s to the present day. Although this included both academic and non-academic elements, ironically it has not yet led to a greater popular understanding of the war in general or Third Ypres in particular.

Academically, from the mid 1980s onwards Australian, British, Canadian and New Zealand military historians began to work their way through the enormous archival deposits that had thus far gone virtually unmined. While this did not necessarily mean that the personality-based disputes that had been ongoing since the war were resolved, such primary research did at least offer the hope that the military history of the war might move towards a greater interest in evidence and structures rather than populist-psychology and polemic. Even so, it took time for historians to focus specifically on Third Ypres.

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53. Macleod, _Reconsidering Gallipoli_, 223.
In 1996, in the introduction to their study of the battle, Prior and Wilson noted the dearth of comprehensive accounts of the BEF in Flanders in the second half of 1917, an absence which explained the subtitle of their work: *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*. As was noted at the start of this paper, such archival studies have encouraged a reassessment of the fighting abilities of the BEF, if not necessarily the abilities of its commander.

Not completely coincidentally, this academic boom took place at the same time as a vast increase in popular representations of the war. These included not only the texts and dramas already noted, but also a heightened interest in commemorative ceremonies, visits to the battlefields and the researching of individual family connections to the war. A number of explanations have been posited for this boom, including a desire for historical connections in response to the uncertainties of modernity, the archival and artefact residue of the war in government records and individual lofts, the wealth and time of the retired baby-boomer generation and the passing down of trauma within families. Whichever of these we accept, it is plain that a leisure culture has been created around the war, in which these different representations often interact.

Yet the war's popularity does not seem to have allowed more scholarly interpretations of Third Ypres a broader acceptance. Instead, if it appears at all, it is as a symbol of the absolute worst of war, and the incompetence of the British high command, as for example in *ANZACS* (which repeated the tale of General Kiggell crying in the mud) or the novelist Pat Barker’s *The Eye in the Door*. Why is this so? In part, it is because the way to create a supposedly ‘realistic’ historical artefact is to confirm, rather than confound, the expectations of the audience. It is also because novelists and television writers tend to react more powerfully to historical polemic than to the complexities of academic argument. But primarily it is because the structural problems of representing the campaign remain. It remains something foreign to contemporary experience and difficult to comprehend. In attempting to explain the relative unpopularity of the Western Front in comparison to Gallipoli for Australian visitors, Bruce Scates has suggested that it is not just that Ypres and the Somme are ‘less trendy’, but that the scale of the battlefields and the cemeteries and the alien nature of the landscape render understanding harder and the installation of patriotic sentiment impossible. Even for British visitors, for whom the greyness of a Belgium autumn is perhaps more familiar, struggle to work out appropriate emotions when they visit. No longer in mourning for a known relative, they are not exactly grieving, but few are unmoved by the enormity of cemeteries such as Tyne Cot.

The relative sidelining of the campaign compared to its predecessors has recently prompted fears that it is in danger of being forgotten. One report of the Australian War Memorial’s current ‘To Flanders Fields’ exhibition argued that younger generations have ‘let these bloody battles slip from the nation’s collective memory’.\(^\text{57}\) In some ways, this might appear overly fretful. The battle, after all, continues to be commemorated officially and to generate significant news media coverage. At the same time, it is clear that its decennial anniversaries do not generate the same furore now associated with Gallipoli and the Somme. In 2006, the BBC gained much publicity for an online discussion in which it invited families to submit their ‘memories’ of the Somme. The message board was quickly filled, sometimes with quite detailed stories that had been handed down between the generations. Over 900 posts went up in the course of just over a week. When the ‘Today’ program attempted to repeat that feat after it sent a reporter back to unearth his family’s connection to Passchendaele in 2007, only three messages were added, none relating to individual experiences.\(^\text{58}\)

It might be plausible to suggest that the effort expended on 1915 in Australia and 1916 in the UK exhausts the commemorative reserves, practical and emotional, of participants, governments and media organisations. The marches, ceremonies, re-enactments, and trips all take a toll on those who are active in remembrance, which they may not be able to repeat on an annual or bi-annual basis. The start date of the Third Ypres offensive does not have the same resonance as 25 April or 1 July, with the result that it is more easily departed from. This year’s ceremony took place in mid-July, according to one source because this was the only date on which Belgian and British royalty were both available.\(^\text{59}\) In terms of visitor numbers, it may simply be that the Dardanelles in April and the Somme in July are seen as more attractive destinations than Belgium in November, the anniversary of the battle for Passchendaele itself. In turn, this lack of commemorative strength makes it harder to attract full-spectrum media attention and ensure the interactivity that is now considered so important.

Yet social, cultural and technological developments make it highly unlikely that Third Ypres will slip completely out of popular remembrance. While the number of those who know or care about the battle has decreased, it is easier than ever before for them to make contact with each other and to visit the battlefield. The internet has allowed those for whom the study of the First World War is something between a hobby and an obsession to

59. Personal information.
communicate more frequently and widely than before, establishing the sort of communal action that is essential for remembrance activity to take place. The AWM, the Imperial War Museum and the ‘In Flanders Fields’ museum in Ypres have made extensive, and sometimes innovative, use of technology both to publicise their activities and to expand the quantity of information that they are able to provide to actual and online visitors. With the war often a waypoint on the trail of family history, and given the sheer number of soldiers who passed through the battle, there is a repeated spark for individuals to find out more. For those living in southeast England—be they British or expatriate Australian—Ypres is even more accessible than the Somme, and it remains a popular site for school visits. Those who are interested can feed their passion. This ease of access also makes it easy for those new to the First World War to establish the sort of imagined emotional connection which, although it may not lead onto any greater understanding of the battle, will maintain its place in public discourse.

As part of this year’s official commemoration in Ypres, a student from the North of England, Laura McLintic, read out a poem she had written after she chose the grave of an unidentified British soldier on a school visit three years previously.

Hello, my unknown soldier,
My comfort and my friend.
You are my continuity,
Though your life is at an end.
I’m sitting here and thinking
About the life you gave.
You fought for your people and country,
And now lie in your grave.  

It might be tempting to dismiss this as an example of the way that British schools tend to teach the First World War—a cross-Channel trip, a few tears at the horror of it all, and then some poetry writing, because we all know that poetry is the appropriate response to the war, and it supposedly offers children the chance to empathise with a past they in fact have been given little opportunity to understand. But a less cynical interpretation should also be considered. Nearly 90 years after a cataclysmic battle, a young woman was encouraged to think about what the past meant to her, and found comfort and stability in the memorialisation of that past. For all that her understanding of a young soldier’s

life might not have encompassed the complexities of infantry tactics circa 1917, it still made sure that she would continue to think about the war and find her own meaning for it. If simplification is the price we have to pay for remembrance, it is one that many of us would be willing to accept.

The use to which the mythic version of Third Ypres can be put is itself an important part of its preservation. Britain, Canada and Australia have retained the military as an important part of their culture, both in terms of how masculinity is defined and because they have intermittently found themselves involved in subsequent conflicts, or potential conflicts. Perhaps as a result, they have also found it necessary to have a cultural reference point that sums up everything bad about war—what it does or does not mean, how it is fought, and above all the risk of a disconnection between ends and means. Historically, Third Ypres has filled that role. It is something against which other conflicts and military experiences have been triangulated. So well has it performed that function that it is hard to believe either that it will be completely forgotten, or that new interpretations of the battle will percolate through to a wider audience.
Edited by Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey

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