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The British Empire on the Western Front: A Transnational Study of the 62nd West Riding Division and the Canadian 4th Division

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The British Empire on the Western Front:
A Transnational Study of the 62nd West Riding Division and the Canadian 4th
Division

By
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Abstract

This dissertation is a detailed transnational comparative analysis focusing on two military units representing notably different societies, though ones steeped in similar military and cultural traditions. This project compared and contrasted training, leadership and battlefield performance of a division from each of the British and Canadian Expeditionary Forces during the First World War.

The Canadian division selected was the 4th, formed in April of 1916 from a mix of units already training in England as reserve battalions as well as others sent from Canada. The Canadian 4th Division's first encounter with the Germans came in the late fall of 1916 on the Somme, and from 1917 until the end of the war it fought continuously with the Canadian Corps in every major operation in which the latter was involved, playing a central role in all of these. The second unit examined was the British 62nd Division, authorized by the War Office in late 1915 to draw upon recruits from northern England. It was part of what was known as the Second Line Territorials. The 62nd Division sailed for France in January 1917, and from the spring onward also fought continuously until the end of the war.

The questions underlying this research are twofold: based on the experience of these two infantry divisions, how did the two armies attempt to form effective fighting forces during the war from little more than enthusiastic amateur warriors, and were they successful in doing so. Secondly, were there significant differences

in the processes employed and did these differences manifest themselves in battlefield superiority of one Expeditionary Force over the other.

In fact the research clearly indicates that both the Canadians and British ultimately were successful in overcoming the daunting challenge that they faced, and that the keys to doing so were installing capable leadership at the most senior levels of command in combination with thorough training based on an appropriate tactical doctrine. Furthermore, while differences certainly existed in approaches and performance, it was the similarities in how the two Expeditionary Forces prepared for and waged war which predominated. In the end these two divisions embraced similar training and battlefield tactics, benefited from like (and capable) styles of command, and underwent a broadly comparable evolution. Most importantly, after an inevitable – but remarkably brief - period of ‘learning’ at the Front, they became consistently effective combat divisions.

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To Renée, Thank you for everything

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Introduction

This dissertation examines how the British Empire's armies managed to create competent fighting divisions relatively quickly during the war. It should be borne in mind that all Dominion, and a great majority of British, divisions were so formed, not from properly trained reservists as in the major continental armies like France and Germany, but from raw, enthusiastic recruits, most having limited or no peacetime military training, and with only a thin cadre of reasonably experienced officers, generally confined to the senior ranks, to provide professional leadership.¹ This study comprises a comparative examination of how two of these many divisions, one British (the 62nd West Riding Division) and one Canadian (the 4th Canadian Division), were raised, trained, and fought. Assessing the effectiveness of this division-building process, the dissertation will argue, ultimately needs to be measured by a single criterion – certainly the only one that mattered during the war years – namely how effectively the units performed operationally.

As logically compelling as this test may be, how does one go about actually assessing 'operational effectiveness' with any measure of reliability, given their inherent subjectivity in the concept? After all, surely an otherwise competent division could fail to achieve the goals given to it if the attack plan was unrealistic. But to assess battlefield 'effectiveness' under these terms would be doubly subjective – one would have to first assess the feasibility of the attack plan and then

¹ This constitutes a remarkable achievement and certainly was instrumental in the British Empire's forces' capacity to play a leading role in the decisive fighting on the Western Front in 1917 and 1918.

the 'success' with which it was carried out. Instead, the analysis which follows will accept the attack plans as givens. In support of such a claim, one must remember that there was a mounting effort as the war progressed and commanders matured to make battlefield goals more modest, more realistic, and hence more achievable. Unquestionably, this does not mean all plans were achievable, or that adverse conditions of weather or unit exhaustion or operational crisis, to name three, did not intervene to cloud the determination. But taking the battle plan as a given analytically eliminates one level of subjectivity, leaving only the task of assessing how competent the division was in execution – in other words, measuring its performance against the plan. There is subjectivity here, to be sure, but it is considerably reduced. Given the large numbers of engagements examined, and the extended period over which they occurred (allowing time for the units to 'mature' as fighting formations and senior command to mature operationally), this seems the best of the options available – that is, the least subjective - to assess battlefield 'effectiveness.'²

It is too easily forgotten that during the Great War the British Empire's military force on the Western Front – despite the presence of a sizable contribution from the far-flung Dominions - was a single army employing many commonalities in command, weaponry and doctrine, with its officers and men drawn, to a significant degree, from a shared culture, what cultural historians have called the 'British World'.³ Indeed, nearly half of the ordinary soldiers and one-third of senior officers

² The considerable degree of success both divisions showed seems to support this estimation.

³ The British World paradigm in essence argues that the Dominion-born population of British descent culturally identify with Great Britain. It is most pronouncedly seen among the educated middle and

in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) were British-born.⁴ Yet this Imperial force has traditionally been studied in its components – the Dominion forces in isolation from the British ones. British historians have shunted the Dominion forces to the side, having been largely unwilling to grapple with their assumed differences, while Dominion historians have shunted British forces aside in their pursuit of telling their ‘national’ stories. The sole exception in the latter case has been generally the inevitable observation that the Australian, Canadian or New Zealand troops, starting with little more than an enthusiastic rabble of amateurs, outfought the more organized and professional British army.⁵ In much Canadian military history the transformation from amateur to military professional manifest in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) has been invariably employed to ‘prove’ that the rise of a more ‘national’ and the corresponding decline of the ‘colonial’ mindset witnessed during the war, along with the substitution of independent-thinking for suffocating class-consciousness and deference to authority among soldiers and officers alike, were ultimately responsible for this superiority. Fortunately,

upper classes but also very much apparent in the working classes. From the late Victorian through the pre-war years, one finds in such persons a profound acceptance of British standards and values as their own. This has been masked in much Dominion scholarship by the understandable desire to emphasize distinction from the ‘Mother Country’, as a necessary underpinning for the emergence of a home-grown ‘nationalism’ in which World War I played no small part, it has to be agreed. The aforementioned commonality of outlook went beyond a mere adherence to ‘political imperialism’ to the point where much can be understood of these British peoples’ attitudes and behavior vis a vis ‘the Empire’ only by accepting that they shared a deep identity as part of a “British World”. For further reading on this subject see Philip Buckner and Doug Francis, eds., *Re-discovering the British World*, and Carl Berger, *A Sense of Power*.

⁴ This does not include the small number of British regular officers who were stationed in Canada in 1914 and who chose to serve in the CEF, or who were subsequently attached to it in France. Corps commanders Edwin Alderson and Julian Byng are examples of the latter, and the long-serving commander of the 3rd Division, Louis Lipsett, an example of the former.

⁵ This idea has been portrayed in John Swettenham’s *McNaughton*, Volume 1: 1887- 1939, D.J. Goodspeed’s *The Road Past Vimy: The Canadian Corps 1914-1918* and Pierre Berton’s *Vimy*, just to list a few.

Canadian military historians have begun to examine what other (and more substantive) factors influenced the development of the CEF.⁶ For their part, British historians, in focusing on the British Expeditionary Force, have either acknowledged the supposed superiority of Dominion contingents as “self-evident” or dismissed it as posturing, though in both cases without offering substantive evidence.⁷ Hence, the questions remain - were Dominion forces, at least during the final two years of the conflict, in fact operationally superior, and if so, what factors accounted for this?

A comparative analysis offers the best hope of answering these questions, as well as the fundamental question of how the Empire forged effective divisions from such apparently unpromising beginnings. But it needs to be one drawing on a quite different perspective which, in recognizing the broad sweep of commonalities in both prewar backgrounds and shared wartime experiences, would be open to the possibility that the similarities in vital matters like leadership, officer-man relations, unit élan, tactical innovativeness and the like balanced or even outweighed the differences.⁸ Methodologically, this would represent a broadening of the application of the aforementioned “British World” paradigm that has recently been employed so successfully in interpreting other aspects of British and Dominion

⁶ Some of the more important monographs are William Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare*, Desmond Morton's *Peculiar Kind of Politics*, Tim Cook's two volumes on the CEF at War, *At the Sharp End* and *Shock Troops* and Stephen Harris's *Canadian Brass*.

⁷ For examples of this see Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* or Peter Simpkin's *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16*. For the 'acceptance' side, see Denis Winter's *Haig's Command*.

⁸ When it arrived in France, the 62nd Division had all of the senior posts (Brigadier Generals and higher) occupied by prewar regulars, with most having some sort of experience fighting in Europe. The Canadians had to make do with a handful of prewar regulars (both British and Canadian). Most of the senior Canadian positions in the 4th Division were filled with prewar militia officers who, however, would have also had experience fighting on the Western Front. Battalion commanders in both divisions were of a mixed sort, some being pre-war militia (or Territorial) officers with no experience on the Western Front and others who had seen combat during the war.

history during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁹ In assessing this possibility, the most appropriate comparison would be between infantry divisions which, with strengths varying between 15000 and 20000 men, were the smallest completely self-contained fighting forces on the contemporary battlefield and the cornerstones of the expeditionary forces. Thus, they were both militarily significant as well as manageable in research terms. The infantry divisions chosen were typical of the broad composition of the parent forces, namely ones formed after the war was well underway from masses of untrained volunteers supplemented by a small cadre of professionals. Specifically these are the 4th Canadian Division, authorized in April 1916, and the British 62nd Division, a 'New Army' Second Line Territorial formation formed fourteen months earlier, both of which saw sustained action during 1917 and 1918. While much has been written on the operational 'learning curve' of the BEF and CEF, jointly comparing and contrasting the armies' development on a divisional level - from recruitment and training to leadership and combat performance - has never been attempted. Doing so will test (and in some instances, likely bring into question) prevailing myths. For this project offers a new perspective on the ongoing military 'learning curve'¹⁰ debate as well as exploring

⁹ For one example see Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *The British World: Diaspora, Culture, and Identity* and the aforementioned Philip Buckner and Douglas Francis, eds. *Re-discovering the British World*

¹⁰ The 'learning curve' has been seen as a process of improvements based on the incorporation of the lessons of battlefield experience. After the Battle of the Somme the leaders of the British Expeditionary Force took it upon themselves to incorporate institutionalized and universalized learning at all levels to address the 'mistakes' that were plaguing attacks and to spread solutions more broadly and quickly, the objective being to be able to carry out more successful assaults. This, its proponents argue, culminated in the highly efficient and effective offensive operations of the Last Hundred Days campaign. For further reading on this 'learning curve' concept see Ian Brown's article "Not glamorous but effective" and Patrick Brennan's and Thomas Leppard's article, "How the Lessons were Learned," as well as Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* and William Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare*, all of which offer valuable insights on the topic.

the major differences and similarities in the Canadian and British components of the common British Empire army that fought the Great War. Thoroughly comparing the British and Canadian ways of forging professional combat forces largely from civilians is a key step in answering the tantalizing and paramount question – how did this great composite army become good? In the process, this study will reveal whether the ‘British World’ of the trenches was a much more homogeneous one than previous existing scholarship has suggested, with commonalities at least as pronounced as the differences and likely far more so.

One factor that could have been looked at in this study was the social and cultural differences that might have had an effect on the fighting performance of the two divisions. However, the ‘British World’ paradigm certainly suggests that these social and cultural ‘differences’ in the Canadian case would have been rather more modest than is commonly thought.¹¹ Fifty percent of the ‘Canadians’ serving in the Canadian Corps were recent British immigrants, and to some degree, must have been changed by their immigrant experiences. Furthermore, there is little doubt that Canadian society was relatively less class-conscious than British. But the fact remained that almost one soldier and junior officer in two was British born and raised, and among more senior officers – from the rank of Lt-Colonel and higher – the figure approached one-third.¹² And additionally, and this is key, the Canadian-born of British descent, who made up most of the remainder of the officers and men,

¹¹ For one example see Philip Buckner and Douglas Francis, eds., *Re-discovering the British World and also Mark Moss’s Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War*.

¹² I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Patrick Brennan for providing me with these statistics.

had grown up in a very British cultural environment.¹³ Thus, a decision was made not to focus on these supposedly defining cultural differences – that other factors – leadership, training practices, and above all else, performance in combat – would offer the most profitable avenue of investigation.

One of the obvious factors contributing to battlefield effectiveness was the level of morale among the troops, and particularly among the junior officers, NCOs and ordinary soldiers who bore the fighting burden. To explore that in detail would require extensive research into records of discipline, and secondarily as broad as possible a canvass of soldiers' contemporary letters and diaries. Gary Sheffield's *Leadership in the Trenches* has explored this story expertly for the BEF as a whole, and to a lesser extent Desmond Morton's *When Your Number's Up* has done the same for the CEF.¹⁴ Both have confirmed that morale, while inevitably ebbing and flowing among units and certainly among individuals during the course of the war, remained collectively high and at the very least was never a significant impediment to performance on the battlefield, nor significantly different in the two armies. In light of this I chose to downplay this facet in my own research so as to focus on the other more significant factors bearing on the creation of combat effectiveness already outlined: training, leadership and shared tactical doctrine. Logically, it was my assessment that divisions with poor morale would not – and, indeed, could not – fight well. In other words, if my research could show the two raw divisions became effective fighting formations, it followed intuitively that divisional morale must have

¹³ For more on this, see Mark Moss's *Manliness and Militarism* and Carl Berger's *A Sense of Power*.

¹⁴ The forthcoming dissertation of Craig Mantle on officer-man relations in the Canadian Corps will add measurably to our knowledge of the latter.

been, at the very least, satisfactory. So while morale remains a topic worthy of examination, in the end, my basic premise as to whether the two armies achieved their goal of forging effective fighting forces in a reasonably short period of time could be confirmed by their operational performance alone.¹⁵

Among the Canadian divisions the 4th was selected because it had not been examined in-depth before, was formed last¹⁶, and like all Canadian Divisions was a primarily volunteer force¹⁷ (similar to the 62nd Division initially) and also saw its fighting throughout the last two years of the war.¹⁸ The 62nd was also chosen because other than a 1920's-vintage history, it has not been researched, was a Territorial unit (and so comparable in key ways to a Canadian militia-based division) and also saw its fighting during the last two years of the war. Numerous documents as well as personal papers from both senior officers and soldiers survive for both divisions.¹⁹ This dissertation's research draws on records from archives in

¹⁵ G.D. Sheffield. *Leadership in the trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), Desmond Morton. *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldiers in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993)

¹⁶ The Canadian 5th Division was formed after the 4th; however, it was never sent to France and was broken up in February 1918 to reinforce the units already serving at the front.

¹⁷ Significant numbers of conscripts only began reaching its ranks in the mid-autumn of 1918.

¹⁸ A Canadian division was picked over an Australian or New Zealand division because the Canadian Corps was substantially larger than the AIF and in-depth research was easier and more cost effective to carryout in Canada.

¹⁹ This dissertation relies heavily on primary research carried out mainly at the National Archives of the United Kingdom and Canada. War diaries of the units involved were invaluable as were intelligence summaries, Cabinet papers and operational materials. For research on the BEF and CEF the war diaries and a variety of related reports at the divisional level and lower are the main sources of information available on the units discussed in the dissertation. Complaints that the war diaries are 'too official' (inevitably edited to cover up as much as they reveal) is simply not borne out by the facts, for the whole approach, certainly from the Somme onward, was to learn in an institutionalized way, and this necessitated candour in reporting, something which seems to have been broadly forthcoming. Finally, by thoroughly examining the official war diaries of all of the units involved, from Divisions through Battalions and indeed for Corps, as well, one gains a measure of reliability by the sheer multiplicity of reports of the same events as seen through different eyes. These papers provided significant appreciation of the day-to-day issues both Divisions confronted as they

Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.²⁰ Court martial records and enlistment records from both Canadian and United Kingdom sources were so massive that to look at these thoroughly would have changed the focus of the dissertation and more importantly left vital questions unanswered or inadequately answered.²¹ In the end, the research was selected for the light it would shed on training and leadership, and battlefield performance. This allowed the key questions of the dissertation to be answered: how effective was the operational performance of these two divisions, how was that level of performance achieved, and what, if any, were the differences between them in both regards.²²

struggled to become combat worthy and more. Other archives in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia were also consulted. Both Divisions had excellent personal papers still in existence: Major-General Watson's diary was substantial and very revealing about how he made day-to-day decisions. Braithwaite's papers and personal correspondence were disappointingly thin but still useful. Victor Odlum and A.T. Anderson had very substantial papers that gave insight into these leaders' decision-making processes and how they viewed the effectiveness of the Divisions at the Brigade level. Arthur Currie and Aylmer Haldane are two Corps commanders whom these Divisions fought and their papers were comprehensive and proved to be very useful resources. The aforementioned personal papers are just highlights the personal papers of the most senior officers accessed, however many more collections were consulted. The War Office training manuals were also a great help in understanding the development of these units in 1917 and 1918.

²⁰ Thanks to research carried out by Dr. Herwig, select papers were also included in this dissertation from the *Bundesarchiv-Militararchiv* in Germany.

²¹ Court-martial papers and enlistment records would have given interesting insight into the morale of these two Divisions throughout 1917-1918 and how many volunteers were fighting in these formations. While interesting insights, in the end the research time and analytical space was allotted to the key point: how effective were these units on the battlefield?

²² Battlefield 'effectiveness' is a subjective term. Could not a competent division fail to achieve the goals given to it if the attack plan was unrealistic? Certainly. But to assess battlefield 'effectiveness' would then be doubly subjective – one would have to assess the feasibility of the attack plan and then the success with which it was carried out. The author accepted attack plans as givens – there was at least an effort as the war progressed and commanders matured to make goals more modest, more realistic, more achievable. That doesn't mean all plans were achievable, or that adverse conditions of weather or unit exhaustion e.g. didn't intervene to cloud the determination. But by taking the battle plan as a given, one eliminates one level of subjective assessment. Then one is left with assessing how competent the division was in execution by simply measuring their performance against the plan. There are subjectivities there, to be sure, but they are reduced. Given the large numbers of engagements examined, and the extended period over which they occurred (allowing time for the units to 'mature' as fighting formations and senior command to mature operationally), this seems the fairest of the options available to military historians to – not perfectly – but reasonably assess battlefield 'effectiveness'.

It is an exciting time to be writing on the First World War, as a wealth of new monographs on every aspect of this conflict are continually appearing in press. While dated, the British official history remains a necessary starting point for any operational study of the British Empire forces in the First World War. The series was impressively researched and had input from all of the key players involved in the British army. However, it is a top-down military history which focuses primarily on the most senior command levels and Armies and Corps and is relatively less useful for the war at all subordinate levels. One of the most pertinent monographs for my study was Peter Simkins *Kitchener's Army*, a well-researched and written examination of the raising of the 'New Armies' of which the British 62nd Division was a component. However, because the book focuses on how these new divisions were raised, it does not follow the story on to show how they fared in combat to any significant depth. Simkins monograph is also twenty-five years old, and substantial research has been published since then, most recently Spencer Jones *From Boer War to World War*, looking at the tactical reforms which occurred in the British Army between 1902 and 1914. An equally well-researched piece of work, it understandably fails to carry the reader into the evolution of the supposed 'learning curve' occurring after the onset of the First World War.²³

The principal authorities on the operational/tactical 'learning curve' of the British Army are Tim Travers, Paddy Griffiths, and Andy Simpson. Travers, who in *The Killing Ground* dealt with the decision-making process at the apex of the BEF,

²³ Peter Simkins. *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), Spencer Jones. *From the Boer War to World War: Tactical Reforms of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

with respect to both the tactical and strategic level, does not focus in much detail on the corps or divisional level, being more concerned with internal problems at General Head Quarters (GHQ). Travers followed this up with *How the War Was Won* which explored the conflict's final two years at a more operational level, including latterly the devolution of command necessitated by the operational pace of fighting in 1918 as well as British commanders' failure to fully embrace technological innovation, especially the tank. Paddy Griffith wrote a retort to Travers' arguments in *Battle Tactics on the Western Front*, again examining all of the BEF to prove his argument about the 'learning curve' and the successful adaptation of more traditional technology (artillery, automatic weapons and infantry) to achieve victory on the Western Front. Simon Robbins' *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918*, also focuses at the operational level of battle, examining senior leadership, with a heavy emphasis on the Corps commanders. Again the scholarship is excellent, nevertheless, in covering the entire war period and latterly dozens of commanders, the analysis inevitably deals with collective developments and the individuals' roles are largely lost sight of. More recently, Andy Simpson in *Directing Operations* undertook a detailed examination of the role of British Corps commanders and how effectively they developed as leaders on the battlefield. *Command and Control on the Western Front*, edited by Garry Sheffield and Dan Todman, in assessing elements of the evolution of senior British generalship, offered critical 'snap shots' of various of the most senior commanders.²⁴ *Winning and Losing*

²⁴ The University of Birmingham has recently produced two Master's thesis which focused on divisional histories; specifically the 61st and 21st Divisions. They are both of merit in showing the development of the respective Divisions, however, because of the nature of the degree for which they

on the Western Front, by Jonathan Boff, gives an excellent account of the Third Army and how it fought during the Last Hundred Days. His book looks at how the 'learning curve' was applied and how German forces reacted to the Third Army's offensive operations, but out of necessity, given the project's broad perspective, has to generalize in its analysis of smaller-unit actions.²⁵

Canadian authors have focused almost exclusively on the CEF experience and in the case of some popular historians, almost ignored the fact that British forces played a relevant role in the First World War.²⁶ The first serious work on the Canadian Corps was the official history, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919*, published in 1964 by G.W.L. Nicholson. It covers the entire war and gives brief accounts of all the units involved. However, it is largely a narrative history, and again, top-down in its perspective. Bill Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare* broke this mold and is a clear account of the Canadian Corps' evolving use of technology as the key to its success on the battlefield of 1917 and 1918. His book was the first serious re-examination of the Canadian Corps. Building off Rawling's work, Ian Brown's article "Not Glamorous but effective" described the evolution of the Canadian forces' highly successful bite-and-hold tactics in the final two years of the

were written, the primary research is fairly superficial and the length of the papers do not allow in-depth examination.

²⁵ Tim Travers. *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917-1918* (London: Routledge, 1992) and *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War, 1900-1918* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987); Paddy Griffith. *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front, 1914-18: Defeat into Victory* (London: Routledge, 2005); Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914-18* (Stonehouse, England: Spellmount, 2006); Garry Sheffield and Dan Todman, eds., *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience, 1914-18* (Staplehurst, England: Spellmount, 2004); Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁶ For examples of this see Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001) and Daniel Dancocks, *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1987).

war. Though expertly written, at times it glosses over setbacks that the Canadian Corps suffered while employing this attack technique, most notably at Lens. Shane Schreiber's *Shock Troops of the British Empire* analyzes all four Canadian divisions during the Last Hundred Days largely favouring them equally. The key to his argument, akin to what Brown concluded, is that the Canadians had perfected the bite-and-hold attack. *Shock Troops of the British Empire*, however, does significant 'heavy lifting' for Canadian nationalism. Tim Cook carries on Rawling's work in his gripping two volumes on the Canadian Corps. Cook provides a comprehensive overview of the Corps' operations, training, and social history – given that he covers its entire war experience – the story is very broad and cannot always focus on the nuts and bolts of specific operational and developmental concerns. His earlier book, *No Place to Run*, specifically looks at gas warfare as a case study of how the Canadian Corps 'learned' on the battlefield. On the 90th anniversary of the Canadian attack on Vimy Ridge, Wilfrid Laurier University released a book comprising a number of essays re-evaluating the assault by a selection of authors. *Vimy Ridge a Canadian Reassessment* offers valuable insight into the evolving debate about how 'good' the Canadian Corps actually was, however, as with all works that are comprised of multiple authors, some chapters are much stronger than others. As well, Patrick Brennan has examined Canadian senior officers and how they became effective battlefield leaders of men. "How the Lessons Were Learned: Senior Commanders and the Moulding of the Canadian Corps after the Somme," "From Amateur to Professional: The Experience of Brigadier-General William Antrobus Griesbach," and "Major-General Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the

Great War” all give detailed insight into how senior Canadian commanders were learning the lessons that mattered during the Great War.²⁷

Finally, in recent years some work has also been completed in Canada focusing on the divisional level. Andrew Iarocci’s *Shoe String Soldiers* dealt at length with training, command and operations of the 1st Canadian Division from its creation through the battles of 1915.²⁸ Kenneth Radley also has examined the Canadian 1st Division, focusing mainly on its staff officers, a long-ignored subject, in his monograph *We Lead Others Follow*.²⁹

Surprisingly, given the certainty of some of the conclusions drawn, there has been little scholarly study done comparing units in the BEF or between British and other Dominion forces. The best so far has been a comparative assessment in a paper by Gary Sheffield which was published in conference proceedings. In it Sheffield pointedly suggested the need for a monograph-length study. The article could only offer a brief (but suggestive) overview which leaves many questions

²⁷ G.W.L. Nicholson. *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1964); Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell, 2004); Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Penguin, 2007), *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting The Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008) and *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999). Brennan’s articles/chapters appear, respectively, in Yves Tremblay, ed., *Canadian Military History Since the 17th Century* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2001); Briton C. Busch, ed., *Canada and the Great War: Western Front Association Papers* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003); and Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership 1914-1918* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010).

²⁸ Another PhD dissertation by David Campbell examined the social and cultural aspects of the 2nd Canadian Division, and there has been nothing written specifically focusing on the Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions. David Campbell, “The Divisional Experience in the CEF: A Social and Operational History of the 2nd Canadian Division, 1915- 1918,” unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, 2003.

²⁹ Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) and Kenneth Radley. *We Lead, Others Follow: First Canadian Division 1914-1918* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2006).

unanswered. Christopher Pugsley's *The Anzac Experience: New Zealand, Australia and the Empire in the First World War* is a social and cultural history of the Anzacs, and largely interested in distinguishing the New Zealanders from the Australians and secondarily both from the British, which it succeeds in doing in all respects.³⁰

In the end, this dissertation examines the wartime experiences of two divisions - one British and one Canadian – with the emphasis appropriately placed on what really mattered for a division in the Western Front at this time: its combat performance and the speed with which it could be brought to a level of consistent competence. Implicit in this is a focus on the impact of senior leadership in the process as well as the nature of the fighting doctrine emphasized in training, both of which were obvious keys to battlefield performance. The two formations constitute a representative sampling of the dozens of wartime-formed divisions from which to draw conclusions about the British Empire forces collectively, as well as comparisons between the British and Dominion approaches to war on the Western Front.

³⁰ Garry Sheffield, "How Even Was the Learning Curve? Reflections on the British and Dominion Armies on the Western Front, 1916-1918," in Yves Tremblay, ed., *Canadian Military History since the 17th Century* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2001), Christopher Pugsley. *The Anzac Experience: New Zealand, Australia and Empire in the First World War* (Auckland: Reed, 2004).

Chapter 1: Raising and Training the Divisions

The 62nd and 4th Canadian Divisions came from separate sides of the world, though there were many similarities between these two 'British nations'. Although the raising of these divisions was in some aspects significantly different, when both left England for the Western Front, they largely mirrored each other, their training, manpower strength, equipment, leadership and tactical philosophy being remarkably similar. The Western Front would demonstrate if the relatively modest differences between them would notably effect their development as combat divisions.

The forming of the Canadian 4th Division

On the 30th of December, 1915 the Canadian Prime Minister, Robert Borden, called to his office the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, and Thomas White, the Finance Minister, to announce that the authorized strength of the Canadian Expeditionary Force would be raised to 500 000, doubling the manpower limit set only two months earlier.³¹ The Canadian Prime Minister had done this without consulting any of his colleagues, and the War Office as well as Major-General Willoughby Gwatkin, the British officer serving as Chief of the Canadian General Staff, were caught completely by surprise. However, Borden felt strongly that the expansion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was necessary to assist the war effort.³² On January 12th, 1916 this Order in Council was ratified. As Finance

³¹ Robert Brown, *Robert Laird Borden*, Volume II: 1914-1937 (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1980), 33

³² Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada's Overseas Ministry in the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 45

Minister White wrote, "We simply went on faith, feeling instinctively that what we had decided upon was right and that means would be found to enable us to carry it out."³³ With this new surge in the size of the CEF, the Borden government made an offer to the Imperial War Office of a fourth Canadian division. The War Office accepted the offer of the 4th Division, however, it came with a stipulation that Canada's first obligation was to complete the provision of 18 reserve battalions in England to supply reinforcement drafts for the 36 battalions of the three Canadian divisions already serving in France. In the first three months of 1916, 38 new battalions would arrive in England, some of the last battalions to be kept intact to form the new division which, unlike the previous three, would be established overseas, at Bramshott, one of the main Canadian training camps in England.³⁴

On April 5th, 1916, the War Office was informed by the Minister of Militia and Defence that Brigadier-General David Watson, commander of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, was his choice to assume command of the new force. Major-General Watson was a wealthy businessman and newspaper editor from Quebec City and had been a senior officer in the prewar Militia. A stalwart Conservative, he also had the right sort of political allies, including Canadian-born British newspaper tycoon, Max Aitken, who would assist him once he reached Britain, and Sam Hughes, who at the outset of the war had helped Watson secure the command of the 2nd

³³ Robert Brown, *Robert Laird Borden*, Volume II: 1914-1937 (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1980), 34

³⁴ David Love, *A Call to Arms: The Organization and Administration of Canada's Military in World War One* (Winnipeg: Bunker to Bunker Books, 1999), 103

Battalion.³⁵ At Second Ypres in April 1915 Watson had displayed excellent leadership abilities under fire and was promoted to command the 5th Brigade in September; eight months later, having never actually directed his brigade in a battle, he was commanding the 4th Division. Watson's selection, like so much concerning the Canadian Corps at this time, was immersed in politics. Initially, Hughes had his son Garnet, an experienced prewar militia staff officer, in mind to command the new Division.³⁶ The other officer in the running besides Watson was Henry Burstall who had been ably commanding the 1st Division's artillery.³⁷ Having served in the permanent force before the war, the latter was deemed suspect by Hughes, who felt that the regular force officers were not as capable or inspired as 'his' militia volunteers.³⁸

However, Hughes was under growing pressure from both the War Office and Borden to get the Canadian Expeditionary Force in order, as both had been dismayed by reports that administrative chaos and cronyism were rife in England and France, not the least in the filling of senior commands³⁹. To organize the forces in England Hughes placed Watson in the position of Inspector General (or head) of his Council for the Canadian Forces in Great Britain. Watson's appointment was well received by his peers, the War Office, and Robert Borden. However, Watson agreed

³⁵ Max Aitken would become Lord Beaverbrook on February 14th 1917. A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 176. Hughes had pulled strings to give the Quebecker Watson command of the Ontario-based battalion, an unpopular move in Ontario militia circles.

³⁶ Ronald Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885-1916* (Waterloo Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 281

³⁷ Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 29

³⁸ Patrick Brennan, "Major-General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War," in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership 1914-1918* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 122

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122

only reluctantly to become temporary commander of all Canadian troops in England, and then only with the caveat that he would have “sole control of all military matters.”⁴⁰ Sam Hughes’ master plan of giving the 4th Division to his son, however, did not work out. The War Office would not have Garnet Hughes, leaving Watson as the only palatable choice in Sam Hughes’ mind.⁴¹ The War Office, on approving his nomination, sent as his General Staff Officer 1 (GSO1) British regular Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Ironside. Standing 6’4, Ironside was nicknamed “Tiny”; he was 26 years old when he became Brigade-Major of the 4th Division. One biographer referred to Ironside’s temperament as “supremely self confident, forceful, and opinionated ... [and] typical of his generation in being an open-air soldier who intensely disliked the confines of desk work.”⁴² James Humphrey, an officer in the 4th Division, wrote revealingly of the relationship of Watson and Ironside:

“Although General Watson had a brilliant mind, as evidenced in his career as publisher and editor of the *Quebec Chronicle* in peacetime, he could not be expected to take a division into battle against the pick of the German army without exceptionally well-qualified staff. The assistance of Colonel Ironside was invaluable to him.”⁴³

Lieutenant-General E.A.H Alderson, formerly the Canadian Corps’ commander and during the summer of 1916 the Inspector General of the Canadian Forces, described the Divisional staff:

⁴⁰ Military Museum, ‘Watson Papers, Diary, 5 April 1916’

⁴¹ Patrick Brennan, “Major-General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War,” in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership 1914-1918* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 122

⁴² John Keegan, ed., *Churchill’s Generals* (London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2005), 18

⁴³ James Humphrey, *The Golden Bridge of Memoirs* (Ontario: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1979), 23

“Its commander (Major General D. Watson C.B.) has experience in France both as a battalion commander and a brigade commander. [In fact Watson never saw combat as a Brigade commander] I have personal knowledge of the ability he showed in both these positions, and I know him to be stout-hearted soldier. The Divisional staff is unusually strong. Both the G.S.O.1 (LT. Col. E. Ironside D.S.O., to whom great credit is due for the evident excellence of the system of training) and the A.A. & Q.M.G. (LT. Col. Edward de Panet D.S.O.) have considerable experience in France, while practically all the rest of the officers of the Divisional Staff have served there.”⁴⁴

By 1916, many of the Canadian battalions sent overseas were being broken up upon arrival, with the men sent as reinforcements to units already on the Western Front. Private Bert Cooke, a soldier in the 75th Battalion, wrote about the shock of his own battalion being dismantled: “We were about to go to bed when the Commander ordered assembly. Eight hundred were picked to go away, then it changed to five hundred... Colonel Beckett felt like a shepherd who had lost his flock.”⁴⁵ Luckily for Lieutenant-Colonel Beckett and the 75th Battalion, news then came that another battalion would be broken up instead, and the 75th Battalion would head to France after all.⁴⁶ Junior officers from dissolved units were usually sent to the Front as reinforcements because of the high casualties these ranks suffered. Unless they were prepared to take a reduction in rank, most middle-grade officers (Captain and above) would stay in England - these officers were largely underemployed and their morale suffered accordingly. It was not until May of 1917 that a policy was introduced whereby ‘draft conducting officers’ above the rank of Lieutenant were given the choice of reverting to that rank or being sent back to

⁴⁴ Library and Archives Canada (LAC) RG 9, V. 44, File 8-5-8D, ‘Inspection of 4th Canadian Division- July 29th 1916’

⁴⁵ Bert Cooke, *We’re Not Dead Yet* (St. Catherines, ON: Vanwell, 2004), 55-56

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 56

Canada. This meant that the competition among battalions to be part of the 4th Division, likely the last to head to the Western Front, was intense.

In choosing the twelve to serve in the 4th Division, Watson and Ironside had the pick of the litter of the battalions remaining. This was the last chance for these units, raised with such fanfare in Canada, to go to France intact. If not chosen, they would almost certainly be broken up for reinforcement drafts.⁴⁷ The 'political' infighting, for the best and worst reasons, amongst the battalion commanders to have their units picked was fierce.⁴⁸ Watson and Ironside toured Canadian training camps bent on claiming the most promising candidates. But the free hand that he had been promised when he became the Inspector General of the Canadian Forces turned out to be largely an illusion. True to character, Sam Hughes began to meddle with the battalions and commanders which should be picked. One example of this occurred when Watson gave in to Hughes, Carson⁴⁹, and Aitken, who together had pushed for the 10th Brigade to be an all-Western formation. Watson found that picking battalions for the other brigades also came with political interference.⁵⁰ He took the 73rd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) which had been raised in Montreal - its patrons included several influential members of the city's Anglophone political and business elite. The 87th, another Anglo-Montreal battalion with

⁴⁷ In fact twelve 'saved' battalions would form the 5th Division, however, they, too, would be broken up in February 1918 and sent to France as reinforcements.

⁴⁸ Military Museum, 'Watson Papers, Diary, 28 April 1916'

⁴⁹ John Wallace Carson, a successful businessman, was one of Sam Hughes' closest political cronies. Too old to serve at the front, he was dispatched to London where his exact role was unclear. He was to represent the Militia Department of Canada in the United Kingdom in connection with supplies and other requirements for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 33

⁵⁰ Military Museum, 'Watson Papers, Diary, 4 May 1916'

important friends, was selected for the 11th Brigade. The Battalion was rated as a highly capable unit, but both Ironside and Watson considered its commander weak. Lieutenant-Colonel Irving Redford, a mere 31, had only recently been promoted and happened to be the son-in-law of General Carson. Watson got part of what he wanted, as Lieutenant-Colonel Redford stepped down to be 87th's second-in-command. However, General Carson, not Watson, got to pick the new commander.⁵¹ Watson was obviously frustrated by the political interference in officer selection. Experience at St Eloi, he told Carson, had convinced him that divisional commanders must be free to choose their own subordinate commanders and staff officers.⁵²

Watson did manage to select some of his battalions without much interference, such as the 102nd. He commented enthusiastically in his diary that it was "by far the best" after watching four prospective battalions train.⁵³ By the summer of 1916 the battalions of the 4th Division had finally been selected. The 10th Brigade would consist of the 44th, 46th, 47th, and 50th; the 11th Brigade was comprised of the 54th, 75th, 87th, and 102nd, and the 12th Brigade included the 38th, 72nd, 73rd, and 78th Battalions. These units were drawn from across Canada and had reached England at different times. Some had been there since 1915, and had completed substantial training before being assigned to the 4th Division, while others had only arrived in England in the late spring of 1916 and were rapidly incorporated in the 4th Division.

⁵¹ Ibid., 30th June and 8th, 10th July 1916

⁵² Stephen Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 118

⁵³ Military Museum, 'Watson Papers, Diary, 30 June 1916'

However, the Canadian Corps was simultaneously suffering a shortage of manpower - in June, mostly at Mount Sorrel, the Corps had incurred 20,000 casualties, this even before the Battle of Somme had commenced.⁵⁴ Contrary to the conclusions of other historians, Brennan argues in his study of Watson that the General has been unfairly judged for trying to keep the best men for his Division at a time when reinforcements were desperately needed at the front.⁵⁵ He argues persuasively that Watson was not responsible for so many battalions being tied up in administrative no-man's land and had simply carried out his orders to form a division out of the best units he could find. Also, the dearth of trained men going to the Front was not Watson's fault.⁵⁶ In fact the 4th Division at this time had the priority in getting trained men, so that it could be deployed to France as soon as possible.

If Watson and Ironside thought that Sam Hughes meddled with the selection of battalions and battalion commanders, their independence in choosing brigadiers was even more circumscribed. Hughes, who felt that as the Minister of Militia and Defence he alone held the right to pick all senior field officers, selected all three men, one of whom was his younger brother, Lieutenant-Colonel William St. Pierre Hughes, then commanding the 21st Battalion at the Front. He took command of the 10th Brigade on the 16th of June. Frederick Loomis, who had commanded the 13th Battalion effectively through the Second Ypres and St. Eloi Crater battles, and earlier

⁵⁴ Patrick Brennan, "Major-General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War," in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership, 1914-1918* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 122

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 122

⁵⁶ Stephen Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 113

that year received the 7th Brigade, was switched to command the 11th Brigade on May 16th. Loomis, however, did not remain long in his new post. He had serious differences of opinion with Watson and Ironside, essentially holding a low opinion of Ironside whom Watson trusted implicitly, and it was decided by mutual agreement that he would leave the 4th Division.⁵⁷

On the recommendation of Carson, Victor Odlum, commander of the 7th Battalion, got the nod as 11th Brigade commander. Odlum, a successful Vancouver businessman prior to the war who had shown excellent leadership ability at Second Ypres where he had been thrust into command in the midst of the battle, and displayed ample battlefield initiative since, was well regarded by Canadian Corps commander, Julian Byng.⁵⁸ He assumed command of the Brigade on the 4th of July.⁵⁹ Finally, on May 11th the 12th Brigade went to Lord Brooke, a close ally of Hughes, who had been a regular officer in the British army and before being given a staff position in England had commanded the Canadian 4th Brigade for five months during 1915. Before the war Lord Brooke had spent time in Toronto and had developed a friendship with Hughes there.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Loomis would command the 2nd Brigade and later (1918) be promoted to command the 3rd Division.

⁵⁸ MG 27, II G 1 A-1764, 'Aitken to Hughes, 24 June 1916'

⁵⁹ MG 30, E 300, 'Victor Odlum Correspondence with David Watson, '

⁶⁰ Of the 40 Senior officers who served as battalion commanders and higher during the 4th Division's tenure on the Western Front (not counting temporary replacements while OCs were on leave, and so forth), 23 were Canadian-born, 15 British-born, one American-born and one unknown place of birth. RG 150, CEF personnel files, accession 1992-93/166, various files and various authors, *Canada in the Great World War, Vol VI*, Appendix I: Commanding Officers Overseas Units, (Toronto: United Publishers of Canada, 1921), 315-22

As previously stated, the 4th Division's battalions had arrived in England from as early as the fall of 1915 to as recently as the end of June, 1916.⁶¹ The regimental history of the 44th Battalion, which had been training at Bramshott since November, recorded that upon arrival the men were told to "forget everything they ever told you in Canada!"⁶² Officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were put through classes of instruction by men who had served in France, with the troops practicing bombing, digging and wiring trenches, range finding, signaling, machine gunnery, musketry, scouting, sniping, bayonet-fighting, day and night marching by compass, and physical training. Specialized training was done both at Bramshott and other army bases such as Aldershot.⁶³ During this period Canadian training in England was under the guidance of General Sam Steele, a septuagenarian hero of the North West Mounted Police and Boer War, but competent enough, and the instruction, based on standard British manuals, proceeded effectively. As the 54th Battalion's regimental history approvingly noted, "Strenuous training was the order of the day and all responded well to the efforts. Courses for officers and N.C.O.'s were freely partaken of and much benefit received therefrom."⁶⁴ Once selected for service in the 4th Division, the battalions spent the late spring and summer taking part in a series

⁶¹ Most of the battalions that would be part of the 4th Division had arrived by January of 1916, although the 102nd battalion, the last to arrive in England of those that would be part of the 4th Division, reached Britain on June 28th 1916. Gould L. McCleod, *From B.C. To Baisieux: Being the Narrative History of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion* (Victoria: Thos.R Cusack Presses, 1919), 18. The battalions that were to be part of the 4th Division were raised from July of 1915 onwards. David Love, *A Call to arms: The Organization and Administration of Canada's Military in World War One* (Winnipeg: Bunker to Bunker Books, 1999), 138-39

⁶² E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), 17

⁶³ RG 9, V.4859, folder 30, file 9, 'Deeply Important Notes to be impressed on every Unit Commander in the 4th Canadian Division'

⁶⁴ J.B. Beswick, *Cinquante-Quatre 1914-1919: Being the Short History of the 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion by One of Them* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2003), 3

of mock tactical exercises with other battalions, both Canadian and British. These mock operations would usually involve two companies from one battalion attacking a redoubt held by the “enemy” and then holding onto it against counterattacks. Such tactical exercises were used to teach the men practical ways of launching an assault. Among the skills practiced were how to scout an enemy position before an attack, advancing in ‘artillery’ formation, communicating with their artillery, dealing with enemy machine guns and digging in once a position had been taken. Large-scale training operations were also done at the brigade and even the divisional level. The point of these larger exercises was obvious - to get the 4th Division’s still rather raw soldiers interacting within a larger formation and mastering how to wage war on the Western Front. These training schemes were also viewed as an ideal testing ground to see which officers showed initiative and leadership abilities, and which did not measure up and should be relieved of command.⁶⁵

The senior officers of the 4th Division felt strongly that battalion-level success depended on the interaction and competence of the junior officers. General Watson issued a memo driving this point home to his subordinates: “As the success of modern warfare depends on the efficiency of the Platoons in a Battalion, the inspection of a Battalion should be largely directed to finding out what the Platoon Commander and the Platoon sergeant know, and know how they carry out their work.”⁶⁶ The document went on to stress what the junior officer’s role was wide-

⁶⁵ RG 9, V.4859, folder 30, file 3, ‘Tactical Exercise’

⁶⁶ RG 9, V.4589, folder 30, file 9, ‘Deeply Important Notes to be impressed on every Unit Commander in the 4th Canadian Division’

ranging, from the tactical realities of how to lead an assault to making sure that the men's boots were in good shape.⁶⁷

Junior officer selection for the 4th Division was slightly different than it had been for previous CEF Divisions. The 4th Division's leadership was not necessarily looking for officers who came from the elevated social positions from which many of the 1st Division officers in particular had been drawn.⁶⁸ They were also looking for junior officers who had combat experience on the Western Front. Obviously, to a considerable degree, the men who had previously become officers, and now had battle experience, would have come from higher social ranks, however, this background was no longer always the major criteria it had been in 1914 and 1915. But as Isabelle Diane Losinger points out in her M. A. thesis, men entering the commissioned ranks in 1916 still by and large came from "good" social standings.⁶⁹ But combat experience now counted for a great deal, although it was hard for the divisions at the front to spare such men.

The upper levels of the Canadian military and political elite in England might have been reaching the height of ineffectiveness and occupying themselves chiefly with political infighting, but fortunately, Watson and the 4th Division steered largely clear of this and focused on training which seems to have proceeded unaffected by the disorganization which characterized so much of the CEF's British activities.⁷⁰ Almost all of the middle-ranking and junior officers (battalion commanders and

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Isabelle Losinger, "Officer Man Relations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919" (unpublished MA thesis: Carleton University, 1991), 246

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ To have a more clear understanding of the Canadian political disaster during this time, see Chapter 4 of Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982)

down) had little or no combat experience on the Western Front. However, the Canadians were receiving very similar training to the British Divisions, training which was basically sound. Watson and Ironside made every effort to pick what, at least in their minds, were the best battalions and officers for their Division. Though the 4th had little experience with fighting, it would soon be thrown into the fray, and prove whether their selections were wise or not.

At the end of the summer, Watson's command would be sent to the Somme. The training that the 4th Division had relatively quickly completed in England had matched what was expected of all units in the BEF, and while not perfect, had nevertheless benefited from lessons learned in action. For the most part, instructors who had seen combat on the Western Front had taken over the responsibility of training the men. This preparation, however, had been rushed. One battalion, the 102nd, spent only six weeks in England before heading to France. Most British units would have had a far longer training period before they would have been deployed overseas. That said, the Inspector General of the Canadian Forces confidently summed up the state of the 4th Division ten days before it left for France:

"I know from personal knowledge, that the 4th Canadian Division has as fine personnel and spirit as the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions have, and I believe that, owing to it having so much experience with it and behind it, it will go overseas with every prospect of adding to the reputation already made of the Canadian Corps."⁷¹

Watson and his men would soon find out whether this appraisal was unduly optimistic or not.

⁷¹ RG 9, V. 44, File 8-5-8D, ' Inspection of 4th Canadian Division- July 29th 1916'

The British 62nd Division

The British 62nd (West Riding) Division was a Second Line Territorial Force initially recruited from the West Riding of Yorkshire. Second Line Territorial Forces comprised units that were formed in the areas where the Territorials had been located before they had volunteered to serve in war zones. The Second Line Territorials would then train new volunteers as replacements for the Territorial units (now called First Line Territorials) at the front. The Second Line unit would take the First Line unit's number preceded by the numeral 'two' to designate it as the Second Line force from the same region.⁷² Though the Second Line Territorials usually had fewer experienced officers and suffered from shortages and inadequate equipment when compared to the original Territorial units, the BEF's critical need to expand meant that fourteen divisions of Second Line Territorials were ultimately raised and sent overseas. As soon as it was possible to do so, the War Office would assign experienced senior officers as divisional commanders and brigadiers, men who were most commonly prewar regulars, to replace the original cadre who had raised the divisions, many of whom were deemed unfit for senior command responsibilities because of age or inability. The 62nd was such a division.⁷³

Initially, most of the men comprising the 62nd Division were part of the great wave of volunteers. The process of forming a new division would commence once the First Line Territorial division had been completed. For the most part, the

⁷² An example of this would be the 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the 49th Division. The 62nd Division would have the 2/6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment. Both Battalions would have been raised in West Yorkshire.

⁷³ Imperial War Museum 3354 86/57/1, 'Private Papers of Brigadier R.C. Foot'

battalions that would eventually make up the 62nd Division had been around at least in name since the fall of 1914. These units, however, would not have been recognizable to the battalions which would eventually sail with the 62nd Division to France. War diaries, even if somewhat self-serving, discuss how in the early days these units were filled with misfits weeded out from the previous Yorkshire Territorial Division (the 49th) and had no equipment, even rifles, or competent officers or NCOs to train their soldiers. As the Director General of the Territorial Force, Sir Edward Cecil Bethune, remarked with understatement: "Great difficulty was experienced in training, as, with so many new Armies to be formed, the majority of capable instructors went to them, and our Second Line Territorials Force had to train themselves as best they could."⁷⁴ While to a large degree, the training syllabus was drawn from regular manuals, from division to division and even from battalion to battalion there were no uniform training methods, and in practice many training decisions were actually left up to the unit's commanding officer.⁷⁵ The 62nd, or as it was called at this time, 2/2nd Division, officially came into being on February 17, 1915, when its Divisional headquarters was established at Doncaster under the command of Major-General Sir James Trotter. Writing of his hectic days as commander of the 62nd Division, Trotter lamented:

"The difficulties affecting training were at this stage very serious. The troops were not all provided with uniforms. They were without equipment; the Infantry

⁷⁴ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 18

⁷⁵ Spencer Jones, *From the Boer War to World War: Tactical Reforms of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 209

had no arms, except a few d[rill] purpose] rifles; the Artillery no guns; the mounted troops, artillery and engineers no horses”⁷⁶

To further complicate matters the Division was soon uprooted, moving initially from Doncaster to Thornsby Park (near Mansfield in Nottinghamshire) in June.

Training was problematic for the 62nd Division in the spring and summer of 1915. Not only was equipment scarce and to a large degree, the officers inadequately trained themselves, but the best men from the units were constantly being siphoned off as replacements for the 49th Division, 116 officers and 2,778 other ranks in the period from March to August of 1915 alone. That fall, a Third Line of Territorials for the West Riding of Yorkshire was authorized and the exodus of men to the 49th was finally stopped. Simultaneously, the 62nd Division also began to receive proper equipment and arms so that for the first time, all units began to be issued rifles, though these were not necessarily the standard Lee-Enfields - many were from Japanese manufacturers. Machine gun sections were formed in the summer of 1915 with real guns instead of ‘ingenious’ wooden models. In November, training moved yet again, this time to Newcastle.⁷⁷ The brigades in the 62nd Division would be designated the 185th, 186th, and 187th. The Division was also allotted a unique symbol that would differentiate it from the other divisions in the BEF - a pelican with a raised right foot. The story went that the pelican would not lower its foot until it was on German soil.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Laurie Magnus, *The West Riding Territorials in the Great War* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trubner, 1920), 70

⁷⁷ Everard Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919*, Volume I (London: Naval and Military Press, 2003), 7

⁷⁸ National Archives of Australia (NAA) Lord Gowrie Papers, MS 2852, Series 8, ‘January- June 1917’

At this time, the War Office began to rectify the lack of experience and skill in the senior leadership in the 62nd Division, most of these officers finally being replaced with battle-experienced men. Overall command passed to Major-General Walter Phipps Braithwaite, a career soldier who had served in Burma (1886-1887) and later South Africa during the Boer War (1899-1902). In an account written after the war, Brigadier-General Richard Foot, who had served in the 62nd Division, described Braithwaite as:

“... a true ‘beau sabreur’, tall and lean, handsome with a hawk eye, immaculate in dress, courteous and concise in speech, with a ready wit that was never unkind. He came to the Division under the cloud of having been on Ian Hamilton’s staff at the Dardanelles failure; and he cannot have been very happy to find himself committed to the making of an untried Territorial Army second line formation.”⁷⁹

Charles Bean, the official Australian war correspondent, who had been at Gallipoli with Braithwaite, wrote in his diary that Braithwaite was both a disloyal “snob” and one of the only British officers at the Dardanelles who had any “brains”.⁸⁰ Perhaps the person with the best insight into Braithwaite was Sir Ian Hamilton, for whom Braithwaite had served as Chief of Staff during the Gallipoli debacle. In his diary, Hamilton wrote that Braithwaite was cheerful, helpful and competent.⁸¹ For his part, Braithwaite, made it clear from the start of the war that he was anxious to get to the

⁷⁹ Imperial War Museum (IWM), 3354 86/57/1, ‘Private Papers of Brigadier R.C. Foot’

⁸⁰ CEW Bean, *Bean’s Gallipoli: The Diaries of Australia’s Official War Correspondent* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009), 122 and 218

⁸¹ Ian Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary*, Volume I (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920), 7

Western Front and command.⁸² The 62nd Division was his opportunity, and he threw himself into his new task with just that in mind.

Braithwaite had for his GSO1 another very capable career officer, Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. A.G.A. Hore-Ruthven, who had won a Victoria Cross in the Sudan in 1899, and like Braithwaite had recently returned from serving in Gallipoli.⁸³ He was an able divisional chief of staff who served with the 62nd Division until September of 1917 when he was transferred to the Guards Division.

The War Office also replaced all the infantry brigade commanders. Newly appointed to Brigadier-General, V.W. de Fable, who had been commanding a battalion in France, was called back to take over the 185th Brigade, which comprised the 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th and the 2/8th West Yorkshire Regiment. The 186th Brigade went to F.F. Hill who had been invalided back from Gallipoli; the battalions in this Brigade were the 2/4th, 2/5th, 2/6th and the 2/7th West Riding Regiment. R.O.B. Taylor, who had also served in Gallipoli received command of the 187th Brigade, which included the 2/4th and 2/5 King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI) and 2/4th and the 2/5th Yorkshire and Lancaster Regiment.⁸⁴

For the most part the original battalion commanders for the 62nd Division were Territorial officers who had been with their regiments for a number of years, some having even served in the Boer War. With Braithwaite taking over command,

⁸² Cambridge University Library: Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, 'Walter Braithwaite Correspondence with Lord Hardinge-November 1914'

⁸³ NAA Lord Gowrie Papers MS 2852, Series 8, 'January- June 1917'. He would later become the longest serving Governor-General of Australia, from 1936-1945.

⁸⁴ Also attached to the 62nd Division was the artillery, which was composed of the 310th, 311th and 312th Brigades, all under the command of Brigadier-General A.T. Anderson. Everard Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919*, Volume I (London: Naval and Military Press, 2003), 239

many of these officers were replaced with younger Territorial men. Such was the case with Lieutenant-Colonel R. A. Bottomley, the first commanding officer of the 2/5th West Yorkshire Battalion, who was 43 years old and an experienced Territorial officer. He came from a wealthy family and had served in the Territorials since 1889. Once the 62nd Division was formed he was found weak and quickly replaced. As Brigadier-General de Falbe bluntly reported: "... in my opinion Lt Colonel R. A. A. Bottomley... does not possess the qualities and experience necessary for the successful training of a Battalion for active service."⁸⁵ His replacement was Lieutenant-Colonel J. Josselyn, a solicitor from Ipswich who had been in the Territorial forces for a number of years and served as Brigade-Major in the 186th before taking over command of the 2/5th West Yorks.⁸⁶ These changes in leadership were fundamental if the 62nd Division was to be successfully trained, let alone successful in battle.

By 1915, the selection of junior officers was also beginning to change. As historian Peter Simkins argues, this was because the enormous expansion of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) meant that the traditional way of selecting officers could no longer always be carried out. That said, the selection process still tried to follow closely to pre-war criteria, namely "... to recruit subalterns from a fairly restricted social stratum."⁸⁷ This desire was clearly discernable in the initial make up of the 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion. Its commanding officer had gone to

⁸⁵ Fraser Skirrow, *Massacre on the Marne* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2007), 46

⁸⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel Josselyn was invalided home for shell shock on August 29th 1917. He would recover and with another unit, win a DSO and OBE, and go on to lead a Brigade in Russia. He was well liked by his men and seemed to have been a competent officer. *Massacre on the Marne*, 220

⁸⁷ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 222

Harrow and his officers were almost exclusively graduates of Eton, Harrow or other elite public schools.⁸⁸

In January, the 62nd Division moved yet again, to Salisbury Plain, where Major-General Braithwaite could finally set about training the Division with its proper equipment and arms. The camps on Salisbury Plain had typically been the last area of training before a division was sent overseas, but in May Braithwaite received orders that he would need to provide a reinforcement draft of 4000 men. This would have effectively gutted his division, and undone much of the training already accomplished. Luckily, this order was rescinded, only to be replaced by another sending the division to the East Coast of Britain where it would be employed in the reserve in a defensive role, guarding against the remote possibility of a German landing. The officers and men of the 62nd Division were shattered. As Brigadier-General A.T. Anderson, the Divisional artillery commander, wrote somewhat dramatically in his diary: "To our unutterable disgust we hear we are, after all, to go to the East Coast, to the neighbourhood of Lowestoft. Everyone down in the depths again. I hear the general is miserable. Woe! Oh! Woe!"⁸⁹ While the east coast location was not as conducive to training divisions as Salisbury Plain, the unit continued to work up as if it would be heading to France. Focus was put on musketry, Lewis guns, trench digging, gas drill, raiding and forced marches intended to toughen the men physically. They did have a little 'excitement' in their new east coast encampment, however, as several German Zeppelin raids went over their lines

⁸⁸ Norman MacLeod, *War History of the 6th (Service) Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders* (Edinburgh: Blackwood Press, 1934), 3

⁸⁹ Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier General Anderson Diary, May 30th 1916'

that summer. Though the airships did not cause them any harm, Brigadier-General Anderson sarcastically noted: "On one occasion three bombs fell within 300 yards of the house. 'Another pill from Kaiser Bill.'"⁹⁰ In October the Division finally received word that it was to move to Bedford and Wellingborough in order to undertake the final preparations before embarkation for France. As a relieved General Braithwaite wrote:

"I do not think a more happy and contented Division, or one better found and equipped, ever left the shores of England, and I think it was as well trained as a Division could be, thanks to all the help I received from the Staff and Commanding Officers, and to all the friends in France, who kept us supplied with the latest training instructions."⁹¹

Ferried across the channel as so many had been before it, the 62nd Division would arrive in France in early January of 1917.

Though both divisions came from different parts of the 'British world', there were certainly many similarities in how they were raised and trained. The divisions were made up, in large part, of men who had no military training before volunteering, and who were led by a small cadre of senior officers who had seen combat either on the Western Front or in the Mediterranean theater. The training their battalions had received before being incorporated into their respective divisions had often been cursory - both tactically outdated and haphazardly undertaken. Observing how these battalions trained in 1915 demonstrates that they had comparable deficiencies. The 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion from British Columbia had had neither uniforms nor proper rifles when they initially reached

⁹⁰ Ibid., 'July 31st, 1916'

⁹¹ Everard Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919*, Volume I (London: Naval and Military Press, 2003), 9

England. As the unit historian wrote: "Life was dull on the Spit: there's no denying it. We had no rifles, except for a dozen or so Ross Rifles, which were periodically exhibited on wet days by some enthusiastic sergeant with confidence in his vocal chords and his ability in the art of demonstration."⁹² This was all too similar to what the 62nd Division's Battalions were going through in England at the same time, for they also lacked basic equipment, uniforms and even combat arms. As Captain E.C. Gregory, then a subaltern in the 2/6th West Yorkshire Regiment, related: "One day [the battalion] would have a few rifles issued to it and the next day these would be withdrawn and replaced by Japanese rifles, but with no ammunition suitable to its particular bore, or no "Dummies" with which any training could be done."⁹³ Predictably, the training of these units was not even barely adequate. With a lack of equipment and arms, not to mention capable instruction, both the British and Canadian battalions emphasized physical training and drill at the section, platoon, company, and battalion level. Bayonet training with dummy rifles and endless route marches would fill the weeks. Not surprisingly battalions in both the 62nd and 4th Divisions complained of rampant boredom among their men during the early period.

Once the divisions were formed, the training took on a very uniform progression, with each carrying out the instruction outlined in the same syllabi that had been handed down from the War Office. Training manuals such as *Notes on the*

⁹² L. McLeod Gould, *From B.C. to Baisieux: Being the Narrative History of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion* (Victoria: Thos.R. Cusack Presses, 1919), 13

⁹³ E.C. Gregory, *History of the 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co, 1923), 6

Employment of Machine Guns and the Training of Machine Gunners issued by the General staff of (British) General Headquarters and instructions for the *Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* issued by the War Office are just two examples of manuals both divisions used. The Canadian forces were not working from their own manuals which in fact did not exist - as part of the B.E.F. they would be applying the same doctrine as any other unit within the organization (though implementation would be under Canadian supervision, not British). An examination of the training received by both units in the spring and summer of 1916 demonstrates that it was still very similar. With the battalions being incorporated into divisions, and with the senior command in both divisions now having officers who had actually seen combat, effective training could be commenced in earnest. The Divisions were supplied with the proper kit and arms and installed in proper training camps: the Canadian 4th Division at Bramshott and the 62nd Division on the Salisbury Plain. At the battalion and brigade level, both units' war diaries from these months talk of practicing advancing in "waves", mopping up, trench-to-trench raids, bombing, and attacking strong points with rifle grenades and Lewis Guns. The goals of the senior officers and the training being carried out under their direction were very similar, and the result was a considerable degree of uniformity between the two Divisions as was intended.

A final similarity between the two Divisions was in the composition of the Divisions themselves. Though there are conflicting sources on the precise number of officers and men that made up a contemporary British or Canadian infantry division,

the numbers are all very close to just under 20,000 men for each.⁹⁴ They were also organized in a similar fashion, with both Divisions' battalions comprised of four companies, each with one Vickers machine gun per battalion, while divisional artillery was also roughly similar in size (though the 4th Canadian Division would not receive its own artillery brigades until November of 1916, and in the meantime the 4th Canadian Divisional artillery had an extra brigade of field guns under its control).⁹⁵ Other than that and a few insignificant differences, the composition of the Canadian 4th Division mirrored that of the British 62nd Division.

However, there were also significant differences between these two Divisions, starting with how senior officers had been selected. In the 62nd Division, battalion commanders who had raised their units were left in place unless they were found to be deficient, in which case a more capable (and invariably more battle-experienced) commander replaced them.⁹⁶ In contrast in the CEF there were obviously other factors than just competency involved in determining command at the battalion level. The bane of the Dominion contingent in the early years, Watson and Ironside had to deal with both Hughes' interests and other political considerations when picking commanders. Ultimately, the 62nd was one of 65 British Divisions operating overseas in the First World War. The War Office was a

⁹⁴ To show an example of exact numbers I have included two books: David Love, *A Call to Arms: The Organization and Administration of Canada's Military in World War One* (Winnipeg: Bunker to Bunker Books, 1999), 28 says that the size of a Canadian Division in 1916 was 19,772. Martin Middlebrook, *Your Country Needs You: Expansion of the British Army Infantry Divisions 1914-1919* (Barnsly: Pen and Sword Books Limited, 2000), 10 puts a British Division in the summer of 1916 at 19,630.

⁹⁵ However in March of 1917 all Canadian divisional artilleries were reorganized to conform to the British model David Love, *A Call to Arms: The Organization and Administration of Canada's Military in World War One* (Winnipeg: Bunker to Bunker Books, 1999), 165

⁹⁶ In most cases these were Territorial officers with little experience, similar again to the Canadian battalions.

thoroughly professionalized institution, and direct political interference in the officer-selection process was not tolerated. A divisional commander like Braithwaite faced many of the same problems Watson did on assembling and training thousands of enthusiastic amateurs, and preparing them for the appalling demands of trench warfare, but worrying about being scrutinized (or overruled) when assessing the competency of his subordinates was fortunately not one of them.

To a large degree, the Canadian recruits came from a mix of urban and rural areas, whereas the Yorkshiremen were drawn primarily from the urban working and lower middle classes. It also must be remembered that a significant number of the 'Canadian' soldiers were in fact recent immigrants from Britain, fully 49 percent of those who served overseas in the CEF, and for the last of the Canadian divisions raised, certainly around one-third, so that at least among the junior officers and enlisted ranks, the cultural similarities with their opposite numbers in the 62nd Division would have been quite pronounced. Though this aspect of the character of the divisions will not be delved into deeply in the coming chapters, it is not insignificant as it demonstrates these formations possessed an additional (and in Canadian accounts, a too often underestimated) commonality as they headed off to war.

Though the Canadian 4th Division would receive its baptism of fire within a British Corps, by November of 1916 it would be part of the Canadian Corps and remain there for the remainder of the war. The 62nd Division, on the other hand, would move from Corps to Corps, at times with very little warning, with the result that its senior commanders and staff officers would never become familiar with

their opposite numbers at Corps level or among the neighbouring divisions at whose sides they would fight.⁹⁷

A final difference between the two formations is the amount of time spent training as a complete division in England before being sent to the Western Front and into action. Though many of the battalions that comprised the 62nd Division had been around in one state or another since the autumn of 1914, the Division was not officially formed until mid-February 1915. In contrast many battalions in the Canadian 4th Division raised in the summer of 1915 arrived in late 1915 and early 1916 and had had only a few months of serious training in England to supplement what was widely acknowledged, even in the CEF, as being perfunctory instruction in Canada.⁹⁸ The Division itself was formally established on April 5th, 1916, and did not have to wait long in limbo – nor have time to complete badly needed preparations - before being sent to the Front, for by September they were on the Somme. In comparison it would be twenty-three months after being officially formed before the 62nd Division reached the Western Front, during which time the men had undergone extensive training in England and were as prepared as possible to head overseas. That said, no amount of preparation in England could properly equip the soldiers of either Division for the reality of trench warfare.

⁹⁷ It is interesting to note that only the BEF among the major World War I combatants carried out this practice of moving divisions between different corps.

⁹⁸David Love, *A Call to Arms: The Organization and Administration of Canada's Military in World War One* (Winnipeg: Bunker to Bunker Books, 1999), 138-39

Chapter 2: The 4th Division and 62nd Division enter the line

In the fall of 1916, at the Battle of the Somme, the Canadian 4th Division would get its first experience fighting on the Western front, which would also be the only time that the 4th Division fought under a Corps other than the Canadian Corps. In its first four months in France, the 4th Division demonstrated that it was not able to deliver consistent results. Though most of its attacks were relatively successful, others resulted in noteworthy failures. The 4th Division and its leadership through all ranks, starting with its commander, showed that if it was to be an effective division in the BEF, it would have to mature as a fighting force. In contrast, the 62nd Division had a quite different introduction to the Western Front where it was quickly thrown into pursuing German forces as they withdrew to the newly established Hindenburg Line. After that, it played a peripheral role at the First Battle of Bullecourt where it underperformed, though in large part due to factors outside the Division's control.

In early August of 1916, the 4th Division began arriving in France. Units came ashore at the ancient port of Le Havre, and entrained for Godewaersvelde, a French town on the Franco-Belgian border from where they marched to the Canadian Corps lines. The Divisional Headquarters was set up at the Flemish town of Hoograaf. On the 14th and 15th, the 10th and 11th Brigades were attached to the 2nd Canadian Division and the 12th Brigade was to be attached to the 3rd Canadian Division.⁹⁹ However, the relief of the 3rd Division on the left sector of the Canadian line was

⁹⁹ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division General Staff War Diary August 1916.'

delayed, so the 12th Brigade was instead attached to the British 19th Division. At this point, the 4th Division was part of Frank's Force, named after the Second Army's Major-General, Royal Artillery. It was a temporary unit composed of British, Australian, and Belgian artillery units and other miscellaneous formations which the Canadian 4th Division would remain part of until the former was dissolved on the 18th of September.¹⁰⁰

The purpose of these moves was to enable fresh divisions to train with and learn from their experienced paired divisions. Advance parties of officers and NCOs joined the latter, followed by a company from each battalion, a practice that was repeated so that all officers and men would receive frontline experience with either the 3rd Canadian or 19th British Division. Later in August, the 4th Division went through some final intensive training before taking over responsibility for a frontline sector. One area of attention that the 4th Division diaries specifically note was gas training.¹⁰¹ During this period, the men were also issued with the Lee-Enfield, a replacement for the discredited Ross rifle, and were also given the newly issued steel helmets.

During August brigadiers, battalion commanders and senior officers in the 4th Division spent time at the Army schools learning attack doctrine. On the 28th, senior officers in the 12th Brigade attended a practice assault put on by the Second

¹⁰⁰ G.W.L. Nicholson. *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1964), 188-89

¹⁰¹ The "PH" helmet was a bag- made of thick grey flannel, impregnated with carbolic acid, provided with glass eyepieces and a rubber breathing tube. The soldiers carried a cloth satchel that held the "PH" helmet. When a gas attack came the flannel bag would be put over the head, the rubber tube clamped by the teeth and the lower part of the "helmet" tucked into the shirt. See E.S. Russenholt, *6000 Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), 29

Army Central School for Instruction where they observed the latest tactics being simulated over a dummy course.¹⁰² The exercise focused on the use of small group tactics employing Lewis guns and bombs (grenades) to support the attacking waves of riflemen moving forward, these methods paralleling what the Canadian 4th and 62nd West Riding Divisions had been carrying out in England. As historian Paddy Griffith wrote: "Once each platoon had its own Lewis Gun, as was starting to be true in the winter of 1916/1917, combined [arms] tactics had begun to be possible."¹⁰³ One needs to emphasize that the training and tactics utilized by the 4th Canadian Division during this period were in no way unique to Canadian units; they were just following the established tactical doctrine of the greater BEF.

At the end of August, the Canadian Corps, without the 4th Division, had left the sector to take part in the Battle of the Somme. On the 23rd of August, elements of the 10th Canadian Brigade were the first to take over a frontline section on their own at Vierstraat. The 11th Canadian Brigade followed suit, relieving Watson's old 5th Canadian Brigade at Saint Eloi the next day, while the 12th Brigade assumed responsibility for the frontage of the 56th and 58th British Brigades on the 3rd of September. On its first night, the 4th Division suffered its initial officer casualty at the front when Lt. Barthe of the 75th Battalion was shot.¹⁰⁴ Overall, their time at the front was relatively quiet, though on certain days throughout the three-and half-week rotation some of their positions were heavily shelled. All battalions rotated

¹⁰² RG 9, V 4234, folder 30, 'Message to Officer Commanding 10th, 11th, 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades'

¹⁰³ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's art of Attack 1916-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 79

¹⁰⁴ RG9, V. 4943, '75th war diary, Appendix August 1916'

through their brigade's frontline trenches, and the men learned to carry out patrol and bombing sorties, as well as execute minor raids across no-man's land. Relatively quiet or not, being there for the first time was quite an experience. As Jim Broomhead, a sniper from the 46th Battalion, remembered years later:

“It was pitch dark except for star shells. The fellows who were to instruct me in my style of work were standing on the fire step and seemed unconcerned that the enemy was only about one hundred and fifty feet away. As far as I was concerned, I was scared to death.”¹⁰⁵

The 4th Division did take part in a series of thirty raids the Second Army launched as a diversion for the Fourth's Army's assault in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. Of the BEF's ten raids on the night of the 16th, the Canadian newcomers conducted seven. The men who would be carrying out the raids were withdrawn from the line a week before, and practiced on dummy courses right up to the final night. A total of 274 officers and men took part, with the soldiers drawn from the 46th, 47th, 54th, 72nd, 75th, and 87th Battalions.¹⁰⁶ The raids were designated by numerals, with all except raid number 7 deemed successful. The plan was for the raiders to silently approach the German lines and wait for their artillery to smother the lines. Once the barrage lifted, the raiders would bomb their way into the German trenches and quickly try to grab prisoners or documents, and then withdraw. To facilitate the route back to their own lines, they were to follow a path earlier laid out with white tape. Alan Jack, a private and one of the raiders from the 54th Battalion, later recalled his experience:

¹⁰⁵ James McWilliams and R. James Steel. *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurting Publishing, 1978), 32

¹⁰⁶ MG 30, E300, V. 18, 'Odlum papers, 11th Infantry Brigade raid 1916'

“... Anyway, I remember jumping into the German line which at point was quite shallow, about 3 feet deep, and I landed right on the back of a German who was crouching down, very wisely. However we booted him out, and sent him back under escort to our line, and then started to work our way along, but we only half about half a dozen men, and we were rushed by a large party of Germans who made it very interesting for us. And we had to stand and fight, lots of grenades thrown and so forth, and I was scouting around German lines by myself. [Concussed] I woke up after a while with the feeling that things had gotten quiet, and I realized when I moved about that I was by myself, the rest of the party had withdrawn, so I commenced to retire also”¹⁰⁷

Chaotic as this must have been, this is generally how the first six raids went that evening. However, the seventh raid, conducted by the 87th Battalion, did not fair well. The force for this raid comprised three officers and forty-seven men. Initially the operation went according to plan, with the raiders reporting that the wire cutting and artillery barrage were in both cases sufficient. As they reached the enemy trench, however, the German defenders, this time alerted by a nearby bombardment, opened fire. The Canadian raiders continued to press on towards the German trenches, but upon reaching the parapet, the Germans detonated a mine under them. After this, a vicious bomb fight ensued. Private Alexander McClintock, one of the raiders, vividly recalled the ensuing melee:

“I have always believed that in some way or another they had learned which spot we were to raid, and had prepared for us. Whether that’s true or not, one thing is certain. That mine blew or as we would say in Kentucky, “plumb to Hell”... there was much confusion among those of use who remained on our feet. Some one gave an order to retire and someone countermanded it. More Germans came out of their dugouts, but instead of surrendering as per our original schedule, they threw bombs amongst us.” ¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ RG 41, V.15, ‘Alan W Jack - 54th Battalion’

¹⁰⁸ Alexander McClintock. *Best O’ Luck: How A Fighting Kentuckian Won the Thanks of Britain’s King* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), 35

The officer commanding, Lieutenant Kenyon, realizing the futility of continuing the attack, ordered his men to retire. In the 11th Brigade's after-action report, the raid's failure was attributed to the Germans having probably been alerted by another being launched to the left of the 87th's front. The seventh raid suffered nineteen casualties and reportedly killed three Germans.¹⁰⁹ These seven were the first in a long line of raids that the 4th Division would carry out throughout the war. In the Canadian Corps, raiding in the ensuing years would take on an almost cult-like status. The 4th Division's first raids had mixed results with some battalions approving of the artillery barrage and wire cutting, and others reporting that they had no support or the plans were ill-designed.¹¹⁰ The two obvious lessons that needed to be learned from these operations were that wire cutting was not being carried out effectively and that more generally the artillery was still trying to figure out what role their barrages were to play during such attacks.

By September 25th, the Brigades had been relieved and were behind the lines in the Second Army reserve at St. Omer, training. The latter focused on musketry (aimed rifle fire) with the newly issued Lee-Enfields, but also concentrated heavily on patrolling, the use of flares, and co-operation with aircraft and artillery. Runners, indispensable to communication during battles, were also being put through their paces. Each man also received the new box-type respirator - a marked improvement from the 'PH' old gasmasks.¹¹¹ The three commanders of the 4th Division's infantry brigades were sent to the Somme to receive syllabi for training

¹⁰⁹ MG 30, E300, V. 18, 'Odlum papers, 11th Infantry Brigade raid 1916'

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Tim Cook, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in The First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 79

which included the latest lessons that had been learned there. Senior and junior officers also were being sent to training schools to learn the most current tactical theories and incorporate them into the training of their own units. However, the Brigadiers' reports, in summing up how effective training schools in France were in their opinion, concluded that there was very little that had not been covered during training in England that summer.¹¹² After a brief move to the IX Corps necessitated by the dissolution of Frank's force, the 4th Division found itself moved on the 2nd and 3rd of October to the Somme, where it was placed in the II Corps.¹¹³

On the 20th of September, J.H. MacBrien, a prewar regular soldier, replaced Lord Brooke as commander of the 12th Brigade. The taciturn, studious-looking MacBrien was one of the few senior officers in the Canadian Corps who had been through the British General Staff College at Camberley, and he had most recently been serving as the Quartermaster General of the 3rd Canadian Division.¹¹⁴ The likeable Lord Brooke was not up to the demands of wartime command and with Sam Hughes' influence waning, Brooke had been replaced.

The Canadian Corps had spent the latter half of September and early October fighting on the Somme, and would continue doing so until the 8th. On that day, Major-General Currie's 1st and 3rd Brigades, and Major-General Lipsett's 7th and 9th Brigades, attacked Regina Trench as part of the Battle of Ancre Heights. The Canadians met with no success this day, and in fact were slaughtered. The wire had not been cut and the Germans had been prepared for the attack. A litany of other

¹¹² RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division General Staff War Diary September 27th 1916.'

¹¹³ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division General Staff War Diary October 3rd 1916.'

¹¹⁴ Tim Cook, *At The Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 509

problems crippled the attacking infantry: they ran out of supplies, and there were poor communications and artillery cover as well as inadequate reinforcements. Major-General Currie also thought that the inexperience of the troops had contributed to the disaster “When drafts come to [France] they should already be trained,”¹¹⁵ he angrily noted in his report. Two days after the bloody setback, the 4th Division arrived on the Somme.

The following day, October 11th, the 4th Division took over the line previously held by the 3rd Canadian Division, with the latter’s 8th Brigade temporarily remaining in the line under Watson’s command. The 10th and 11th Brigades as well as the 8th Brigade were responsible for the front around the ruined town of Pozières. That same day, orders were received for the next operation. A conference was held at Divisional headquarters and preparations for the assault were started. Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander and Chief of the BEF, had reported to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) on October 7th that he estimated the Germans had already sent seventy divisions to the Somme (forty of them against British forces) and, by his own optimistic assessment, had lost 340,000 men. He felt that the remaining defences they were holding bore no comparison either in strength or depth to the elaborate trench systems already captured, and urged the CIGS that the “utmost efforts of the Empire should be directed to enabling [me] to continue the offensive without intermission.”¹¹⁶ Haig did allow that it was not possible to predict precisely how near breaking the German forces were, but there was surely an

¹¹⁵ MG 30, E 100, V .35, File 159, ‘Currie Papers – ‘1st Canadian Division to Canadian Corps, 12 October 1916’

¹¹⁶ Eds. Garry Sheffield and John Bourne, *Douglas Haig War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005)

opportunity for far-reaching success if the issue was pressed. Disappointing results of operations in the following days and poor weather caused the ongoing attack to be scaled back.¹¹⁷ As the British Official history notes without understatement: “By the middle of October conditions on and behind the battle-front were so bad as to make mere existence a severe trial of Body and Spirit.”¹¹⁸ No longer would the Third Army be taking part as previously planned. Instead, the Reserve Army, under General Hubert Gough, to which the II Corps including the 4th Canadian Division was attached, would attack on the 23rd with co-operation from elements of General Henry Rawlinson’s Fourth Army on its left. The Fourth Army would then launch a massive attack on Le Transloy on the 26th in conjunction with a French assault on Rocquigny. The II Corps, employing the 4th Canadian Division, planned to attack Regina Trench on the 19th; this would complete the capture of Thiepval Ridge. On the 23rd, a large section of the Reserve Army would then move through that area to launch its major assault astride the Ancre River.

Gough, who had just had the other Canadian divisions fighting under his command at the beginning of the month, wanted the II Corps’ and specifically the 4th Division’s attack to “... straighten our front for a final attack and clear the enemy off all vantage points.”¹¹⁹ Gough assumed full control over what his divisions would be doing, virtually ignoring his Corps commanders and issuing direct orders to the

¹¹⁷ MG 30, E300, V. 19, ‘The Situation in mid autumn the change in British plans October 1916’

¹¹⁸ Miles Wilfrid, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916 volume II* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1992), 457

¹¹⁹ Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 154

divisions. His orders were inflexible and explicit. Thus, the 4th Division would be given little leeway in planning its attack.¹²⁰

As the troops detrained and approached the Somme battlefield, they began to realize the gravity of what awaited them. Lieutenant A.K. Harvie put it candidly: “On the way down I began to realize that our first experience in Belgium was almost child’s play in comparison with what we were going into.”¹²¹ At this time, the Canadian 4th Division still did not have its own artillery, so the Lahore (Indian) Division’s field brigades, which had previously been attached to the Canadian 3rd Division, were transferred to it.¹²² Not only would the 4th Division have the Lahore artillery’s support in its upcoming operation, but six other divisional artilleries including the guns of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Canadian Divisions.

Major-General Watson’s men now held a 2000-yard line east of Miraumont Road on the II Corps’ right. The attack by the II Corps would be carried out on a 5000-yard front. From right to left, the Canadian 11th Brigade, the British 53rd Brigade (18th Division), and two Brigades from the 25th Division and 39th Division would simultaneously advance. The goal was to gain the whole of Stuff Trench and all but the most easterly 1000 yards of Regina Trench. As previously mentioned this

¹²⁰ Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2006), 53

¹²¹ Charles Foster. *Letters from the Front: Being a record of the part played by officers of the Bank in the Great War 1914-1919 Volume 1* (Toronto: The Canadian Bank of Commerce, 1920), 167

¹²² The Lahore Division had been raised in British India and had fought in France since 1915. When the Indian infantry were withdrawn from the Western Front, the divisional artillery remained. The Lahore Divisional artillery would stay with the 4th Division until its own artillery arrived in the summer of 1917.

advance would be supported by the artillery of seven divisions, as well as an additional 200 heavy guns and howitzers.¹²³

Brigadier-General Odlum went over the plans for the attack with the commanding officers of his battalions on October 11th, each being assigned a section of Regina Trench,¹²⁴ and their advance being co-coordinated with the 53rd Brigade. At Zero hour, the first and second wave would immediately advance, hugging their barrage, with the third and fourth waves following close behind to give support, and to ensure they were beyond the jumping-off line when the enemy counter-barrage came down. Supporting the 102nd and 87th would be the 54th and 75th Battalions respectively.¹²⁵

The weather was so appalling, that the attack was delayed three days. A private in 102nd Battalion, related just how wretched the mud was:

“... dugouts on the Somme they were dangerous and they weren’t very deep cause if you got in then they would fill right up The mud was so deep that they had to bring troops in to haul us out. They had issued us hip boots; waders they figured that would help, well when the mud came in on our waders we couldn’t get the waders out. We had to get out of the waders and an awful lot of us came back with sandbags on our feet instead of the shoes we just left them.”¹²⁶

However, on the morning of the 21st, the sun came out and the weather was reported as clear and cold. Following the thundering barrage of the Allied artillery, the 102nd and 87th Canadian Battalions left their trenches at 12:06 pm. The bombardment in the previous days seemed to have worked and the wire had been

¹²³ G.W.L., Nicholson. *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery*, Volume 1, 1534-1919 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 270

¹²⁴ Roger Odlum, *Victor Odlum: By Roger Odlum As I saw him and knew him and some of his letters* (Unpublished memoirs, 1994) 61

¹²⁵ RG9, V.4903, ‘11th Brigade War Diary, October 11th 1916’

¹²⁶ RG 41, V. 16, ‘C Swanson, 102nd Battalion page 4’

cut. Furthermore, the artillery was reported to have laid down a perfect barrage.¹²⁷ The Canadian infantry quickly fell on Regina Trench. On the 102nd's front, the first two waves, consisting of "C" Company under Major H.E.H. Dixon and "B" Company under Major J.S. Mathews, caught the Germans in a "daze," swiftly taking control of their portion of the trench. The first wave then passed 150 yards beyond to form a screen. As this was unfolding, the second wave from "D" Company under Major G Rothnie rounded up prisoners, consolidated positions and brought up supplies. Astonishingly, the 102nd had gained their objectives by 12:20.¹²⁸ The 87th Battalion had equal success and a similar experience, achieving their objectives even quicker, in a mere nine minutes. The forward battalions quickly established strong points and linked up with each other.¹²⁹ The infantry then set up a block on the right section of Regina Trench that still had not been captured (this was the section that the Canadian 1st Division had been unable to take at the beginning of October). Predictably the Germans counter-attacked throughout the day, but as General Watson wrote in his diary, these were "feeble" and "easily repulsed."¹³⁰ Overall, the first attack by the 4th Division had gone resoundingly well. Still basking in the warm glow of that success, on the 22nd, Major-General Watson met with Brigadier-Generals Odlum and Hughes to plan future operations. It was decided that the 10th

¹²⁷ G.W.L., Nicholson. *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery*, Volume 1, 1534-1919 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 270

¹²⁸ RG9, V.4903. '11th Brigade War Diary, October 21st 1916'

¹²⁹ RG9, V.4944. '87th Battalion War Diary, October 21st 1916'

¹³⁰ Military Museum, 'Major General David Watson diary, October 22nd 1916'

Brigade would conduct a minor operation on the 24th to take the remaining portion of Regina Trench.¹³¹

The attack on October 21st had gone well for a number of reasons: the planning was not rushed, the ground was scouted over a series of days, and the goals set were limited. Furthermore, the artillery barrage had been on target, delivering heavy fire on the German lines for a number of days and in the process pulverizing the German defences. As well, the barrage had also been coordinated effectively with the infantry's attack. The assault waves did not suffer heavy casualties, which meant that they could dig in after the attack and set up strong defensive positions, thus being ready to repel any counter-attacks launched by the Germans. Also, the follow-up waves were all able to move forward relatively intact, guaranteeing fresh reinforcements to assist in the defence of the newly-won lines. By limiting the goals for the attack, and hence the ground to be covered, the heavy loads that the soldiers were required to carry at this time were feasible, and allowed them to bring forward crucial supplies.

Patrols were sent out on the 22nd and 23rd, but they could not report much about the enemy's lines as German patrols were out at the same time checking on the wire.¹³² Machine gun and artillery fire constantly played on the remaining part of Regina Trench not in Canadian hands, which was seen as the most challenging section. In his memoirs, the future Lieutenant General E.L.M. Burns, who served as a Lieutenant in the 4th Division during the First World War, summed up the challenges this section of Regina Trench posed:

¹³¹ RG9, V.4859, '4th Division General Staff War Diary, October 23rd 1916'

¹³² RG 9, V.4859, '4th Division General Staff War Diary October 23rd 1916'

“This position had previously been attacked three times by the three senior divisions of the Corps, on a front of about 3,500 yards. They had suffered from 2,500 to 3,000 casualties. The Regina trench lay on the reverse slope: that is to say, it was situated on the other side from us of a rise in the ground, and this meant that it was difficult or impossible for the artillery officers to observe fire on it.”¹³³

This section was also on the flank of the quadrilateral trench system so that it gave the German defenders the ability to bring to bear heavy supporting fire.¹³⁴ In the early morning of the 24th the attack was postponed, as the conditions were reportedly so bad. In the words of the 44th Battalion’s historian:

“All day men sit in their crumbling ditches. Hour after hour the rain pours steadily down upon them. ‘Funk-holes’ dug in the forward wall of the trench give temporary protection. Soldiers, wrapped in rubber sheets, wedge themselves into these holes... Soon the soldier finds himself slipping down, down, to the bottom of the ditch- into the muck and water that rises steadily, hour by hour.”¹³⁵

If Major-General Watson had any concerns for the upcoming attack by the 44th Battalion the following day, he did not confide them to his diary. The 44th would attack on the 25th with a three-platoon front, with each platoon followed by three other platoons, making the assault four waves deep. Simultaneously the 11th Brigade would push its block on Regina Trench further in.

At 7am on the 25th, the 44th Battalion left its trenches and approached the German lines, but the attack began to fail almost immediately. The German machine guns and artillery had not been silenced and began to inflict heavy casualties on the

¹³³ E.L.M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1970), 28

¹³⁴ A quadrilateral trench was a four-sided trench

¹³⁵ E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), 49

44th Battalion, the assault bogging down as desperate soldiers took cover in any shellholes they could find. As E.S. Russenholt, the regimental historian, wrote:

“Officers, NCO’s and privates drop on all sides. No control is possible amid the noise and carnage. Suddenly the survivors realize that something is wrong- the task is hopeless- no living man can reach the German line. Men drop into shell holes, some try to help their comrades who are hit.”¹³⁶

By 8:15 it was reported that Germans had been seen heavily reinforcing their lines. The attack was called off and many of the 44th’s men hid until dark when they were able to crawl back to their own lines. Brigade and battalion war diaries and intelligence summaries concluded that the failure of the operation was due to weak intelligence in the lead up to the attack and poor artillery support. The Canadian official history of the Great War and *The Gunners of Canada* also support this conclusion. The guns had recently been moved into position and, as Brigadier-General Hughes complained, they had not been registered.¹³⁷ As Nicholson, points out in the latter volume: “The surprising thing is that with the infantry attack being delivered on a relatively quiet front, the task tables for the operation reveal that the flanks received little attention in the barrage”¹³⁸ Not surprisingly, it was also reported that the wire had not been completely destroyed as it had been three days earlier prior to the previous attack on Regina Trench.

In terms of the 200 casualties suffered in one day, the first attack by the 44th Battalion would be its worst for the entire war. As well as poor artillery support,

¹³⁶ Ibid. 51.

¹³⁷ Department of National Defence (DND) RG 24, G.A.Q 13-7, ‘Garnet Hughes to Overseas Minister March 20 1917’

¹³⁸ G.W.L., Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery*, Volume 1: 1534-1919 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 269.

there was obviously failure at the planning and staff levels. The attack was drawn up quickly after the success of the 11th Brigade two days earlier. The section of Regina Trench that the 10th Brigade was to assault should have been known to pose a greater challenge, as the 1st Division's failed two-battalion attack earlier in the month surely highlighted. Sending the 44th Battalion across no-man's land with operational plans scrawled on the back of Form of Will stationery for lack of paper speaks of a hurried and poorly organized plan that was destined to fail.¹³⁹ Major-General Watson, Brigadier-General Hughes and the staff officers planning the raid, starting with Lieutenant-Colonel Ironside, should all be held responsible for the failure of this attack. Watson and Ironside were both aggressive officers and were undoubtedly keen to show the mettle of the 4th Division. It is clear that the time and effort that went into the planning of and training for the 11th Brigade's attack was not replicated with the 10th Brigade's. The 4th Division had showed that although it may have had enthusiasm for fighting, it was far from mature.

The Fourth Division was to have another crack at the section of Regina Trench that had frustrated Canadian units throughout October, however this time the attack would not go in until two successful days of artillery barrages had pummeled the German lines and the wire could be definitively reported as having been cut.¹⁴⁰ Depressingly, the weather over the next fortnight brought repeated postponements - it had rained 16 out of the 21 days that the 4th Division had held the frontline. As Watson wrote in his diary:

¹³⁹ RG9, V.4939, "44th Battalion War diary October 25th 1916."

¹⁴⁰ RG9, V.4859, "4th Division General Staff War diary Operation on the 10th/11th November."

“It was desperate hard work and often we were up to our middles in slush and slime... I was absolutely covered with mud and soaked to the skin [and] saw large numbers of unburied bodies all around in all sorts of positions.”¹⁴¹

On the night of the 10th/11th of November, under an artillery barrage which has been described as “perfect,” three battalions, the 102nd, 47th, and 46th, advanced on the Canadians’ old nemesis, Regina Trench. At Zero hour the intense bombardment began to blast German lines, and eight minutes later lifted. The battalions quickly rushed the German trenches so that when the German counter-barrage came two minutes later, the Canadian troops were already well in front of the zone of fire. The Canadians quickly overwhelmed the trenches and the surviving soldiers waited for the inevitable counter-attacks to be launched.¹⁴²

Throughout the early morning the Germans obliged several times. The 47th Battalion requested reinforcements because of a German machine gun that could not be silenced and had caused heavy casualties among its ranks, with the result that Companies that had been detailed for working parties instead were moved up to help hold the line. By daybreak German counterattacks had stopped and the exhausted battalions were relieved that evening.¹⁴³ The last part of Regina Trench that had caused so many problems for the Canadians had fallen. However, the trenches were in a horrible condition. Shelling had blown the trench systems apart and the area was littered with debris and rotting corpses. Many dugouts were falling in and the ground was little better than a swamp after a month of rain and shelling, so that it was difficult for the soldiers to tell where dugouts or trench lines actually

¹⁴¹ Military Museum, ‘Major General David Watson diary, November 2nd 1916’

¹⁴² RG9, V. 4859, ‘4th Division General Staff War Diary Summary of Events’

¹⁴³ Ibid.

were located. Working parties had to dig down to the chalk line to start to clear the area for defense.¹⁴⁴ Having been captured at such cost, Regina Trench had lost its tactical advantage.

The 4th Division's role on the Somme was not yet over. On the night of November 11th, the 12th Canadian Brigade took over the 10th and 11th Canadian Brigades' front lines. On November 13th General Gough and the Fifth Army (the name of the Reserve Army had officially been changed on October 30th) launched a whole new operation called the Battle of the Ancre. Field Marshall Haig had given Gough approval to continue the attack on the Fifth Army's front, but after three days of fighting, the Fifth Army's results had been mixed. Nevertheless, Gough felt confident that more could be accomplished and the II Corps was selected to carry out his plans. The 19th British Division was assigned to take Grandcourt and cross the Ancre River, while the 4th Canadian and 18th British Divisions were to capture Desire Trench and Desire Support Trench which lay from 450 to 700 meters north of Regina Trench.¹⁴⁵

With snow falling and the weather deteriorating, the 4th Division's task of seizing the Desire Support Trench was hastily drawn up. Watson and his staff started planning the attack on the 16th of November, and four hours before it was to go in, his headquarters was still issuing orders on what the goals would be. The 10th Brigade would attack on the right and would have a smaller frontage to take. Its 46th and 50th Battalions would lead the assault with the 44th held in reserve. The 75th, 54th and 87th Battalions, as well as the 12th Brigade's 38th Battalion lent to the 11th

¹⁴⁴ RG9, V. 4901, '10th Brigade report on Operations- Night of November 10/11 1916'

¹⁴⁵ RG9, V. 4859, 'Operations: 4th Division, November 18th'

Brigade for this assault, would be attacking with the 78th Battalion, also part of the 12th Brigade, held in reserve. Throughout the evening of the 17th, the 4th Division's objectives continued to change based on orders coming in from Corps Headquarters.¹⁴⁶

Major-General Watson wrote in his diary on the eve of the attack that "... it was a horrible night [a] howling gale with snow and sleet."¹⁴⁷ At 6:10 in the morning the artillery barrage commenced on schedule and the Canadian troops left their trenches. Bitter fighting soon erupted as German machine gun posts opened up. The advancing first waves of men in the 46th and 50th Battalions began to suffer heavy casualties from both artillery and machine gun fire. For those who were able to hide in the ditches and shell craters, the sights around them were ghastly. One private in the 46th Battalion, interviewed years later, recalled just how ghastly:

"I caught up with about eight men from the 50th in a ditch and stayed with them for long hours. There was a stretcher-bearer shaking like a leaf in a storm, tending the wounded less than one hundred yards from the enemy. I saw two of their snipers dodging here and there, seldom stopping in one place for more than two minutes. One of them got the stretcher-bearer in the head. He fell only a few feet from me. I crawled over and dragged him into our ditch when I heard him groaning. I pushed some brains, which were oozing out, back in his head and bound him up... I must have been with the stretcher-bearer for 12 hours or more. The stretcher-bearer never fully regained consciousness, but he raved on about his wife, Marg. At about 2 in the morning the rattles in his throat and his groans got too much for me. I crept away, leaving him and his remaining bandages and bag with him."¹⁴⁸

The 10th Brigade met with no success. By 9:20 that morning the Brigade headquarters was reporting that they were back in their start off position of Regina

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Military Museum, 'Major General David Watson diary, November 17th 1916'

¹⁴⁸ James McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 63

Trench and had lost contact with the 11th Brigade. At noon the 10th Brigade was ordered to send the 44th Battalion to link up with the 11th Brigade and try to push forward, however, by 14:30 the 10th Brigade was instructed to concentrate on strengthening its original line at Regina Trench.¹⁴⁹

The 11th Brigade met with more success. By 8:20, the 87th Battalion was reporting that it had taken its section of the Desire Trench Support Line. By 9:20 the Brigade had taken its objectives and the survivors began to consolidate their position. However, with the failure of the 10th Brigade to reach its assigned goals or keep contact with the 11th Brigade, the afternoon was spent linking up with the 10th Brigade, which was reported achieved at 18:45. Trying to put a favourable gloss on things, the 4th Division reported that the attack on the Desire Support Trench Line had resulted in 17 officers and 608 other ranks captured. This was viewed as an impressive number, but they had also suffered 1250 casualties during the fighting that day.¹⁵⁰ The 4th Division dug in and held its sector until the 26th when it began to be withdrawn from the Somme. Henceforth, it would serve in the Canadian Corps. Army and Corps commanders appeared satisfied with how the 4th Canadian Division had carried itself at the Somme. As Wilfrid Miles, the British official historian, wrote:

“Coming into the Somme battles at a late stage, the division had worthily upheld the reputation won by the Canadian Corps at the Battle of Flers-Courcellete. That it was not relieved until the 28th November, after nearly seven weeks in the battle front, is testimony to the reliance placed upon it.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ RG9, V. 4859, 'Operations: 4th Division, November 18th'

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Wilfrid Miles, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1916*, Volume 2 (Tennessee: The Battery Press, 1992), 516

The last engagement by the 4th Division sums up the six weeks that they spent on the Somme: mixed results. In appalling conditions some of the attacks went perfectly: the wire had been cut, the artillery cooperation was stunning, and the troops reached their objectives and consolidated their new positions. However, the 4th Division had equally poor results. There were problems in the final engagement as well as throughout the six weeks with artillery fire not effectively destroying the wire or suppressing German defenses (especially German machine gun fire), insufficient manpower to take trenches let alone hold them, poor communication between attacking forces, inadequate intelligence and rushed attack planning. All of this contributed to the failures that the 4th Division suffered at Desire Support Trench as well as on the Somme as a whole. The 4th Division definitely had room to grow and lessons to incorporate if it was to enjoy consistent success on the battlefield.

Senior leadership had also proven a mixed bag. On one hand Brigadier-General Odlum and Lieutenant-Colonel Ironside were praised for the roles they had played on the Somme. Indeed, both were being recommended for awards. Odlum did show initiative and his Brigade had always achieved its goals. And Ironside deserved credit for the planning that went right at the battle of the Somme. However, he also has to bear responsibility with Major-General Watson and Brigadier-General Hughes for the debacle of October 23rd. All three should have realized that the attack was rushed and that Regina Trench was unlikely to fall to a single battalion. Brigadier-General Hughes' 10th Brigade had a poor showing during October and November. However, it also had bad luck on its side when it carried out

the attack on Desire Trench, for it could have easily been the 11th Brigade that was ripped apart by German machine guns.

However, Watson was determined to force Hughes to take responsibility for the 10th Brigade's failings. As Watson wrote of their chilly meeting:

"I called on General Hughes and read him my report to the Corps Commander regarding the operations of the 4th Division down on the Somme and the grave cause I had for complaint against the 10th Brigade by reason of failures and other reasons. Naturally he was much exercised but he signed it and I sent it to the Corps."¹⁵²

The 4th Division had realized from their first operations that they still had much to learn. Close co-operation between the artillery and the infantry during the 11th Brigade's attack on October 21st showed that the Fourth Division could be successful. However, this was followed up with the 44th Battalion's disastrous attack two days later, one crippled by inadequate artillery support, hasty staff work, and poor planning which had led to a complete failure. The division was 'green', and no amount of training would have prevented errors in the opening stages of its harsh introduction to the Western Front. In the coming months, the 4th Division would see a Brigadier and three Battalion commanders axed, while striving to incorporate lessons it and the Canadian Corps as a whole had learned on the Somme.

¹⁵² Military Museum, 'Major General David Watson diary, December 5th 1916'

The 62nd Division began to arrive in France in early January, and in the words of Lieutenant Thomas Riley, “the men are splendid and as keen as mustard.”¹⁵³ At the end of the month the Division had moved to take positions north of Amiens, Divisional Headquarters being located in the tiny village of Bus-Les-Artois.¹⁵⁴ The Division would be serving in the V Corps, under Lieutenant-General Edward Fanshawe, a relatively new Corps Commander. Fanshawe had commanded the 11th Division at Gallipoli and had been promoted to command the V Corps in the summer of 1916. Under his command, the V Corps had gained some experience from the Somme campaign the previous autumn. It was now part of General Gough’s Fifth Army.

The 62nd had a steep learning curve, getting used to living in the trenches and carrying out patrols. The war diary of the 2/4th West Riding Battalion reported that the weather was bitterly cold in January and that the men were settling in as best as possible.¹⁵⁵ You could almost feel the chill in Brigadier-General Anderson’s diary: “Freezing hard; a real black frost... the temperature report has come in 22 degrees of frost. Some cold!”¹⁵⁶ The infantry of the 62nd Division rotated through the 32nd and 19th Divisional lines to gain frontline experience. When the troops were in the rear they received further instruction on the practical handling of Lewis guns and trench mortars as well as how to bomb and cope with gas attacks. The 62nd Division was also extensively employed behind the lines fixing roads, building up

¹⁵³ *Harrow Gate Herald* Jan 24th, 1917

¹⁵⁴ All except the 2/6th Duke of Wellington regiment that was part of the 186th Brigade. Because of an outbreak of scarlet fever they would not arrive in France until February 8th.

¹⁵⁵ WO 95/3081, ‘2/4th West Riding War Diary, January 24th 1917’

¹⁵⁶ The Royal Artillery Museum, ‘Brigadier General Anderson diary, Jan. 25th 1917’

ammunition dumps and burying communication cables.¹⁵⁷ Braithwaite and his Brigadiers were busy throughout the month inspecting the battalions and making sure that they were carrying out their tasks efficiently.¹⁵⁸ During January, the 62nd Division suffered 212 casualties, a fairly significant level of 'wastage' for a division not participating in action. Nevertheless, the Divisional war diary for January optimistically closed with these words: "The men are keeping very well and cheery."¹⁵⁹ Their first month in the frontline had proceeded satisfactorily, but the 'quiet tour' would soon end. Lieutenant-General Fanshawe was to give the 62nd Division a larger role to play in the coming month.

On the second of February, the 62nd's artillery would be engaged in supporting attacks launched by the 32nd Division up the Beaucourt-Puisieux road and the 63rd Divisions' (part of the II Corps) attack on Grandcourt the following day.¹⁶⁰ At the beginning of the month, the infantry were still engaged alternately in work behind the lines, and in tours of instruction in the forward areas of the 19th and 32nd Divisions. The first officer killed in the 62nd Division was 2nd Lieutenant N.E. Bentley of the 2/5th Duke of Wellingtons who was shot while on a familiarization patrol with a group of soldiers from the 19th Division.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Reginald Bond, *The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914-1918* Volume III (Great Britain: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co Limited, 1929), 857

¹⁵⁸ The 62nd as well as the individual brigades mention their senior officers visiting the various brigades and battalions to oversee training. See 62nd War diary for further comments. WO 95/3072 407262, '62nd Divisional Headquarters January 1917'

¹⁵⁹ WO 95/3072, 407262, '62nd Divisional Headquarters January 26, 1917'

¹⁶⁰ WO 95/3075, 407262, 'War diaries of the 312 Brigade R.F.A February 2nd, 1917'

¹⁶¹ Everhard Wyrall, *The History of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919* Volume 1 (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1925), 16

During the first week of February, the 62nd Division also received word that it would be taking over the 32nd Division's frontlines, depending on the success of the latter's attack in the Beaucourt Valley. That attack being successful, on the nights of 13th, 14th and 15th, the 186th Brigade and 185th Brigade took over the newly won frontlines of the 32nd Division. The 62nd Division was now in control of the frontline sector, but they inherited a wasteland of glutinous mud and debris. The trench-maps for this area acknowledged that almost all of the previously existing roads had been obliterated by British and German artillery fire. The frontlines were crudely held with a series of posts and dugouts, aptly described in the war diary of the 185th Brigade as "islands in a sea of mud."¹⁶² The V Corps had been given directions to advance from the Beaumont Hamel - Beaucourt-sur-Ancre area north towards Miraumont. To carry out this order, the 185th and 186th Brigades were ordered to push out strong patrols to test the Germans' strength, but these gleaned little intelligence. As the 2/7th West York diary explained, "the enemies'[sic] machine guns and snipers were extremely dangerous."¹⁶³ While the 62nd was getting used to holding a frontline position, the surrounding 63rd, 18th and 2nd Divisions were pushing forward toward Miraumont.

On the 18th of February, the Germans launched counter-attacks against the British incursions and the 63rd Division sent messages calling for support, to which the 62nd Divisional artillery responded with varying degrees of success. That evening, the 2/5th West Yorks took over 500 yards of frontage on the left flank of the 63rd Division, dug in hastily and waited for the German attack. It soon came, and one

¹⁶² WO 95/3080, 407262, 'HQ 185 Infantry BDE February 13th'

¹⁶³ WO 95/3082, '2-7th BN R. West Yorks February 16th'

of the posts held by A Company was promptly overrun. As Brigadier-General de Falbe later reported: "... after throwing bombs [the enemy of about ten men] jumped in and came out again almost immediately with six prisoners, one of which was wounded. The remainder of the garrison was killed."¹⁶⁴ De Falbe argued that there were extenuating circumstances as to why the 2/5th West Yorks' company fared so poorly. For one thing, the defensive position they were holding had been quickly set up and that it was in such a shambles that it was hard to build effective defensive works. Also, the 2/5th's West Yorks had been in the line for a long time and a relief for them had failed when the guides had gotten lost.¹⁶⁵ He concluded "it is probably that the garrison of the post was exhausted and were not keeping a good lookout."¹⁶⁶ The 2/5th and 2/8th West Yorkshire Battalions had fared poorly in holding the frontline and this would reflect badly on the 185th Brigade as a whole.

In this small operation of holding the line, the 185th Brigade demonstrated that staff work, and a better understanding of the conditions in which the frontline troops found themselves, would help prevent such setbacks from happening in the future. If the Brigade and Divisional headquarters had been more alert they would have realized the trying situation at the front and made it a priority to relieve the men who had been in frontline positions for an extended period of time. And though the night was challenging, Major Lupton and the company of the 2/8th West Yorks should have endeavored to relieve the exhausted men at the front rather than turning around. By the amount of correspondence that Brigadier-General de Falbe

¹⁶⁴ WO 95/3068, 407136, '62nd Division appendix February 1917'

¹⁶⁵ Fraser Skirrow, *Massacre on the Marne: the Life and Death of the 2/5th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the Great War* (Great Britain: Pen and Sword Military, 2007), 65

¹⁶⁶ WO 95/3068, 407136, '62nd Division appendix February 1917'

had to send both to Divisional and Corps headquarters and received in reply, it seems that he did learn from this incident and in the future would be more conscious about the state of the frontline positions and the need to relieve tired garrisons in a timely fashion.¹⁶⁷

On the 24th of February, patrols, which had been pushed out to access the strength of the Germans in front of the village of Petit Miraumont, reported back that the enemy had retreated from their forward trench lines. At 1pm, the V Corps issued orders to the 7th, 62nd, and 63rd Divisions to push out patrols until contact had been re-established with the enemy.¹⁶⁸ In fact, this was the first sign that the German High Command had decided to withdraw so as to straighten and shorten the German line, freeing up thirteen divisions as well as fifty batteries of heavy artillery to strengthen their defences.¹⁶⁹

For two days no enemy was sighted as the Brigades pushed north.¹⁷⁰ On the 27th, the Division began to run into German machine gun posts which held up the advance, and on the following day the 62nd Division was issued with orders from Corps headquarters to dig in. During the next few days the stiffening defence showed that the Germans were still prepared to fight. On the 4th of March, two field guns of the 62nd Division, which had been dragged forward with the advance, were put out of action by German artillery. On the 9th of March, the 186th Brigade tried to

¹⁶⁷ See the appendixes of the 62nd Division and 185th Brigade during the month of February 1917 for Brigadier-General De Falbe official responses.

¹⁶⁸ WO 95/3068, 407136, '62nd Division Summary of Operations and Intelligence 24th Feb'

¹⁶⁹ Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997), 250. Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story Volume II* (New York: Harpers & brothers Publishers, 1919), 3

¹⁷⁰ WO 95/3068, 407136, '62nd Division Summary of Operations and Intelligence 26th of March'

push their lines forward but met with little success. They tried again on the 13th and 14th and met with the same results. The war diary iterates that this was because of aggressive machine gun fire and thick wire that had not been cut.¹⁷¹ However, on the night of the 17th/18th, patrols from the 186th Brigade found once again that the enemy had abandoned their lines.¹⁷²

By the 26th, the German line had stiffened again and the 62nd Division began to take up defensive positions. They had received instructions for the attack on the Bullecourt-Fontaine Line (a part of the new Hindenburg Line) from V Corps. The advance to the Hindenburg Line was not simply a matter of following the retreating Germans, for the enemy had blown craters in and felled trees to block roads, left strings of barbed wire, and booby trapped and mined various other locations. Beyond mostly passive obstacles, German sniper and machine gun crews lurked in ambush while enemy artillery shelled pre-planned lines of advance to further cover the withdrawal. An officer in the 2/5th Duke of Wellington Battalion, which was leading the advance of the 62nd Division, summed up his experiences:

“There were many fires burning when we occupied the village (Gomicourt) and as they were still burning we tried to put them out. The junction of every road in the village had been mined and blown up and everything of value had been destroyed. All fruit trees had been either pulled down or an incision made round barks so that sap could not rise. All wells had been blown in and one had been poisoned with arsenic”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ WO 95/3068, 407136, ‘62nd Division war diary March 15/16’

¹⁷² WO 95/3084, 407409, ‘186th INF BDE war diary March 1917’

¹⁷³ Everhard Wyrall, *The History of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919*, Volume 1(London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1925), 35

In pursuing the Germans to the Hindenburg Line, the 62nd Division had advanced 4000 yards from Beaucourt-sur-Ancre to Puisieux-au-Mont and suffered casualties of 35 officers and 300 other ranks.¹⁷⁴

During the German retreat, the 62nd Division demonstrated that it was able to handle very complex situations. Infantry and artillery were pushed forward, and the staff officers were able to devise new plans for the Division even though its location was constantly changing. In particular, the 62nd Division was able to keep pace with the more experienced Divisions around it (the 7th on its left and 18th on its right). Major-General Braithwaite and his subordinates also demonstrated a wise measure of caution. When the Division came up against significant German resistance in the later part of March, they did not try to push past the German lines, but stopped and waited for orders from Corps. This was astute, as the German forces had dug in along prepared positions and the launch of a hastily-prepared attack would have undoubtedly resulted in heavy casualties for no great gain.

In April of 1917, the British Third Army would be attacking near Arras, and the GOC of the British Expeditionary Force decided that the Fifth Army under General Gough would assist it with a northeasterly thrust into the Bapaume salient.¹⁷⁵ Specifically, Gough's force would attack the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt. The 4th Australian Division, aided for the first time by tanks, would lead this attack, with the 62nd Division on their left.¹⁷⁶ If the opening phase of the attack

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 35

¹⁷⁵ The Canadian 4th Division would be part of the Third Army's thrust and their role will be discussed in the subsequent chapter examining the Canadian operations at Vimy Ridge.

¹⁷⁶ The 62nd Division would be without the 311th Brigade, R.F.A which had been incorporated into the Army Artillery Brigade. It was withdrawn from the line on March 23rd. This was the first unit to

went successfully, the 62nd would carry on past Bullecourt to Hendecourt.¹⁷⁷ This operation was rushed to correspond with the timetable of the Third Army, and getting the necessary artillery in place and moving the masses of supplies forward for the attack proved difficult to achieve in the limited time. On the 31st of March, General Gough admitted that “owing to the transportation difficulties in the supply of ammunition, the commencement of the bombardment of the Hindenburg line will be light, but it will gradually become heavier day by day.”¹⁷⁸ By the 8th of April it was clear that the preparations for the Australian attack were inadequate, with the wire only being partially cut and the German defences still robust. Even the usually impatient Gough had doubts, and after meeting with his Corps commanders, sent a telegram to GHQ:

“Fifth Army cannot carry out their attack owing to the fact they have not been able to cut the wire. General Gough hopes to be able to attack Thursday (April 12). Everything possible will be done by Fifth Army to assist the Third Army’s attack by means of bombardment.”¹⁷⁹

Fifth Army headquarters showed sound reasoning in the decision not to rush the attack when it was obvious that the Australian and British units were not yet ready. However, on Easter Monday (April 9th), the First and Third armies launched their attacks on Vimy Ridge and Arras. With reports coming in of the initial success being had by both Armies, General Gough threw caution to the wind, abandoning his commitment to a prepared attack, and telegraphed his Corps commanders that “...

leave the 62nd Division. See Brigadier-General Anderson diary of March 22nd - 24th for a more detailed account of the departure of this unit.

¹⁷⁷ WO 95/3068, 407136, ‘62nd Division Summary of Operations and Intelligence March 30th, 1917’

¹⁷⁸ C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18: volume IV The A.I.F in France 1917* (Australia: Angus & Robertson publishing, 9th Edition, 1939), 262

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 268

[they] must be prepared to push forward as instructed"¹⁸⁰ The Australian attack on the Hindenburg Line was to go in on April 10th at first daylight, 4:30.

The 185th Brigade had been pulled from a frontline position in mid-March to start training for an attack on Achiet Le Petit. This hamlet was located north of the Hindenburg Line and immediately in front of the 62nd Division's position. The preparation for the first formal operation by the 185th Brigade¹⁸¹ was similar to those that the 4th Canadian Division had gone through earlier on the Somme. The staff officers created a scheme of attack, and full-scale replicas of the enemy positions were made. Then the assault battalions practiced over these dummy courses, with emphasis on ensuring they knew what role they were to play, their objectives, and where the units on their flanks would be and what their responsibilities were. However, this attack never came to fruition and the Achiet Le Petit operation was cancelled for a bigger role which the II Corps and Fifth Army would be playing in April.¹⁸²

In the little time remaining, the 62nd Division prepared for their responsibilities in support of the Australian 4th Division. On April 5th, the 185th Brigade took over the frontlines of the 7th Division and began sending out patrols to gauge the lay of the land over which they would be attacking.¹⁸³ On the morning of the 10th, if the Australians were successful on their left, the 185th Brigade was to push out strong patrols and take over the enemy's front lines and support trenches. Presumably on the night of the 9th and 10th, when the Australians sent out patrols to

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 271

¹⁸¹ Or for the 62nd Division, in fact.

¹⁸² WO 95/3068, '62nd Division Appendix C April 1917'

¹⁸³ WO 95/3068, '62nd Division war diary April 6th,7th,8th, 1917'

reconnoiter for their imminent attack, it became clear that the wire had not been cut, nor was the preliminary bombardment destroying enemy strongpoints. At 11:50 that night, the 62nd Divisional staff sent a message to the Australian 4th Division confirming the attack.¹⁸⁴ The Australians, though, over the course of the next four and half hours, decided after assessing all the aforementioned problems, as well as the failure of the promised tanks to reach the battlefield because of mechanical problems, that the attack would be called off.¹⁸⁵ However, through extremely poor staff work by the AIF Brigade and at the Australian 4th Division level, no one thought to let the 62nd Division know that they had cancelled their attack and its covering barrage.

As the 62nd Division's war diary states with more than a tinge of bitterness: "Owing to the 4th Australian Division cancelling the order for their barrage and the forward movement of tanks, and not informing us till 4:55 - 25 minutes after Zero - our patrols went forward unsupported."¹⁸⁶ Predictably, the 185th Brigade patrols were ripped apart. At 4:35 elements of the 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion began passing the first belt of German wire. When at 4:55 the Australians finally got around to informing Braithwaite's headquarters that they had called off their attack, however, elements of the 185th Brigade were already well into the German wire. The 2/5th, 2/7th and 2/8th West Yorkshire Battalions were butchered, mostly by murderous enemy machine gun and artillery fire. The Yorkshiremen pulled back at

¹⁸⁴ The message read "Unless it is discovered that the enemy have evacuated the S.L. during the night on our front, the 185th Brigade in conjunction with the 4th Australian Division will push forward strong patrols under a barrage as per order 32." WO 95/3068, '62nd Division order 33, April 9th, 1917'

¹⁸⁵ Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Staplehurst: Spellmount publishing, 1998), 87-88

¹⁸⁶ WO 95/3068, '62nd Division Appendix C April 1917'

5:10, having suffering 162 casualties. The 185th Brigade report on this fiasco was quite stoic:

“Unfortunately the attack by the Anzac Corps was postponed and no notification was received until too late to postpone the attack of this Brigade. On the right the wire was reached but cross fire was opened by Machine guns from Bullecourt... The patrols from the centre subsector reached hostile wire, in every case, but further progress was made impossible by machinegun fire.”¹⁸⁷

In Jonathan Walker's, *The Blood Tub*, the author writes about the Australians cursing the British for incompetence, with the Australians calling the attack a “Buckshee battle”¹⁸⁸ However, it was the British 62nd Division that should have been cursing the Australians for their failure to notify them that the attack had been called off. Lieutenant-General Fanshawe wrote in his diary the simple passage: “62nd Division stood by to attack but Anzacs did not make the opening and the tanks failed.”¹⁸⁹ Captain Cyril Falls, a historian for the British official history of the Great War, was then serving as a staff officer with the 62nd Division. When compiling information for the writing of the history in the 1930's, he contacted Braithwaite to gain his opinion on the debacle. Braithwaite replied to Falls on the latter's draft of the First Battle of Bullecourt:

“The failure was not the fault of the 62nd Division or its staff. But that is all in the past history and you have smoothed the whole thing over very nicely, but that same failure caused a great deal of heart-burning at the time and as you can imagine, the Anzacs were not very popular with the 62nd Division.”¹⁹⁰

Falls, himself, wrote of the incident:

¹⁸⁷ WO 95/3080, 407262, 'April 10th HQ 185th INF BDE'

¹⁸⁸ Buckshee battles was used by the Australians as given in for nothing. Jonathan Walker. *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1998), 89

¹⁸⁹ CAB45/116, C497032, 'Fanshawe to Falls, July 3rd 1937'

¹⁹⁰ CAB45/116, C497032, 'Braithwaite to Falls July 1937'

“Not being informed by the Australian Division that the tanks had not appeared, the 62nd Division sent forward strong patrols from three Battalions of the 185th Brigade... It was actually at 4:55 A.M., when they were within the wire, that word of the cancellation of the attack was received at Divisional headquarters”¹⁹¹

Unfortunately for both the 62nd British and 4th Australian Divisions, the attack was just postponed 24 hours.

The Australians were to attack Bullecourt again with the 62nd Division in support. Specifically, the 62nd Division’s role was to wait for confirmation that the Australians had reached Bullecourt, and then for the 185th Brigade to push forward. To be in place, the latter had to take an exposed position just outside of the village of Écoust. Here they were heavily shelled with 30 casualties incurred just waiting in the jump off spot. Hearing that the Australians had taken Bullecourt, the 185th Brigade sent out patrols before launching a full-scale attack. However, the patrols came back with word that the enemy continued to strongly hold Bullecourt, and that the wire remained uncut.¹⁹² Braithwaite decided that sending his men forward would only result in their massacre. He held his men back and then watched as the 4th Australian Brigade sent SOS flare after SOS flare.¹⁹³ The 4th Australian Brigade was being cut apart and was desperately looking for support both from Australian artillery and the 62nd’s infantry. Braithwaite held firm, however, convinced that sending his men forward would have just led them to be slaughtered, without lending any effective aid to the Australians. The Australian lines were in chaos and

¹⁹¹ Cyril Falls, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1917* Volume 1 (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1992), 363

¹⁹² WO 95/3081, ‘2/7th West York Battalion Appendix R April 1917’

¹⁹³ An Australian historian, Les Carylton, wrote that the 4th Brigade leader fired seventeen SOS signals: ‘a green flare followed by a red then another green. Not a shell came to help them.’ Les Carylton, *The Great War* (Melbourne: Picador, 2006), 339

unable to respond effectively to their 4th Brigade's plight. Later that day, the 62nd Division received a message from 4th Australian Division that it was now "not at all certain that the Australians held the place."¹⁹⁴ The 62nd Division did not push forward but continued to lend artillery support to the hard pressed Australian battalions. Not surprisingly, the 4th Australian Brigade complained bitterly about the apparent inactivity of the 62nd Division on the morning of the 11th. A jibe which Australian troops began to repeat after the First Battle of Bullecourt was that 'by the time t'pelican puts its foot down, t'war will be over" [a reference to the 62nd Division's crest].¹⁹⁵ However, the Australian official historian, Charles Bean, privately admitted that the Australian criticism was "damnably unjust."¹⁹⁶ In fact Braithwaite showed remarkable leadership on the 11th, clearly balancing his ally's dire plight with the patent futility of intervening.

The 62nd Division handled itself well in the First Battle of Bullecourt. Through mistakes made by the Australian staff, the 62nd Division did not stand a chance of making a successful assault on the 10th and the casualties they suffered did not reflect poorly on their training, leadership or fighting élan. Braithwaite and Brigadier de Falbe also showed good common sense in refusing to send their infantry forward immediately (and blindly) on the 11th. Not bowing to pressure from the Australians to launch their attacks and instead sending out patrols to scout the battlefield was prudent. When realizing that the German positions were still strongly held, they did not heedlessly send their men into the wire. As for the 4th

¹⁹⁴ Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1998), 89

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 192

¹⁹⁶ Australian War Memorial, 92, 3DRL, 268, 6405, 'Bean to Gellibrand 19 May 1929'

Australian Brigade complaint about the inaction of the 185th Brigade, Charles Bean, not one to mince words about the British, iterated after the war: “The 4th Australian Brigade is still damnably unjust to the 62nd Division, for not doing something it was never supposed to do and for which its officers ought to have been shot if they had done it.”¹⁹⁷ The Fifth Army intelligence summary for early April, though not heaping praise on the 62nd Division, shows that Army Headquarters was satisfied with the role the Division had played and was confident about employing it in coming operations.¹⁹⁸ The 62nd Division would get another crack at Bullecourt three weeks later, at which time they would play a much more prominent role. While the 62nd did not gain any fame for itself in its first three months in the line, the officers and men had accounted well for themselves, playing the role asked of them effectively.

As to be expected, during their first three months in the frontlines (Mid-January through mid-April 1917 for the 62nd Division, and mid-August through mid-November for the 4th Canadian), there were similarities and differences between the 62nd and the Canadian 4th Divisions. Following the standard practice for new divisions, both were slotted into British Corps and had a period of adjustment to the grim conditions of trench warfare. The war diaries of both Divisions read alike with accounts of similar training, patrolling, and generally assuming the responsibilities for front line positions in relatively quiet sectors. Brigades in both Divisions prepared for battles in the same manner as was evidenced in the Canadians’ preparation for the Somme and the British training for the cancelled attack on Achiet Le Petit, in both cases concentrating on the battalions practicing on dummy

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ WO 157/209, ‘Fifth Army Intelligence Summaries April 1st- 8th 1917’

courses where units could focus on their objectives and keeping pace with the units on their flanks. During this period of acclimatization and preparation, there were no significant differences in the tactics and training employed.

Unfortunately, both the 4th Division and the 62nd Division were thrown into attacking roles when the preparation for the attacks was clearly incomplete and the state of German defences known to be strong. This is certainly seen in the 10th Brigade's attack at Regina Trench on October 23rd and the 62nd's role on April 10th just east of Bullecourt. Both formations were willing to risk a poorly planned attack in the hope of achieving some sort of victory, and regardless they were ordered to proceed by the superiors. One final similarity was that they entered operations on the Western Front as part of General Gough's Fifth Army. Given Gough's deserved reputation for aggressiveness bordering on recklessness, and the accompanying lack of attention to detailed planning, this was not a stroke of good fortune.

However, there were also significant differences in how these two Divisions operated in their first three months at the front. While the 4th Canadian Division's records discuss the posting of both senior and junior officers to training schools,¹⁹⁹ this is something of which the 62nd Division's papers make no mention. One reason could be that the 62nd Division had been raised in 1915, and had spent well over a year training in England where such courses were also available, whereas the 4th Canadian Division contained battalions which had reached England as late as the spring of 1916, only to be shipped over to France that summer, and hence their officers had not had the opportunity. Another reason for this could be that during

¹⁹⁹ Regardless of how useful the Canadians actually found the training camps.

February and March, the 62nd Division was chasing the Germans to the Hindenburg Line and all three Brigades were constantly involved in this pursuit, quite possibly not allowing officers to be spared on such courses. During its first three months at the front, the 4th Canadian Division never had all of its brigades engaged simultaneously.

The 62nd War Diary mentions often how the men were building roads and burying communications wire when they were out of the line, something to which the Canadian unit diaries rarely allude. This was probably due to the fact that the 4th Canadian Division was thrown quickly into the attack at the Somme before being transferred to the Canadian Corps where the Canadian Corps was already trying to reduce the amount of labour infantry were expected to do when out of the line so as to leave more time for training. To a much larger extent, the 4th Canadian Division's War Diary did discuss the types of training its brigades were undertaking behind the line. This is not to say that the 62nd Division's brigades were not making training a priority when the opportunity presented itself or that the 4th Division was never engaged in any maintenance work; the War Diaries simply illustrate where the two Divisions were placing their emphasis, and perhaps more importantly, where the BEF and CEF placed emphasis for them, while they were in reserve.

Raiding also offers a difference between the two Divisions' initial experiences. Though the 62nd Division did take part in raiding throughout February and March, they did not carry out such 'minor operations' with the same frequency as the Canadians. Nor did the 62nd Division carry out the large-scale raids that the 4th Division undertook in September. Since raiding was a BEF policy, there should

have been little or no difference. Again one of the obvious reasons why there might have been a difference is that from mid-February until April, the 62nd Division was closely following the Germans to the Hindenburg line. In an advance, there would be no purpose in raiding, as any small forces sent forward would usually encounter German units falling back, not ones holding fixed defensive lines where raiding might be worthwhile. This was not the case for Canadians.

In their third month at the front, the 4th Canadian Division played a prominent role in the last days of the Battle of the Somme, carrying out a number of brigade-sized assaults on German positions. As discussed earlier, these had mixed results and demonstrated the 4th Division's weaknesses. In its first months, the 62nd British Division was not asked to play a comparable role; instead they undertook a supporting role in the First Battle of Bullecourt. Though they did suffer serious casualties in their fight on April 10th, this cannot be held against their record, as they went into the attack believing that they would be supporting what turned out to be a non-existent Australian advance.

One development that would prove a trend throughout the war was that the 62nd Division had lost a major component of its fighting power with the departure of the 311th Artillery Brigade.²⁰⁰ The 62nd would function throughout the remainder of the war without it being replaced. This marked the first of a series of units – the rest infantry battalions - that would be removed from the 62nd Division. That said, during this period, the 4th Canadian Division did not have its own divisional artillery,

²⁰⁰ The 311 Brigade was removed from the line and was converted into an Army Brigade. A.T. Anderson, *War Services 62nd West Riding Divisional Artillery* (Cambridge, 1920), 7

instead having to rely on the Indian Lahore Divisional Artillery, a situation that would only be rectified by the summer of 1917 when the Canadian 4th Divisional artillery was ready to join them. Overall, it is hard to see any major difference in battlefield effectiveness during the first three months both divisions operated at the front, but that could simply be because the 62nd, and to a lesser extent the 4th Canadian Division, had not been fully tested in battle, something that would change dramatically for both Divisions in the coming months.

Chapter 3: The 62nd Division at Bullecourt

In the spring of 1917, the 62nd Division took part in the Second Battle of Bullecourt, where it suffered heavy losses and failed to make even the slightest advance. The blame could have been spread all around - inadequate leadership, planning, and training at all levels: Army, Corps, and Divisional. The men of the 62nd Division were sent into a battle when they could not succeed, with painfully obvious results. The senior officers of the 62nd would have to analyze the causes of the debacle and rectify their Division's weaknesses. This was carried out in the summer of 1917, and by the fall, the 62nd Division had reinvented itself as a more capable formation that would have a chance of battlefield success on the Western Front.

The 62nd Division was pulled out of the line immediately after the First Battle of Bullecourt, but it was then decided that they would prepare to attack the Hindenburg Line again. In late April, it became apparent to Field Marshall Douglas Haig that General Nivelle, commander of the French forces, was going to be removed, with immense repercussions for the BEF. Gripped by a leadership crisis, the French army would not be able to support a combined operation planned for late spring. On the 30th of April, Haig held a conference at Nyelle Vion with three of his Army commanders: Generals Horne, Allenby and Gough, where he confided to them that the spring attacks would be scaled back, while informing Gough that he

was going to entrust to him the northern operations in Flanders for a big push later that summer.²⁰¹

As the British official history offers, “in view of Sir Douglas Haig’s decision to limit the future scope of the Arras offensive preparatory to switching his efforts to Flanders, it may appear strange that a fresh attack should be launched by three armies on a frontage of over fourteen miles.”²⁰² The author goes on to argue that the BEF had already prepared for the attack and that the French might continue to fight. Regardless of the reasoning, the 62nd Division’s renewed attack on Bullecourt was to be launched on April 15th, though it would be postponed no fewer than five times.²⁰³ There were two main reasons for the delays: Gough decided that he wanted to carry out a more thorough artillery bombardment than the first attack on Bullecourt, and secondly he wanted his attack to coincide with the Third Army’s attack on the Sensée. Ever the optimist, General Gough felt that if the Third and Fifth armies both broke through the German lines, a brilliant victory could be achieved.²⁰⁴

The 186th and 187th Brigades were being deployed in forward trenches in front of Bullecourt. The 62nd Division then began a regime of harassing the German lines through a combination of artillery and machine gun fire. Brigadier-General Anderson, undoubtedly writing with some hyperbole, boasted:

“The men fall asleep while working at the guns. For nine or ten weeks now they have worked without a rest, and it is a question whether human endurance can

²⁰¹ Eds. Garry Sheffield & John Bourne, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 288

²⁰² Cyril Falls, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1917* Volume 1 (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1992), 429

²⁰³ WO 95/3068, ‘62nd Division war diaries- April 1917’

²⁰⁴ Cyril Falls, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1917* Volume 1 (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1992), 455

go much further. They fire day and night, and when not firing they are staggering through the mud carrying ammunition; they no sooner have dug a resting place than batteries have to move to a fresh position. And the weather is beyond words abominable. If it isn't raining it's snowing, and it's impossible to keep anything dry; nothing but cold, squalor, and hideous discomfort. And yet they stick it out with the utmost courage and cheerfulness, and fight splendidly."²⁰⁵

Although this passage might have a few embellishments, it surely gives an idea of the trying conditions in which the men of the 62nd Division were operating. During the darkness they were also deploying Bangalore torpedoes under German wire. They also practiced for the eventual attack, adding additional depth to their preparations with each postponement. A priority for the upcoming attack was to focus on the more effective use of machine guns. Later the Division built dummy courses on which to train, carefully registered their artillery, buried 1600 yards of communication cables, studied aerial photographs, went over instructions on the operation and use of tanks, and with the extra time allotted before the attack, Brigades were directed to pay particular attention to specialist training.²⁰⁶ The training, however, was repeatedly interrupted as the troops geared up for the assault only to be informed at the last minute that it had been once again cancelled, and training resumed.

Patrols were sent out at night to gauge enemy strongpoints. Initially it was reported that the German forward posts were not all manned. However, as the month progressed, the patrols reported that the German front lines were becoming much more aggressively held with constant harassing machine gun fire and the use

²⁰⁵A.T. Anderson, *War Services of the 62nd West Riding Divisional Artillery* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1920), 12

²⁰⁶ WO 95/3068, '62nd Division war diaries- April 1917'

of searchlights. Nonetheless, as late as April 22nd, the 62nd Division still thought that the Germans were not unduly alarmed. As one senior officer confidently put it: “I think the show ought to be a success [and] though the Boche is naturally suspicious and jumpy all along the front, I don’t think he expects to be attacked at this particular place.”²⁰⁷ On April 26th, a German regimental photographer of the 120th Infantry Regiment (part of the 27th German Division opposite the 62nd Division’s front lines) became lost when photographing derelict tanks, wandered into the British lines, and was taken prisoner. Upon interrogation he confirmed the Germans were expecting an attack on the Bullecourt front and had been preparing accordingly. Ominously, throughout April the 62nd’s patrols had consistently reported that British artillery had had little impact on the enemy’s barbed wire.²⁰⁸

On May 1st, the 62nd Division received instructions from the V Corps²⁰⁹ that the attack would finally take place on May 3rd, and that as planned they were to attack the town of Bullecourt with the 2nd Australian Division on the right to take the area to the east of Bullecourt and link up with the 62nd Division on the far side of the town (part of the I Anzac Corps). There would be a gap between their lines and it was planned that after reaching their individual objectives the units would bomb their way through the German rear trenches to affect the link up. Jointly preparing for the attack had its problems. The interdivisional communications were strained as both sides mistrusted and blamed the other after the fiasco at the beginning of

²⁰⁷The Royal Artillery Museum, ‘Brigadier-General Anderson papers, April 22nd, 1917’

²⁰⁸ WO 95/3068, ‘62nd Division war diaries various entries in April of 1917’

²⁰⁹ The 62nd Division was still part of 5th Corps; the other divisions in the Corps were the 7th and the 58th Divisions. These Divisions were planned to be held in reserve during the attack on Bullecourt.

April. This poor liaison would have adverse consequences during the attack.²¹⁰ Also tanks would again be used. However, the Heavy Branch (as the Tank forces were still called), would only be deployed on the Yorkshiremen's front as the Australians had decided after the previous engagement that they would have nothing more to do with tanks.²¹¹ Eight tanks would take part in the attack with two more held as a reserve. They were part of No.12 Company, D Battalion of the Heavy Branch, and the machines and the men driving them had just arrived at the Bullecourt lines after taking part in the Canadian attack at Vimy Ridge.²¹²

V Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Edward Fanshawe, was aware that the Germans had a complex series of defences in the town, and prepared the attacking goals for the 62nd Division accordingly. Because of suspected concrete bunkers, it was decided that the German front line trenches where these bunkers were thought to be would serve as the first objective. The follow-up units would then leapfrog the frontline positions and head into the town. To carry this attack out it was decided that the assaulting brigades would advance on a two-battalion frontage with two battalions following behind them. The 62nd's method of attack followed almost exactly B.E.F. manual *S.S. 144* that had been released in February. Strangely, it was also decided that 'moppers-up' would not be required, though the records do not state why.²¹³ After the First Battle of Bullecourt, where there was

²¹⁰ EM Andrews, *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, "Bean and Bullecourt: Weakness and Strengths of the Official History of Australia in the First World War" Volume 72 (1990), 35

²¹¹ The Australian forces refused to use tanks until the summer of 1918. Christy Campbell, *Band of Brigands: The First Men in Tanks* (London: Harper Press, 2007), 276

²¹² Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Staplehurst, England: Spellmount, 1998), 41

²¹³ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diary May 1st 1917'

insufficient artillery cover and enemy machine gun fire had been ubiquitous, the attack on May 3rd would use a rolling barrage to try to suppress the German machine gunners.

A Divisional machine gun company would employ ten Vickers situated at the railway embankment, a high point just south of Bullecourt, firing a barrage to keep the German troops under cover. It was planned that they would each fire one belt²¹⁴ every three minutes for 60 minutes before they would be moved forward to newly-established defensive positions to help consolidate the gains. It was also planned that four Vickers each would be attached to the advancing brigades to help deliver additional firepower.²¹⁵

The week leading up to the attack on May 3rd witnessed a deadly artillery barrage focused on the town of Bullecourt. The 62nd Division had at its disposal not only its own artillery, but that of the 7th, 11th, and 58th Divisions as well, for a total strength of 180 18-pounder guns and 48 4.5-inch howitzers.²¹⁶ In what turned out to be a significant oversight, the artillery concentrated its fire on the town of Bullecourt, largely ignoring the flanking ridge, a natural high ground dominating the approach to the town. Predictably the British absolutely annihilated what remained of Bullecourt, turning the town into a heap of rubble, however this did not have the desired effect on the town's defences.

The Germans used the resultant debris to build strong defensive positions, which would be difficult for the advancing British infantry and tanks to break

²¹⁴ At this time belts were either 250 or 400 rounds.

²¹⁵ WO 95/3077, 'War diaries of the 62nd Battalion Machinegun Corps May 1917']

²¹⁶ A.T. Anderson, *War Services of the 62nd West Riding Divisional Artillery* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1920), 11. WO 95/3073, 'War diaries of the 62nd Artillery –April 1917'

through. Lt-Colonel Hastings, Commanding officer of the 2/5th West Yorkshire Battalion, after the war described Bullecourt as: "... not a village but a fortress"²¹⁷ The 27th German Division that had been holding the line at the beginning of April was still there in May,²¹⁸ manning the complex of tunnels, catacombs and bunkers that had to a large extent remained unscathed. However, the increased British focus both by artillery and aircraft (for aerial reconnaissance) on this section of the line had convinced the Germans, unbeknownst to the British, to bring in fresh reinforcements at the end of April in the form of the 2nd Guard Reserve Division.²¹⁹

All three Brigades of the 62nd would be used in the attack, which would mean that Braithwaite would not have a reserve brigade to throw into the line to take advantage of an opening or to help reinforce a brigade that began to falter. This was not prudent, and it is unclear why this happened. Years later, Lieutenant-General Fanshawe only recalled that:

"There was a misunderstanding about the formation of 62nd Division on [the] 3rd of May. I understood from Braithwaite that he would like to attack with his own 3 brigades in line, which was unusual and not as originally planned. I might have mistaken him, as some time later when talking about it he told me that it had not been his wish."²²⁰

²¹⁷ CAB 45/116, 'Colonel Hastings to Captain Falls'

²¹⁸ The 27th Division was raised in Württemberg and entered the line near Bullecourt at the beginning of April after having been out of the line at Valenciennes during March. *United States Army Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German army which participated in the war (1914-1918)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 371

²¹⁹ Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Staplehurst, England: Spellmount, 1998), 135. The 2nd Guards Division had been out of the line for the most part since January. Once its fighting was over in May it was reconstituted and sent to the Russian front. *United States Army Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German army which participated in the war 1914-1918* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 53

²²⁰ CAB 45/116, C497032, 'Edward Fanshawe to Cyril Falls- July 10th, 1938'

The 187th Brigade would be on the far left with the 186th in the centre and the 185th on the right. The 185th, under the command of Brigadier-General de Falbe, would also need to liaise with the 6th AIF Brigade on its right. As previously mentioned, relations between the 62nd and 2nd Australian Divisions were frosty. However, the distance between the Australian and British Brigade headquarters did not help. The Australian 6th Brigade had dug theirs into a railway embankment just behind their line,²²¹ while the 62nd Division's brigade headquarters were all placed three miles back from the start line, in Nissen huts; sheltered in sunken roads.²²² Communication from the 62nd Brigade headquarters both with the Australians and their own battalions would be much slowed if the wires were cut.

With sections of barbed wire cut, the troops, following a rolling barrage, would move forward. The 185th Brigade's role in the attack was to advance through the village and capture part of the Siegfried Line's (the German nomenclature for the Hindenburg Line) front and support trenches. The 186th's goal, attacking with all four Duke of Wellington Battalions, was to seize the trenches to the southwest of Bullecourt and then push forward a half mile to take the village of Hendencourt. The task of the final Brigade, the 187th, to the left of the 186th, was to take the trenches directly opposite it, attacking with all four battalions on a 750-yard flank to protect the 186th's operations. The attack was to be carried out under a barrage commencing on the German front line at zero hour and lifting at the standard rate of 100 yards every three minutes. The Brigades were to have their first objective in

²²¹ Peter Sadler, *The Paladin: A life of Major-General Sir John Gellibrand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131

²²² WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diary May 2nd 1917'

hand at Zero plus 1hour and 15 minutes, and the second objective consolidated an hour later. Stating the obvious, all three of these Brigades had been given very challenging tasks.²²³

Intelligence on the German line was quite vague as the 62nd Division's information came from aerial photography, captured prisoners, and patrols that were not getting past the first belt of barbed wire. The portion of the Hindenburg Line being attacked stretched for 2600 yards and was defended by belts of barbed wire ranging between 60 to 80 yards in depth. Two or three more belts intersected at right angles to the front belt, with all trenches sited behind this initial wire. The dense pattern of wire was seen to present, as a narrative of the attack stated: "a considerable barrier."²²⁴ Bullecourt was on a hill that sloped down towards the 62nd's lines, allowing German machine gunners full view of the advancing British troops. The 62nd Division did realize that the German position they were attacking was deemed formidable with the Germans in the past few days having been alerted to a pending attack.²²⁵

On the evening of May 1st, the men of the 62nd Division moved into their jump-off positions, relieving the 91st Brigade (7th Division) that had been holding the line for the last few days.²²⁶ The 2nd of May was hot, clear, and dry; little artillery fire came from the German lines. At dusk on the 2nd, the lines were taped to the barbed wire to show the avenues of assault. That evening was very clear and the German

²²³ WO 157/364, '5th Corps: Summary of Operations April 28th-May 4th, 1917'

²²⁴ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diary May 2nd 1917'

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum, '2/5th West Yorkshire Battalion War Diary - May 1917, appendix 1'

artillery became active, shelling the jump-off positions and the forward British lines. This shelling resulted in a 'modest' thirty casualties among the men of the 187th Brigade who were caught waiting in their jump-off area, but for a time during the night, all forward telephone and telegraph wires were cut. Fortunately the signalers were able to repair the breaks and re-establish contact with headquarters before Zero hour.²²⁷ Leading up to the attack, Braithwaite and his Brigadier-Generals did not mention that they had any apprehension about the upcoming battle, Brigadier General Anderson going so far as to pen in a joint entry in his diary for the 28th and 30th of April: "The savages are now contesting every inch of ground with desperation, but Tommy is more than a match for Fritz! ... A long consultation with General Braithwaite this evening! I think we have considered every eventuality - every possible move on the chess board."²²⁸

As an officer in the 62nd Division wrote of the weather on the day of the attack: "The waste land in front of Bullecourt, which had been a mud stretch was on the 3rd of May baked hard and the shelling made the dust rise in dense clouds; all [landmarks] were hidden and direction was very difficult to maintain."²²⁹ The war diary of the 62nd Division commented favourably on the weather, noting that it: "... continues fine and hot. Cool and very clear at night. The ground is very hard facilitating transport."²³⁰ Zero hour was set for 3:45 am, and by 3:30 all Battalions were in position. The 186th Brigade, because of heavy German fire on the start line, decided to place its men 500 yards back, it having ordered them to start moving

²²⁷ WO 95/3076, '62nd Division Signalers War Diary, May 3rd 1917'

²²⁸ The Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anderson diary April 28th and 30th 1917'

²²⁹ CAB 45/116, C497032, 'name indecipherable to Captain Falls- January 8th 1939'

²³⁰ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diary, May 1st 1917'

eight minutes before Zero hour so that they would reach the start-off position at the prepared time to follow the barrage. At Zero hour, the 62nd Division's troops commenced to follow the bombardment towards the German lines, however, within 9 minutes they were suffering heavy casualties from a German artillery barrage that was zeroed in on the three Brigades' lines. The German machine gunners were also very active and appeared to the advancing troops to be firing through the British artillery barrage.²³¹ The 185th Brigade on the right of the attack had mixed results. The 2/5th West Yorkshire Battalion found the German wire cut and rapidly reached the frontlines of the German trenches and began to enter the village.²³² However, the 2/6th Battalion to their right stumbled into uncut wire and began to founder under German machine gun fire. The two Battalions soon lost contact with each other, though as the commanding officer of the 2/6th Battalion, Lieutenant- Colonel J.H. Hastings, subsequently pointed out:

“It is true that direction was lost at first, as it was absolutely dark, and smoke and clouds of dust and brick dust etc made everything hazy and indistinct. But touch was eventually re-established with the 2/5th West Yorkshire”²³³

The 185th Brigade also soon lost contact with the 186th Brigade, as owing to enemy fire and dust raised from the artillery barrage, the two attacking battalions of the 185th Brigade were pushed off course.²³⁴

²³¹ Laurie Magnus, *The West Riding Territorials in the Great War* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1920), 134

²³² WO 95/3069, 'Narrative of the attack on Bullecourt by the 62nd Division'

²³³ CAB 45/116, C497032, 'John Hastings to Captain Falls- January 8th 1939'

²³⁴ E.C. Gregory, *History of the 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment: Volume II, 2/6th Battalion* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries, 1923), 100

Within the first half an hour, the 185th Brigade had suffered very heavy casualties. By 5:00, communication between the two attacking battalions had been re-established, however, communications with brigade headquarters had been cut and the advancing battalions had to rely on carrier pigeons to communicate with the rear. The 2/5th troops that entered the town during their assault were soon driven out because of loss of men. Most of the officers in the battalion were casualties. The four Vickers guns that advanced with the brigade had mixed results - two were put out of action early on but the other two survived in a shell crater firing all day. Wired communications were knocked out for the first two hours of the assault and runners and pigeons were heavily relied upon. In the end, the 185th Brigade had to fall back to their jump-off lines and had suffered just over 700 casualties, most of them suffered by the two attacking battalions.²³⁵ The commanding officer of the 2/6th West Yorkshire Battalion wrote bluntly of the 185th effort: "We all failed that day"²³⁶.

The 186th Brigade fared even worse. Attacking in the centre, it failed to make it past the first line of German defences. Here, the German machine gun fire was extremely intense and the German artillery fire had the range of the attacking British troops. Those who had started forward eight minutes before Zero hour did not reach the jump-off line in time to keep close contact with their protective rolling barrage with the result that during their initial advance they were slaughtered and had to retreat to their start line. With their attack blunted, the rolling barrage was brought back to the jump-off line and a second attack was planned for the survivors.

²³⁵ WO 95/3079, 'Narrative of the attack on Bullecourt by the 185th Infantry Brigade'

²³⁶ CAB 45/116, C497032, 'John Hastings to Captain Falls, January 8th 1939'

But this assault was also a failure and by 1:00 all further attacks were called off.²³⁷

The Brigade's war diary entry for May 3rd offered a bleak assessment:

"Attack unsuccessful our troops having been unable to consolidate even in the enemy's first line, on account of heavy enfilade M[achine]G[un] fire. About 50 men per B[attalion] back at R[AIL]WA[Y] Embankment. Remainder of men in No Man's Land and shell holes. Casualties Heavy: Not Yet Known."²³⁸

The troops of 187th Brigade on the left of the Divisional front did not leave their jump-off line until 5 minutes after Zero hour because of heavy German shelling. The darkness and time wasted searching for gaps in the wire caused the 187th Brigade to be delayed, sowing confusion amongst the advancing troops, a situation only made worse when successive lines of infantry bumped into the men who were held up. As on the other two Brigades' fronts, continuous artillery and machine gun fire were taking their toll. By 4:20 the battalion commander of the 2/5th KOYLI had been killed and general confusion reigned in the lines.²³⁹ The attack began to crumble and troops began to take cover in shell craters. A second attack was planned and the rolling barrage was brought back to launch it. This assault went forward at 8:25 but was almost immediately stopped by ferocious machine gun fire. Brigadier-General R.O.B. Taylor candidly summarized the unfolding disaster in his after-action report:

"The night was very dark, the darkness being intensified by the dust from the bursting shells, and by the smoke barrage. Thus the attack became a night attack, and not a dawn attack, and a night attack is a very difficult operation for even the most highly trained troops. The difficulties of this attack were beyond the capacity of the Platoon Commanders to control, though many showed great individual

²³⁷ WO 95/3088, 'War Diary of the 186th Brigade, May 3rd 1917'

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Reginald Bond, *History of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War: 1914-1918* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries, 1929), 875

gallantry. The individual soldier, left largely to his own initiative apparently lost all power to exercise it. The result was a failure, and a costly failure.”²⁴⁰

The 187th Brigade had lost an appalling 55% of its attacking officers and 48% of its other ranks. Obviously the Brigade was unable to link up with the 6th Australian Brigade to its right.²⁴¹

After the battle, General Braithwaite wrote a report on the use of tanks in the attack. He iterated that the tanks were at the British front around 5:00 and pushed forward into the German lines. However, by 7:30 the tanks were either immobilized or had retired to the British lines. He went on to state that only one tank actually crossed the German lines and made it into the town of Bullecourt, but it soon had to retire. Operationally, he reported, they were severely limited by the width of the trenches and the rough state of the ground which they had to traverse.²⁴² In this case, at least, they had proved next to useless. Overall the 62nd Division had suffered staggering casualties: 116 officers and 2860 other ranks. Suffice to say, the 62nd's Division's attack on Bullecourt had been a disaster.²⁴³

The Australian 2nd Division's battle had not been the outright disaster that the 62nd's had been. The Australian 5th Brigade's attack had been stillborn, not having even gotten past the initial German wire. However, the 6th Australian Brigade, on the 187th Brigade's right, had reached its goals and was planning to link up with the 187th. But it soon became clear to the Australians that the 62nd Division's

²⁴⁰ WO 95/3088, '187th War Diary- report on the Operation of 3rd May 1917'

²⁴¹ WO 95/3088, '187th Brigade War Diaries May 1917'

²⁴² WO 95/3069, 'Report on the action of tanks during the attack of 3/4th May'

²⁴³ WO 95/3069, 'War Diaries 62nd Division- May 1917'

attack had failed and link up would not be possible.²⁴⁴ At 6:28 Major-General Smyth, the commanding officer of the 2nd Australian Division, tried to aid the 62nd Division, and sent the 25th Australian Battalion to help, but it was met with withering fire and was quickly ordered to stand fast.²⁴⁵

The German account of May 3rd also describes the 62nd's failed attack:

“At 3:30 on May 3rd the German artillery laid down the bombardment ordered by the commander of the 27th Division’, annihilation fire which was to shatter the enemy infantry in its assembly positions’ ... when the blow fell the 120 I[nfantry] R[egiment], west of Bullecourt, quickly regained from the 62nd Division all its trenches temporarily lost”²⁴⁶

Though heavily depleted, the 62nd Division was not completely pulled from the line. Its 185th Brigade was annihilated and was replaced by the 22nd British Infantry Brigade (7th Division),²⁴⁷ but, the 186th and 187 Brigades had to stay put in the hope that in the coming days they would be able to renew their attacks on Bullecourt.²⁴⁸

For the next couple of days, the 62nd Division, minus the 185th Brigade, held these lines, during which time the Corps commander, Lieutenant-General Fanshawe, and the Army commander, General Hubert Gough, jointly visited the troops. On this occasion General Gough addressed the staff and all available Brigade and Regimental officers of the 62nd Division, outlining what he felt had gone wrong; after the war he argued that “they (62nd Division) lacked experience and training, and

²⁴⁴ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Volume IV: *The A.I.F in France: 1917* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1939), 467

²⁴⁵ WO 95/3069, ‘Narrative of the attack on Bullecourt By the 62nd Division’

²⁴⁶ C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Volume IV: *The A.I.F in France: 1917* (Australia: Angus and Robertson), 464

²⁴⁷ Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 188

²⁴⁸ Wyrall Everard, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the war 1914-1918*, Volume II (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1922), 69

their attacking bodies lost direction,”²⁴⁹ so this was most likely the message delivered. During this lecture he specifically went over the positions that the 62nd Division would be attacking in the coming days.²⁵⁰

In the days immediately following the failed attack on Bullecourt, battalion diaries gruesomely discuss how German snipers were picking off those wounded who still remained in No Man’s land.²⁵¹ On the night of the 7th of May the still badly depleted 185th Brigade relieved the 186th and 187th Brigades. Meanwhile, the 7th Division and the 2nd Australian Division had continued the fighting at Bullecourt and succeeded in making small inroads, capturing the southeast corner of the village.

The 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion, which had relieved the 2/6th West Yorkshire Battalion on the 3rd of May, was detailed to continue the attack under the control of the 7th Division’s 91st Brigade on May 12th. The 7th Division’s push was supposed to take the southwest portion of Bullecourt (called the Red Patch in operational orders), push through the Red Patch and then link up with the Australians fighting in the eastern part of the town. On the 7th of May, British troops had enjoyed some success and had gained a foothold in Bullecourt. On the 12th, the 91st Brigade, with the 2/7th West Yorks attached, were to take the Red Patch and hopefully the town of Bullecourt itself would finally fall.

²⁴⁹ Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 188

²⁵⁰ WO 95/3069, ‘62nd Division War Diary May 1917’

²⁵¹ For one example see The Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum, ‘2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion War Diary- May 7th 1917’

On the 11th, the 2/7th Battalion received orders that they would be attacking the 'Crucifix' on the following morning.²⁵² The 'Crucifix' was a German strongpoint within the Red Patch. One company of the 2/7th West Yorkshires would carry out the attack with a detachment of the Brigade's trench mortars and Vickers machine guns to assist them. The 2/7th attack went forward at 4:00 am and soon met stiff resistance. Communications were cut off, and "information was very hard to get back and the situation ... obscure except for reports from the wounded till 06:30am when an aeroplane reported our men dug in at the Crucifix."²⁵³ Fighting ensued throughout the day and Battalion headquarters could not gain contact with the company holding the 'Crucifix'. Parties were sent up to regain contact but were turned back. At 8:00 pm another plane reported that the 'Crucifix' was back in German hands. The 2/6th West Yorks tried to relieve the men at the 'Crucifix' throughout the day but also had no success. In his report on their attack, Captain F.L. Fane, commanding one of the latter's companies wrote:

"... [We] attacked in 3 platoons, one being kept in reserves... From what I heard from wounded men who came back to the SUNKEN ROAD they all got to their objectives with slight loss, but there Lieutenant Hamilton was hit and some confusion ensued ... they do not know what happened to the rest of their platoon"²⁵⁴

²⁵² The 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion had been in support during the initial attack on Bullecourt and had not suffered the same number of casualties as the other three battalions in the 185th. The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum, '2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion War Diary, May 7th 1917'

²⁵³ The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum, '2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion War Diary, May 12th 1917'

²⁵⁴ WO 95/3069, 'Report by Captain F.L. Fane 2/7th West Yorkshire Regt ON ACTION OF ATTACKING COMPANY of 185th INFANTRY BRIGADE on morning of the 12th May.'

After hanging on to the west side of the village throughout most of the day, the 2/7th was finally driven back.²⁵⁵ The Company that attacked the 'Crucifix' that day suffered 68 casualties out of the 80 men committed, and could not hold their objectives.²⁵⁶ Overall, the British attack on May 12th did not achieve the desired results.

Over the course of the next five days British units were thrown into that area piecemeal hoping to dislodge the German troops. On the 14th of May, the 185th Brigade was finally pulled out of the line and the 186th Brigade took over the entire 62nd Division's front. The 186th Brigade pushed out strong patrols into the Red Patch which duly reported back that the Germans were still tenaciously holding their positions.²⁵⁷ On the morning of May 15th, the German forces from the Garde Fusiliers (3rd Guards Division) counter-attacked the 186th frontlines, but were beaten off.²⁵⁸

Astonishing, on May 16th, the 62nd Division received a report that the 58th Division patrols sent towards the 'Crucifix' had met with no opposition. It was being reported that the Germans in front of Bullecourt might have evacuated the Hindenburg Line, but it turned out that they had just pulled out of Bullecourt and were still holding the Hindenburg Line beyond it in strength. On the 17th of May, the British and Australian Forces finally held Bullecourt and Field Marshall Douglas Haig visited Braithwaite's command. During the 62nd Division's fighting at

²⁵⁵ CAB 45/116, C497032, 'no signature of the author to Captain Falls, January 8th 1939'

²⁵⁶ West Yorkshire Regiment Museum, 'War Diary, 2/7th Leeds Rifles Battalion: The Prince of Wales Own, May 1917'

²⁵⁷ Wyrall Everhard, *The Story of the 62nd West Riding Division 1914-1919* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1922), 56

²⁵⁸ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diary May 15th 1917'

Bullecourt in May they had suffered 4,233 casualties. The first large attack launched by the Division had been a ghastly experience.²⁵⁹

The attack on Bullecourt by the 62nd Division and the British forces as a whole proved extremely costly. General Gough said of the 62nd Division that it did not accomplish its objectives because of inexperience, lack of training, and the attacking forces losing their direction.²⁶⁰ However, other divisions that took part, such as the 7th Division, which was then seen as one of the best British formations, also suffered very heavy casualties - nearly 3000 - and enjoyed little success.²⁶¹

General Gough was right, though - the attack was rushed and the men had not trained effectively for Bullecourt. However, he was also to blame for these problems. The attack was planned and postponed five times before it actually went in. After each cancellation, the 62nd Division did use the time trying to train the men for the operation on the prudent assumption it would be re-mounted, particularly familiarizing them with the challenges of assaulting a town. However, the continual efforts to re-launch the attack did not allow the in-depth training that would have been desirable. Instead, the troops were constantly getting only a day or two to prepare before they were sent up the line again for the final assault. This was in stark contrast to the time-consuming but more purposeful training that would have helped them understand the nature of the terrain over which they would be attacking, and how to use machine guns and Mills bombs in a contained, rubble-choked urban environment.

²⁵⁹ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diary Appendix- May 1917'

²⁶⁰ Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 188

²⁶¹ Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917* (Staplehurst, England: Spellmount, 1998), 186

It was also clear from patrols along the British front that the artillery had not destroyed the barbed wire or silenced the German machine guns. Furthermore, prisoners and aerial photography confirmed that the Germans were dug in and prepared for an attack. When and where the attack was going to fall was decided at the 5th Army headquarters, but they continued to change plans on an almost day-to-day basis. Directions were handed down from Gough's Army Headquarters to Corps which detailed to the Divisions where they were going to attack, and the senior officers of the 62nd Division had little room to debate their attacking orders. The documents available, both official and private, do not show that the 62nd Division ever balked at their orders or that Major-General Braithwaite or any of his Brigadier-Generals sent comments up the hierarchy to say the attack was going to be a catastrophe or needed significant modification. Rather, the war diaries of the 62nd Division and the units which served in it, as well as surviving personal papers, show that they knew the assault was going to be challenging, but that the attack on the whole British front was going to be difficult and they would simply have to play their role.²⁶²

The 62nd Division did not determine the time of the attack; it was synchronized at 5th Army headquarters so that all of Gough's Corps would attack simultaneously. However, because it was launched at 3:45 it was still dark and this led to many assaulting companies advancing slowly or becoming lost. The 62nd Division's narrative of the Bullecourt operation concludes that leaving half an hour

²⁶² See the War Diaries of the 62nd Division and its units. For private sources on how certain individuals felt, the Captain A.E. Green Papers and Brigadier-General Anderson Papers offer detailed descriptions.

later when it was lighter would have helped the assaulting force and would have allowed for more direction of the assaulting troops.²⁶³ Another problem after-battle reports mentioned was that the 186th Brigade units which were starting behind the jump-off line in the 186th Brigade (because of enemy artillery) found that the eight minutes given for them to travel 500 yards insufficient to allow them to reach the start off line and link up with their rolling barrage, with the result that they were already falling behind even before the attack started and this proved a costly factor.²⁶⁴ The weather was seen as another unfavourable development that was out of the 62nd Division's hands. A strong easterly wind was blowing during the attack and this raised dust storms that hampered visibility and the ability to maintain contact with other units, and at the same time made observations from the rear positions impossible, raising insurmountable difficulties for artillery spotters and headquarters staffs.²⁶⁵

The 5th Army planning went against official policy and War Office training manuals, both of which stressed the need to allow ample time for reconnaissance and preparation. Moreover, the plans themselves were largely ad hoc, with the details not having been worked out. The replica of the terrain the 62nd Division trained on was not up to the standard now expected from the War Office, and when the 62nd Division tried to make alterations they did not have enough time to carry

²⁶³ WO 95/3084, 'Narrative of Attack on Bullecourt by the 186th Brigade'

²⁶⁴ Ibid

²⁶⁵ WO 95/3069, '186th Infantry Brigade Report on Operations May 3rd 1917'

these out. Among the BEF's Army commanders, Gough was alone in not following the manuals and official doctrine faithfully.²⁶⁶

The factors listed above were some of the more salient ones which lay beyond 62nd Division's control and had led to its disaster at Bullecourt. However, the leadership of the 62nd Division did make costly mistakes that were their responsibility alone. One of the most crucial was the failure not to have mopping up parties following the first assault waves. The latter, if they made it to the German front line positions (itself a rare case in most of the attacks launched by the 62nd Division during the Battle of Bullecourt), inevitably found themselves surrounded by enemy machine gun nests and strongly -held dugouts. Instead of the troops leaving these to be dealt with by mopping-up units while moving on to their objectives, they were pinned down and had to deal with them themselves. This was time-consuming, and meant that the troops lost contact with the rolling barrage and also became disorganized, losing critical focus which they were unlikely to regain in the heat of battle. And the suffering of unnecessary casualties meant that the assault units would be that much weaker for the follow-up attacks.

At the larger operational level, the attack was always going to be extremely difficult, no matter the preparation. But at the tactical level, the 62nd Division had some say in how its attack would be carried out, and chose to follow almost exactly the template for assaulting an entrenched enemy position laid down in the most

²⁶⁶ General Allenby and the 3rd Army gave their Corps commanders twelve weeks before an attack on its front to prepare properly. See Jeffery Williams. *Byng of Vimy: General and Governor General*. For the official training manual on the preparation for an assault see SS143 GENERAL STAFF, War Office "Instruction for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action" December 1916

recent British training manuals.²⁶⁷ Lack of creativity in the attack cannot be chalked up to inexperience of the senior officers, commanders and staff officers alone, as almost all had had significant combat experience in the First World War, either on the Western Front or at Gallipoli.

The 62nd Division's artillery barrage also failed. Though it was reported from all three Brigades that artillery fire seemed to be excellent, it failed to silence the German machine gunners.²⁶⁸ Once delayed, the troops struggled to find a path through the wire and were pinned down by German defenses and since they could not communicate to the artillery barrage to hold on a line, it continued to roll forward, becoming more ineffectual with every lift. One of the reasons it did not stop was because artillery observers could not see the battlefield and had no choice but to stick to a predetermined schedule. Regardless, the rolling barrage's timetable, moved too rapidly; and it was not realistic to expect that the assault waves, without troops to mop up surviving German resistance, would be able to keep up with it.

The excessive distances that the troops had to cover were raised by the British historian Cyril Falls as one of the reasons for the 62nd Division's failure to gain its objectives.²⁶⁹ The original goals of pushing through Bullecourt and on to Hendencourt were quite ambitious, in some cases required an advance of more than 2000 yards, with battalions leapfrogging past one another throughout the day.²⁷⁰ However, that was not the problem, as in most cases the attacking companies were

²⁶⁷ See the April and May 62nd War Diary and British training manual SS. 144 for comparisons.

²⁶⁸ WO 95/3069, 'Narrative of Attack on Bullecourt by the 185th Infantry Brigade'

²⁶⁹ Cyril Falls, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1917* Volume 1 (London: The Imperial War Museum, 1993), 480

²⁷⁰ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division War Diaries April 24th 1917'

stopped at the first line of German defenses about 250 yards from their jump off lines. The one company that did reach its first objectives, from the 2/5th West Yorks, was so understrength that it had to retreat almost immediately after entering the town.

The gap between the 2nd Australian Division's 6th Brigade and the 62nd Division's 185th Brigade was a fundamental error for which both Divisions could take responsibility. It should have been clear that having to link up by bombing through 350 yards of German communication trenches would take a considerable amount of time and manpower. Irrespectively, it did not matter how the forces were going to link up, as by the time the Australian 6th Brigade got to the objective where they could start bombing towards the 185th Brigade's line, the 185th Brigade had already failed and the Yorkshiremen had been cut to pieces. The gap between the units was simply too large, and with no effective form of communication between the two, this part of the attack was almost guaranteed to be a failure. In an attack against a strongpoint like Bullecourt, the assaulting forces could not afford to have large gaps that would need to be cleared throughout the day, a problem exacerbated by the lack of troops assigned to 'mop up'. Indeed, this was something that the 62nd Division recognized as its number one failure in its attack on Bullecourt.²⁷¹

A major problem (among a series of problems) for the 62nd Division infantry was the numerous German machine guns and the barbed wire entanglements. The machine guns were not all silenced and the survivors remained active throughout the day, thanks to the artillery not focusing on the hills on the flanks - a critical

²⁷¹ WO 95/3069, '62nd Division Narrative of Operations on May 3rd 1917'

misstep. Those German machine guns tore the advancing British troops apart. The assaulting infantry had no effective way to deal with them as they tried to navigate their way through the wire. One of the consequences of the machine gunners' lethal work was that many junior officers quickly became casualties and the impetus of the attack collapsed. NCOs and riflemen had not been drilled in what the objectives were, and for the most part took cover wherever they could to wait for orders from officers instead of continuing to move forward independently.

That the wire had not been effectively cut in front of a significant number of attacking companies almost a year after the disasters on the Somme was appalling. Lessons had been learned and incorporated from two years of fighting on the Western Front and should have been applied to this attack. The 62nd Division had at their disposal three different Divisions' artillery, and though they made it a priority to shell German positions in Bullecourt, Braithwaite should have made it clear to his artillery that the attack could not take place until all of the routes that the 62nd troops were to advance along were known to be clear. If he could not achieve this, Braithwaite should have informed Lieutenant-General Fanshawe and General Gough that the attack should not go in, although he would have likely been overruled (and relieved of command) had he done this. The documents, however, do not indicate that the 62nd Division was overly worried about the wire or the German machine guns. If anything, there was a pervasive overconfidence in the success of the operation that was to prove to be disastrous on the day.²⁷²

²⁷² Brigadier-General Anderson diaries in late April offer a clear examples of overconfidence before the attack. Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anderson diary April 1917'

Brigadier-General Charles Higgens of the 174th Brigade (58th Division) wrote of Bullecourt that “for the sheer horror of war, Bullecourt could not be surpassed,”²⁷³ while an unnamed British officer lamented that he “never saw a battlefield, including Ypres in 1917, where the living and the unburied dead remained so close for so long.”²⁷⁴ For its part the British Official history observed: “It is this aspect of the fight, its bloodiness that has made most impression. ‘Second Bullecourt’ has had the reputation of a killing match, typifying trench warfare at its most murderous”²⁷⁵ The whole battle on the British front was a debacle, the 62nd Division being but one of three attacking BEF Divisions ripped apart.²⁷⁶ The 62nd Division had done no worse than its sister (and more battle-experienced) divisions.

On the night of the 28th of May, the 62nd Division was relieved on the Bullecourt front. On the 31st of May, the V Corps, including the 62nd Division, was transferred to the Third Army under its newly appointed commander, General Julian Byng. Having suffered over 3000 casualties²⁷⁷, the 62nd Division was in tatters, and desperately needed to be reorganized and retrained so that it would not go through another catastrophe like it had just endured.²⁷⁸

Lieutenant-General Fanshawe wrote briefly of the troubles that the 62nd encountered, concluding that “like all trench fighting, there was often the need for a

²⁷³Jonathan Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt 1917* (Staplehurst, England: Spellmount, 1988), 186

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ Cyril Falls, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1917* Volume 1 (London: The Imperial War Museum, 1993), 480

²⁷⁶ CAB 45/116, C497032, ‘Colonel Hastings to Captain Falls’

²⁷⁷ This was close to 16% of the entire Division or to put it another way it amounted to almost the size of an infantry brigade.

²⁷⁸ Wyrall Everhard, *The Story of the 62nd West Riding Division 1914-1919* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1922), 58

good man on the spot to take charge at a check; they were so often hit - neither 58th nor 62nd Division had been long in France, [but] the 58th had three very good brigadiers.”²⁷⁹ Obviously he felt that the 62nd Division did not have good brigadiers, and after the Bullecourt disaster; in fact two out of the three Brigadier-Generals were replaced. Brigadier-General de Falbe, now deemed unfit for his command, was given leave in mid-May, to be replaced by General Viscount Hampden in August.

Viscount Hampden, although only 37 years old, had served with the 10th Hussars during the Boer War and later had become the colonel of that regiment. Prior to his appointment with the 62nd Division he had served with the Hertfordshire Regiment as a battalion commander and was seen as an able officer.²⁸⁰

The 186th Brigadier-General, Hill, was also found wanting and was given leave in May.²⁸¹ His replacement, Roland Bradford, had won a Victoria Cross during the Battle of the Somme and had been commanding the 9th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry Regiment prior to his promotion. Although when he took over command of the 186th Brigade he was only 25, his leadership abilities were well regarded.²⁸² As General Haig noted of Brigadier-General Bradford: “He started the war in the 6th Division on the Aisne – soon got a company and latterly has had a battalion in the 50th Division. Has come from battlefield, Poelcappelle sector. He has won the VC and Military Cross. Quite a fine

²⁷⁹ The official reason given for de Falbe’s departure was that he was given mandatory retirement because of his age; he was 50.²⁷⁹ CAB 45/116, C497032, ‘Edward Fanshawe to Cyril Falls- 10TH JULY 1938’

²⁸⁰ G.W.H. Peters, *The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment* (London: Ebenezer Baylis and Son, 1970)

²⁸¹ In October, a replacement was found and officially he was retired because of his age.

²⁸² Harry Moses, *The Fighting Bradfords: Northern Heroes of World War One* (London: County Durham Books, 2003), 94

modest fellow.”²⁸³ The only Brigade commander to stay on was Brigadier-General Taylor of the 187th. Finally, on September 4th the GSO 1, Lt-Colonel Hore-Ruthven, left for the Guards Division, and a new GSO 1, Lieutenant-Colonel C.R. Newman replaced him.²⁸⁴ Heretofore, Newman had been serving as a G.S.O 1 in the 35th Division.²⁸⁵

Although no damning words or explanations against the two brigadiers who were replaced at the end of May can be found in official or unofficial papers, it is clear that these men were seen as not having the leadership ability necessary to command their formations. Perhaps the 185th's failings on May 3rd and again nine days later sealed Brigadier-General de Falbe's fate. Brigadier-General Hill was quickly removed from command, not lasting out the month, and an acting-Colonel was leading the 186th in the last weeks of May. Hill's 186th Brigade, as detailed above, had not even reached the first line of the German defences, an extremely poor showing. That said, Brigadier General R.O.B Taylor's 187th Brigade had fared no better and yet he kept his command.

New leadership at the top was not the only significant change forthcoming in the 62nd Division. Officers in the 62nd Division had, in large part, either been killed at Bullecourt, found wanting and replaced, or promoted because of the number of vacancies that were now available. As T.B Hutchison, an officer in the Division, wrote,

“Although many of the Battalion commanders who came out with their Division from England had been “invalided” home again - the new Co's had not had sufficient

²⁸³ Bradford was the youngest Brigadier-General in the 21st century to serve in the British forces. Harry Moses *The Fighting Bradfords: Northern Heroes of World War One* (London: County Durham Books, 2003) 5 .Eds. Garry Sheffield & John Bourne *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), 341

²⁸⁴ Hore Ruthven finished the war as a Brigadier-General and served with the occupying forces in Germany. National Archives of Australia MS 2852, Series of letters, Series 8, July- September 1917, 'Lord Gowre papers'

²⁸⁵ WO 95 3072, ' War Diary 62nd Division Headquarters- Sept 4th 1917'

time to make their presence felt and to transform their Division into the good one which I believe it afterwards became.”²⁸⁶

While there were a large number of promotions for NCOs to become junior officers, many officers from other units in the BEF who had been convalesced home and were ready to return to the front were sent to the 62nd Division as well. These new officers often had seen action during the war, which was a welcome change for some of the battalions. An example of this was the 2/5th West Yorks - when it had gone to France at the beginning of January, only Major Peter (who was promoted to command the Battalion after Bullecourt) had any combat experience. Lieutenant-Colonel Josseyln, who was invalided for 'shell shock' after Bullecourt, and the rest of the officers in the Battalion were Territorials who had come straight out from England.²⁸⁷ Of the officer replacements funneled to the 2/5th between May and June 14, all had had combat experience on the Western Front. This had great significance; the 62nd Division units would now have battle-tested commanders leading them on the Western Front.

The initial reinforcements for the ranks were usually from the Yorkshire region, however with the 62nd Division suffering so many casualties replacements now came from all over England so that henceforth the Yorkshire identity of the Division's manpower would become increasingly blurred. During the summer months, the composition of the companies in the battalions changed as well, both because of a shortage of trained NCOs and officers to lead the units, and because their battalions were reorganized to have three companies instead of four.²⁸⁸ In June 1190 reinforcements were received, followed by a further 11309 in July, 1410 in August and 1147 in

²⁸⁶ CAB 45/116, C497032, 'T.B Hutchinson to Cyril Falls, 11TH JULY 1938'

²⁸⁷ Fraser Skirrow, *Massacre on the Marne* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2007), 126

²⁸⁸ See WO 95 3072, 'War Diary 62nd Division Headquarters' from June to September

September, for a total of almost 4000. These went toward making good the Bullecourt losses as well as 'wastage' in the subsequent four months.

Training throughout the summer months focused on specialist attack skills: how to work with tanks, employ machine guns and bombs, and tightly follow a rolling barrage. Emphasis was also placed on improving aimed rifle fire and the use of the bayonet. During the summer, the 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion diary provides a good example of how the battalions trained - from June 1st to 7th five days were taken up with specialist training and the other two days were spent applying these lessons in battalion training.²⁸⁹ Officers were also being sent off to training schools and short courses, something that had not been a priority prior to Bullecourt. These included army, musketry, and sniper schools, as well as tactical tank exercises and demonstrations focusing on platoon attacks.²⁹⁰ Nevertheless work parties remained a heavy part of the 62nd Division's routine during the summer. Between the extensive construction program by the Division, whose men built light railways, defences, roads, and did agricultural duty, the brigades were occupied with other work to such a degree that in some cases training could not be carried out satisfactorily. The persistence of labour duties in British divisions was definitely a limiting factor in allowing the troops the time they needed to train when out of the line.

At the end of June, the 62nd Division was moved to the Noreuil-Langnicourt sector, not that far from Bullecourt. These two sectors would be part of their front at the beginning of August.²⁹¹ The focus for the BEF during this time was Gough's offensive in

²⁸⁹ WO 95/3081, 'War Diary for the 2/7th West Yorkshire Regiment- June 1917'

²⁹⁰ Wyrall Everhard, *The Story of the 62nd West Riding Division 1914-1919* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1922), 59

²⁹¹ *Ibid.* 59

Ypres, and the Third Army was generally left alone during the summer, Byng's focus being to rebuild and train the units under his command. However, by no means was the 62nd Division placed in a quiet sector. Through the summer months of 1917, the Germans aggressively patrolled no man's land and raided as well as heavily shelled the 62nd's lines. The 62nd Division was getting a true experience of trench warfare during the months of July, August, and September, suffering 839 casualties.²⁹²

In the summer of 1917, Braithwaite and his Brigadiers were making training at the battalion and company levels their priority. The war diaries of individual units as well as brigades are filled with passages such as: "Platoon training and Musketry continued" or "Brigade commander with Mounted Officers from units carried out reconnaissance of ground for Brigade practice on the 15th."²⁹³ Brigadiers were also going to the Army Infantry schools to glean the newest tactical insights, as well as Divisional meetings to discuss tactics. Braithwaite himself was engaged in reviewing the schemes and exercises being carried out by the troops at all levels, and was constantly stopping by to inspect. A mix of defensive and offensive schemes was being carried out, and close attention was being paid to close-order drills and rapid-fire marksmanship, as well as more specialized training.²⁹⁴ Overall, the 62nd's leadership was actively involved in training schemes at the company and battalion level to try and make them more effective.

General Byng, following his earlier practice with the Canadian Corps, was closely involved in the supervision of the 62nd Division training, and certainly more involved than General Gough had ever been. The War Diaries for June, July, August, and

²⁹² See the monthly casualties reports of the 62nd Divisions Headquarters War Diaries WO 95/3072

²⁹³ This was just one example WO 95/3088, '187th Brigade War Diary June 12th, 1917'

²⁹⁴ For one example of this see WO 95/3082, '2/5th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment August 6th, 1917'

September have him visiting and inspecting various units in the 62nd Division on almost a weekly basis, more often even than the Corps commander, Lieutenant-General Fanshawe.²⁹⁵ Following another practice of his time with the Canadians, the new Army commander was making it a priority that all units under his command become much more proficient at raiding. General Haig was present at one meeting that Byng had with his Corps commanders in the summer of 1917, and noted in his diary: “Byng’s policy is to encourage his men to make successful raids and so raise their morale and teach them how easy it is to enter the German trenches if the operation is well thought out and troops practiced beforehand.”²⁹⁶ Major-General Braithwaite and the 62nd Division took this idea of patrolling and raiding to heart.

Between June and October, at least one unit of the 62nd Division would be going on patrol in no-man’s-land every night, and twice a month a unit from the 62nd Division would be carrying out raids on the German lines. The usual raid would comprise a group of ten men commanded by an officer who would try to penetrate the German lines and grab prisoners and any information that they could before falling back to their lines.²⁹⁷ These raids gave the soldiers an opportunity to apply their small-unit training in a realistic setting, and it also had a secondary effect - raising the élan of the unit as a whole. Major-General Braithwaite and the 62nd Division were making it a priority to dominate no man’s land, and as reports demonstrate, the soldiers were responding well to this intense (and potentially dangerous) activity. As one officer wrote in June: “You can scarcely realize what a different battalion we are to what we were exactly a fortnight ago.

²⁹⁵ See the 62nd War Diaries for the summer of 1917. WO 95/3069

²⁹⁶ Jeffrey Williams, *Byng Of Vimy: General & Governor General* (London: Leo Cooper Books, 1985), 172

²⁹⁷ For example of a typical raid see the 187th Brigade raids in July of 1917 – in the appendix of the 187th Brigade WO 95/3088

Peter (the new commanding officer of the 2/5th Battalion) is insisting on Company commanders being company commanders.... I bet that within a fortnight we'll be a better disciplined and organized unit than ever we were."²⁹⁸ By the end of the summer the morale for the 62nd Division was viewed as high; the Division had clearly recovered from Bullecourt.

On September 11th, the 185th Brigade launched a much larger raid against the German forces. As the Brigade diary puts it, the objectives of the raid were to "kill Germans, take prisoners and any valuable war material, destroy dug-outs and ... capture ... documents."²⁹⁹ The raiding party was composed of men from the 2/6th West Yorkshire Battalion and was sent to the area around Vaux (60 kilometers north of Paris, and just south of the 62nd Division's position) to train for the coming operation. Officers that were to lead the raid went through no-man's-land to reconnoiter the area and especially the predetermined routes over which they would be leading their troops. On the 11th of September, General Byng and Brigadier-General Hampden (185th Brigade) visited the frontlines. At 11:00pm, an artillery barrage from the 62nd Division opened up in front of the 185th Brigade's lines, and three minutes later the raiders left their trenches as German machine gunners began to return fire, wounding two of the advancing British soldiers. Nevertheless, the raiders quickly penetrated the German trench system, grabbed four prisoners, and reportedly inflicted twenty casualties on the defenders. Within 30 minutes all of the raiders were back in their trenches, having suffered six casualties, only one seriously wounded.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Liddle Collection, University of Leeds, Captain Arthur Green papers, 'Lieutenant John Airy to Lieutenant Arthur Green, 5,6,1917'

²⁹⁹ WO 95/3080, '185th Brigade attack on Sept 11th'

³⁰⁰ WO 95/3080, '185TH INFANTRY BRIGADE INTELLIGENCE Summary Noon 11th to Noon 12th'

In the early morning of September 13th, the 2/6th West Yorkshire Battalion's line was attacked by a large German raid, estimated at 120 men. Just before 4:00, German artillery pulverized the frontline trenches of the 185th Brigade. They followed this up with two separate attacks; the first at 4:00, which was quickly repulsed by Lewis gun fire and bombs, and forty-five minutes later, the second, just to the east, where vicious fighting ensued, the Germans making it to a supply trench before being beaten back. During the raid, the 62nd Division suffered 34 casualties. From captured prisoners it was ascertained that the German force had spent weeks going over a practice course and that their goal was to destroy British mine shafts that the enemy believed were in that section of the line.³⁰¹ The defence was seen as a success; despite the heavy bombardment and follow up assault no posts were abandoned. Lewis gunners were seen as having been particularly instrumental in repelling the Germans. The raid on and defence of the 185th Brigade's lines were seen as a success and Army, Corps, and Divisional commanders wired their congratulations to the 2/6th West Yorkshire Battalion. Third Army wrote: "The Commander-in-Chief congratulates you and your troops on the repeated success gained in your local operations which show excellent spirit and skill. These success[es] help appreciably in the general plan."³⁰² The Corps commander, General Fanshawe, sent his own congratulations:

"The several recent success of the Division and the repulse of the enemy's Storm troops after severe bombardment, is a clear proof, if any proof were wanting, of the superiority of our troops. It is above all things important at the present time to maintain our moral ascendancy over the enemy..."³⁰³

³⁰¹ WO 95/3069, 'Report of the Brigadier General, Commanding 185th Infantry Brigade on enemy's raid this Morning'

³⁰² WO 95/3072, '62nd Division Special order of the Day- Sept 14th, 1917'

³⁰³ Ibid.

This was the first serious test of the 62nd Division's defences since Bullecourt, and the Division had dealt with the threat effectively, demonstrating in the process that the training and new leadership were having positive effects on its combat capabilities.

October would see the 62nd Division training for an attack on the city of Cambrai, a major offensive to be carried out by Byng's Third Army. The rebuilding of the Division during the summer of 1917 had gone well, and officers that had been found lacking had been replaced. New officers coming into the Division had almost always seen combat during the war and seemed to be proficient in their tasks. The training had also been intense. Not only had the 62nd Division focused on skills that were viewed as necessary for a division and its components to be successful, but they had also taken the idea of having an offensive spirit to heart. The constant raiding had raised the Division's élan and the success that they had demonstrated in September gave promise that this could be a fighting formation that could succeed on the Western Front. However, these were just minor raids - there would have to be success on a much larger scale to be seen as a really proficient division.

The 62nd Division was entering October and the battle of Cambrai with high morale, significant combat experience and fresh troops. However, the first five months of 1917 had not been good to the 62nd Division. There had been obvious flaws in the leadership of the Division and the training of the infantry that were glaringly clear in the Bullecourt battles. The troops lacked initiative and did not know how to respond once their officers were incapacitated. Also the tactics being employed were inadequate. It should have been obvious to all levels of the 62nd Division that the attack was most likely going to fail; attacking a series of distant objectives through urban rubble in pitch dark

conditions against an alerted enemy was clearly known to be foolhardy by the spring of 1917. The mistakes that led to the 62nd Division's failure in May of 1917 should be placed on General Gough, Lieutenant-General Fanshawe, Major-General Braithwaite and his Brigadiers and their staffs. All of these leaders should have voiced concern about the attack, but there is no evidence that any sort of significant protest was raised by anyone.

Two of Braithwaite's brigadiers were relieved of duty at the end of May and Braithwaite went about rectifying what he saw as the challenges that he and his men needed to overcome for the 62nd to become a first-rate BEF division. The battle of Cambrai would demonstrate if he and the 62nd Division had found the winning formula.

Chapter 4: The 4th Division's road to Vimy

After the Somme the 4th Canadian Division would join the Canadian Corps and in the winter and spring of 1917 would take part in a series of raids, undertake a considerable amount of training, and then the major attack on Vimy Ridge in conjunction with the three other divisions in the Corps. During this period Watson's command would establish that it was now as capable as any other division in the CEF. However, these operations would also demonstrate that at least at the senior leadership levels the officers were still maturing and that costly mistakes would continue to be made, the bloody consequences of which the soldiers would have to bear.

The 4th Division joined the Canadian Corps on December 4th on the First Army's front in Artois, literally looking up at Vimy Ridge.³⁰⁴ In December and January it reorganized itself under the impetus of Major-General Watson and Lieutenant-Colonel Ironside. One of the most significant personnel changes Watson implemented was rooted in his having completely lost faith in Brigadier-General St. Pierre Hughes, for he now actively began trying to engineer his removal. On December 7th Watson wrote in his diary that he had visited General Byng, and after discussing the situation with him, agreed to give Hughes one last chance to prove his mettle. But within a month, Watson was approaching the Corps Commander again, informing him that Hughes was not up to the standard the 10th Brigade required or deserved. As a memorandum outlying his concern stated:

³⁰⁴ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division General Staff War Diary December 4th 1916.'

“The conditions existing in the 10th Brigade ... continue to remain in an unsatisfactory state, and I therefore recommend a vigorous reorganization of the Brigade. In this connection I do not consider Brigadier General W. St. P. Hughes capable of effecting such reorganization as I have not that confidence in him that is necessary for same.”³⁰⁵

General Byng wrote an official letter to First Army the following day conveying his agreement and attaching Watson’s letter.³⁰⁶ By the 15th of January, Field Marshall Haig had directed that a letter be written from his office relieving Hughes of his command and transferring him to Canadian Headquarters in England.³⁰⁷ Five days earlier, when Watson had informed Hughes that he was being removed,³⁰⁸ the latter was incensed and wrote to George Perley, the Overseas Minister, vehemently alleging that he was being fired to cover up Watson’s own incompetence and as a form of retribution against his brother, now the ex-Minister of Militia and Defence.³⁰⁹ Perley had the uncomfortable task of explaining once again to Hughes that he was deemed unfit to direct the rebuilding and reorganization of his Brigade.³¹⁰ However, he did promise Hughes that if he at least publicly accepted the verdict he would be given command of a Reserve Brigade in England, to which Hughes reluctantly agreed.³¹¹ General Byng appointed Edward Hilliam, a former British regular who had immigrated to Canada and served as a corporal in the North-West Mounted Police before the war, to take over command of the 10th

³⁰⁵ RG 9, V. 104, ‘Hughes papers- Memorandum dated the 8th of January 1917.’

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ The Military Museums, ‘Major-General David Watson diary, January 10th 1917’

³⁰⁹ MG 24, E 44 ‘Borden Papers, Hughes to Perley, 20 March 1917’

³¹⁰ C.M.G Adverse reports, R611-442-x-E, V. 104, ‘Brigadier-General Hughes W. St. P. Hughes, - Hughes requests investigation’

³¹¹ Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada’s Overseas Ministry in the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 119

Brigade.³¹² At the time of his promotion, Hilliam had been commanding officer of the 2nd Division's 25th Battalion. Brigadier Hughes' bitterness towards Watson was in some ways understandable. For the first eighteen months of the War Watson had been a strong supporter of his older brother and had enjoyed advancement as a result of this. However, when Watson saw the writing on the wall for Sam Hughes, he began to cut his links with the family.³¹³ At the time of Hughes' removal as Minister in November of 1916, Watson's diary simply stated that it would "likely be a wise move for all concerned."³¹⁴ But if the Brigadier's ill-will towards Watson had an understandable basis, it did not change the fact of his incompetence.

As the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Byng, fully supported by his Brigadier-General General Staff, Brigadier-General Percy Radcliffe, followed GHQ directives and directed his staff and the Divisional commanders and their staffs to analyze the fighting during the Somme and candidly report back on what both the successes and failings had been. The findings were many: the artillery had failed to cripple enemy defences, German shelling inflicted heavy casualties, objectives were difficult to identify, reinforcements had been inadequately trained, and most damning of all, the infantry formations were often pushed too far.³¹⁵ This meant that Byng and his Divisional commanders looked for more effective methods of attack

³¹² RG9, V.4901, '10th Brigade war diaries, 17th January 1917'

³¹³ Patrick Brennan, *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership* Chapter 5: Major-General David Watson: A critical appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 118

³¹⁴ Military Museum, 'Watson Diary- November 15th, 1916'

³¹⁵ Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 92

than the ones generally employed on the Somme.³¹⁶ The resultant reforms reshaped the roles of the artillery and infantry in the attack. The infantry concept that would be relied upon now was 'small-unit' tactics. Once an assault was launched, each platoon would be responsible for reaching its allotted objectives. Specialists such as rifle grenadiers and Lewis gunners would keep the enemy's heads down as the troops advanced and help the infantry subdue strong points without the benefit of artillery fire which, due to the almost inevitable severing of communication links, was a frequent requirement. As Major-General Currie said of this focus on small-unit tactics:

"It may be pointed out that there is nothing new in this system of training. Before the war we endeavored to make platoon a self-reliant and self-sufficient unit of battle. Owing to the demands for so many specialists, there grew up in our battalions a wrong system of organization and development of the initiative of company, platoon, section and squad leaders were some-what neglected."³¹⁷

Upon arrival at the Corps, the 4th Division went immediately into the training area. The 4th Canadian Divisional School was organized under Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Harbottle (who would later command the Division's 75th Battalion). The course focused on the offensive: bombing, bayonet fighting, the Lewis Gun and rifle marksmanship, all aimed at fostering the attack. For a large part, the training closely followed the training documents recently issued by the British War Office. One of the main themes stressed was that:

³¹⁶ Byng and the Canadian Corps were not creating these new doctrines. The Canadian Corps were not revolutionizing the way battles would be fought, but rather they merely submitted ideas up the chain of command as instructed throughout the BEF which would then be synthesized into doctrine issued by GHQ. For a detailed exploration of this see Bill Rawling's *Surviving Trench Warfare* and Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*.

³¹⁷ RG 9, V.4142, folder 6, file 2, 'Notes on French Attacks, North East of Verdun in October and December 1916'

“... Ample time should be available for reconnaissance and preparation. Plans must be thought out, all developments foreseen, and every detail worked out beforehand most minutely and carefully. The whole Operation can be rehearsed over an exact replica of the trench to be assaulted, until every individual knows his task thoroughly and can be trusted to carry it through, even if his leaders become casualties.”³¹⁸

During December, the situation at the front was relatively active on both sides.

January passed the same way, with units rotating between the front and Divisional training schools.³¹⁹

The changing role of artillery would also affect training for the 4th Division. The artillery would now ‘conquer’ the ground and the infantry would move up to occupy it, however, if the artillery was found to be insufficient in a certain instance - often the result of communications breakdowns - the infantry would be trained to be self-reliant. Following GHQ directives Canadian Corps HQ began to change the way the Divisions, and more specifically small units, would interact with their artillery. As Currie noted:

“Too often, when our artillery are checked they pause and ask for additional preparations before carrying on. This artillery preparation cannot be quickly arranged ... Our troops must be taught the power of maneuver and that before giving up they must employ to the utmost extent all weapons with which they are armed and have available.”³²⁰

The artillery barrage would not cease when the infantry left their trenches.

‘Accompanying fire’ like the creeping barrages sometimes utilized on the Somme, would now be standard, moving forward at a prearranged rate until it reached the final objectives. If the infantry was delayed, their training and weapons were to

³¹⁸ General Staff, War Office. *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, December 1916

³¹⁹ RG9, V.4859, ‘4th Division General Staff war diary, January 1917’

³²⁰ RG 9, V.4142, folder 6, file 2, ‘Notes on French Attacks, North-East of Verdun in Winter 1916’

overcome the obstacles and then continue with the advance, instead of calling down artillery (which was often not possible anyway) when enemy strong points were encountered.³²¹

As Paddy Griffith argues, by the start of 1917, BEF's infantry tactics had come of age.³²² With the introduction of *SS 135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, released in December, and of *SS 143, Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, issued in February, there was a new template for how to launch an attack that would last, with only minor alteration, for the remainder of the war. The focus would be on infantry moving forward after careful preparations, and with overwhelming support from artillery (including smokescreens), as well as with the firepower of the infantry's own Lewis guns, Stokes mortars, and rifle grenades. Also these manuals moved away from large homogeneous formations of riflemen with little additional firepower to an emphasis on platoons and companies with increased numbers of specialized fire-support weapons advancing to their own specific and limited objectives. The BEF's focus on this new way of waging trench warfare was central to the training of 4th Division units during the winter of 1916-17.³²³

Byng also wanted to cultivate the spirit of the offensive in his troops. As historian Tim Cook has written: "Not content to sit back, the Canadians actively raided the German lines, causing casualties and eroding the German morale. Taking

³²¹ Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), 95

³²² Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-1918* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), 79

³²³ For one example see the comments in the 78th Battalion War Diary. RG 9 V.4943, '78th Battalion War Diary, March 28th, 1917'

pride in winning control of No-man's land, the Canadians began to not only compete among themselves but with other units for the biggest bag of prisoners or the most destruction wrought."³²⁴ The 4th Division enthusiastically embraced this 'cult of raiding' when they joined the Canadian Corps.

Unfortunately, as Cook has concluded, the Canadian Corps' policy of raiding "began to spiral out of control."³²⁵ Odlum neatly summed up the goals of the 4th Division when he ordered his own Brigade "to become more aggressive."³²⁶ When the 4th Division as a whole carried out an intensive series of smaller raids in January and February, Watson and his staff were very pleased with how well the raiding was proceeding. His diary is full of enthusiastic entries such as: "The big raid last night was quite a success," "... our big raid by a company of each of the Battalions of the 10th Brigade took place ... it was a real success," and "the 72nd Battalion had a very successful raid last night."³²⁷ Brimming with confidence, Watson, Ironside, and the 4th Division headquarters decided to launch a 1,700-man attack against Hill 145, the highest point along nearby Vimy Ridge.³²⁸

Although this raid has already been written about in depth, it illustrates an interesting learning curve in the leadership abilities of senior officers in the 4th Division and particularly their serious lapses in judgment during this phase of the

³²⁴ Tim Cook, "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge" *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 1999, 9

³²⁵ Tim Cook, "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge" *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 1999, 9

³²⁶ MG30 E300, V.24, 'Victor Odlum Papers, Trench Discipline'

³²⁷ See Watson's diary on the 3rd, 13th and 17th of February. Military Museum, 'Major-General David Watson diary'

³²⁸ Tim Cook has written extensively on this topic in his journal article "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge" *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 1999

war when they appear to have been trying to prove their aggressive spirit to their own superiors. The March 1st operation would be the largest raid that the Canadian Corps had launched to date. Its goal was to gather intelligence on the forward German defences and take prisoners as well as destroy enemy strong points, all in preparation for the Corps' upcoming attack on Vimy Ridge. Quite likely one of the reasons why Watson had decided to launch this over-sized raid was to demonstrate that the 4th, and most junior, Canadian Division and its commander, who had yet to fight a battle under Byng, had the offensive spirit the Corps commander wanted to cultivate. That said, a raid on this scale, it could be argued, would be useful as practical training for entire battalions.

The perceived key for the success of the 'minor operation' would be the use of gas to gain tactical surprise. Units from the 72nd and 73rd Battalions would be leading the raid, with elements of the 54th and 75th Battalions in support. The Divisional plan predicted that the employment of gas would replicate what had happened at the Second Battle of Ypres and incapacitate the enemy. This in turn would allow the troops to approach the formidable German defenses in the area with relative ease.³²⁹ Hoping to retain the element of surprise, there would be no artillery preparation, and no rolling barrage would protect the advancing troops.³³⁰ All would depend on the effect of the gas in neutralizing the enemy defences. The failure to appreciate how challenging it would prove to disperse the gas, which was heavier than air, uphill in the absence of a suitable wind was a foolhardy mistake.

³²⁹ Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 97

³³⁰ J.B. Beswick, *Cinquante Quatre: Being a Short History of the 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion by one of them* (England: Privately Published, 1919), 13

However, at least two of the Battalion commanders grasped the risks, and made their case that the total reliance on gas was too risky. Interestingly, they were both from the 11th Brigade. Lieutenant-Colonel Sam Beckett, commanding officer of the 75th Battalion, felt that not only was surprise unlikely, but that his troops had insufficient training with gas. The commanding officer of the 54th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H.G. Kemball, told Odlum that because of the unpredictability of the wind, the raid should be postponed, and more artillery fire brought to bear on the German defences. Odlum apparently agreed with both men and went to Divisional Headquarters to try and get them to re-evaluate the plan, arguing that they should wait at least until the wind was favourable. Odlum also argued for more artillery. He got into a heated argument with Ironside, as one officer present reported, “...using very stiff, almost insubordinate language.”³³¹ Odlum, however, was overruled.

The gas was carried to the frontline trenches by the 85th Battalion, one of the Corps’ pioneer (labour) battalions, and was in position for use on the 25th of February. In the words of their Regimental history:

“Fifteen tons of gas was to be sent over to strike terror into the black heart of the enemy. The first wave was to be deadly poisonous gas that would kill every living thing in its path: While the second would corrode all metal substances and destroy guns of every description. When complete all our men will have to do would be to walk into the enemy trenches, throw out their dead bodies and take possession”³³²

³³¹ Edmund Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company Limited, 1970), 40

³³² Joseph Hayes, *The Eighty-Fifth in France and Flanders; Being a History of the Justly Famous 85th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders) in the Various Theaters of War, together with a Nominal Roll and Synopsis of Service of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers And Men who served with the Battalion in France* (Halifax: Royal Print and Litho Limited, 1920), 44

High hopes were invested in this attack. It now remained for the specialist British gas troops men to give the go ahead when the wind was appropriate.

Meteorological conditions postponed the attack until the early morning of March 1st when at 3:00 am, the gas specialists released 1,038 cylinders of White Star (chlorine and phosgene) gas. Unfortunately, the German defensive doctrine had left them well prepared for a gas attack and their artillery began pounding the Canadian trenches from which the gas clouds were being launched. In short order shells began to puncture the canisters, some of whose lethal contents had not already been released, and both the gas specialists and Canadian infantry began to be poisoned by their own gas.³³³ Even worse, the gas released did not seem to be melting away the German defenses as planned. It had the desired effect of moving the defenders briefly out of their trenches, but, when it passed their frontline positions, because of weak artillery support, the garrison who had not been killed or disabled returned to man their weapons.³³⁴

The raiders were to go forward forty minutes after the second cloud was released at 5:00. However, as the second cloud began to drift up the hill the wind changed, and the gas began to waft back down the hill into the Canadian lines, saturating them.³³⁵ The Canadian raiders, hoping that the gas had done its job, now left their trenches and struggled forward toward the German lines.

White flags had been set up during the night to direct Canadian troops through gaps in the belts of uncut wire. With the German forces predicted to be

³³³ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division Intelligence Summary No. 63, March 1917.'

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Alexander McKee, *Vimy Ridge* (London: Souvenir Press, 1966), 41

incapacitated, such visible markings would allow the men to move rapidly through the German defences. But, with numerous of the enemy manning their trenches, these white flags merely served to move the attackers into zones where they could be butchered. As the Canadians continued to push forward the German fire caused men, including the mounting number of wounded, to try and hide in the many shell craters. But these were filled with gas, and the Germans added to the Canadian raiders' troubles by sending gas shells of their own into the Canadian lines. The attack rapidly degenerated into a slaughter.³³⁶

The following day, the field of corpses was so ghastly a German officer left his trenches to inform the Canadians that the Germans would offer a temporary cease-fire so that the former could collect their dead and wounded. The body of Lieutenant-Colonel Kemball, one of the two Battalion commanders to raise his concerns with Odlum, was peeled off a belt of wire. The other Battalion commander who was vocally critical of the raid, Sam Beckett, was also killed leading his men. Battalion commanders were not expected to lead raids, but both men had felt that the attack was so questionable they had a responsibility to accompany their men into this 'valley of death'.³³⁷ Watson's response to the debacle he had done so much to author was a formal congratulatory note:

"Will you kindly convey to the Officers and men of the 72nd and 73rd BNs, under your command, my very sincere congratulations on their gallant efforts in the raid carried out this morning. I deplore with them the sad losses in their ranks"³³⁸

³³⁶ Tim Cook, "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge" *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 1999, 17

³³⁷ RG9, V. 4942, '54th Battalion War Diary – March 2nd 1917'

³³⁸ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division War Diary - March 2nd 1917.'

It would have offered cold comfort to the survivors.

The four attacking Battalions suffered a total of 687 casualties.³³⁹ The 54th war diary remarked that the release of gas had had no effect on the enemy and questioned why it was ever thought otherwise. At this stage of the war, almost two years after the introduction of gas warfare, the Germans and Canadians had effective gas masks, and against a prepared enemy, gas was discomfiting but largely ineffectual. Also, the 250 meters between the trenches allowed the Germans between one and two minutes to don their masks, which was ample time. Brigadier MacBrien noted that the first wave of gas alerted the Germans that an attack was coming and the time between the two releases allowed them to be thoroughly prepared when it did. Odlum raged that the raid had gone ahead when it was obvious that the German defences were well prepared for an attack. A chastened Watson noted after the raid that “gas was overestimated and too much reliance was therefore placed on it.”³⁴⁰ The attack at least changed Corps policy; this was the last gas-led attack it would launch.³⁴¹

The 4th Divisional Headquarters was to blame for this disaster. As historian Tim Cook points out, the staff officers planning the raid had little understanding of how gas worked.³⁴² Years later, Private Selwood of the 72nd Battalion summed up his opinion of the events:

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ See Watson’s diary on the 15th of March. The Military Museums, ‘Major-General David Watson diary’

³⁴¹ Tim Cook, *Shock troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918: Volume Two* (Toronto: Viking Press, 2008), 70

³⁴² Tim Cook, “A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge” *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 1999, 14

“... the troops are fine but the officers always pull off a boner of some kind, you know. And they should have called [the raid] off and they didn't. They lost all kinds of men there. Here they were huddled in this tunnel waiting to go into No Man's land through the exits and here they had all kinds of machine guns trained right on it.”³⁴³

Private Selwood was right. The 4th Division headquarters did make a critical mistake in carrying out this raid, absolutely overestimating what its potential could be - almost to delusional standards. They needed to listen to their frontline commanders and take into account the doubts of some who, like Odlum, were proven 'fire eaters', but nonetheless thought the plan was deeply flawed. Watson and his staff needed to learn one principal lesson from the raid - that they could not build attacks around new technology without fully understanding how to use it and particularly its limitations.

It has been argued that the “supremely self-confident, forceful and opinionated” Ironside was the driving force behind this bloody fiasco and that he had perhaps intimidated Watson into following his lead.³⁴⁴ However, Watson was fully engaged in planning the attack, indeed played the lead role, and felt confident that everything would work out well with the gas. As historian Patrick Brennan points out, at one point he even threatened to call off the raid if sufficient artillery support could not be guaranteed.³⁴⁵ But as to concerns about the reliance on gas, he had none. Though Ironside should be held accountable for the part he played, the

³⁴³ RG 41, V. 16, 'Private Selwood interview' 72nd Battalion 12th Brigade, 4th Division'

³⁴⁴ Patrick Brennan, "Major-General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War," in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 123

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

'buck' stopped with the Divisional Commander, and historians should not permit Watson to shirk his responsibilities.

Costly gambles like the March 1st raid which produced only paltry results – a bomb dump demolished, twenty-two dugouts wrecked, three machine guns destroyed and thirty-seven prisoners taken - were not expected of a successful, mature formation.³⁴⁶ Another cause for concern was that in five weeks the Canadian Corps, including the 4th Division, would be attacking Vimy Ridge in a major operation designed to wrest this formidable position from the Germans. The four battalions that had taken part in the raid had lost many of their best men; on the Western Front it took months to restaff combat formations and intensive training to bring the troops up to the appropriate standard, months the 4th Division did not have. Raiding was certainly not discredited by the experience, however, for on the evening of March 31st, the 46th, 47th and 50th Battalions launched a 600-man attack which proved far more successful than its March 1st predecessor, destroying several bunkers and gaining some German prisoners.³⁴⁷ However, this was the last raid carried out by the 4th Division before the attack on Vimy Ridge.

The Canadian Corps had been preparing for the attack on Vimy Ridge since January. Byng would often meet with his Divisional commanders, including Watson, and go over the details of the operation and the roles that were expected of them. Detailed planning of the attack included a surprisingly recent innovation, the distribution of maps of the areas that the troops would be assaulting to all NCOs taking part, and not just the junior officers. The concern was practical – if NCOs

³⁴⁶ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division War Diary, March 1917 - Appendix A.'

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

were to step forward and lead their units they had to be 'in the know' about the attack plan. The preparation for the 4th Division was intensive to make training more realistic. A large open field was used to lay out a full-scale taped course which replicated the German position that the Division would be assaulting. The men practiced on this course, going over it first as platoons, then battalions, and finally as whole brigades.³⁴⁸ This was carried out with unprecedented thoroughness to ensure that all ranks knew their objectives, where they might run into difficulties and what those difficulties might be. The key to this first demonstration of 'bite and hold' doctrine would be overwhelming artillery support combined with the new infantry tactics that the BEF had been implementing in training since the release of *SS 135* and *SS 143*.

Artillery planning - and training - was left in the hands of Corps' artillery experts and particularly the two superb staff officers, Major Alan Brooke and Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McNaughton, the Staff Officer Royal Artillery and Counterbattery Staff Officer, respectively. It was the responsibility of the Divisions to train the infantry, and during the build up to Vimy Ridge intense focus was placed on the new platoon-fighting tactics. As has already been pointed out, the Canadian Corps focused on religiously following the doctrine contained in British training manuals, and in particular *Standard Drill for a Platoon in the Attack*. These documents clearly spelled out the links between training and the battlefield:

"The first stage of collective training takes the form of a drill as set forth in attached 'Standard drill for a platoon in the attack'. The final stage takes the form of tactical exercises in which various situations of attack and consolidation will be created with which the Platoon Commander will deal. If possible these will be carried out on

³⁴⁸ RG9, V. 4859, '4th Division War Diary, March 1917'

a rifle range provided with the necessary trenches and targets indicating M[achine] G[un] and Infantry.”³⁴⁹

Both Byng and Watson were constantly visiting the individual battalions to make sure the training was being carried out effectively.³⁵⁰ Lieutenant-Colonel Harvey, who had taken over command of the 54th Battalion after Lieutenant-Colonel Kembell’s death, recorded that Byng had watched the 54th practicing an attack on March 14th.³⁵¹ Such visits were in fact commonplace. Not only Byng and Watson but all three brigadiers were personally involved in making sure that the training was being carried out appropriately. For the upcoming operation, officers with specialized training had been attached to the battalions for instructional purposes.³⁵² Odlum wrote that he had personally gone over the training ground and training regime with all four of his battalion commanders.³⁵³ As mentioned above, the training regime was not being created at the battalion, brigade or divisional level. Orders were coming down from Corps headquarters, with the full endorsement of Lieutenant-General Byng and Brigadier-General Radcliffe who were determined that the training be carried out to the letter and that in general all preparations be carried out with an unprecedented level of thoroughness.

On March 5th, Byng reported to General Henry Horne, commander of the British First Army, on his “scheme of operations”. The 4th Division would be

³⁴⁹ MG 30, E-300, V. 20, ‘Training the 11th Brigade- April 2 1917’

³⁵⁰ For one example see the 102nd battalion’s war diary for March 14th, 1917. RG9, V. 4944, ‘102nd War Diary, March 14th, 1917’

³⁵¹ For one example see 54th Battalion War Diary, March 14th 1917. RG 9 V. 4942, ‘54th Battalion War Diary, March 14th, 1917’

³⁵² For one example of this see the 75th Battalion war diary on the 10th of March 1917. RG9, V. 4943, ‘75th War Diary, March 10th, 1917’

³⁵³ RG 9, V. 4904, ‘11th Brigade War Diary, March 12th 1917’

attacking the northern side of the Ridge. Two points stand out on Vimy Ridge: Hill 145 and Hill 120 ('The Pimple'). Hill 145 was the highest point on the ridge and offered a commanding view overlooking the Canadian lines, while 'The Pimple', located about 1500 meters to the west of Hill 145, was also going to be a difficult challenge from the Canadian perspective since it would provide a clear view of much of Hill 145, and machine guns there would be able to deliver deadly enfilade fire on any attackers. Watson and Ironside, having looked over the plans, reported back to Corps headquarters that taking Hill 145 and 'The Pimple' would be too ambitious and that it should be a two-divisional operation, but they were curtly told that it would remain their sole responsibility. To facilitate this, a concession was made – The operation against 'The Pimple' would take place subsequent to that against Hill 145, either by the remaining Brigade of the 4th Division, if it had not been engaged in taking the former, or by some other Brigade if the entire 4th Division strength had been committed.³⁵⁴

The Lahore Divisional Artillery, which continued to serve as the 4th Divisional field artillery, now renamed the Reserve Divisional Artillery, was augmented with a further 36 field guns (18-pounders) and 16 howitzers. As discussed earlier, artillery's role in supporting an attack would change for the Vimy Ridge assault. *Canadian Corps' Artillery Instructions No.1*, released on March 28th, outlined its role in four phases. The first two would consist of the preparatory bombardment

³⁵⁴ RG 9, V.4228, folder 16, file 4, '4th Canadian Operation Order No.33'

(counter-battery and wire cutting) that had already commenced on the 20th.³⁵⁵ Phase three would comprise the artillery fired in support of the assault on the 9th (creeping barrage and counter-battery). The final phase of the artillery operation would encompass field batteries moving forward so that they could aid in supporting the final advance and provide defensive fire for the newly won Canadian positions.³⁵⁶

The assault on Vimy Ridge was allocated most of the artillery that was available to the First Army. Of its 306 pieces of heavy artillery, for example, fully 284 were attached to the Canadian Corps, providing the 4th Division with one medium or heavy howitzer for every fifty yards of frontage. As well, the field artillery that the Canadian Corps had under the command of Brigadier-General Morrison was placed at the disposal of the Divisional artillery commanders. Thus, the 4th Division had one hundred and twenty-six 18-pounders and forty-two 4.5-inch howitzers to support its operations. These would be the workhorses of the artillery barrages during the assault, used to cut wire, assist in demolishing enemy strongpoints and trenches, and form a rolling barrage when the infantry advanced.³⁵⁷ On the 20th of March the artillery bombardment commenced on German positions on Vimy Ridge, the start of a carefully regulated 20-day scheme of demolition.³⁵⁸ The destruction of the German

³⁵⁵ Though the document was released on the 28th, preparatory bombardment had already started on the 20th. G.W.L., Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 279

³⁵⁶ RG 9, V. 4958, file, 506, 'War Diary G.O.C. Royal artillery, Canadian Corps Artillery Instructions No.1, 28th March 1917'

³⁵⁷ MG 30 E-300, V. 20, 'Odlum Papers - Chapter 11: Battle of Vimy Ridge, 24'

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 26

forces was also aided by mortars and 60-pounders and heavy howitzers provided by Corps and First Army.³⁵⁹

Since the Battle of the Somme, a crucial new focus for the Canadian artillery was counter-battery fire. The success of counter-battery operations depended upon obtaining accurate information about enemy batteries, including the caliber of the guns, their precise locations, and their potential arcs of fire.³⁶⁰ With this information, gathered from a variety of sources, British and Canadian gunners could target enemy artillery and machine gun positions, and hopefully eliminate them. Failure to do so at the Somme had contributed mightily to the resultant heavy infantry casualties.

Accepting that there would be no hope of a decisive breakthrough lay at the forefront of the Vimy planning. The attack had limited objectives and with the larger Arras offensive of which it was a part, represented the earliest attempt to carry out what came to be called a 'bite and hold' operation. The massed and now highly accurate artillery would make possible breaking into enemy positions, where the troops would dig in and hold the new ground, instead of overextending themselves looking for a breakthrough. Obviously, a very complicated relationship would have to work among the different arms of the Division for these set-piece assaults to succeed.

Massed Vickers machine guns were also to play a prominent role in the attack. In the lead up, the Corps' 280 heavy machine guns were placed in selected sectors on all four Divisional fronts, and were primarily used during the build up to

³⁵⁹ The 4th Division had 24 heavy and 5 medium mortars.

³⁶⁰ Andrew McNaughton, "Counter Battery Work" *Canadian Defence Quarterly* (July, 1926), 381

provide harassing fire in the evenings.³⁶¹ A private at the front said that “whereas the ground of the Somme battlefield appeared to suffer from small-pox, Vimy Ridge at the conclusion of the bombardment had confluent small-pox.”³⁶² Hill 145 was a wasteland of muddy craters.

The Canadian Corps did not, and indeed, could not, keep their plans to attack Vimy Ridge a secret, and the Germans had prepared for an assault. At the beginning March, the 1st Bavarian Reserve Corps occupying the town of Givenchy, just on the opposite side of Vimy Ridge from the Canadians’ position, were told “... that in a short time they would have to stand a great assault.”³⁶³ Reinforcements were brought into the area creating Group Vimy, composed of the 79th Reserve, 1st Bavarian Reserve and the 14th Bavarian Divisions. Next to Group Vimy was Group Souchez, consisting of the 16th Bavarian Division. The 4th Division would be attacking across terrain held by elements of the 79th Reserve and 16th Bavarian Divisions.³⁶⁴ A stroke of luck for the Canadian forces followed when General Ludwig von Falkenhausen, commanding the Sixth Army (part of Group Vimy), ignored German Army practice and did not bring his reserve infantry divisions or artillery forward to provide relief or support for the units holding Vimy Ridge. On the 6th of April, he commented to the Crown Prince of Bavaria, who commanded the Army Group, that he wished to avoid filling the villages near the frontlines too densely

³⁶¹ RG 9, V. 4228, folder 16, file 4, ‘4th Canadian Operation Order No.33’

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Rudolf Fisher, *Das Reserve Infanterie Regiment Nr 262, 1914-1918* (Zeulenroda: Bonhard Sporn, 1936), 115

³⁶⁴ MG 30 E-300, V. 20, ‘Oldum Papers- Chapter 11: Battle of Vimy Ridge Appendix’

with troops.³⁶⁵ It would mean, however, that they would be too far to the rear to intervene promptly in the case of a Canadian breakthrough.

The Canadian Corps' training for the attack, which was to take place on April 8th, had been hard and sophisticated. However, because of poor weather it was decided to delay the assault until Easter Monday, April 9th. The 4th Division, as previously mentioned, was to take Hill 145 and then follow that up with the capture of 'The Pimple'. The attack frontage extended 2000 yards from the 3rd Division lines to Kennedy Crater, about 300 yards from the Souchez-Givenchy road.³⁶⁶ The 4th Division's attack, although only having to advance 700 yards (compared to the 1st Division's 2000 yards) to bring the 11th Brigade to the top of the ridge, would have to cover what was by far the most challenging terrain. To reach their objectives, the infantry would have to proceed through Souchez-Zouave valley, targeted by German artillery, and then up to the highest point on the Ridge while being enfiladed by German forces on 'The Pimple'. To try and lessen the fire expected from the latter's slopes, it was planned to neutralize this position with smoke and poison gas.³⁶⁷

To allow the 4th Division's troops to get as close to the forward-most German positions as possible, the 176th and 182nd Tunneling Companies, using over 800 men, had been building six tunnels over the course of three months, extending from rear areas to the 4th Division's jump off points. These would allow the assault troops to approach very close to the frontlines with less risk of being injured by German

³⁶⁵ Rupprecht von Bayern, Eugeun von Frauenholz, *Mein Kriegstagebuch: Vol. II*. (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag, 1929), 138

³⁶⁶ Andrew Godefroy, *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, "The 4th Canadian Division: 'Trenches Should Never be Saved'" (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 216

³⁶⁷ RG 9, V. 4228, folder 16, file 4, '4th Canadian Operation Order No.33'

fire. The summit of Hill 145 had been turned into a fortress. A double row of barbed wire and pill boxes surrounded its four sides in the form of a square. The outer trench was constructed to serve as either a communication or fire trench and to direct fire over the valley below. Also, on the reverse side of the trench was an extensive system of deep dugouts that gave the German reserve units protection from Canadian artillery fire.³⁶⁸ The 11th Brigade was to advance on the right side of the 4th Division's assault and take Hill 145, while the 12th Brigade was to push forward on the left and hopefully crest the hill and then take the southwest corner of the village of Givenchy-en-Gohelle. Both of these Brigades would be attacking with all four of their battalions. The 10th Brigade was left in reserve in case it was needed to reinforce either of the main thrusts.³⁶⁹

At 5:30, as the artillery across the Canadian Corps' front punctured the air, mines in front of the 4th Division were blown, leaving gaping holes in the German lines as the Canadian troops left their positions and began advancing behind the rolling barrage. The 11th Brigade surged forward with two battalions on their front - the 102nd and the 87th. The 54th and 75th Battalions were assigned to leapfrog them once the first wave had achieved their objectives. The first of these was near the crest of Hill 145, from which hopefully the 54th and 75th Battalions would advance a further 250 yards to the final objectives on the reverse slopes, where the accompanying engineers and machine gunners would set up defensive positions.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 284

³⁶⁹ RG 9, V. 4942, '72nd Battalion War Diary, April 9th 1917 '

³⁷⁰ RG 9, V. 4904, file 314, 'War Diary- 11th Brigade Vimy Ridge narrative'

The 102nd Battalion, met with early success under the able leadership of its acting commander, Major A.B Carey.³⁷¹ When communication broke down, Carey, after gaining permission from Odlum, went to the front lines to make sure that the attack and consolidation were being carried out effectively, returning to his headquarters only once he was "... convinced that the battalion was securely dug in."³⁷² This sort of leadership would be a key if Hill 145 was going to be taken. At 6:40 it was reported back to Brigade that all of their objectives had been gained and that they were consolidating them in preparation for a German counter-attack.³⁷³ The 54th Battalion, as planned, passed through the 102nd's lines and moved towards its objectives on the reverse slope. However, it soon ran into heavy German machine gun fire and began to falter. The 87th Battalion, of which more will be said later, had not reached its objectives and in consequence the 75th Battalion, which was supposed to be pressing the attack down the slope at the same time as the 54th Battalion, was not in position. This left the Germans to focus all their fire on the 54th Battalion's front.³⁷⁴

The 87th Battalion left their trenches at 5:30, however, on the right side of the Battalion's sector the wire was not cut, which checked the assaulting troops' attack. Failing to cut the wire was a costly error that threatened the whole 4th Division operation. Though it had been learned that the wire had been replaced by German

³⁷¹ The commanding officer, LT Colonel J.W. Warden, of the 102nd Battalion had been temporarily removed from command on February 15th because he had contracted paratyphoid fever. He came back to command the 102nd Battalion on April 11th. LAC RG 9 III D-3 Vol. 4944, "War Diary- 102nd Battalion February 15th, 1917"

³⁷² RG 9, V. 4944, file 456, '102nd Battalion War Diary, April 9th 1917'

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ RG 9, V. 4942, file 445, '54th Battalion War Diary, April 9th 1917'

forces on the 7th of April, nothing was done to eliminate it.³⁷⁵ Fifteen minutes after zero hour it was reported that troops had still not left their jump-off position because of the hold up.³⁷⁶ A draft chapter written in 1937, for what seems to have been an unpublished official Canadian history of Vimy Ridge, found in Odlum's fonds, seems to confirm this had been the result of a conscious decision by the Brigadier:

"This section of the trench was directly opposite and commanded at 400 yards range the exit of the British tunnel (Tottenham) under the Zouave Valley leading up to the Brigade front. It has been destroyed earlier in the bombardment but air photographs taken on the 11th [March] showed it intact. Requests were made to destroy this position ... but in compliance with the wishes of Brigadier General Odlum who hoped to make it his headquarters during the advance, the bombardment was not carried out."³⁷⁷

This was a costly decision. As a 4th Canadian Division War Diary appendix for April states:

"Trench destruction by the Heavy Artillery was excellent, and only in one place was a portion of the trench allowed to remain, and that by the desire of the infantry who proposed to use it afterwards. This was a mistake, which should not have been allowed to occur. After an attack, lines of shell holes are easier to occupy than any lines of trenches. Trenches should never be saved from destruction for the purpose of use after an assault."³⁷⁸

The *Gunners of Canada*, a history of the Canadian artillery, alleges that it was the commanding officer of the 87th Battalion, not Odlum, who was responsible for

³⁷⁵ Andrew Godefroy, "The 4th Canadian Division: "Trenches Should Never be Saved," in Geoffrey Hayes et al, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 220

³⁷⁶ MG 30, E300, V. 20, 'Odlum Papers- Chapter XI Battle for Vimy Ridge', 26

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ RG 9, V. 4859, '4th Division Report on Operations, Appendix B, 4/24, War Diary, March-April 1917'

making the decision.³⁷⁹ Major Shaw had only assumed the post after its original commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Frost, was evacuated seriously ill on the 6th of April. Little is mentioned of Shaw in any account surrounding Vimy Ridge other than in the Canadian Grenadier Guards' history (87th Battalion) which merely states that he left the unit permanently for Canada on May 8th.³⁸⁰ However, whoever was responsible for leaving a portion of the trench unharmed for some future use - whether Shaw or Odlum - made a foolhardy decision. On the left flank, the 87th men passed through the wire and advanced to their objective, however because of their reduced numbers, they were soon evicted from the German trenches. This exacerbated the situation, because the retreating 87th soldiers began crossing into the attacking 12th Brigade area, causing confusion in that attack. In a matter of minutes, the 87th Battalion was cut to pieces, losing 60 percent of its men and almost all of its officers. The soldiers of the 78th Battalion, who were supposed to leap frog, were so unnerved by the retreat that many of them refused to leave their trenches. As the battle unfolded, their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Kirkcaldy had to resort to drastic measures:

“19 Officers only went into action at first, the balance of officers (9) were employed at Battalion Headquarters. As the engagement proceeded it was found necessary to send forward other officers owing to heavy casualties. ... I ordered all available Officers and O.R.'s in Battalion Headquarters irrespective of their previous duties (with the exception of Signalers and runners) sent forward to strengthen the line.”³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ G.W.L., Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 284

³⁸⁰ A. Fortescue Duguid, *History of the Canadian Grenadier Guards 1760-1964* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Company, 1965), 147

³⁸¹ RG 9, V. 4943, file 453, 'Report of Operations by the 78th Battalion C.E.F. from April 9th to 13th both inclusive'

However, though Kirkcaldy threw in everything he had to save the situation on the 11th Brigade's front, the 12th Brigade's attack began to fall apart.³⁸² Brigadier-General MacBrien showed strong leadership and was actively engaged throughout the day checking with his battalion commanders and trying to figure out a way to continue to push his hard-pressed battalions forward. Kirkcaldy reported that he had consistent contact with MacBrien throughout the day.

The 38th and 72nd Battalions' role was to consolidate the far left of the Corps' attack. They left their jumping off positions at Zero hour and struggled up the hill through the glutinous mud and sleet. Staggering through the German front lines, officers and men soon came under enfilade fire from 'The Pimple' as well as from the German positions atop Hill 145. The clouds of smoke released to block the view from the former did not work as effectively as planned, for the Germans began to fire blindly through the smoke at the advancing Canadians, causing the 12th Brigade's attack to stall.³⁸³ Private Young, a soldier in the 72nd Battalion, recounted after the war: "Well there wasn't a square inch of that ground that wasn't just mud. A lot of the casualties were from drowning, they got wounded and they fell into these mud holes and they couldn't get out."³⁸⁴ The 72nd attack lost its impetus and the survivors dug in 300 meters from their final objectives. The 38th also tried to advance through the mud and shell holes and was suffering heavy casualties. Captain T.W. MacDowell, who led a company of about 150 men from the Battalion, sent this message to his Battalion headquarters:

³⁸² RG 9, V. 4906, file 552, '12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, April 10th 1917'

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ RG 41, V.16, 'Mr M. Young - 72nd Battalion'

“The mud is very bad and our machineguns are filled with mud... and can see others around and am getting them in here slowly... The runner with your message for “A” Company has just come in and says he cannot find any of the Company officers. I don’t know where my Officers or men are but am getting them together... there is not an NCO here. I have one machine gunner here but he has lost his cocking piece off the guns and the gun is covered in mud. The men’s rifles are a mass of mud, but they are cleaning them.”³⁸⁵

MacDowell and his men would capture 75 German prisoners while struggling forward, and MacDowell would be awarded the Victoria Cross for his courageous leadership under the most trying conditions.

Suffice to say the attack was not going well for the 4th Division. As the 261st Prussian Reserve Infantry Regiment reported, the Canadian “corpses accumulated and form small hills of khaki.”³⁸⁶ The Canadian artillery tried to lend support to the embattled groups of men, however, because of the ragged pockets of troops all over the hill they had to proceed with caution so as to not shell their own comrades.³⁸⁷ With the 4th Division being pushed from their modest gains, Hill 145 was about to be lost. If this happened, the entire Corps’ assault would be in jeopardy.

The 12th Brigade’s final battalion was hurriedly thrown into the fray. Through the chaos of the day, communication with the frontline of the 4th Division was extremely poor, and Odlum had an incomplete picture of how the fight was being carried out. He gathered elements of the 85th Battalion³⁸⁸ (12th Brigade) in one of the forward tunnels on Hill 145 to explain to the officers what role they would play. One of the men present related this story:

³⁸⁵ CWM, 58A 1.171.29, ‘T.W. MacDowell, Notebook, 9 April 1917’

³⁸⁶ H.F. Wood, *Vimy!* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1967), 141

³⁸⁷ G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 284

³⁸⁸ The 85th Battalion was a pioneer battalion with infantry training but no combat experience.

“When we got there, General Odlum’s report was that, since early morning, he had sent five Battalions up on his front and he hadn’t had a word back from” any one Battalion or any one company or from any source. He had sent out thirty scouts and none of them had got back to him with any message all morning so he figured there must be strong points and machine gun emplacements and that, whenever anybody showed up, that they were being picked off. The Result was that an arrangement was made that our two companies of the 85th that were within two hundred yards of him in the musical line where we’d been all night, we were all equipped for fighting you understand, all the time, that we would make an attack on the 2nd German Line at five o’clock that afternoon”³⁸⁹

At 6pm, the 85th (Nova Scotia Highlanders) Battalion stormed the German positions, seemingly regardless of their own safety,³⁹⁰ and resorting to brutal hand-to-hand-combat. The ferocity of their attack pushed the Germans from their commanding position atop Hill 145 and captured most of the features that were still in the enemy’s hands.

Thus, by the evening of the 9th, most of Hill 145 had been taken except for the furthestmost part of the 12th Brigade’s objectives and part of the reverse slope. The 11th Brigade was shattered and had to be withdrawn, so the 10th Brigade, under Brigadier-General Hilliam, took over its front. The 12th Brigade was decimated, too, but had to be left in the line for lack of alternatives.

Because of the chaos reigning on Hill 145, made worse by the poor weather, the remaining part of the hill still in German hands was not attacked until the 10th at 15:15.³⁹¹ In so doing, the 44th and 50th Battalions encountered withering flanking fire from ‘The Pimple’. Nevertheless, the 44th, following a rolling barrage, advanced

³⁸⁹ RG 41, V.16, ‘Crowley, 85th Battalion, 12th Brigade, 4th Division’

³⁹⁰ The 85th Battalion until recently had been a pioneer battalion; it had only just been converted to replace the 73rd Battalion. The 73rd Battalion was soon to be broken up and deleted from the Canadian Order of battle. The 85th Battalion had only basic infantry training and no combat experience.

³⁹¹ RG 9, V. 4971, file 549, ‘War Diary, 10th Brigade – April 10th 1917’

quickly and took its objectives within 30 minutes.³⁹² But the 50th Battalion attack did not go as well. They were raked by German machine gun fire, and as Victor Wheeler, a signaler in the 50th, recalled: “[Men] were being impaled like grotesque scarecrows on rusty concertina wire, splashed into water-filled craters, scattered over the lower slopes of the hill in gruesome fragments.”³⁹³ However, through the efforts of individuals like Sergeant John Pattison, who won a Victoria Cross for single-handedly silencing a German gun post, the attack did not fall apart. By day’s end the 50th Battalion consolidated the remaining objectives on Hill 145 that had been part of the 4th Division’s responsibilities. Vimy Ridge had now been all but taken, only ‘The Pimple’ being still held by the enemy, but Canadian intelligence reported that the 5th Guards Grenadier Regiment, an elite Prussian formation, had been sent to reinforce it.³⁹⁴

The 44th and 50th Battalions were called upon again to attack ‘The Pimple’ on April 11th. But the weather was horrible, with driving sleet falling along Vimy Ridge. Watson, with the agreement of his staff, and in conjunction with his brigade commanders, wisely decided to postpone the attack until the following day. Thus, the assaulting Battalions were given 24 hours to reorganize and it was also decided that the 46th Battalion was going to join them in the attack to provide some extra weight. At zero hour (5:00 am) on the 12th, the men surged forward, however the pervasive mud and German machine gun fire slowed the pace of advance to such a degree that the troops lost contact with their creeping barrage. Fortunately for the

³⁹²E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), 87

³⁹³ Victor Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man’s Land* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), 95

³⁹⁴ RG 9, V. 4859, ‘War Diary, 4th Division, Report on Operations, Appendix -April 1917’

Saskatchewan boys, the strong snowstorm hid the soldiers to a degree. Private

George Kentner, who served in the 46th Battalion, later recalled:

“We had scarcely started when we began to have casualties. A man on my right dropped - another close by on my left went down - another barely three paces away let out a fearful yell and went sprawling in the mud. As we neared their front line, we were greeted by stick-bombs which took effect but didn’t stop us. In a moment we were in the front line.”³⁹⁵

Once atop ‘The Pimple’, it was discovered that there were two hidden concrete pillboxes that Canadian intelligence had been unable to locate in the preparation for the battle. Once again, the fighting degenerated into a desperate hand-to-hand brawl and once again the Canadians won the fight. Leutnant Ueckert, who soldiered with the 2nd Reserve Infantry Regiment, wrote that:

“There was no sign that any operation was to be undertaken that night. Suddenly, in the early hours of 12 April, the sentries raised the alarm. Within minutes the company was out of the dugouts and stood-to along the parapet. Squally snow showers blotted out the dawn and it was impossible to see more than five meters. Insanely violent drumfire came down on our trenches and the village of Givenchy. Under the protection of the driving snow, the enemy had attacked and had gained a lodgment in the sector of the Grenadier Guards. Suddenly the enemy appeared in *Kock-Gang* as well and began to roll up the company position, taking some prisoners. Everyone was taken by surprise by this sudden appearance of the Tommies [sic] in the trench. Nobody could explain it.”³⁹⁶

In under an hour ‘The Pimple’ fell, and the 4th Division, though bled white by its efforts, was victorious. On the 13th, the British 5th Infantry Division took over the sector and the 4th Division retired to the neighborhood of Camblain L’Abbé. The casualties suffered by the Division between April 9th and 13th totaled 159 officers

³⁹⁵ James McWilliams and James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 84

³⁹⁶ Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on Vimy Ridge 1914-1917* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2008), 320

and 3,352 other ranks.³⁹⁷ The exact number of German dead on the 4th Division's front is not known, though it must have been substantial, given the ferocity of the fighting. A relatively small number of prisoners – 631 – were also captured during their assault on Vimy Ridge.³⁹⁸

The attacks on Hill 145 and 'The Pimple' were the most challenging objective in the Canadian Corps' assault on Vimy Ridge, and were entrusted to its most inexperienced Division. Robust defences, difficult geography (two major hills providing enfilading fire each for the other), and poor weather conditions led to many of the 4th Division's hardships, however, from examining where the attack began to falter, it is clear that the intact trench system confronting the 87th Battalion either caused or made infinitely worse many of the subsequent difficulties. Although published assertions since have alleged that it was Major Shaw's fault for not having ordered the wire cut and trenches destroyed, and he certainly was made the scapegoat at the time, Brigadier Odlum, twenty years after the fact in notes he wrote in the margin of an unofficial history draft, took responsibility for the debacle.³⁹⁹ It is possible that Odlum was just doing this to cover up for Shaw, but regardless, a battalion commander, when making a decision that would affect surrounding battalions, would have reported this decision to his Brigadier-General. Also, a battalion commander who had taken control of a battalion two days before the launch of a major operation would not have been granted the leeway (or even had the time) to make that significant a decision on the operational plan. In the end, it

³⁹⁷ RG 9 S, V. 4859, '4th Division War Diary, April 1917- Appendix'

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ MG 30 E-300, V.20, 'Victor Odlum papers, Chapter 11: Battle of Vimy Ridge'

just does not seem credible that Shaw was responsible for the fateful decision. The responsibility should fall on Odlum, as at the very least he would have been aware of decisions of that magnitude and would have had to subsequently consent to his battalion commander's decisions on how to carry out the assault. Furthermore, he would have had detailed input into and full awareness of the 11th Brigade's artillery plan, including any last minute changes. In the end it is more likely that Odlum was admitting his own mistake in leaving those particular trenches intact out of some misguided tactical consideration.

The collapse of the 87th Battalion's attack sent shockwaves through the rest of the assaulting battalions' operations. Only through desperate fighting and by benefiting from otherwise well-organized preparations and a remarkable ability to improvise were the Canadians able to continue advancing and gain their objectives. Overall, the 4th Division demonstrated that it had trained and otherwise prepared well for the operation. Though it was battered, suffered very heavy casualties and took three days to achieve objectives that had been planned for one, the 4th Division, like the rest of the Canadian Corps, emerged from Vimy Ridge victorious.

Vimy Ridge was a very different battle than the 4th Division had taken part in at the Somme the previous fall. The Canadian Corps, and by extension the 4th Division, had had much more time to prepare. At the Somme the 4th Division, after receiving orders for the attack, had only a little over a week to prepare (specifically nine days). However, the objectives were notably more limited and did not call for the same complex attack plan; in fact they were to attack over the same ground that the 1st Canadian Division had only recently fought on. Also, because of the smaller

scale of the operation, the 4th Division's attack at the Somme did not utilize all three brigades (the 12th Brigade had been held in reserve). The results of the Somme were mixed. They had taken Regina Trench, however not all of their follow-up actions had resulted in success. At Vimy the 4th Division, though taking four days to achieve all of its objectives, did achieve them.

One of the most significant differences between these two battles was the months of training for the operations that the 4th Division had leading up to the Battle of Vimy Ridge. During this time, and under the tutelage of the Canadian Corps, the officers and men hardened from previous battle experience were able to focus on what was necessary to carry out a successful attack. Letting the infantry know what their own and nearby units' objectives were, training over realistic 'dummy' courses, and encouraging individual initiative on the battlefield all proved to be crucial factors in successfully carrying Vimy Ridge. Similarly the provision of overwhelming artillery superiority before and during the attack greatly facilitated the infantry's task. Much training had contributed to this as well, though except from some joint training exercises, it was not carried out under the supervisions of the infantry divisions and so gets little mention here. The new British 'bite and hold' tactics implemented by the Canadian Corps were one of the main reasons for the success at Vimy Ridge. When setbacks happened they were able to respond to them in an effective manner because they had been trained to do so.

Most of the commanding officers at Vimy Ridge had performed well, having gained experience on the Somme and having the time (and willingness) to absorb the lessons learned there, and the openness to accept with enthusiasm the new

attack doctrines which were being disseminated by GHQ. Officers like Kirkcaldy (78th) and Carey (54th) demonstrated timely leadership by commanding from the front, remaining calm in extremely trying situations, and making rational decisions in the face of a collapsing assault, all of which spoke highly of the competency of most battalion commanders in the 4th Division.⁴⁰⁰ Three battalion commanders were found wanting and were removed after Vimy Ridge. Obviously Shaw was one of the ones replaced for the debacle of his battalion's⁴⁰¹ attack; the other two were Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Worsnop who had taken over the 75th Battalion when Beckett had been killed in the March 1st raid, and Lieutenant-Colonel William Winsby, the CO of the 47th Battalion. According to Odlum, Worsnop was exhausted and no longer could effectively command a battalion.⁴⁰² As for Winsby, Hilliam had doubted he was up for the task for a number of months and the lackluster performance of his battalion at Vimy Ridge had sealed his fate.

All three Brigadier-Generals were also engaged throughout the attack, altering plans on the go as the inevitable chaotic situations arose. Despite his appalling planning error, Odlum otherwise stood out for all the right reasons during the attack, showing excellent leadership when he organized and sent the 85th Battalion into battle to help save the situation on Hill 145, and clearly demonstrating by his actions that he was an effective brigade commander. However, his error of judgment in restricting the artillery preparation was a costly one that jeopardized the whole attack. Brigadier Hughes was forced to give up command for

⁴⁰⁰ Most battalion commanders were the same as when the 4th Division had arrived in France. One Brigadier and six battalion commanders had been replaced before the Vimy operation.

⁴⁰¹ Though he may have been used as a scapegoat

⁴⁰² MG 30, E 46, V. 11, file 80, 'Manley-Sims to Turner April 28th 1917'

lesser mistakes he had made during the battle of the Somme. No doubt Odlum had demonstrated far better leadership in the months leading up to Vimy Ridge (the artillery plan aside) and showed that during the heat of the battle he could be relied upon to act decisively. Unquestionably his personal relationship with Watson was also that much stronger than Hughes. Regardless, Watson (and Byng) were willing to overlook Odlum's mistake, and wisely so, given Odlum's overall competence, whereas with Hughes both senior officers were searching for any reason to get rid of him.

Watson himself had handled his command responsibilities well during Vimy Ridge. Obviously with the confusion of the opening day, there was not much a divisional commander could do but hope that he had the right officers at brigade and especially at the battalion level, men who would promptly respond to situations on the ground. This he had done. In the following days Watson's role with his brigadier-generals and staff in coming up with a working plan to take Hill 145 and 'The Pimple' demonstrated he could make sound decisions based on cool judgment in the most trying situations. Without question Watson had proved at Vimy Ridge that he was a competent divisional commander.

The Canadian Corps would be engaged again only a couple of weeks after the success of Vimy Ridge. Reinforcements of both officers and men began to arrive at the end of April from reserve battalions and as the less seriously wounded began to filter back.⁴⁰³ The First Army, of which the Corps then was a part, participated in the

⁴⁰³ For one example see the 87th War Diary in April. On the 26th it received fifty-seven O.R. from the 22nd Canadian Reserve Battalion. On April 30th the 87th Battalion received both officers and men from

Second Battle of the Scarpe. On April 28th, the 1st Canadian Division's attack on Arleux-en-Gohelle enjoyed a measure of success, achieving its goals and pushing its line forward 500 yards. However, the rest of the British assaults on the First Army front faltered. As the British official historian generously (but quite accurately) wrote, the Canadians managed "the only tangible success of the whole operation."⁴⁰⁴ The 4th Division would take part in the renewal of the offensive on May 3, in what was called the Third Battle of the Scarpe, attacking in the Souchez-Avion Sector.⁴⁰⁵ Just north of Vimy Ridge, near the coal-mining town of Lens, the 4th Division would carry out a series of diversionary attacks against the German lines. The attacks were primarily designed to stir up German reserves so that the routes they took forward would be known to Corps artillery.⁴⁰⁶

The operations in May and June were of mixed results. The raids launched in early May, with limited objectives and substantial artillery support, did meet with success, and though training for the specific objectives was limited they were doable tasks. Although the attacks launched at the end of May and beginning of June also had limited objectives and were supported by modest firepower, these raids largely fell apart. In the latter case the blame cannot be laid exclusively on the new troops in the battalions, as all of the battalions that took part in operations in May were also involved in June. It also cannot be placed at the brigade level for planning the

the 60th Canadian Infantry Battalion, a first line unit only recently broken up. LAC RG9, Militia and Defence, Series III-D-3, Volume 4944 "87th Battalion War Diary, April 1917"

⁴⁰⁴ Cyril Falls, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1917, Volume 1* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1993), 423

⁴⁰⁵ RG 9 V. 4217, folder 1, file 2, 'First Army Summary of Operations, May 3 1917'

⁴⁰⁶ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1964), 280

assaults, as battalions in the same brigades had different results. Whereas the 47th and 46th Battalions achieved their goals, the 44th was ripped apart. One reason could be that the Germans were able to fight and defend their trenches more fiercely at the end of May than the beginning. The pressure put on the German forces by the First and Third Armies during the Second and Third Battles of the Scarpe in late April and the beginning of May had begun to peter out. The Fifth Army attack at Bullecourt was also wrapping up at this time. The Germans had time and resources available now to direct against the Canadian forces.

The attacks that the 4th Division was launching in May and June were sloppy efforts that lacked the detailed planning and preparation shown in the attack on Hill 145. This could be attributed to the inadequate time allowed by the Canadian Corps to properly prepare these attacks that the Corps was forcing the 4th Division to carry out in order to try to keep pressure on the German forces. That said, however, nowhere is it mentioned in the archival record that anyone in a leadership position in the Division had a problem with launching these hastily prepared operations.

In the coming weeks the Canadian Corps would be getting a new commander, Arthur Currie, formally GOC the 1st Canadian Division. Watson was an admirer of Currie's professionalism, telling colleague Henry Burstall (GOC 2nd Canadian Division) that Currie was: "one of our big, capable and efficient officers [who] would compare favourably anywhere."⁴⁰⁷ In fact Watson spoke to all the senior Canadian Field Commanders to make a case for lining up behind Arthur Currie so that neither

⁴⁰⁷ The Military Museums, 'Major-General David Watson diary- February 4th, 1917'

Richard Turner nor especially Garnet Hughes got the job, and certainly not a British officer.⁴⁰⁸

It could also be that on the Western Front during this time the difference between victory and failure was simply razor thin and that in most of these small operations the results could go either way. That said the Canadians did not prepare for these actions with the thoroughness they had shown for Vimy Ridge. Instead of months of planning which left no important detail to chance, days of artillery bombardments and ensured that all assault units, indeed every soldier, knew the ground and their objectives, the battalions were rushed over a taped course in a manner of hours instead of spending weeks, and the new soldiers and officers flooding in since Vimy Ridge would be lucky if they had two days of specialized training.⁴⁰⁹ The way these operations were rushed is reminiscent of the Division's action at the Somme. The responsibility fell on Watson and his staff to ensure that the 4th Division would have the best chance of success available, but in fairness there was a chain of command, orders were orders and circumstances were rarely ideal.

This idea of a mixed result really seems to sum up the 4th Division's experience in the Canadian Corps through the spring of 1917. The March 1st raid was planned in depth, however, the 4th Division's leadership took a chance on a technology that was largely unproven and overrode several of their frontline

⁴⁰⁸ Lieutenant-General Richard Turner was the general officer commanding the Canadian Forces in the British Isles. Major-General Garnet Hughes was commander of the Canadian 5th Division in England.

⁴⁰⁹ See the War Diaries for individual Battalions' training leading up to these attacks. They briefly mention training on certain days and give a brief description on what type of training was carried out.

commanders' objections to launch the attack, which resulted in ghastly consequences. On the other hand, the other ten raids leading up to Vimy Ridge, albeit smaller scale, were all successful. The 4th Division's assault on Vimy Ridge itself was a success, too, but just barely. The 4th Division, the Canadian Corps' most untested Division, was given the hardest section to attack, a fact which was readily acknowledged. This seems to have been done for no other reason than the Canadian Corps attacked across its front in numerical order from 1st to 4th Division.

The decision (lying with Odlum) not to destroy the trench system in front of the 87th Battalion lines could have resulted in the 4th Division not being able to capture Hill 145, leaving the whole of the Canadian Corps' left flank open. However, through the meticulous planning of everything else and attention to detail in the build up to the attack which ensured every soldier knew his unit's overall goals, as well as those of neighbouring formations, and morale was high, the attacking forces were able to rally and overcome the most daunting setbacks as the plan unraveled. This is something that did not happen, and could not have happened, when the 4th Division assaulted Regina Trench in the fall of 1916, less than six months earlier.

In the spring of 1917, the Canadian 4th Division and the British 62nd Division both engaged in their first full Divisional assaults against prepared German positions, but with dramatically different results. On May 3rd, the 62nd Division attacked on a front of 2600 yards against the town of Bullecourt, part of the Hindenburg Line. This was a very challenging operation with the goal of taking a built-up centre whose defences had been constructed to withstand a major assault. The large sector that the 62nd Division was responsible for was determined by Corps headquarters, and did not leave many divisional reserves if the attack began to falter. The Canadian 4th Division attacked on a much smaller front of about 1500 yards, however, the ground that they would be covering was also quite challenging, for Vimy Ridge was also a fortress. The terrain over which the 4th Division had to attack was the most difficult of the Canadian Corps' assault, and involved climbing up Hill 145 while under direct and enfilade fire to achieve their objectives.

The 62nd Division's failures, as discussed in Chapter 3, were to a significant degree not of their own making. The 4th Division knew their goals three months ahead of time and prepared accordingly. Both Divisions were working with the same training doctrine that had been issued from the British War Office in the aftermath of the Somme.⁴¹⁰ The difference was that the 4th Division had months to train over taped courses, moving from small unit actions to mock full-Brigade attacks. Every man knew what to expect and what his responsibilities were, and training paid particular attention to small specialist group tactics. In May, the 62nd Division was

⁴¹⁰ See documents released from the War Office such as "Standard Drill for a Platoon in attack" and "Instructions for the training of Division for offensive Action." Both of which were extensively used by the 4th Canadian and 62nd British Divisions.

rushed into an attack at Bullecourt and was literally given only days by General Gough to prepare. While it is true that a series of delays imposed by Fifth Army headquarters meant the 62nd did end up with three weeks of preparation time, the training was disorganized and frustratingly interrupted as the date of their attack on Bullecourt kept being postponed. The fundamental difference in preparing for the operation was that the 62nd Division had only days to go over the 'what and where' of the enemy's defences and how to overcome them; a pretty quick lesson compared to the months the 4th Division's units had to plan and train.

Artillery arrangements were also significantly different. For their attack on Bullecourt, the 62nd Division was given the artillery of two other Divisions, bringing the total available to them to 180 18-pounders and 48 howitzers. In comparison, for their attack on Hill 145, the 4th Canadian Division had 126 18-pounders and 42 howitzers, a comparable number of guns, but the 62nd Division's frontage was almost twice the size.⁴¹¹ An equivalent disadvantage was that the 62nd Division received their extra guns with only a few days to carry out the preparatory shelling of German lines. This is in sharp contrast to the 4th Canadian Division's artillery preparation for Vimy Ridge which commenced in January, and on March 20th, three weeks before their assault, became a systematic and around-the-clock bombardment, pulverizing preplanned objectives on Hill 145 and 'The Pimple', which continued until they were captured.

The artillery supporting the 62nd Division obviously did not have the time, but, neither did it incorporate such an intense bombardment schedule. The

⁴¹¹ A.T. Anderson, *War Services of the 62nd West Riding Divisional Artillery* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Limited, 1920), 11

Divisional artillery commander, Brigadier-General A.T. Anderson, felt that after having chased the Germans to the Hindenburg Line and taken part in the First Battle of Bullecourt it would be better to rest his gunners for the coming attack. As he argued:

“It was impossible to relieve the artillery as a whole, but as it was now decided to make no serious attack for at least a fortnight, I obtained authority to keep 50 percent of my command as rest in the wagon lines during this period, and this measure did something to relieve the strain.”⁴¹²

Braithwaite approved this reduction in the 62nd's artillery plan. The result of the two artillery programs was predictable: the 4th Division's wire was cut (other than in front of the 87th Battalion, which had been intentional) and the Canadian soldiers were quickly able to enter the German positions, for the most part with 'acceptable' casualties. In contrast, the 62nd Division assault ran into many sections of uncut wire, raked by machine gun fire, obstacles that caused significant casualties amongst the Yorkshire attackers. The blame for the ineffectiveness of the artillery in the build-up to the attack on Bullecourt has to be equally shared by the Fifth Army for not providing sufficient artillery for the scale of the frontage, and the 62nd Division for not making proper use of the artillery they had, given the task ahead.

The Canadian Corps and the 4th Division placed a lot of emphasis on every man in the unit knowing what his role was in the assault, and encouraging individual initiative, so that when the officers and senior NCOs were wounded or killed the attack could be carried on as planned. This was something severely lacking in the 62nd Division. Neither the VII Corps nor the 62nd Division papers

⁴¹² Ibid. 12

mention preparing anyone other than the officers to lead the attack, nor did they mention that soldiers would know what the final objectives were or how to move forward if the commanding officers were incapacitated. As the May 3rd attacks of the 185th and 186th Brigades demonstrated, once a significant number of the officers became casualties, the attack would grind to a halt and the men would find cover and wait for directions. This was something that the Canadian soldier, through several months of diligent preparation, had been prepared for. When officers were lost, the 4th Division's attack was able to carry on, and this was one of the crucial reasons for their success at Vimy Ridge. The blame for the 62nd's lack of preparation could obviously be put again on the lack of time given to train, since with so little time it would be reasonable to focus on making sure the officers who led the assault knew what ground to cover before focusing on the other ranks. But since the former was part of the new doctrine both divisions were supposed to be adopting, it may indicate that the leadership of the 62nd Division did not initially embrace all the elements of the new approach with as much such enthusiasm as the Canadians.

There were also variations in the leadership of the two divisions. Watson in the ensuing days after the initial attack on Hill 145 showed that he was cool under pressure and made rational decisions about altering his plan of attack in conferences with his staff and brigade commanders, and the resultant follow-up assaults were carried forward effectively. But his performance in the gas raid of March 1st and later in failing to prepare his battalions effectively during May and June showed that his judgment was not always as sound. Braithwaite, on the other hand, did not get any 'ensuing days' to show his leadership abilities during the Battle

of Bullecourt; his forces were ravaged so badly at the outset that the subsequent 'minor operations' would not be possible. He did show capable leadership during March in pursuing the Germans to the Hindenburg Line, and as well, displayed sound administrative talents in rebuilding the 62nd Division during the summer of 1917. With Vimy Ridge Watson had proven that he was an effective divisional commander; by the summer of 1917, Braithwaite had still not proven this.

The difference in the degree of success enjoyed could also be chalked up to which Army these divisions were fighting. The First Army, commanded by General Horne, had allowed Byng and the Canadian Corps ample time to plan and otherwise prepare for the attack on Vimy Ridge. In March and April, in the lead up to the Second Battle of Bullecourt, Gough was always driven to charge instead of allowing the Corps and Divisions in his Fifth Army the time afforded to the Canadian Corps to properly prepare for major operations.

Leadership from the Corps commanders was also distinctive. Watson and his battalion commanders received significant attention and guidance from Byng and his chief of staff, Percy Radcliffe. The unit war diaries are filled with examples of Byng monitoring the progress of training and offering insights to his subordinates and, indeed, even ordinary soldiers if needed. Not only were senior officers extensively consulted, but junior officers were also given substantial attention and advice.⁴¹³ The officers and men of the 62nd Division did not receive the same attention from their Corps commander. With the 62nd constantly advancing on the

⁴¹³ For an excellent account on the role Byng played in interacting with his men in the preparation for Vimy Ridge see Patrick Brennan's chapter in Geoffrey Hayes, et al, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007)

Hindenburg Line and the rushed preparation for the attacks on Bullecourt, Fanshawe did not have the opportunity to pay as much attention to his division's plans of attack or offer council to his officers in the same way as Byng did. Perhaps it was not even his style. Regardless of the reasons, Fanshawe is seldom mentioned in the 62nd unit diaries and was not seen to pay much attention to the training schemes being practiced by the units, with the Division being placed at a disadvantage as a consequence.

One final comparison between the two Divisions' operations in the spring of 1917 shows, not surprisingly, that both suffered heavily in their first major engagement against the German Army. The 62nd Division incurred 2976 casualties in the attack on Bullecourt, and the 4th Division 3,511 casualties for its part in the attack on Vimy Ridge.

Chapter 5: The 4th Division in the Fall of 1917

The Canadian Corps, including the 4th Division, would be involved in two other major operations during the remaining months of 1917: Hill 70/Lens and Passchendaele. The 4th Division would demonstrate that fighting on the Western Front after Vimy Ridge was not a steady learning curve of triumphs. While Hill 70 was a successful operation, the role that the 4th Division played at Lens could only be described as a failure. At Passchendaele the Division had a series of difficult attacks (like all units engaged in the Third Battle of Ypres), but in the end the 4th Division demonstrated that it could succeed in even the most trying circumstances. These operations demonstrated that for the officers and men of the 4th Division there was still room for improvement if they were to earn the label “shock troops”, but improving they were.

On June 9th, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie, formerly commander of the 1st Division, officially took over command of the Canadian Corps.⁴¹⁴ Lieutenant-General Byng’s reward for transforming the Corps and the great victory at Vimy Ridge had been an Army command. Brigadier-General Radcliffe remained as principal staff officer, providing a significant measure of continuity. During the rest of the month, the 4th Division had a fairly quiet time rebuilding and training its battalions, all of which had been shattered during fighting in the spring. On the 7th of July, the

⁴¹⁴ A pre-war embezzlement carried out by Currie, if it had become public, threatened the Corps leadership; a loan from Watson and Odlum cleared the \$10000 debt. This incident demonstrated just how close these officers of the 4th Division were with the Corps commander. Nothing of this sort happened in the 62nd Division. A more in-depth examination of Currie’s embezzlement can be found in Desmond Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982)

Canadian Corps was notified by First Army Commander General Henry Horne that it would be attacking Lens. This was to be a diversionary operation to draw German forces away from the larger British offensive at Ypres.⁴¹⁵ Three days later, after personally scouting the ground, Currie proposed to Horne that instead of a frontal assault on Lens, the Canadian Corps would take the height of land overlooking Lens to the north (Hill 70), hopefully inducing the Germans to try to retake it. If the enemy followed their usual practice, the Canadian Corps would use its artillery to destroy the counter attacks. Currie also thought there was a possibility that the German defence of Lens, with the Canadians looking down on the town, would become untenable, forcing the enemy to evacuate without the necessity of an attack, though this was not thought likely. Horne had already considered a similar approach, and readily accepted Currie's analysis. However, the Canadian Corps understood that even after taking Hill 70 they would still be required to attack the city itself,⁴¹⁶ as demonstrated in the Corps' orders released in late July 1917, which emphasized "offensive operations with the ultimate objective of the capture of Lens ..."⁴¹⁷ The First and Second Division would capture Hill 70 and hold it, and if this part of the operation went well, the 4th Division and elements of the 2nd Division would be tasked with advancing on Lens proper.⁴¹⁸ Horne gladly accepted this plan

⁴¹⁵ RG 9, V. 4014, folder 25, file 2, 'General scheme of Operations- 1st Division, 11 July 1917.' Don Farr, *The Silent General: Horne of the First Army* (West Midlands: Hellion and Company Limited, 2006), 171

⁴¹⁶ Ibid

⁴¹⁷ RG 9, V. 3850, folder 61, file 1, 'Canadian Corps scheme of Operations, 26 July 1917'

⁴¹⁸ Geoffrey Jackson, "Anything but Lovely: The Canadian Corps at Lens in the summer of 1917" *Canadian Military History* Volume 17, Winter 2008, no.1 (2008), 11

as it clearly fit with Haig's strategy of drawing German forces to the region, and away from what was, for the British, the critical Ypres salient⁴¹⁹

In the build up to the attack on Hill 70, the 4th Division, with the majority of the Corps artillery, was given the responsibility of convincing the Germans that the main weight of the Canadian Corps would fall on the city of Lens. In July and the first few weeks of August, the 4th Division carried out an intense schedule of raiding in the Lens area to coincide with the artillery barrage that the Canadian Corps' Field Artillery under the practical direction of its chief staff officer, Major Alan Brooke, would lay on Lens. Simultaneously this would be joined by a systematic bombardment by the Corps Garrison (heavy) Artillery, the hard work of Counter Battery Staff Officer McNaughton. As mentioned above, this raiding program had a two-fold goal of making the 11th Reserve Division (the German Division that had been occupying Lens since May 14th⁴²⁰) believe that the Canadians' main focus was Lens and also to gather information on how to fight in Lens if the Hill 70 attack proved successful but the Germans still decided to defend the town.⁴²¹ As a result, raids in July and August were being launched by one of the twelve battalions about once every three days. The size of the raids varied, usually numbering from eight to thirty men, the large-scale raids in March of 1917 having been drastically scaled back by the summer of 1917.⁴²²

⁴¹⁹ Don Farr, *The Silent General: Horne of the First Army* (West Midlands: Hellion and Company Limited, 2006), 171

⁴²⁰ American Expeditionary Forces. General Staff, G-2. *Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German army which participated in the war (1914-1918)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 200

⁴²¹ Geoffrey Jackson, "What was the point?: Raiding in the Summer of 1917," *Canadian Military History* Volume 19 Autumn 2010, number 4, 33

⁴²² *Ibid.* 34

These raids were of mixed success, in that some returned with prisoners while others acquired no intelligence at all. Similarly some had multiple casualties, and others had none. An 87th Battalion raid on August 1st miscarried when the Germans became aware of its presence and dropped gas shells on top of the men, resulting in eleven Canadian casualties.⁴²³ However, a raid launched by the 38th Battalion eleven days later resulted in no losses and the men were able to gather useful information on the German defences in the area.⁴²⁴ Overall the intensive artillery barrage focused on Lens, in combination with the raids, seem to have convinced the Germans that the Canadian Corps' main objective was, indeed, Lens. All levels of the Division also felt they had accomplished the goal of figuring out how to attack Lens successfully. One private boasted that "we even know the names of the streets we are to march up and the actual houses we are to mop up."⁴²⁵ Through the constant probing of Lens, the 4th Division felt confident in the intelligence that it had gained about fighting in this urban area. Interestingly, throughout the period of raiding carried out in July and August, and with all the intelligence gathered from prisoners, scouts, and aerial photography, the plans which had been laid out by the Canadian Corps and 4th Division at the beginning of July changed in no substantive way. The 2nd Division would use those of its battalions not committed to the Hill 70 operations to attack the northern outskirts of the town, whereas the 4th Division would be attacking into the town and beyond to the Green Crassier, an expansive coal mining slag heap on its southern edge. The Canadian Corps leadership felt

⁴²³ RG 9, V. 4945, file 455, 'War Diary, 87th Battalion, 1st August 1917'

⁴²⁴ Geoffrey Jackson, "What's the point? Raiding in the Summer of 1917" *Canadian Military History* Vol. 19 Autumn 2010, Number 4. 37

⁴²⁵ MG 30, E 488, 'William C. Morgan Papers, diary, 24 July 1917'

confident about operating in Lens and achieving their objectives, but events would prove them wrong.

The attack on Hill 70 on August 15th was one of the success stories of the Canadian Corps. Though a far from bloodless attack, the 1st and 2nd Divisions quickly reached their objectives and dug in. Major-General Morrison, commander of the Canadian field artillery, subsequently wrote of the role his guns had played at convincing the Germans that the main attack would fall on Lens: “to our great satisfaction the enemy put down a tremendous barrage in front of Lens and Avions ... He was entirely outmaneuvered... and by the time the Germans realized their mistake the attacking troops [at Hill 70] were on their final objective.”⁴²⁶ The 4th Division also played a role in masking the Canadian Corps’ main assault that morning by sending strong patrols into Lens. The Germans launched multiple counter-attacks against the Canadian forces on Hill 70 over the following five days, all of which were repulsed at heavy cost to the German forces. As Lieutenant-General Currie wrote in his diary:

“There were no fewer than Twenty-One counter-attacks delivered, many with very large forces and all with great determination and dash.... Our casualties so far about 5600 but in my opinion the enemy casualties must be closer to 20,000. Our Gunners, machine gunners and infantry never had such targets. F[orward] O[bservation] O[fficers] for all of their targets... it was a great and wonderful victory. G.H.Q. regard it as one of the finest performances of the war...”⁴²⁷

On August 18th, Arthur Currie and the Canadian Corps’ staff set the 21st of August for the launch of the follow-up Lens operation.⁴²⁸ The 2nd and 4th Divisional

⁴²⁶ Edward Morrison, ‘Vimy and Hill 70,’ *Toronto Star Weekly*, 24 April 1928.

⁴²⁷ MG 30, E 100, V.52, ‘Arthur Currie Papers - Diary, 18 August 1917.’

⁴²⁸ Department of National Defence Papers (DND) [RG 24], V. 1820, file GAQ 5-7, 19 Aug 1917

infantry would now be undertaking urban combat, an entirely new venture for which they had no training. A private who took part in the assault remembered his foreboding at the prospect:

“You see, the houses were built in long rows and they had knocked bricks out of each house and built tunnel through. You could move two or three streets, out of sight. Don’t forget this, the Germans had been there for about twelve or thirteen months.”⁴²⁹

Carl von Clausewitz wrote that no other activity is as continuously or universally bound up with chance as war.⁴³⁰ As chance would have it, the Germans and Canadians attacked each other on this frontage almost simultaneously. Fresh German troops from the 1st Guard Reserve Division, which had replaced the 11th Reserve Division in Lens on the 20th, launched their assault as the Canadians were massing for their own attack, at 0425. The Germans tumbled over the 5th Brigade’s trenches, and in the ensuing chaotic fighting, the 5th Brigade was driven back, though a counterattack, led by the 25th Battalion was able to regain a foothold in the original positions later that morning.⁴³¹ As an intelligence report from the 25th Battalion recorded: “A lively scrap ensued in which our men fought their way out of the dug-outs, and began to drive Germans from our trench The troops that D Company were opposed ... were probably the best which [we] ever encountered.”⁴³² Ten minutes after the surprise German attack, the 6th Brigade launched its own assault, only to meet advancing German forces in no-man’s land, where the fighting was especially brutal. As a rifleman in the 31st Battalion later wrote of the attack:

⁴²⁹ RG 41, ‘In Flanders Fields transcripts, V.11, 46th Battalion Hart interview.’

⁴³⁰ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 85

⁴³¹ RG 9, V. 4933, ‘War Diary, 25th Battalion, 22nd August 1917.’

⁴³² *Ibid.*

“...a battle royal took place. After bombing and bayonet work, we slowly forced the enemy back, meeting another line later on. After some desperate fighting we were supposed to have reached our objective, but with sadly depleted forces. We had, however, to pull back leaving outposts composed of bombers and Lewis gunners to hold the line.”⁴³³

The fighting throughout the day was frenzied and vicious for the 2nd Division. By noon none of the objectives given to them had been reached. The 6th Brigade suffered so badly that it had to be pulled from the line on 22nd of August, and the 5th Brigade was compelled to extend its line to cover the former’s front. This marked the end of action for the 2nd Division in the Lens area.⁴³⁴

The 4th Division’s task at Lens was more daunting than the 2nd Division’s. Its battalions were ordered to press into the ruined city centre. The German army had spent the last two years setting up defensive positions in the rubble, and had undertaken the task with their usual thoroughness:

“What had originally appeared to be the ruins of workingmen’s houses on the Southern edge of Lens were discovered to be lined and interlined with trussed concrete. The walls were from six to eight feet thick and practically impregnable to even the heaviest shells. One of these pill boxes, armed with a machine-gun could hold up an advance on nearly a mile front.”⁴³⁵

Though this comment almost certainly exaggerates the effectiveness of the Germans’ machine guns, it was clear that entering this all-but-destroyed city riven with underground bunkers and hidden pillboxes would be a totally new and deadly type of warfare for the Canadian infantry.

⁴³³ Reginald Roy, ed., *The Journal of Private Fraser* (Nepean, ON: CEF Books, 1998), 305

⁴³⁴ RG 9, V. 3850, folder 62, file 2, ‘2nd Division narratives of Operations 15-22 August 1917. 9 September 1917.’

⁴³⁵ Various authors, *Canada in the Great War: An Authentic Account of the Military History of Canada from the Earliest Days to the Close of the War of Nations*, Vol IV: *Turn of Tides* (Toronto: United Publishing, 1920), 201

The Canadian 10th Brigade would be storming Lens on the 21st of August in coordination with the 2nd Division's 6th Brigade. On the 20th, the 50th Battalion decided, based on the 2nd division's intelligence report, to attack Alooof Trench, with the goal of having a better jumping-off point for their attack on the following morning. The 50th Battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Lionel Page, believed that the Germans opposing his forces were withdrawing and that his men would meet weak resistance.⁴³⁶ In fact, the Canadians were shocked to find that the Germans were not in fact pulling out of Alooof Trench. Victor Wheeler, a signaler in the Battalion, described the grim events of August 20th in his postwar memoir:

“We were engaged in nothing less than a battle-to-the death with an enemy who was equally determined that we should not pass. Many individual acts of bravery among our heroic men were exploits of self sacrifice- sacrifice that might, somehow, enable their buddies to go forward and gain the Battalion's objective. Our objectives gained, we thought we could hold it against counter-move, but the boche[s] decided otherwise. He launched a powerful counter-attack against our decimated ranks with such ferocity that his onslaught drove us back to our original position.”⁴³⁷

The 50th Battalion withdrew after losing over 50 men, and during the night, a replacement company had to be sent forward to refill its ranks for the next day's main assault. Lieutenant-Colonel Page had demonstrated that he was eager to gain any perceived advantage even if it contradicted other available information. Brigadier Hilliam had disregarded assessments issued by the 10th Brigade which had warned that the 50th Battalion should not undertake any early attack for fear it jeopardize the next day's assault by depleting the Canadian forces as well as alerting

⁴³⁶ Geoffrey Jackson, “Anything but Lovely: The Canadian Corps at Lens in the summer of 1917” *Canadian Military History* Volume 17, Winter 2008, no.1 (2008), 15

⁴³⁷ Victor Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), 139

the Germans.⁴³⁸ Certainly the 50th Battalion's attack had demonstrated how unprepared the Canadians were to operate in a urban environment. Their intelligence was weak and they could not determine where or how many Germans were opposing them. They also failed to utilize the tool that had made them successful in the past, artillery.

On August 21st, the day of the main assault, the 50th Battalion suffered a severe pounding from enemy artillery that had zeroed in on its position. The men lay under this bombardment for twenty-five minutes before beginning their attack, so that by the time they left their trenches, they had already suffered substantial casualties. Nevertheless, the Albertans pressed forward, but under increasingly heavy enemy machine gun fire coming from the houses of Lens. Some small parties reached their objectives, but the 50th Battalion as a whole had been battered and fell back. The rest of the day was spent regrouping and discussing with Brigade command what should be done. At 1800, another attack was launched, but quickly failed to gain any of the objectives set for it, and was promptly called off. As an indicator of just how badly things were going, when the battle began on August 21st, and in following days, the Germans had launched red flare signals similar to the ones that the Canadians had used to summon supporting fire. The Canadian artillery dutifully responded to these and shelled the 50th Battalion's frontlines, causing even

⁴³⁸ RG 9, V. 4941, '50th Battalion War Diary, 27 Aug 1917'

more casualties. The unfortunate 50th Battalion held their line for two more days, and reinforcements were sent up to fill the decimated ranks.⁴³⁹

The 46th and 47th Battalions' attack into Lens also started ominously. On the night of August 20th, just prior to the main Canadian attack, the Germans shelled the Battalions' lines relentlessly. All officers in the leftmost company of the 46th Battalion became casualties, and officers had to be quickly called up from reserve Battalions to replace them. The shelling from the Germans was constant all day and accounted for numerous further casualties. The troops finally left their lines at 0435 am and quickly moved forward into the neighborhoods of Lens, promptly finding themselves engaged in house-to-house fighting in areas that had been fortified and booby-trapped. As one Canadian soldier recounted:

“Bombs would be concealed in small dugout stoves, with wires attached to the doors. Naturally enough, a door would be opened sooner or later, and immediately the safety pin would be released and the bomb would explode, doing considerable damage to the garrison.”⁴⁴⁰

The fighting in Lens was fierce, but the 47th and 46th Battalions were consolidating their objectives by the early evening.⁴⁴¹

The second part of the attack on Lens, the attempt to take the Green Crassier, was about to start even though the initial push into Lens had met with mixed

⁴³⁹ RG 9, V. 3851, folder 63, file 9, 'Report on Operations by 50th Canadian Battalion from August 17th to August 26th, 1917 - 27 Aug 1917'

⁴⁴⁰ Various authors, *Canada in the Great War*, 212

⁴⁴¹ Corporal Filip Konowal a former bayonet-fighting instructor in the Russian army, received the sixth and final Victoria Cross awarded in the Hill 70/ Lens Operation. He attacked a machine gun position in Lens, shooting three Germans and bayoneting another four, and because of his actions captured the German machine gun. The next day he knocked out another machine gun nest. He was wounded during his actions and was carried from the front line on the 23rd of August. Konowal survived the war. Bishop, Arthur. *Our Bravest And Our Best: The Stories of Canada's Victoria Cross Winners* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson limited,1995), 59

results. The Green Crassier would be the defining battle for the 4th Division and the Canadian Corps in Lens. If taken, the Canadians would have three sides of the city enclosed, and it was expected that this would make the German position untenable and force them to withdraw.⁴⁴² The Green Crassier was a large, flat-topped pile of mine refuse, located between the railway station on the south side of the city and the Lens Canal, 350 yards to the right of the 10th Brigade's position. A private in the 44th Battalion described it as a:

“tremendous thing, it stood up as a land mark, it stood about roughly 500 yards to the side, in the shape of triangles, heart shaped, with the points down towards us, and toward the Lens-Arras railway. Now they had the damned Souches [Souchez] River right near that place and it had flooded the whole area and the crassier something like an arrow point ...”⁴⁴³

Urban warfare in 1917 was no easy task. The Canadian Corps had not trained for this type of fighting and were ill-prepared to deal with it. The tactics and lessons that the 4th Division had focused on of storming trenches with the benefit of heavy and accurate artillery support were of little use here, and their casualties reflected that. It should have been realized by senior commanders that after the poor outcome of the initial push into Lens, taking sections of built-up areas, a veritable maze of improvised pillboxes, bunkers and tunnels, would simply bleed the infantry. Brigade and Divisional commanders did realize that the fighting in Lens was more difficult than had been expected, but felt that by using tactics that had been successful at Hill 70 - a limited 'bite and hold' attack - they would achieve the goal of

⁴⁴² RG 9, V.4902, file 308, '10th Canadian Infantry Brigade- Summary of Operations August 17th/18th to August 25/26th - c. Sep 1917'

⁴⁴³ RG 41, V.10, '44th Battalion, D.M. Marshall interview'

capturing Lens.⁴⁴⁴ Clearly, a re-evaluation of the objectives clearly was called for, but despite the Corps' failure in the previous day's assaults it was decided to go ahead with the attack on the Green Crassier. Indeed, after six days of heavy engagement, the Canadians can have been under no illusions that the Germans were strongly ensconced in the city and ready to fight for it.⁴⁴⁵ But the willingness to press on even in the face of uncertainty was in fact pervasive in the 4th Division, and at Lens it proved a serious leadership flaw.

A signal officer, Lieutenant Burns, who took part in the raids on Lens at the beginning of the month, remembered that the early fighting had indicated tough going ahead: "... [we] push[ed] forward fighting patrols towards Lens to test enemy defence there (which it turned out was solid)."⁴⁴⁶ Indeed, it was known to all levels of command that the fighting in Lens was proving very difficult, but Watson left the decision for the attack on the Green Crassier up to the 10th Infantry Brigade commander, Brigadier-General Edward Hilliam, who decided that the risks would be well worth the opportunity of having Lens surrounded.⁴⁴⁷

Led by Lt-Colonel Davies, the 44th Battalion, a Winnipeg-raised unit, had been kept in reserve, but was brought forward for this operation. The idea was to push toward to the Green Crassier, and once it was taken swing left (north) to face the

⁴⁴⁴ RG 9, V. 3907, folder 27, file 14, 'Operation Order No.25 by C.R.A. 4th Canadian Division - 19 Aug 1917'

⁴⁴⁵ A statement made by Corporal Myers, who was involved in the diversionary raid by the 4th Division on August 15, showed that the troops knew the fighting was tough: "We worked around ruins between Aconite and Amalgam (trenches) and drove the enemy out of them. Fire was coming very heavy from houses east of Aconite trench. I had three men casualties and on account of this heavy machine-gun and rifle fire, saw that it was impossible to go any further." RG 9, V. 4944, '87th Battalion War Diary, 15 Aug 1917'

⁴⁴⁶ Burns, *General Mud*, 53

⁴⁴⁷ RG 9, V. 3851, folder 63, file 9, '4th Canadian Division Operation Order No. 52, 19 Aug 1917'

center of Lens. The problem was that it called for a very narrow line of approach to the slag heap - on one side of the route was a river, and the Germans held most of the surrounding area except for a tight corridor that intelligence said could be taken. This route passed by Fosse St. Louis, one of the many pithead installations dotting the area. Scouts were sent out and reported back, erroneously as it turned out, that the Fosse and the route to the Crassier were relatively clear of Germans.⁴⁴⁸ Captain Marshall, one of the Battalion's company commanders, later recounted his own astonished reaction to the plan:

“... A communiqué came out from company HQ said, to all company commanders ... to submit plans and attack the Green Crassier as a company operation. Well it was such a colossal proposition – this man Bruff, wonderful man, kept everybody in excellent humour, and so I thought it was a joke ... and answered it in a joking way, figuring it was the thing to do. Told them, well the thing to do was ... to attack in single file mind you up the railway embankment and have a couple of battleships and submarines. Well I got snapped up so fast on that, it would make your hair curl so I missed that show. I was under open arrest.”⁴⁴⁹

Both Corps and Divisional Headquarters believed they understood how to attack and capture the Crassier. Messages sent to the artillery from the former on August 19th demonstrated this: “The most important Artillery target in our operation is the GREEN CRASSIER. This must be thoroughly isolated both during and after [emphasis in the original] the operation.” Another telling message from Corps Headquarters reiterated the necessity of proper artillery coverage, emphasizing that “too much cannot be made of neutralizing the Green Crassier after the assault has succeeded because it dominates the right flank and casualties will be heavy if it is

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ RG 41, V.10, '44th Battalion, Ed Garrison'

not properly dealt with.”⁴⁵⁰ No. 1 and No. 4 Companies of the 44th Battalion were detailed for the attack, with No. 2 Company to provide mopping-up parties and support. No. 3 Company had been attached to the 46th Battalion to help it with its assaults during the previous days and had still not rejoined the Battalion.⁴⁵¹

One of the first mistakes with the assault was that the 44th Battalion was under-strength and lacking sufficient reinforcements. Just before launching the attack, a patrol reported back that Fosse St. Louis was not as weakly held as previously reported. Two platoons were detailed to deal with the pit installation, as the rest of the Battalion would simply pass by on the way to the Crassier.⁴⁵² At 0300 on August 23rd, the barrage opened and the Battalion moved forward. Some enemy troops were found to be hiding in shell holes and these were mopped up by the following company. By 0330, No. 4 Company had reached the objective atop the Crassier. No. 1 Company had also moved forward to the base of the Crassier to keep open communications with No. 4 Company and to support it if necessary. Meanwhile, the platoons that attacked Fosse St. Louis had encountered severe resistance. A handful of machine guns were reported to have been very active, firing from the surrounding buildings, and hard fighting developed. More reinforcements were sent to the Fosse and it was not until 0830 that the Canadians finally had a foothold in the area. This was short-lived, however, as the troops had to pull back to

⁴⁵⁰ RG 9, V. 3850, folder 62, file 4, 'Messages and Signals, 20 Aug 1917'

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., V. 3850, folder 62, file 4, 'Report on the Attack on the "Green Crassier by the 44th Canadian Infantry, August 23rd, 1917, c. Sep 1917'

⁴⁵² Ibid.

support No. 2 Company at Alpaca Trench, which had suddenly come under attack on two sides of the narrow passage leading up to the Green Crassier.⁴⁵³

The companies below the Green Crassier continued to fight all day for possession of Alpaca Trench and the Fosse. During the course of the action, it was discovered that the Germans had a tunnel leading to the pithead installations and were continually funneling reinforcements through it.⁴⁵⁴ Private Reid of the 44th subsequently described how ineffective Canadian artillery was in this battle:

“Well then they could put all their forces in there and you could pound it for 48 hours with the biggest barrage that you had and it made no effect you see. Well the minute the barrage lifted these Germans would come out you see and set up their guns. Because I know from one dugout they had set [the] gun that the minute you popped your head around the corner, they just plugged you.”⁴⁵⁵

Critical to the success at Hill 70, and a central part of the Corps' doctrine in 1917, was the ability of the artillery to break up German counter-attacks and pre-emptively pummel them before an operation. The lack of success in replicating this in a built-up area severely limited the 44th Battalion's effectiveness. Furthermore, the Germans' artillery was more destructive than the Canadians'. Unlike the German defenders, the 44th Battalion did not have underground bunkers, strong points, or tunnels in which to hide, though the ruined buildings did offer some protection. In the early afternoon, the Germans pulled back to their tunnels and an intense bombardment fell on Alpaca Trench and the Fosse, rendering these areas untenable and compelling the Canadians to withdraw from the vicinity. After this

⁴⁵³ RG 9, V. 4939, '44th Battalion War Diary, 24 Aug 1917'

⁴⁵⁴ RG 9, V. 3851 folder 63, file 9, '10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations, c. Sep 1917'

⁴⁵⁵ RG 41, V. 4933, '44th Battalion, Reid interview'

bombardment, the Canadians counter-attacked, and eventually Alpaca Trench was retaken, though it changed hands constantly throughout the day.⁴⁵⁶

It became clear during the afternoon of the 23rd that the attack on the Green Crassier had failed, and that the hard-pressed 44th Battalion's advance would not force the Germans out of the central and southern part of Lens. Lieutenant-Colonel Davies reported that elements of four German Divisions were operating against his men.⁴⁵⁷ In light of their precarious position, Hilliam ordered the Battalion's withdrawal. This, however, was impossible because the soldiers on top of the Crassier had been cut off. The men had reached the top of the Crassier in half an hour and turned their efforts to consolidating their position. Unfortunately, the surface of the Crassier - unforgiving loose slag and rail tracks - meant dugouts or even basic trenches could not easily be constructed. At 0430, a message was received from the Crassier asking for ammunition, sandbags and timber to build some sort of defensive position. However, this request could not be fulfilled because the heavy fighting in the Fosse prevented supplies from reaching them.⁴⁵⁸

With nightfall, all communication with the troops on top of the Green Crassier was lost. Men could not go up or come down because the routes were constantly covered from three sides by enemy machine gun fire (the fourth side was a steep face leading into the river). The Manitobans suffered through the night as their position was shelled, and in the morning, the German artillery and mortars

⁴⁵⁶ RG 9, V. 3850, folder 62, file 4, 'Report on the Attack on the "Green Crassier" by the 44th Canadian Infantry, August 23rd, 1917, c. Sep 1917'

⁴⁵⁷ WO 95/172, 'Intelligence Summary, c. Sep 1917'

⁴⁵⁸ RG 9, V. 3850, folder 62, file 4, 'Report on the Attack on the "Green Crassier" by the 44th Canadian Infantry, August 23rd, 1917, c. Sep 1917'

kept up the pressure. Ed Garrison, a private in the 44th Battalion, described the hopelessness of trying to get a message to the top of the Crassier the previous evening:

“They were trying to get across with the messages and that and we couldn’t do anything about it really. There was a sniper there and we couldn’t do anything about it and then we got back to battalion and we stayed there all night”⁴⁵⁹

On August 24 there was no attempt made to rescue the men atop the Crassier as it was decided that it would cost too many lives. The survivors held off the German attacks with their remaining bombs, but strong enemy parties supported by trench mortars continued to press the attack on the shrinking Canadian perimeter throughout the day. By the afternoon, however, Mills bombs and ammunition had run out, and the remaining Canadians on the Crassier, including many wounded, were taken prisoner. Allen Hart, another private in the 44th Battalion, later recounted:

“Well of course everything was anything but lovely because these boys got over there and it was - it was not a small show, it was a big show, and it hadn’t been realized for some reason or other, hadn’t been realized how big an undertaking it was, so these boys got up there... those that weren’t killed were captured.”⁴⁶⁰

In 36 hours of fighting, Davies’ Battalion suffered 260 casualties including 70 who surrendered, close to half of its assaulting strength.

⁴⁵⁹ RG 41, V.10, ‘44th Battalion, Ed Garrison interview’

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

With the 50th Battalion's consolidation of Aloof Trench the following day, the operations of Hill 70 and Lens were at an end.⁴⁶¹ The Canadians had suffered almost 4,000 casualties during the August 21-25 period fighting in the city.⁴⁶² None of the major objectives for the Lens operation were met and the Canadians withdrew their lines from the center of city.⁴⁶³

General Horne wanted to try to take Lens, feeling strongly that a converging assault southeast from Hill 70 and northeast from Elue to the other high point overlooking Lens - the Sallaumines Hills - would bring about the city's capture. Although the 4th Division was alerted, the attack never materialized. The fighting in the Ypres salient was not faring well and the Canadian Corps soon moved north to take part in the Battle of Passchendaele. The Germans would hold Lens for another year until the summer of 1918.⁴⁶⁴

The attacks on Lens displayed the weaknesses of the Canadian Corps and specifically the 4th Division in the middle of 1917. The Canadians still had much to learn, particularly that artillery barrages employed in built up areas were far less effective than in the usual open country, and indeed entering into urban warfare on the enemy's terms probably needed to be avoided. The Lens operations also established that the 4th Division and the Canadian Corps as whole were not yet consistently effective fighting forces. Crucial and costly mistakes were still an occurrence. Certainly the battles for Lens and the Green Crassier revealed that the

⁴⁶¹ RG 9, V. 4939, '44th Battalion War Diary, 25 Aug 1917'

⁴⁶² RG 24, V. 1844, file GAQ 11-11F, 'Battle Casualties, 11 Sep 1943'

⁴⁶³ RG 9, V. 4125, folder 5, file 1, 'Operations: Hill 70- July and August 1917 2nd Canadian Division, 9 Sep 1917'

⁴⁶⁴ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 297

artillery-intensive attack, and also the offensive use of machine-gun barrages, which the Canadian Corps had learned to rely upon in its operations, would be negated by the cover afforded by city rubble. Within Lens, the debris was easily utilized by the defenders as barriers and potential strong points, and there were tunnels to move reinforcements to critical points, unseen. Moreover, the intelligence necessary to know what the Corps was facing - not just the physical barriers and structures but the quality and quantity of forces manning them and their defensive capability - was not available to the Canadians when they attacked Lens. Admittedly, having been reduced to rubble, and strongly defended, Lens posed serious reconnaissance problems, but the attack had gone ahead anyway. Thus, one of the lessons emphasized in the after-battle summary was the importance of good intelligence, and that this needed to be acted on "without hesitation or doubt as to the situation."⁴⁶⁵ Although this policy had been applied successfully in the Hill 70 attack where the fighting was more open, it was not always recommended in urban warfare where intelligence would never be as accurate. Poor intelligence and over optimism, for instance, led the 50th Battalion to suffer heavily when its commander made a quick decision to attack preemptively on the night of August 20th. Achieving even the smallest of objectives in an urban environment was a Herculean task, and going into Lens with these deficits from the Corps' normal doctrine led to heavy casualties. For the 4th Division to operate successfully in a ruined city would have necessitated the commitment of a much larger force as the casualties the Canadians would have suffered in successfully taking Lens would have been substantial. For

⁴⁶⁵ MG 30, V.2, file 6, 'Parsons Papers, Report on the Capture of Hill 70 and Puits 14 Bis by the 1st Canadian Division 15 August 1917, Sep 1917'

Canadian troops in the First World War, Lens was the first and last battle fought in a built-up area against a well prepared, determined, and reinforced enemy.⁴⁶⁶ Effectively, the 4th Division was waging a battle that they could not win by using the same means - a limited 'bite and hold' - that had been successful only a few days earlier at Hill 70 when employed by the rest of the Canadian Corps, but under very different - and far more favourable - circumstances.⁴⁶⁷ At Lens, the Germans in fact had not been bled white and were actually able to withdraw troops to the Ypres sector.

The attack on Lens demonstrated that Currie, Radcliffe, Watson, and Ironside did not understand this new urban battle environment and that a variation of a set-piece attack would not always work. The initial setbacks suffered from pushing infantry into Lens should have alerted Canadian commanders that fighting in a built-up area threatened to bleed that infantry white. Instead of risking prohibitive casualties to take the Green Crassier and to surround Lens, the operation should have been delayed until better intelligence enabled them to prepare a new plan that dealt with the Germans' tunnels and numerous strong points. For their part, General Horne and Field Marshall Haig should have been challenged about the necessity of capturing Lens. As the Corps Commander (albeit an inexperienced one), Lieutenant-General Currie should have appreciated that the assault on Lens would not be worth

⁴⁶⁶ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 475

⁴⁶⁷ The Canadians at Valenciennes on November 3, 1918 were fighting against German troops who were dispirited, retreating and did not try to hold the city, while a month earlier, at Cambrai, the Germans had also chosen not to fight. Since this was their first and last large-scale operation in a built-up urban area, it makes it difficult to analyze whether the Corps learned any specific lessons for fighting in cities that could and would have been employed in the future. An examination of pertinent records revealed no such analysis. It would be interesting to see if the experience of Lens could have aided the Canadians at Ortona and other similar situations twenty-five years later in the next World War.

the casualties. Indeed, a more considered course would have been to call for a delay if not the complete abandonment of the attack. After all, in conceptualizing the overall operation, Currie's forceful opinions, which incorporated what his superiors wanted – an attack to distract the Germans from reinforcing Passchendaele – but offered what he considered a better chance of success - had been willingly accepted by First Army headquarters. Similarly, when he objected to suggestions that his 3rd Division retain any ground gained in its probing attacks leading up to the main operation, his strong opposition had carried the day. Subsequently, against the advice of his superiors, he had delayed the attack for two weeks until the weather was more reasonable. But despite all his earlier misgivings, he ultimately did go into Lens at the request of General Horne. Currie's unwillingness in the end to stand his ground points at least in part to an incomplete trust in his own judgment, which was understandable enough given that this was his first major operation as a Corps Commander.

Once ordered by Corps Headquarters, Watson, as commander of the 4th Division, had to commit his troops (or resign). However, he unoriginally simply followed Corps doctrine to prepare. As Wilfred Kerr, a signaler with the 11th (Field Artillery) Battery, subsequently wrote of the Lens attack: "... our Generals should have spent their time in devising something entirely new ... rather than using up our strength in assaults, bound to be costly and fruitless, against an enemy forewarned and forearmed."⁴⁶⁸ Indeed, Watson, and the usually more creative Ironside, should have spent time trying to come up with a new strategy for Lens, rather than

⁴⁶⁸ Wilfred Kerr, *Shrieks and Crashes: A memoirs of 1917* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2005), 62

preparing like they were attacking over open ground. Overall their zeal for the attack, always in evidence, was misplaced and there was a failure of leadership at the Brigade, Divisional and Corps levels.

From Lens, the Canadian Corps were ordered to Passchendaele to take part in the Third Battle of Ypres. The great British offensive had stalled and the BEF was suffering very heavy casualties. Out of the total of 60 BEF Divisions on the Western Front in October of 1917, all but nine would take part in what came to be called the Battle of Passchendaele. On October 3rd, General Henry Horne visited Canadian Corps headquarters to let Currie know that two divisions were needed for the Passchendaele offensive. In what has been described as a heated interview, Currie informed his commander that the Canadian Corps would go to Ypres as a collective unit and under no circumstances would they serve with the Fifth Army,⁴⁶⁹ bluntly stating that “the Canadian Corps would not fight under General Gough.”⁴⁷⁰ Shocked, Horne replied: “My god, Currie, that is a terrible thing to say.”⁴⁷¹ Currie had served under Gough during the battle of the Somme, an unhappy experience, and his opinion had not improved after talking to many British and Australian Divisional commanders about the conduct of the ongoing battle in Ypres, from which he had drawn the conclusion that the Fifth Army was poorly organized, and wasteful with soldiers’ lives.

⁴⁶⁹ Simon Robbins, “Henry Horne: First Army, 1916-1918,” in Ian Beckett and Steven Corvi (eds.) *Haig’s Generals* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2006), 104. Currie by this time had a level of autonomy that British Corps commanders did not have. If he had disagreements with orders received he could turn to the Canadian Overseas Ministry run by Edward Kemp and to the Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden who had given him their full support. Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 174-75

⁴⁷⁰ Simon Robbins, “Henry Horne: First Army, 1916-1918,” in Ian Beckett and Steven Corvi, eds., *Haig’s Generals* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2006), 104

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

That evening Currie had dinner at First Army headquarters and was informed that the entire Corps was heading to Ypres, and would be operating under the Second Army, commanded by General Herbert Plumer.⁴⁷² To accommodate the Canadian demands, the Second Army's front had been extended to also cover the Fifth Army sector where the Canadian Corps was going to attack. By October 13th, the Canadian Corps was directed by Plumer's headquarters to "submit plans for the capture of Passchendaele (Ridge and village),"⁴⁷³ and Currie's headquarters started compiling a list of what they would need if the operation was going to be successful.

Currie demanded from Haig that he be given a free hand in planning the attack as well as the time needed to prepare. He especially wanted more artillery pieces before committing his men. Historians Nigel Steel and Peter Hart have written that: "The reduced scale and importance of the Ypres operations is demonstrated by the fact that it was to their Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Currie, rather than Plumer, that Haig turned to to take effective control of operations directed against the capture of the village of Passchendaele high on its eponymous ridge."⁴⁷⁴ This may be true, however, the authors do not take into account that Currie was refusing to fight under another general, and that unlike other Corps commanders, if he did not get his way he could always go over Haig's head to the Canadian government for resolution. The Canadian Corps, if they were to fight in Ypres, would be fighting on their terms.

⁴⁷² D.J., Goodspeed, *The Road Past Vimy: The Canadian Corps 1914-1918* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), 115

⁴⁷³ Ed. Mark Osborne Humphries, *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917-1919* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2008), 52

⁴⁷⁴ Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (England: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2000), 280

Canadian Corps staff officers scouted the terrain over which the attack was going to be carried out and reported back that it was even worse than rumored. The whole area was a morass where the only sure-footed passage was on duckboards that had been laid out over the slime. If a soldier, laden down with equipment, fell off a greasy duckboard, there was a high chance that he might not be able to pull himself out and would drown in the ooze. Everywhere rotted and bloated corpses floated in the mud. Where the village of Passchendaele stood, there was only a swamp of mud and rubble, the place itself having been pounded out of existence by artillery. Passchendaele Ridge, whose base was to be the Canadian front, was small, only about 3000 meters in length and reached only a few tens of meters above the surrounding countryside, but, it gave German machine gunners and artillery spotters a commanding view. The German artillery wrapped around the Canadians' line, giving them an almost 200 degree view of the latter's positions.⁴⁷⁵ As Ypres had been fought over since the beginning of the war, the German artillery was accurately registered on the British frontline positions and shelled them constantly.

The Australians, who were manning the front that the Canadians would inherit, reported that the available artillery (sitting on the only scraps of land that were not sodden) was worn out and in some cases the barrels were melted from overuse. This would obviously hamper Canadian planning, requiring, as it did, thorough artillery preparation. Out of the 550 British heavy and field artillery pieces allotted to the Canadian sector, roughly half of them were out of commission.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁵ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918*, Volume II (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 319

⁴⁷⁶ Nicholson, *CEF*, 313

After personally touring the front, Currie returned to GHQ demanding the shortfall be made up. He got his way, getting heavy and field artillery as well as the Corps' own artillery which had been augmented by the Canadian 5th Division's guns previously brought over from England. Altogether, the Canadian Corps would have at their disposal 587 artillery pieces of all calibers for the attack on Passchendaele. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McNaughton, the Counter Battery Staff Officer at Corps Headquarters, estimated that during the four years of the Boer war the artillery had fired 273,000 rounds; at Passchendaele, the Canadians would fire this amount in two days.⁴⁷⁷

In preparing for Vimy Ridge, the Canadians had had three months to train; for Hill 70, they had six weeks of preparation before they attacked. In contrast, the Passchendaele assault would allow only fourteen days before the attack was to go in. The logistics of building roads to move artillery, ammunition, equipment and supplies, as well as tens of thousands of troops, forward across a quagmire with enemy shells raining down is staggering. The Germans had an artillery policy of focusing on all 'living targets'⁴⁷⁸ and harassing "the enemy's service of supplies."⁴⁷⁹ There were no shortages of targets in the congested Ypres Salient. Despite the conditions, and the incessant German bombardment, the Canadian Corps' engineers and labour battalions overcome the daunting obstacles and achieved their directives at a cost of 1,500 casualties.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁷ A.G.L McNaughton, "The Development of Artillery in the Great War" *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 6.2 (January 1929), 13

⁴⁷⁸CWM, MHRC, S.S. 749, 'The Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare, September 1st, 1917'

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ RG 24, v.3859, 85/8, G.724/27-3, 'November 20th 1917'

The Canadian Infantry had to move to the frontlines and wait under a storm of enemy shelling with no place to hide from the German forward observers on the ridge. Whereas troops could find some modest protection by digging into the mud, artillery emplacements could not. They were located on the only relatively dry ground at the front and made easy targets. As Lieutenant Wilfred Kerr of the 11th Battery of the Canadian Field artillery described the situation: "We would have moved the guns; but in that awful sea of mud it was impossible either to move the guns or bring in new ones. We stayed and endured and paid the price."⁴⁸¹ Once the Canadian artillery preparations had done their job, it would fall to the 3rd and 4th Divisions which were going to lead the attack on Passchendaele.

Facing the Canadian lines was the 11th Bavarian Division. At the beginning of the year it had been on the Eastern Front, however, during the summer it was brought to France and subsequently deployed to Passchendaele on October 22nd.⁴⁸² The German defenses were tied together by a series of pillboxes. The latter offered a low profile in the flat, muddy terrain and were constructed with reinforced concrete. A direct hit by a 15-inch shell could crack the pillbox, but that was about it. As one soldier despairingly wrote, "our field artillery shells would bounce off them like tennis balls on the sidewalk."⁴⁸³ In the fall of 1917, German doctrine called for their defences to be divided into three elastic zones. The first zone, called the 'protective line', was defended by machine gun nests and a relatively few soldiers

⁴⁸¹ Keer, *Shrieks and Crashes*, 179

⁴⁸² United States Army American Expeditionary Force General Staff G-2, *Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German army which participated in the war (1914-1918)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 209. Christian Stachelbeck, *Militarische Effektivitat im ersten Weltkrieg: die 11. Bayerische Infanteriedivision 1915 bis 1918* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoningh, 2010)

⁴⁸³ E.P.S Allen, *The 116th Battalion in France* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Company, 1921), 51

with rifles. These men were expected to hold up the attacking forces and inflict as many casualties as possible, before falling back as the enemy advanced. On a pre-planned schedule, German artillery would begin to fall on the 'protective line', hoping to kill advancing enemy forces as the German troops retreated, although in reality the latter were deemed expendable.

The second line was called the 'line of resistance' and was usually located 500 meters behind the first line. Here the defenders would make a stand amid interwoven defensive strongpoints such as pillboxes that would provide overlapping covering fire. It was anticipated that heavy casualties would be inflicted on the attackers here. Finally, 500 meters further to the rear was the 'main resistance line'. Built around a network of strongpoints, it was to be held at all costs,⁴⁸⁴ and what was left of the attackers' momentum blunted. German defensive doctrine also continued to rely heavily on counter-attacking forces that would quickly respond if a section of the 'main resistance line' was breached. However, by late October of 1917, the German infantry units were becoming severely depleted. Because of this, German defenders were ordered to hold the 'line of resistance' at all costs: "Every man had to fight where he was stationed. Only over his dead body could the enemy advance."⁴⁸⁵ This approach, heroic though it might sound, amounted to a death sentence for front-line soldiers, and obviously cost the Germans many lives.

⁴⁸⁴ CWM, MHRC, Ia/8704/88187 'Translation of German Order, New Methods of Defence for the Ypres Group',

⁴⁸⁵ Robert T. Foley, "The Other Side of the Wire: The German Army in 1917," in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, eds., *1917: Tactics, Training and Technology* (Canberra: Chief of the Army's Military History Conference, 2007), 164

The Canadian Corps had decided to break their assault into four separate attacks spread over fifteen days. The first phase called for an advance to the Red Line on the 26th of October. The 4th Division was to attack on a front of about 750 meters up the gradual southern slope of the ridge 500 meters, where hopefully the newly won positions would be consolidated. On the left, the 3rd Division would be attacking, and on the right the Anzac Corps would launch a diversionary assault. The 46th Battalion was tasked to carrying out the 4th Division's initial assault.

Having received orders to move on October 13th, the 4th Division did not have much time to prepare for the attack, arriving in the Ypres area only on October 22nd. The operation, however, was not going to be employing any intricate tactics. Passchendaele would become famous for the misery of weather and the grind suffered by the BEF and its Dominion contingents to achieve its goals. The 4th Division, with support of heavy artillery, would push forward a mere half kilometer to achieve its limited objectives. They did not go over an intricately prepared taped course or scout the ground in more than a cursory fashion, both because of time constraints and because of the condition of the ground. Passchendaele would be a straightforward brawl for the 4th Division. Though the plans were simple and the orders given were straightforward, some soldiers were concerned over lack of detailed planning. As Harold Emery, a Private in the 46th Battalion, wrote: "An officer pointed vaguely in the northeastern direction over some ground and mud. No one seemed to know anything. And all directions seemed to be pointing someplace. If there was a plan of attack I never heard of it."⁴⁸⁶ The 4th Division, however, did

⁴⁸⁶ James McWilliams and James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion*, 113

receive intelligence from the Australians that the small section of the German front on the 4th Division's extreme right called Decline Copse was held in strength.⁴⁸⁷

On the night of October 22nd/23rd, the 10th Brigade moved forward and took up its positions in front of Passchendaele, relieving the British 148th Brigade. At 10 pm on the 25th, the 46th Battalion occupied its assembly position. Zero hour had been set for the following morning at 5:40.⁴⁸⁸

The attack went off in the grey dawn of October 26th, the 46th Battalion leaving their 'trenches' (little more than interconnected shell craters in reality) as their barrage commenced. However, the guns, having been placed in swampy positions (the gunners considered themselves lucky to have found locations dry enough simply to support the weight of their artillery pieces), could not keep the range and the barrage began to fall on the 46th Battalion men. The Germans, observing from the heights of Passchendaele Ridge, also began to shell the advancing Canadians. Private Percy Helling recounted that:

"Our own guns were in this sloppy muck and they couldn't keep the range and they dropped short. The Germans were using overhead stuff. We were right in the middle of it - getting shelled by both sides - a pretty rough situation. They were coming down just like rain. ... I don't think I went twenty feet and there was dozens like me. When I was hit, the sergeant alongside of me got his shoulder shot off with a piece of shrapnel."⁴⁸⁹

The 46th's men who did not become casualties of artillery and machine gun fire struggled through the mud and miraculously fought their way to the Red Line. At 9:20 Lieutenant-Colonel Dawson could report that their objectives had been

⁴⁸⁷ RG 9, V.4902, Folder 1, File 10, 'Orders and Instructions Issued by 10th C.I.B'

⁴⁸⁸ RG 9, V. 4859 '4th Division War Diary- General Staff'

⁴⁸⁹ James McWilliams and James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion*, 114

taken, but at the cost of 70 percent casualties.⁴⁹⁰ The 3rd Division's simultaneous attack had had mixed results and the 58th Battalion on the 46th's left had also suffered severe casualties (in the area of 60 percent). Though the 46th Battalions' survivors dug in, their position was thinly held and their lines bent back slightly to protect their flank. Brigadier Hilliam rushed the 50th Battalion forward to reinforce their position⁴⁹¹ but even with these added numbers, the 46th front could still only be tenuously held with isolated posts.⁴⁹²

That morning, the Germans quickly launched counter-attacks to regain Decline Copse, hastily prepared assaults which were beaten back by the 46th and 50th Battalions. However, at 3 pm the German artillery put down an intense barrage for nearly an hour on the 4th Division's lines, then followed it with a massive counter-attack from three directions: Crest Farm, Passchendaele village and Tiber House (all areas surrounding Decline Copse). The hard-pressed defenders sent up SOS flares at 4:43pm, but to no avail, as there was a breakdown in communications with the rear; the artillery did not respond for twenty minutes to the urgent cries for support from the 46th Battalion lines.⁴⁹³

The Vickers machine guns on the 4th Divisional front immediately opened up to support the appeals from the Saskatchewan troops,⁴⁹⁴ continuing to fire until they were either targeted or destroyed by German artillery or the guns began to jam with

⁴⁹⁰ RG 9, V. 4939, '46th Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 1917'

⁴⁹¹ RG 9, V. 4941, '50th Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 1917'

⁴⁹² RG 9 V. 7208, file 1, folder 10, 'Report by Officers commanding Battalions - 46th Battalion'

⁴⁹³ RG 9, V. 7208, file 1, folder 10 '10th Canadian Infantry Brigade: Report on Operations'

⁴⁹⁴ RG 9, V. 7208, file 1, folder 10 'Section 4. Battle of Passchendaele: October 23rd to November 17th 1917'

mud.⁴⁹⁵ The Canadians' position in Decline Copse was too weak and the small arms fire that they could direct at the Germans was insufficient, so they began to withdraw to their jumping-off point. Privates Mckerchar and Dyck sardonically joked after the war that as they fled they could hear the German bullets twice, "once when they passed us, and again, when we caught up to them."⁴⁹⁶ A German soldier from the 2nd Battalion, Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, related their counterattack:

"The enemy had overrun and captured the outpost company so quickly that it had no time to react ... they simply had to be driven off ... Our companies lined up along the railway embankment. All our batteries concentrated a short period of drum fire on the enemy. Then we stormed forward. Of course it was nothing of the kind. Wading up to our knees in the bog, we made our way forward from crater to crater and on up the hill. Enemy machine gun fire mowed down many, but the courageous troops pressed on ... Suddenly flares went up! The enemy had fled; the position was ours once more... We were relieved at 2:00 AM and were very happy about it. It had become an eerie experience, rather as though we could hear the beat of the wings of death, which had already reaped a dreadful harvest earlier that day."⁴⁹⁷

The senior commanders of the 4th Division, who understood that communication would break down and decisions would have to be made on the fly, hoped that the training carried out throughout the year focusing on independent action would pay off in this sort of situation. Brigadier-General Hilliam had told his officers to "use your own judgment and do the best you can."⁴⁹⁸ The remnants of the 46th and 50th Battalions rallied under the leadership of Major Hope who just after 5:00 pm led a charge to retake Decline Copse, yelling: "We can't lose that place, the

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Daniel Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1986), 134

⁴⁹⁷ Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2007), 259

⁴⁹⁸ E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montefort Press, 1932), 131

46th has never lost an inch of ground yet!"⁴⁹⁹ They retook some intervening ground and a small rise in front of Decline Copse, but that was it. Machine gunner Ray LeBrun recounted his experience coming upon a group of wounded infantrymen:

"I nearly vomited. [One fellow's] insides were spilling out of his stomach and he was holding himself and trying to push this awful stuff back in. When he saw me he said, 'finish it for me mate. Put a bullet in me. Go on. I want you to. Finish it! He had no gun himself. When I did nothing, he started to swear. He cursed and swore at me and kept on shouting even after I turned and ran."⁵⁰⁰

Shattered by their ordeal, the survivors of the 46th and 50th Battalions were finally relieved by the 47th and 44th Battalions.⁵⁰¹ Soon after being withdrawn, the 46th was paraded in front of their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Dawson, who appeared shocked after they had been assembled. "Where's the rest of them?" he asked incredulously, to which his adjutant replied, "that is all you have, sir, there are no more left." Dawson, a prewar regular who had taught mathematics at the Royal Military College and who was known for his stolid demeanor, allegedly broke down in tears.⁵⁰² That day, the 46th Battalion had suffered 403 casualties out of the original 600 men who had jumped off at 5:40.⁵⁰³

Brigadier-General Hilliam left no doubt in the minds of the commanders of the 47th and 44th Battalions, Lieutenant-Colonels Milton Francis and Reginald Davies, that Decline Copse had to be retaken that night "at all cost", and that they would be working in tandem to do this.⁵⁰⁴ The attack was launched at 10pm, and

⁴⁹⁹Daniel Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* 135

⁵⁰⁰ Lyn Macdonald, *They called it Passchendaele: The Story of the Third Battle of Ypres and the Men who Fought in It* (London: Joseph, 1978), 219

⁵⁰¹ RG 9, V. 4940, '47th Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 1917'

⁵⁰² Daniel Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele*, 136

⁵⁰³ RG 9, V.4207, folder 9, file 7, '4th Canadian Division, November 1st 1917'

⁵⁰⁴ RG 9, V.4207, folder 1, file 10, 'Orders and Instructions Issued by 10th C.I.B'

through the mud, in complete darkness, the two battalions pushed forward. The troops believed that they had taken Decline Copse, and just after midnight a runner reported to the battalion headquarters being jointly used by Francis and Davies that the 47th had retaken Copse woods.⁵⁰⁵

Unfortunately, the good news was short-lived. With the ghastly condition of the battleground and the darkness the advancing soldiers had become confused about Decline Copse's location. The Australians, on hearing the news that Decline Copse had been captured, began to push patrols up to straighten their lines, only to come under fire from Decline Copse. They quickly withdrew and informed Hilliam that the woods had in fact not been taken.⁵⁰⁶ The 44th and 47th Battalions would have to attack it again. That morning (the 27th) Hilliam ordered them:

"... [to] attack, capture and consolidate Decline Copse and hold it.... From that point [Decline Copse] will be joining up with the 47th Battalion on your left and the Australians on your right. Your Battalion will form a protective flank to 10th Brigade and hold this till relieved by the 12th Brigade."⁵⁰⁷

The renewed attack would go in at 10pm, and at 6pm Hilliam sent another message to Davies:

"The Australians are not cooperating at all. The whole operation is yours, so you must protect your own right. Use all the men you want to. All I want is for you to make sure of your job, and after capturing make sure of holding. Good Luck."⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁵ RG 9, V. 7208, file 1, folder 10, '10th Canadian Infantry Brigade: Report on Operations – October 1917'

⁵⁰⁶ C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Volume IV (Sydney: Angus and Robertson press, 1933), 935

⁵⁰⁷ RG 9, V.4207, folder 1, file 10, 'Orders and Instructions Issued by 10th C.I.B.'

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

Hilliam was unfairly harsh on the Australians - their battalions were carrying out a relief, and regrettably they could not send supporting units. As ordered, the 44th Battalion attacked at 10pm, and the regimental history noted that the barrage opened fire but "... owing no doubt to the terrible conditions in the water logged battery positions, the Canadian shells [flew] wide of their objectives."⁵⁰⁹ Ominously, the German machine gun positions were left largely unmolested.

Through vicious bayonet fighting the 44th managed to clear most of Decline Copse, and it was finally reported taken. However, in the morning, Lieutenant-Colonel Davies and Brigade reconnaissance challenged that assertion, and the exhausted 44th launched still another attack on two German machine gun posts on the fringe of the Copse. After this, the 44th dug in and waited to be relieved, sending out patrols to establish contact with their flanks, which they managed to do.⁵¹⁰ The 10th Brigade was relieved on the 28/29th by the 12th Brigade. The Germans launched a counter-attack when the 85th Battalion was relieving the 44th Battalion. However, the two units, working together, were able to stop the German drive and push the enemy out of Decline Copse. In three days of fighting the 4th Division suffered 942 casualties,⁵¹¹ and their work at Passchendaele was not over.

The second phase of the Canadian attack was to be launched in conjunction with a larger British offensive. The 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions would be attacking with two British Divisions to the north and the Australian Corps to the south. The Canadians would be leading the spearhead with the 3rd Division tasked

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montefort Press, 1932), 135

⁵¹¹ RG 9, V.4207, folder 9, file 7, '4th Canadian Division, November 1st 1917'

with the most challenging objective of the day - the Bellevue Spur at the crest Passchendaele Ridge. However, the 4th Division attack was by no means easy, as they were attacking uphill towards the ruins of the town of Passchendaele. Barring their way was Crest Farm, a German strongpoint defended by an estimated twenty-four machine guns set in strong defensive positions, and Vienna Cottage, another strongpoint. General Gough approached Currie about launching the attack on the 29th. He was concerned about the British and Australian troops already in the line who were suffering from German shell fire. Currie, however, would not be rushed, and the BEF assault waited until the Canadians were ready.

The 4th Division would be attacking on a 500-meter front, with the 85th Battalion on the right, the 78th battalion in the middle and the 72nd Battalion on the left. The 72nd would have the most challenging task of the 4th Division units - taking Crest Farm. At 5:50AM on the 30th of October the Corps' 420 guns opened fire, but the artillery support again was weak, most likely because the guns sunk into the mud as they recoiled, and could not deliver accurate fire. Certainly the nine minutes of pounding before the troops left their trenches did not destroy the enemy strongpoints as planned. Surviving officers from the 85th Battalion remarked that if they had to attack again "they would prefer to attempt it by surprise without any barrage."⁵¹² The 85th war diary concluded that it "appeared [merely] to give the enemy warning that an attack was pending."⁵¹³ When the 85th left their trenches,

⁵¹² Daniel Dancocks, *Legacy of Valour: The Canadians at Passchendaele* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1986), 134

⁵¹³ RG 9, V. 4944, '85th Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary - Appendix A, November 1917'

they were met with a “continuous sheet of machine-gun bullets,”⁵¹⁴ suffering very heavy casualties including a significant number of officers.

The Lewis gunners and rifle grenadiers proved paramount on that day. As the men, with the aid of machine guns and grenades, scrambled from shell hole to shell hole and staggered forward. The 85th Battalion committed all of its troops. Major Anderson, the only surviving senior officer, led the attack effectively. During the 4th Division’s assault, individual efforts by men like Anderson were the reason why success was had. Major Anderson and his men charged and captured a field gun that was protected by two German machine guns at Vienna Cottage. With the capture of Vienna cottage, the Germans’ lines began to break. A desperate but clearly proud Anderson sent a message to Brigade Headquarters at 6:38: “We have gained our objectives. Captain Campbell and Lieutenant Cook are the only officers I have with me. Send us S[mall] A[rms] A[mmunition] for the Lewis guns. Casualties are very heavy.”⁵¹⁵ With the help of Vickers guns from a Divisional Machine Gun Company, rushed up to help consolidate their lines, they managed to hold off several counter attacks throughout the day. The 38th Battalion was also sent up the line to help reinforce the hard-pressed Nova Scotians. Gaining its objectives cost the 85th Battalion 394 casualties, including Major Anderson who was wounded.⁵¹⁶

The 78th attack did not go smoothly either. When they left their trenches they were also met by withering fire and the attack began to falter. Men threw themselves into shell holes hoping to avoid being ripped apart by the machine gun

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Joseph Hayes, *The Eighty-Fifth in France and Flanders* (Halifax: Royal Print and Litho, 1920), 91

⁵¹⁶ RG 9, V.4207, folder 9, file 7, ‘4th Canadian November 1st 1917’

fusillade. Major John McEwan, seeing the attack begin to fall apart, spurred his men on and led a charge - or what must have passed for a 'charge' in the awful mud - across 700 meters to the final objectives, earning a DSO for this brave action.⁵¹⁷ Desperate fighting continued in the German trenches, however, and only by 7:30 was it reported that the objectives had been gained.⁵¹⁸ The 78th would have to fight off three counter-attacks during the day, and suffered 320 casualties.⁵¹⁹ The Battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Kirkaldy, who was wounded in the battle, wrote with justifiable pride that the 78th's performance was "... a fine operation and the men were better than ever."⁵²⁰

The 72nd's goal was Crest Farm. As already mentioned, this area was protected by twenty-four machine guns, and the area surrounding it was flooded, making the ground in front seem like a small lake.⁵²¹ Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. 'Jimmy' Clark, the commanding officer, decided hours before the attack was to go in that instead of attacking on a wide front, the companies should be stacked together and attack through a small gap between the flooded fields, hopefully surprising the German defenders.⁵²² This was risky, because if a German machine gun got a bead on this opening it could annihilate the whole battalion. Fortunately, the 72nd's attack, unlike those of the other two battalions, had excellent artillery and machine gun support. The Canadian gunners' Vickers fired hundreds of thousands of rounds

⁵¹⁷ Tim Cook. *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War 1917-1918 Volume Two* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 346

⁵¹⁸ RG 9, V. 4943, '78th Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 31th 1917'

⁵¹⁹ RG 9 V.4207, folder 9, file 7, '4th Canadian November 1st, 1917'

⁵²⁰ J.H. MacBrien

⁵²¹ RG 9, V. 4942, '72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 1917-Operational order 79'

⁵²² RG 9, V. 4942, '72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 31st 1917'

at the German forces on this front.⁵²³ Confirming the effectiveness of the machine guns, German prisoners reported that they had been:

“... entirely cut off from [their] reserves... Both the frontline and reserve companies sustained very heavy casualties and the men in the front line seeing that they could not expect any reinforcements surrendered.”⁵²⁴

The 72nd Battalion followed closely behind their artillery barrage like they had at Vimy Ridge six months earlier. The Canadians crossed no man’s land as quickly as possible and reported back by 9:30 that they had taken Crest Farm. German prisoners admitted that they did not think the Canadians would attack on this front because of the waterlogged ground, two German machine gun officers commenting that “... they were not able to fire their gun at all, as our [Canadian] troops were behind them before they were at their posts.”⁵²⁵ The focus of the 4th Division’s training throughout 1917 was now paying enormous dividends. Though the 72nd was the only battalion in the 4th Division to have proper artillery support, it demonstrated in a textbook fashion how to use it. Unlike in the other sectors of the 4th Division’s line, the Germans did not launch a counter-attack on the 72nd’s position. Instead, they pounded it with artillery for eighteen hours with German aircraft joining in to strafe the lines for good measure.⁵²⁶ Field Marshall Haig, who had little to cheer about in recent months, hailed the 72nd Battalion’s attack as “a feat of arms which would go down in the annals of British history as one of the great

⁵²³ RG 9, V. 4207, folder 9, file 7, ‘Canadian Corps summary of intelligence 1st November 1917’

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ RG 9, V.4207, folder 9, file 7, ‘Canadian Corps summary of intelligence 1st November 1917’

⁵²⁶ RG 9, V. 4942, ‘72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 31st 1917’

achievements of a single unit.”⁵²⁷ Not surprisingly, of the 4th Division’s attacking battalions, the 72nd Battalion lost the fewest men, suffering only 276 casualties. The 72nd’s war diary entry states with some irony that “the balance of the tour (Passchendaele) was comparatively quiet.”⁵²⁸

The 4th Division’s role at Passchendaele was done. During the night of October 31st, the 2nd Canadian Division took over their lines and the 4th Division moved to the rear. As Nicholson wrote, the step-by-step battle was gradually accomplishing its purpose.⁵²⁹ Watson was understandably pleased with his Division’s results, noting in his diary on the 30th of October: “... today was a complete success, all 3 Battalions gaining their full objectives... the Third Division did not get on nearly as well as we did.”⁵³⁰ For ordinary infantrymen, tactical and operational success came at a fearful price. As Sergeant L.M. Gould of the 102nd Battalion would later recount: “we had just done the little that we had been set to do, but had suffered casualties out of all proportion to our task, and [that’s what] makes the memory of Passchendaele a nightmare.”⁵³¹

The 4th Division’s attack at Passchendaele had been different than their attacks at Lens or Vimy Ridge. They had been hurried into the area and given little time to prepare, although it is hard to argue that time would have helped much given the appalling physical conditions. They were forced to attack a prepared

⁵²⁷ Bernard McEvoy and A.H. Finlay, *History of the 72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion: Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* (Vancouver: Cowan and Brookhouse, 1920), 82

⁵²⁸ RG 9, V. 4942, ‘72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary October 31st 1917’

⁵²⁹ Nicholson, *CEF*, 323

⁵³⁰ Military Museums, ‘David Watson diary entry for October 30th, 1917’

⁵³¹ Gould, *From B.C. to Baisieux*, 73

enemy without the benefit of surprise.⁵³² Also, unlike the previous battles of 1917, the 4th Division had nowhere to hide before the attack. Vimy Ridge had had the tunnels, and at Lens the troops could find some cover in the ruined buildings. At Passchendaele, the 4th Division troops and the entire Canadian Corps had to remain in the open, digging into the quagmire for any shred of protection.

The attacks had been designed to employ very limited 'bite-and-hold' tactics spread out over a series of days to allow battalions to be quickly relieved and the fight continued with fresh troops. This was why the 4th Division was successful. The goals were achievable by single battalions, and the battalions that were decimated were efficiently replaced. The limited objectives ensured that the advances would not be drawn out, despite the mud, and the gains promptly consolidated. Relief would then come quickly. During the Battle of the Somme the previous year, casualties like the ones the 85th suffered, where almost all of the battalion officers were incapacitated, would have stopped the attack cold. However, with the benefit of the heightened discipline and new training regime that the Canadian Corps had focused on in 1917, the soldiers at Passchendaele possessed the knowledge and self-confidence to continue pushing ahead, even in the absence of effective artillery support. This was one of the crucial reasons why the 4th Division's attacks were successful, albeit at heavy cost.

Watson also had capable brigadiers and battalion commanders operating under him. He should receive credit for allowing his officers to be innovative and exercise the judgment needed to make the on-the-spot decisions so often required

⁵³² Captured German prisoners revealed that they were told by German high command that the Canadian attack would most likely fall on October 26th.

during such chaotic battles. Hilliam in this instance showed command sense in continuing to drive his battalion commanders forward and personally scouting the lines when conflicting reports came back. The battalion commanders and their subordinate officers displayed great courage in leading from the front, as well as clear appreciations of the objectives assigned to their units and how to gain them. Lieutenant-Colonel Clark of the 72nd Battalion particularly stood out with his risky decision to stack his attacking troops in columns for the assault on Crest Farm. The gamble paid off and the most challenging objective of the day was carried with the fewest casualties suffered by any attacking Canadian battalion. Simply put, Passchendaele demonstrated that the senior officers of the 4th Division were capable of operating successfully under the most trying circumstances that the Western Front was capable of offering.

In contrast to the effective performance of the infantry, the artillery that played such a fundamental role in the attack doctrine of the British Empire forces proved a weak link in the 4th Division's assaults. Too often, the artillery shelled its own troops, its fire failed to reach (and neutralize) enemy strongpoints, and the shells that did sink into the glutinous mud before exploding, greatly reducing their destructive effect. Communications between the frontline troops and artillery was frequently ineffective, most noticeably on the 46th Battalion's front on October 26th. Of course, a large part of this can be blamed on the appalling battlefield conditions. The artillery pieces could only be placed in certain areas, those which were at least reasonably firm, and then had to stay put, but slowly sank into the ground as the batteries fired their barrages. This threw out their range and they did not have time

to recalibrate their guns. Also, each time the guns fired they would be pushed off their firing pads by the force of the recoil and would have to be righted, significantly reducing the rate of fire.

The Germans, on the other hand, held the high, comparatively drier ground, and had been in protected positions for months, with plenty of time to range their pieces. They specifically targeted the British artillery. As Gunner Earnest Black, who luckily survived the destruction of twenty-three guns in his battery, a casualty rate of almost 400 percent, grimly recounted, "I spent thirty-one months in France and Belgium and I would do all of the rest of it again rather than those six weeks at Passchendaele".⁵³³ Getting fire support messages to the gunners quickly was also an insurmountable problem as conditions slowed all movement to a snail's pace and the telephone wires laid down were often completely useless because of the boggy conditions. Indeed, communications on the 4th Division's front were hopeless during their entire tour of Passchendaele. The most reliable system was to use runners who often became disoriented on the featureless battlefield or were killed, and who could only make painfully slow progress regardless. Thus, even if they did manage to deliver the message it had often taken too long, a serious problem given that every minute was critical for hard-pressed infantry units.

The Canadian Corps' operations at Passchendaele were successful because it was part of the larger BEF effort. Australian and New Zealand units had fought their way forward earlier in the month so that the Canadians would have a better jumping-off point for their attacks. British and Australian troops also launched

⁵³³ Ernest Black, *I want one Volunteer* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), 63

major attacks on the Canadians' flanks to help support their operations. The BEF allowed Currie and the Corps the time they needed to fully prepare for the attack, at the considerable cost to British and Australian soldiers who had to hold the line waiting for the Canadian offensive to commence. Not only did the British artillery bolster the Canadians, but also British units reinforced (indeed provided most of) the logistical train which was bringing supplies as well as supplementing the engineers and pioneer (labour) troops who were building artillery positions and rudimentary trenches along the Canadian front. All of this support was indispensable in enabling the Canadian Corps to launch its attacks successfully.

In the end, Passchendaele was a 'success' for the 4th Division and the Canadian Corps, as both had achieved the goals set for them. The casualties suffered to achieve the limited aims set for the Canadian Corps were almost exactly what Currie had predicted.⁵³⁴ As he recapped the operation and the rest of 1917, Currie confidently concluded that "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."⁵³⁵ The officers and men of the 4th Division might well have added that "unbroken success" had been bought dearly at Hill 145, Lens and the approaches to Passchendaele Ridge. A long hiatus in operations would now follow. The 4th Division would not be part of any major offensive operations again until August 1918 and the commencement of the Last Hundred Days campaign.

⁵³⁴ Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie predicted that the Canadian Corps would suffer 16,000 casualties taking Passchendaele. The Canadian Corps actually suffered 16,404.

⁵³⁵ RG 9, V.3854, folder 71, file 1, 'Reasons for Success and Failure, Passchendaele, November 20th 1917'

In fact, General Currie's appraisal had overstated the case. In the instance of the 4th Division, the results in 1917 had been mixed. The March 1st gas raid and Lens demonstrated that the 4th Division still had much to learn. However, the bigger operations of Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele proved that the 4th Division was capable of producing results in the most challenging of circumstances. As the divisional commander, Watson showed similar strengths and weaknesses throughout the year. He was responsible for the March 1st raid, and leading up to the attack was adamant that everything had been done to ensure that raid's success. He also should have stepped forward at Lens when the initial attack into the town went poorly and attempted to call it off. That said, he showed admirable leadership both at Vimy Ridge and the Third Battle of Ypres, specifically sound judgment, quick thinking and the insight to surround himself with a competent group of subordinates who worked well as a team.

For the most part, the Brigade commanders demonstrated their capabilities time and again. That said the glaring errors made by Brigadier Odlum when he cancelled the artillery barrage in front of the 87th Battalion lines at Hill 145 cost hundreds of lives and almost derailed the entire 4th Division attack. Yet other than this fundamental mistake, he had led his brigade competently throughout the year. Hilliam's ordering of the attack on the Green Crassier, knowing just how hard the fighting in Lens was proving, showed little regard for his men or tactical understanding of the situation. It seems in this case that he was a 'thruster' who just wanted to keep pushing in hopes the German forces would break. But otherwise

Hilliam led his men ably. The third Brigade commander, MacBrien, had shown throughout 1917 that he was consistently competent in his post.

Senior Canadian staff said at the time that the sophisticated fighting tactics of the Canadian infantry and artillery could not be showcased effectively at Passchendaele because it would be masked by the appalling physical conditions encountered there. This assessment obviously would imply that if not for the mud the Canadian Corps would have been even more successful during October and November. Such a counter-factual argument cannot be proven. One must remember that the 4th Division at Lens, in dry conditions, only eight weeks prior to their superior performance at Passchendaele, had carried out an attack which drew on all the same training and doctrine but had only resulted in failure.

For freshly formed divisions a measure of failure was inevitable fighting on the Western Front. Having been deployed in France for the past eighteen months, the standardized doctrine of the limited 'bite and hold' attack had proven successful and the 4th Division had demonstrated that they had mastered it well, and had become as effective as the other divisions in the Canadian Corps, a considerable achievement. Having proven in 1917 that they could fight capably, 1918 would bring its own challenges and the test would be to become a more consistent fighting division.

Chapter 6: The 62nd Division and Cambrai

The Battle of Cambrai in November 1917 would be a defining engagement for the 62nd Division. In the aftermath of Bullecourt, the 62nd had focused its attention on training in platoon-fighting tactics, and replaced several brigadiers and battalion commanders. The cult of the offensive had been an overarching theme within the Division, as throughout Haig's command. Embracing a more effective attack doctrine built around the self-contained infantry platoon and artillery-intensive attack would pay dividends for the 62nd Division on the battlefield, enabling it to transform itself into a solid Division that was capable of carrying out successful attacks. While serious faults remained to be addressed, the 62nd Division would end its first year of combat on the Western Front on a high note.

In the spring of 1917, Field Marshall Haig had proposed to General Robert Nivelle, the commander of the French forces, that the British assault the Hindenburg Line near Cambrai. However, with the French armies struggling in the early summer, the British focus had shifted to the Ypres salient in Flanders. As discussed in Chapter 3, Byng's Third army, including the 62nd Division, took over the section of the Hindenburg Line immediately west of Cambrai in early July. It was a relatively quiet part of the front, where German forces that had been worn down by combat would go to rest and rebuild. Commenting on the area around Cambrai, a Second Lieutenant in the German 54th Division wrote: "The sector was excellently fortified with very broad, exceptionally strong wire entanglements, and good deep dugouts;

it was therefore called ‘the Sanatorium of the West.’⁵³⁶ With its heavily fortified lines and the British throwing their weight against the Germans to the northwest, it was a fairly quiet summer in the Cambrai sector.

In August, Brigadier Hughes Elles, commander of the British Tank Corps, approached Byng with his chief of staff, J.F.C Fuller. The purpose of their meeting was to advocate a raid on enemy positions using a novel combined-arms approach simultaneously employing tanks, aircraft, and infantry.⁵³⁷ Also in August, serendipitously, Brigadier-General Henry Tudor, divisional artillery commander in the 9th (Scottish) Division, suggested the use of tanks and the groundbreaking idea of silent registration of artillery to secure surprise in a small-scale attack on the Hindenburg Line.⁵³⁸ Tudor’s belief was that guns could be positioned to deliver relatively accurate fire on the German lines without the benefit of practice firing. The lack of registration meant that there would be no creeping barrage. Instead, a ‘lifting’ barrage would be used, which consisted of firing on the German frontline, and lifting to each of the successive defence lines without covering the intervening ground. The concern with this approach was that the wire that usually required weeks of bombardment would not be cut prior to the attack.⁵³⁹ Tudor came up with the solution to this: tanks would roll over and crush the wire and troops could safely follow behind.⁵⁴⁰ The lack of artillery registration would preserve the element of

⁵³⁶ Anon, ‘More Light on Cambrai, 1917’ *The Army Quarterly*, Vol.XXXV, No.1, October 1937, 143

⁵³⁷ J.F.C. Fuller, *Tanks in the Great War, 1914-1918* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1920), 120

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 121

⁵³⁹ Tanks’ wire crushing ability was needed because of the move to a brief wire-cutting bombardment immediately before the attack. Some wire was bound to survive.

⁵⁴⁰ Bryn Hammond, *Cambrai 1917: The Myth of the First Great Tank Battle* (London: Phoenix, 2009), 70

surprise. This was a novel approach to say the least - up to this point offensives had usually been preceded by increasingly intensive and prolonged bombardments.

Byng, as one historical study of his generalship has written, was particularly interested in using surprise to break through enemy defences.⁵⁴¹ Impressed with Tudor's and Elles' argument, he began to lobby GHQ for the resources to carry out a full-scale attack on his Third Army's front along the lines suggested. On the 16th of September, Byng presented a detailed combined-operations plan to Field Marshall Haig and his senior staff. Referring to this meeting in his diary, Haig observed:

"I discussed some operation which Byng proposed after lunch, and I told him I would give him all the help I could.... He wished the following divisions made up to strength - 34th, 35th, 40th, 50th and 62nd. Each is about 3000 men short of the establishment in infantry."⁵⁴²

On October 15th, with the Third Battle of Ypres entering its final month, Haig gave the go-ahead to Byng for what was now the Cambrai operation.⁵⁴³ Eleven days later, Byng informed his Corps commanders of the upcoming plan.

The attack on Cambrai would utilize two Corps comprising six infantry divisions, plus five cavalry divisions and three tank brigades. The 51st and the 62nd Divisions would lead the main assault for the IV Corps, commanded by Charles Woollcombe,⁵⁴⁴ which would also have at its disposal 466 guns to attempt the novel lifting barrage. The employment of the tanks would differ from Corps to Corps. The III Corps was adhering closely to the doctrine being advanced by Elles and Fuller

⁵⁴¹ Ian Beckett and Steven Corvi, eds., *Haig's Generals* (Pen and Sword: Barnsly, 2006), 69

⁵⁴² Garry Sheffield and John Bourne, eds., *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2005), 325-26

⁵⁴³ CAB 45/118, C482725, 'Notes on the Battle of Cambrai: Inception'

⁵⁴⁴ The 51st (Highland) Division was regarded as one of the elite assault divisions in the BEF

which called for an advance body being followed by the main body and then the infantry. In contrast, after observing tank exercises, the 62nd Division modified Fuller's idea. With 60 tanks at its disposal, 30 for each attacking Brigade, 46 would be sent forward with the first wave of troops. These 46 would have 'W.C.' written in black at the rear for the infantry to follow. The W.C. stood for 'wire -crushing', and that would be their designated role - clearing a path for the advancing infantry to reach the first objective beyond the uncut belts of wire. The remaining tanks would accompany the infantry to their final objective and would be tasked with dealing with any remaining strongpoints. Any wire-crushing tanks that were still operable would also advance to the second objective.⁵⁴⁵ The 51st Division also was allowed to come up with its own tank doctrine for the attack.

On October 12th, the 62nd Division left the frontlines (and VI Corps) near Bullecourt and was moved to the Third Army reserve as part of IV Corps. In October, Major-General Braithwaite sent a memo to all battalions that they would now permanently be organized into three platoons (from the previous four) per company. Also, each platoon would consist of two sections of riflemen, one Lewis gun section (an NCO and six men) and one section of bombers and rifle grenadiers (an NCO and six men, trained in both roles). Included in the two sections of riflemen would be trained reserve Lewis gunners, bombers and rifle grenadiers who would be available to replace specialists if required. This reshuffling of the company would leave four spare Lewis guns that the battalion commander could deploy where he

⁵⁴⁵ WO 95/3070, 407136, '62nd Division: Instructions No.1- Tank and Infantry Operations, without methodical Artillery Preparations.'

saw fit.⁵⁴⁶ The reorganization was relatively distinct to the 62nd Division, as most BEF infantry companies still had the traditional four platoons. Braithwaite, however, believed that it would offer the attacking troops more flexibility. The 'extra' men would be used as a fourth wave during an assault and would be used for 'mopping up'- something that had been glaringly lacking at Bullecourt.⁵⁴⁷ While behind the lines between the 12th and 27th of October, the 62nd's carried on as normal, and the men had no inkling that a major operation was looming. Route marches, range practice, sports and a divisional concert filled the days. As one officer wrote in mid-October:

“At the moment we are having a very good time. Some old billets, 8,9, or 10 hours of sleep a night, topping billets for the officers, beds for most of the men and really a tiptop time... We work 9-1 every morning vigorously and then play football or some other mob game for the rest of the afternoon.”⁵⁴⁸

During October, the 62nd Division was also brought up to strength with the arrival of nearly 1200 reinforcements. On the 27th of October, the day after Byng informed his Corps of the coming operation, the 62nd Division began intensive training.⁵⁴⁹

The training would be carried out quickly, over barely two and a half weeks. On the 13th of November the 62nd Division began to move into position for the assault. The training for the infantry was directed at semi-open warfare tactics. A report compiled by Braithwaite after the battle stated that special attention was paid to bringing out the initiative of company and platoon commanders. The focus for these battalion and brigade training exercises over taped courses was to

⁵⁴⁶ WO 95/3069, 407136, 'Memorandum on 3 Platoon Organization'

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ University of Leeds Liddell Collection, 'Captain Green papers, November 1917'

⁵⁴⁹ WO 95/3069, 407136, 'War Diary 62nd Division October 1917'

concentrate on the platoon as the tactical unit in the attack, something which had, of course, been the focus of British infantry training for the better part of the year.⁵⁵⁰

The 62nd Division's battalions each had a mere two days training with the tanks. Nevertheless, the experience deeply impressed the infantryman, as Private Bill Kirby of the 2/6th West Yorkshire Regiment later wrote:

"A day came when we moved from our camp to a battle front in miniature - a series of trenches defended by rows of barbed wire. Several tanks were already there in attacking position. We lined up behind them and followed them to see, to our astonishment, these massive new and mysterious machines stride over wire, crushing it into the ground as if it was so much waste paper. Then as we continued to follow, our amazement increasing, as they surmounted the huge trenches, without effort, turning to bring their deadly quick-firing guns and their Lewis guns to bear upon the defenders. Of course, there were no defenders, but the lesson was clear. No defences, however strong, no machine-gun fire or small arms fire, etc would stop these thickly armoured monsters... Only a direct hit by shell fire would stop them as it would anything."⁵⁵¹

With this limited amount of preparation time, the 62nd Divisional leadership made the decision to change the role of the tanks from what Elles and Fuller had suggested to their own unique approach as previously discussed. Brief though it might have been, a report written by Braithwaite on the Division's tank training affirmed it was "of the utmost value, as the personnel of the tanks and infantry got to know each other...."⁵⁵² Colonel Christopher Baker-Carr, whose tank units trained with the 62nd Division, commented favorably on his experience with Braithwaite and the 62nd Division as a whole:

"... General Braithwaite became a confirmed tank enthusiast. He visited all the demonstrations given to the infantry to inspire confidence and was delighted when

⁵⁵⁰ WO 95/3070, 407136, 'Report of Operations 62nd (West riding) Division- November 20th- December 4th in the Cambrai battle'

⁵⁵¹ IWM, Unpublished manuscript, Bill Kay, *The Battle of Cambrai 1917 'I was there'*, 42

⁵⁵² Ibid.

the tanks, without the least difficulty, negotiated the trench-system and barbed wire entanglements, which the infantry had been invited to construct in the most formidable manner possible. His faith was reflected throughout the division and the Tank Units co-operating were given loud in their praise of the whole – hearted support given.”⁵⁵³

Given the limited time, the training between the various arms had gone well.

IV Corps would be attacking on the eastern flank of the Cambrai offensive with the 36th Division launching a diversionary raid on its left and the 51st advancing on its right. On October 31st, the 62nd and 51st Divisions were presented with the general scheme of operations from Corps headquarters. The first objective, or Blue Line, lay 1500 yards in front of the Corps’ start lines, and included the village of Havrincourt that the 62nd would be tasked with taking.⁵⁵⁴ The attack by the 51st and 62nd Divisions would then continue another 1500 yards to the Brown Line which would encompass the town of Flesquières and a large part of the Hindenburg Support Line. If these objectives were successfully gained, the cavalry attached to the Corps would then attempt to break out and attack Bourslon with support from the both infantry divisions.⁵⁵⁵

The 62nd Division would attack on a 3000-yard front. Poor tank terrain in the centre meant that the 62nd would advance on the flanks converging inwards on Havrincourt. It would be a two-brigade assault (by the 185th and 187th), and the Brown Line was expected to be taken no later than Zero plus 210 minutes. The 62nd’s third brigade (the 186th) would be moving up behind the two attacking

⁵⁵³ C.D. Baker-Carr, *From Chauffeur to Brigadier* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1930), 261

⁵⁵⁴ WO 158/382, ‘IV Corps, Cambrai: Havrincourt Bourslon Operations’

⁵⁵⁵ WO 95/ 3070, 407136, ‘Report on Operations 62nd(West Riding) Division Nov, 20th-Dec 4th in the Cambrai battle.’

brigades and would immediately push forward once the Brown Line was taken to capture the town of Bourlon, supported by two squadrons of King Edward's Horse.⁵⁵⁶

The artillery 'preparation' began on November 4th and carried on until November 19th. This consisted of moving forward and establishing positions for the nineteen batteries of field artillery. There would be minimal actual artillery fire to keep the element of surprise the Third Army deemed crucial.⁵⁵⁷ The artillery had a set program to follow from Zero to Zero plus 210 minutes, but obviously leading up to the attack the guns were very quiet. The Vickers guns of the Machine Gun Companies of all three Brigades, as well as the Divisional machine guns and those of the 36th Division, would fire a barrage for the assaulting troops at Zero hour. On its completion, the 186th Brigade's Machine Gun Company and the Divisional Machine Gun Company would be attached to the advancing 186th Brigade. This was a bold plan of attack. The timeline and orders given to the Brigades left little room for error, and the 62nd Division's plan was based on the tanks doing the job with which they were tasked: clearing a path through the wire. The offensive would commence at 6:20 on November 20th.⁵⁵⁸

The 185th and 187th Brigades had taken up positions by 6:10. On the 62nd Division's front, just before Zero hour, has been described as deathly quiet, while wisps of smoke could be seen in the valley being emitted from the waiting tanks

⁵⁵⁶ WO 95/3084, CA07409, '186th Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations commencing 20th November 1917'

⁵⁵⁷ The Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anderson Diary, November 19th 1917'

⁵⁵⁸ WO 95/ 3070, 407136, ' Report on Operations 62nd(West Riding) Division Nov, 20th-Dec 4th in the Cambrai battle.'

(this silence is surprising as tanks were known to make a considerable racket).⁵⁵⁹ At 6:20, Zero hour, in the words of one private:

“Suddenly the silence of the coming dawn was shattered by such an earthquake and fire as surely was never heard before by men. Though the ground shook with the thunder of our massed guns, it was the breathtaking circle of multi-coloured flames rising like millions of gigantic fireworks which produced a sight so breathtaking, so altogether awe inspiring, as to root us to the ground, unable to take our eyes away from the beauty of man’s explosive power appearing like some ethereal glory rather than the concentrated hellish force which would tear men apart leaving then little more than shapeless, shattered flesh and blood.”⁵⁶⁰

The tanks led the charge with the infantry following 100 yards behind as had been ordered. A proportion of the artillery was directed to release smoke to give the advancing tanks and infantry some additional cover.

The 185th attack started off well. The tanks assigned to 2/7th and 2/8th West Yorks worked effectively with the infantry and by zero plus 20 the Battalions had taken 100 prisoners and four machine guns, facing little opposition. The advance by the right side of the Brigade continued to go well until they reached the Grande Ravine, about 300 yards in front of their jump off line.⁵⁶¹ The 153rd Brigade of the 51st (Highland) Division that was attacking on their right began to falter. The history of the 51st Division acknowledged that “it was some time before the garrison of Triangle Support Trench could be overcome, as only one second-wave tank on the battalion front managed to cross the Hindenburg front line.”⁵⁶² Once the trench had

⁵⁵⁹ Everard Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919* Volume 1 (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited), 79

⁵⁶⁰ IWM, unpublished manuscript, Bill Kay. *The Battle of Cambrai 1917: 'I was there'*, 42

⁵⁶¹ WO 95/3080, 'Narrative of Operations commencing 20th November 1917- 185th Brigade'

⁵⁶²F.W. Bewsher, *The History of the Fifty First (Highland) Division 1914-1918* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1921), 244

been dealt with the 185th's battalions advanced and captured their first objective by Zero plus two hours.⁵⁶³

On the left side of the Brigade attack, the tanks were less effective. Lance Corporal Ernest Thwaites, of G Battalion, the Tank Corps, described the initial progress of his own tank:

"6:20 am and away we went. Engines running in top gear- no need for quiet now- down the slope into the lane of Trescault village, up a side track, across our front line trench, hell for leather, we pelted, into No Man's Land, just as dawn was breaking, straight for the German trenches. The Tank was ordered to keep on the extreme right of Havrincourt Wood and we hugged the edge of the wood pretty closely, the artillery barrage, which had opened at zero falling just in front of us."⁵⁶⁴

However, the infantry had to advance through the woods, which was a warren of shattered stumps and fallen trees. This was not tank country and they offered little aid here. The companies of the 2/5th and 2/6th West Yorks had to fight their way through these woods alone. After some intensive fighting they exited the woods and came upon the village.

At 7:50 the reserve companies of the attacking battalions began to leap frog the first wave and carry on the attack. Fighting through the village was fierce, and enemy machine gun positions were a hazard that had to be dealt with methodically. Here the tanks were of great assistance, offering cover as the infantry moved through the streets and bringing added firepower. An after-battle report graphically describes some of the hardships encountered by the 185th men in taking their final objective:

⁵⁶³ WO 95/ 3082, 'War Diary 2/7th West York's Regiment-November 1917'

⁵⁶⁴ Ernest M Thwaites, 'The chronicles of an amateur soldier' *The Tank Corps Journal*, Vol.2, No 19, 1920, 162

“The 3rd and 4th Coys then moved on to the Final part of the 1st objective... The right Co[mpan]y had some 40 casualties from the direction of Risecourt and called a tank to assist their right flank that was up in the air. The left Co[mpan]y had also considerably casualties including all its officers; the senior Sergeant led the Co[mpan]y to the Final objective- i.e. the Chapel Wood, Havrincourt Trench. Two M[achine] Guns held p this Co[mpan]y on Route; one was dealt with by a shower of Rifle Grenades and the other rushed with bayonet. The enemy was found to be in Chapel Wood Trench in large numbers. Many were killed and 110 taken Prisoners.⁵⁶⁵

After four hours of fighting, they had managed to reach their final objective. The 185th Brigade captured 1,353 prisoners, and the usual collection of enemy weapons, while suffering 707 casualties themselves.⁵⁶⁶

The 187th Brigade, on the 185th Brigade’s left, started off less successfully. The tanks were initially delayed⁵⁶⁷, however, the Brigade’s commanding officer, Brigadier-General Reginald Taylor, had emphasized during training that the troops were to push forward, tanks or no tanks. The night before, the 187th had sent out men on its own initiative to cut wire and left tape to guide the infantry in case the tanks proved unreliable. Considering what happened this was very prudent. The troops surged ahead and were dealing with enemy strongpoints when the tanks joined the assault and added useful firepower and wire-crushing abilities.⁵⁶⁸

The 2/4th and 2/5th King’s Own Yorkshire Regiment had entered the outskirts of Havrincourt and immediately were met with heavy machine gun and sniper fire, the Germans having deftly positioned themselves in the ruined buildings of the shattered town. However, by 9:00, as the Brigade War Diary iterates: “the blue

⁵⁶⁵ WO 95/3080, ‘Narrative of Operations commencing 20th November 1917- 185th Brigade’

⁵⁶⁶ WO 95/3070, ‘62nd Division Narrative of events Nov 20-23rd’

⁵⁶⁷ Documents for the Battalions, Brigade and Division do not elaborate on why the tanks were delayed.

⁵⁶⁸ R.C. Bond, *The King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914-1918*, Volume III (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd, 1929), 902

line had been reached and the part of Havrincourt allotted to the 187th Brigade had been completely mopped up.⁵⁶⁹

The 2/4th and 2/5th York and Lancaster Battalions which had been following behind the advancing troops had to push past the town. Although they met fierce machine gun fire, overall German artillery fire was surprisingly quiet on the whole front. The two rear battalions forced their way to the German trenches and entered them, whereupon they did not wait for the remaining tanks, but rushed forward to the Brown Line - in some cases almost into the lifting barrage. Leutnant Sauke, a member of the Havrincourt garrison, recounted the fury of the British attack:

“Hardly had we covered one hundred meters when we bumped into British soldiers coming the other way. There was no means of escape left. Hauptmann Soltau jumped up out of the trench, as did the leading Unteroffizier. A few machine guns opened up and seconds later the Unterofficer, bleeding from an arm wound jumped back in, blurting out, ‘Hauptmann Soltau is dead!’ ...”⁵⁷⁰

The Brown Line was captured around 10:30 and consolidation began. The Brigade suffered about 500 casualties and captured about 1100 prisoners, 39 machine guns and 19 trench mortars. It had been an overwhelming success.⁵⁷¹

In this offensive, the attacking 62nd troops showed great skill and initiative. Despite only limited training, they worked effectively with the tanks to deal with enemy strongpoints, as Leutnant Hergemann of the 8th Company 84th Infantry Regiment attested to:

“They moved right up our trench. The first of them crossed over and then halted. It was still dark. We came under fire from the tank and had to take cover. ‘Keep throwing grenades at that monster!’ – but they had no effect on it. It dawned

⁵⁶⁹ WO 95/3089, ‘War Diary of the 187th Brigade-November 1917’

⁵⁷⁰ Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Cambrai* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2009) 112

⁵⁷¹ WO 95/3070, ‘62nd Division Narrative of events Nov 20-23rd’

on us that we were powerless against this tank. It, on the other hand had sized up the situation and was making life hell for us in the trench..."⁵⁷²

However, when the tanks were not available the small-unit tactical training carried out during the summer and autumn came into play. Enemy strongpoints and machine gun nests were dealt with effectively by rifle grenadiers and Lewis gunners providing covering fire, while the riflemen and bombers would rush the positions. Also, as demonstrated in the 187th attack, it was appreciated that tanks might not be available, no matter how much the plan relied on them, and so there were contingency plans in place. Overall, the troops of the 62nd Division had a clear grasp of their goals and knew how to move forward, no matter the strength (or nature) of the defence encountered, clearly demonstrating a tactical skill that had been sadly lacking at Bullecourt.

At 9:00 am the 186th's commanding officer, Roland Bradford, received orders that the attack was going well and that his Brigade should begin moving up the line to carry it beyond the Brown Line. As the two lead Brigades consolidated the latter, the 2/6th and 2/5th Duke of Wellingtons launched their attack around 11:00am at Chateau Woods. They came under heavy machine gun fire, however, with the help of the 2/7th Duke of Wellingtons they were able to push forward."⁵⁷³ Few tanks remained to help the 186th Brigade's advance. The assault units of the 2/4th Duke of Wellingtons, whose line slightly overlapped that of the 51st Division, were held up.

⁵⁷² Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Cambrai* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2009), 48

⁵⁷³ WO 95/3084, '186th Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations- 20th November to 3rd December 1917'

When the latter were unable to take their Brown Line objectives, the 186th Brigade had to deal with the remaining defences on the 51st's line of advance.⁵⁷⁴

The cavalry attached to the 186th Brigade were sent to help the 51st Division take the village of Flesquières, one of their objectives, however they were turned back by German machine gun fire.⁵⁷⁵ After this, the King Edward's Horse troopers were used as scouts to assist the advance for the 186th Brigade. At 3:30, after having been stymied by' intensive machine gun fire throughout the day, the King Edward's Horse were withdrawn.

Brigadier-General Bradford went forward with the advance, and after personal reconnaissance, ordered the 2/7th Duke of Wellingtons to attack the village of Graincourt, supported by two remaining tanks, which they successfully carried out. Instructions were received that because Flesquières had not fallen, the 62nd Division attack must stop as their right flank was vulnerable. The 186th Brigade was grouped in and around Graincourt, where they were poised to strike Bourslon.⁵⁷⁶

At 7pm, the 62nd Division received an order from Corps headquarters that the advance would continue the following day. The 51st was to attack at dawn and hopefully take Flesquières (their first-day objective) with the 36th Division on the left of the 62nd Division offering support.⁵⁷⁷ Braithwaite's men were given the hardest objective of the day: to advance and capture Bourslon village and the high ground around nearby Bourslon Wood. At 10pm the 186th Brigade was tasked with

⁵⁷⁴ WO 158/382, 'IV Corps Havrincourt-Bourslon Operations. Nov. 20th-Dec. 1st '

⁵⁷⁵ IWM, 86/57/1, 'B D Parkins manuscript (c1929)'

⁵⁷⁶ Jack Horsfall and Nigel Cave, *Battleground Europe: Flesquieres* (South Yorkshire: Leo Cooper, 2003), 62

⁵⁷⁷ WO 158/382, 'IV Corps Havrincourt-Bourslon Operations - Nov. 20th-Dec. 1st'

the attack. All remaining tanks (18 in total) as well as the remaining troopers of the King Edward's Horse were put at its disposal. Zero hour was fixed for 10 am on the 21st.⁵⁷⁸

At 8:00, the 51st Division took Flesquières and continued to press forward. At Zero hour, with the 62nd Division's artillery shelling the German lines, three out of the 186th Brigade's four battalions began to attack (the 2/6th Duke of Wellingtons was held in reserve with the intention of its being used to capture Bourlon village once the other battalions had reached their objectives). Because of mechanical issues, the tanks on the 2/4th Duke of Wellingtons' front did not arrive in time to advance with the attacking infantry.⁵⁷⁹ By 11:45, the village of Anneux was taken, about halfway between the Brigade's start line and its final objective. The leading companies going through the village reported that sniper fire from windows was holding them up. However, the war diarist for the 2/4th Duke of Wellington Regiment dryly commented that "Lewis gun fire from the hip proved of value in reducing this."⁵⁸⁰ Soon after Anneux, the 186th Brigade's attack began to stagger in the face of serious resistance from the German forces, in particular, as was often the case, their machine guns.⁵⁸¹

At noon, the 2/6th Duke of Wellingtons was rushed forward and used to shore up the ranks of the attacking battalions, in particular the 2/7th Duke of

⁵⁷⁸ WO 95/3070, 'Summary of Operations - 21st November 1917'

⁵⁷⁹ This was due to poor terrain and the hardships of moving the necessary gas and oil to these forward positions.

⁵⁸⁰ WO 95/3084, '2/4th Duke of Wellington War Diary Nov 21, 1917'

⁵⁸¹ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Narrative of events Nov 20-23rd'

Wellingtons.⁵⁸² Nevertheless, despite the reinforcements the attack soon ground to a halt and the 186th Brigade began to dig in, fortuitously as they were compelled to beat off several counter-attacks throughout the afternoon. The Brigade had advanced over 2000 yards and during the course of the two days had taken 1200 German prisoners and captured thirty-eight artillery pieces, as well as a large number of machine guns.⁵⁸³ The tanks seemed to have performed extremely well when operational, however, the cavalry were found lacking, and in the afternoon of the 21st were dismounted to reinforce the 186th Brigade's lines. By day's end the 186th had been put in the Divisional reserve with the sister 185th and 187th Brigades taking over the Division's front line.

The attack on the 21st failed for a number of reasons, however being rushed was not one of them. Since an attack on Bourslon Wood and Bourslon village was something that the 62nd Division had prepared to carry out if the attack on the 20th proved successful, it was known that Corps headquarters might ask for it. Factors that contributed to the failure started with the reality that the tanks were fewer in number and less reliable than on the first day. When available, the firepower and wire-crushing capabilities given to the attacking infantry had helped enormously. The men of the 186th Brigade were also exhausted, as all four battalions had been heavily engaged the previous day, suffering substantial casualties. To expect the same sort of effort on consecutive days was simply unrealistic with the wastage that inevitably occurred during a Western Front attack. Finally, the German resistance

⁵⁸² J.M. Brereton and A.C.S. Savory, *The History of the Duke of Wellington Regiment (West Riding) 1702-1992* (Halifax: The Duke of Wellington's Regiment, 1993), 249

⁵⁸³ WO 95/3084, '186th Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations - 20th November to 3rd December 1917'

has been well documented to have been much stiffer on the 21st than the 20th. As Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff wrote in his memoirs, the first German reinforcements had arrived by the morning of the 21st, and by the 23rd they had sufficient troops in place to launch heavy counter-attacks.⁵⁸⁴ The Germans obviously knew any offensive would continue on the second day and had rushed reinforcements to the battlefields; a well-prepared enemy is much harder to displace than a surprised one. Although they fell short of their original objectives, the 186th Brigade had made a strong showing on the 21st as their capture of 1200 prisoners attests. The official history rightly concludes: "Brigadier General Bradford's 186th had accomplished as much as could fairly be expected. Against an increasing resistance, with very little support, it had striven for an objective which might have taxed the powers of a fresh division."⁵⁸⁵

On the night of the 22nd/23rd the 62nd Division was to be replaced by the 40th Division, but at 7pm the previous night, Braithwaite received orders from the Corps to try one last time to take the high ground west of Bournon Wood. The 51st Division was also going to be advancing on the nearby village of Fontaine in support. However, at dawn German forces launched powerful counter-attacks against the 185th lines. The Germans were hurling their elite storm troops against the British positions, and one of them, Ernst Junger, who led a company of the 73rd (Hanoverian) Infantry Regiment at Cambrai, later recounted the fury of the assault:

⁵⁸⁴ Erich Ludendorff. *Ludendorff's Own Story August 1914- November 1918* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919), 109

⁵⁸⁵ Wilfrid Miles, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1917*, Volume III (London: Imperial War Museum, 1991), 113

“We went on, and a moment after a fresh stand was encountered. Bombs flew on both sides and burst with resounding din. Now the technique of the storm troop came into play. A chain of bombs went from hand to hand along the trench. Snipers took up positions behind traverses ready to draw a bead on enemy bombers; the platoon commander kept an eye out over the top to see a counterattack in the nick of time; and the light machinegun section mounted their guns where there was a good field of fire.”⁵⁸⁶

Private Bill Kirby of the 2/6th West Yorkshire Regiment wrote of the hail of German machine gun fire sweeping his trench:

“So deadly was it in both accuracy and volume we lost man after man, killed outright as we endeavored to locate something to shoot at. First to was Albert Chadwick, falling lifeless into the bottom of the trench, quickly followed by Jim Smithson, both lying there forming a cross of bloody humanity below me, looking down shocked beyond description at the suddenness of it all.... I saw someone crash down as though hurled by some gigantic force. Instinctively, I knew it was old Sam Taylor. He could not have known what had hit him... Jim Turnbull looked across at me with that shattered look, so common to fighting men when they see great friends and comrades killed before their eyes...”⁵⁸⁷

Kirby went on to describe his commanding officer being hit, minutes before the 2/6th was expelled from their trench:

“In the midst of this our Company Commander, Captain Moorhouse, entered our bay, seeing the carnage around us. Looking up at me standing on the fire step, [he] ordered me down saying ‘I will see what the Boche are up to’ his whole bearing one of utter disregard for his own safety... I watched, dreading the inevitable end. Suddenly it came- he slowly sank down and down onto my fire step, coming to rest full length, face upwards, still, so very still, so very silent in death... His eyes were wide open as though still looking upward to the heavens. I was shocked beyond description. He had just taken over command of the company, we all admired him so much, hoped to continue to serve under him until the end of the war, if any one of us could survive.”⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁶ Ernst Junger, *Storm of Steel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), 227

⁵⁸⁷ IWM, Private paper of Bill Kirkby

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

The 2/6th West Yorkshire Regiment took the brunt of the attack, and by 9:00 was driven back all the way to the Bapaume-Cambrai road. Where they were able to stem the German advance and reorganize. With the help of the 2/5th West Yorkshires they rallied, and by 10:00, actually managed to retake the ground they had lost that morning.⁵⁸⁹ The 2/8th West Yorkshires were also driven back, however, they were not pounded as severely as the 2/6th. With the help of the 2/4th Yorkshire and Lancaster battalion from the 187th Brigade, they quickly retook the lost ground. That achieved, and with the pressing need to consolidate, Major-General Braithwaite cancelled all further operations for the day. The 51st Division briefly achieved its objective of taking the village of Fontaine, however, by noon they were back in their start-off positions, having gained nothing.⁵⁹⁰ As planned, the 62nd Division was relieved that night by the 40th Division and went into Corps' reserve.

The 62nd's role in Cambrai was not over. On the 23rd, the 40th Division had attacked Bourslon Wood and Bourslon village and had been repulsed, suffering large casualties. The 62nd Division re-entered the line on the 25th with the Guards Division on their right and the 36th Division on their left, the 186th and 187th Brigades being deployed to the front lines with the 185th held in reserve. The German artillery was much more active than it had been on the previous days and considerable casualties were incurred. On Monday, November 26th, a Corps conference was held at the 62nd Division's headquarters, where Field Marshal Haig, General Byng, Lieutenant-General Charles Woolcombe (commanding officer of the IV Corps), and Major-General Braithwaite, as well as other divisional commanders, were present. It was

⁵⁸⁹ WO 95/ 3082, 'War Diary 2/5th West Yorkshire Regiment, November 1917'

⁵⁹⁰ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Narrative of events Nov 20-23rd'

recognized that breakout assault so ardently hoped for had stalled. As Haig wrote in his diary:

“... [in Havrincourt] I met Third Army Commander (Byng) who had been holding a conference to decide on the plan of operations at Bourslon. The objectives were to capture and hold the best line possible for winter.”⁵⁹¹

Still, the general sense of optimism had not been quenched by the recent setbacks.

After some discussion, it was decided that the 62nd Division, in tandem with the Guards Division, should attack the following morning with the assistance of tanks, and capture Fontaine, the remainder of Bourslon Wood and Bourslon village.

Historian Tim Travers noted that GHQ and Third Army were putting all of their focus on this attack to the detriment of consolidating their gains in the hope that it would pay huge dividends.⁵⁹²

The 62nd's assault would see the 186th and 187th Brigades attacking abreast with a battalion from 185th Brigade being assigned to each. The rest of the 185th Brigade and the 2nd Cavalry Brigade (dismounted) would be held in Divisional reserve. Twenty tanks would be available for the 62nd Division's operation, with sixteen allotted to 187th, as they had the more challenging goal of attacking Bourslon village. Artillery support would return to a rolling barrage pattern and be delivered by five Brigades of field artillery, and there would be a smoke barrage on the left flank to provide cover, as well as a high-explosive bombardment on Quarry Wood and Marquion Trench. The night of the 26th-27th saw the 62nd's lines hammered by

⁵⁹¹ Garry Sheffield and John Bourne, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2005), 352

⁵⁹² Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won: Factors that Led to Victory in World War One* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military Classics, 1992), 64

German artillery.⁵⁹³ By this time German reinforcements had arrived in strength and the German defences were holding well. In fact a trap had been laid for the unsuspecting (and exhausted) British, with the enemy just waiting to bring up the huge quantities of ammunition needed for a massive counter-attack.⁵⁹⁴ Sadly, the Germans were fully alerted and prepared for the continuation of the British offensive.

During the night of 26th, the 36th Division, deemed spent, was pulled from the line and replaced with the 2nd Division.⁵⁹⁵ By 5:30 the troops and tanks were in position, and at 6:20, Zero hour, the artillery opened fire and the infantry and tanks began their advance. The 186th Brigade, now much understrength, advanced through Bournon Wood with their four tanks, and immediately began to come under heavy machine gun fire. The fighting was intense and battalions were having a challenging time keeping in touch with each other and Brigade Headquarters.⁵⁹⁶ Reports filtered back to Divisional Headquarters that the Guards Division had reached all of its objectives but was not in touch with any troops from the 62nd Division. Fighting on the 186th Brigade's front was chaotic, and the only news Braithwaite's Headquarters received that morning were of hard fighting, but with no mention of the progress being made.⁵⁹⁷ Unlike in previous assaults, communication wire had not been laid down, and the attack was rushed and haphazardly cobbled together.

⁵⁹³ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Narrative of events Nov 20-23rd'

⁵⁹⁴ Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story August 1914- November 1918* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919), 109

⁵⁹⁵ William Moore, *A Wood Called Bournon: The cover-up after Cambrai, 1917* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988), 131

⁵⁹⁶ WO 95/3084, 'Narrative of Operations of the 186th Brigade- Nov 1917'

⁵⁹⁷ WO 95/3070, 'Events of November 27th'

By noon it had become apparent that the Guards Division had been driven back to its original position, whereas surprisingly the 186th Brigade was reporting that it had made considerable progress, reaching its objectives and now consolidating its gains, though adding ominously that its flanks were exposed.⁵⁹⁸ The Germans launched a sizeable counter-attack around 4:30 against the 186th's newly won lines and forced the left flank of the Brigade to pull back almost to its original position. The right flank, in contrast, managed to hold. The 186th Brigade was relieved that night by the dismounted troopers of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade.

The 187th Brigade's attack was daunting. It found the streets of Bourslon barricaded and impassable to the twelve tanks which had followed them into town.⁵⁹⁹ The remaining four tanks and a company of infantry were to swing around Bourslon and attack a German strongpoint on its outskirts, but this attack failed as the tanks became lost, and the attacking company of the 2/5th King's Own Yorkshire Regiment was torn apart by German machine guns.⁶⁰⁰ The 187th Brigade committed its reserve troops to the fight for the village but they were forcibly ejected by 9:00. The 185th Brigade, with a regiment of dismounted troopers from the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, was then ordered to relieve the 187th Brigade and to extend the British lines around the south edge of Bourslon village.⁶⁰¹ *Generalleutnant* Otto von Moser, commander of Battle Group Arras, took special interest in the 187th Brigade's attack:

"We did not lose our nerve, as the British had evidently hoped. I caused Bourslon Wood to be shelled from all sides by the heaviest possible artillery fire, effectively neutralizing and isolating it. Rarely have I heard such a bombardment!

⁵⁹⁸ WO 95/3084, 'Narrative of Operations of the 186th Brigade, November 1917'

⁵⁹⁹ WO 95/3089, 'War Diary 187th Brigade, November 27th, 1917'

⁶⁰⁰ WO 95/3089, 'War Diary 2/5th Kings Own Yorkshire Regiment, November 27 1917'

⁶⁰¹ WO 95/3080, 'War Diary 185th Brigade, November 27th 1917'

Simultaneously, all our ground attack aircraft flew sorties against Bourlon Wood and Fontaine. I also sent several reserve Battalions of the 221st Infantry Division on foot and by truck to support the troops who were fighting so hard at Bourlon Wood.”⁶⁰²

Unquestionably, the 187th attack had been a disaster. By this time, the surviving tanks were performing ineffectually, with the vehicles being disorganized and their crews utterly exhausted. Mercifully, the 187th was withdrawn from the line that evening as well.⁶⁰³ On the 28th, the 62nd Division moved back to Havrincourt and the following day marched into the reserve area at Berticourt. Their battle of Cambrai was over.

Overall, the 62nd Division had performed remarkably during their part of the battle. On November 24th Braithwaite, clearly pleased, issued a Special Order of the Day to his men:

“The Divisional Commander has the honour to announce that both the commander and chief and the army commander have expressed their high appreciation of the achievements of the 62nd Division in Battle. The Divisional Commander had the most implicit confidence that the Division would acquit itself with honour. To have advanced 7,000 yards on the first day, taken all objectives, held them against counter-attack and handed over all gains intact to the relieving division, is a feat of arms that any division may be justly proud. The number of prisoners taken by the Division is not far short of 2,000... the discipline, valour and steadiness of all ranks has been beyond praise. It is with great and legitimate pride that I have the honour to sign my name as commander of the 62nd West Riding Division.”⁶⁰⁴

On the 20th of November, the 62nd Division had advanced further than any other BEF Division participating in the Cambrai operation. One of the reasons why it had been successful was that it had thoroughly trained through the summer and autumn in

⁶⁰² Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Cambrai* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2009), 182

⁶⁰³ J.F.C. Fuller, *Tanks in the Great War, 1914-1918* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1920), 151

⁶⁰⁴ WO 95/3070, ‘62nd Division Special Order of the Day November 24th 1917’

platoon-fighting tactics relying almost exclusively on the use of infantry weapons and initiative, paying particular attention to the responsibilities of specialists such as rifle grenadiers and Lewis gunners. In the 'lessons learnt' section of the 187th War Diary, it was emphasized that the most effective way to deal with enemy machine gun nests was "for platoons to tackle them by the combined action of Rifle Grenadiers and Riflemen"⁶⁰⁵ This is the same message laid down in training manual *S.S. 143*, adopted in the aftermath of the Somme. Again, all these elements were part of British tactical doctrine for offensive operations. Braithwaite and his commanders and senior staff officers were not innovating per se, but had certainly mastered current tactics and were using them to fight effectively under very arduous conditions.

Another area in which the 62nd Division demonstrated a high level of battlefield competence was the initiative displayed among its platoons and companies in action. During the Battle of Bullecourt, if platoon and company officers were killed or wounded the attack would have usually fallen apart. Whereas at Cambrai, the attacking forces continued to move forward and carry out their tasks, leadership falling to subordinates (often NCOs or ordinary soldiers) who had been trained and given the confidence to carry out these responsibilities. Finally, the training for all of the troops in the weeks before the attack focused in detail on the ground over which they would attack. This paid handsome dividends on November 20th and 21st when the 62nd Division was achieving all of its objectives, the only division to do so in the IV Corps.

⁶⁰⁵ WO 95/3089, 'War Diary 187th Brigade November 27th, 1917'

Whereas the infantry tactics applied by the 62nd Division were drawn directly from *S.S 143* and *S.S. 144* training manuals, the tank tactics were not. Through careful monitoring of the inter-arms training, and within the scope of the objectives he had been given, Braithwaite decided to alter the role the tanks would play in his Division's assault. These tactics differed from what was suggested by the Heavy Branch. During the battle, the tanks attached to the 62nd Division proved very helpful - when they were operational. After the battle, Braithwaite was generous with his praise for their contribution.⁶⁰⁶ Their 6-pounder cannon were a formidable antidote to machine gun nests and the wire crushing ability was invaluable. As the 185th Brigade's War Diary for November enthused: "The wire was in all cases most effectively crushed by the tanks and the passage of infantry and Mules through the gaps was simple. Once the tanks succeeded in passing over the enemy's trenches the garrison was cowed and prepared to surrender to the infantry."⁶⁰⁷ Hindenburg was impressed too, recounting in his postwar memoir:

"The English attack at Cambrai for the first time revealed the possibilities of a great surprise attack with tanks...; the fact that tanks had now been raised to such a pitch of technical perfection that they could cross our undamaged trenches and obstacles did not fail to have a marked effect on our troops."⁶⁰⁸

As historian Paddy Griffith has written:

"The tank obviated the need for guns to cut the German wire, so to that extent they assisted the artillery fireplan... In operational terms they were certainly never intended to break out, or trained for it, but only to accompany the infantry during the initial phases of the break in."⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁶ WO 95/3070, '62nd War Diary, November 20 1917'

⁶⁰⁷ WO 95/ 3080, 'War Diary 185th Brigade, November 27th, 1917'

⁶⁰⁸ Paul Von Hindenburg, *Out of My Life* (East Sussex: Naval & Military Press, 2005), 291

⁶⁰⁹ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-1918* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1994), 164

Tanks worked effectively in pursuit of this goal, but that said, they experienced major problems as well. In all of the attacks a certain portion of the tanks would not be available, and they continued to be plagued by mechanical unreliability which had major consequences for the advancing infantry. Many broke down while others were knocked out by enemy action, and in the following days of an operation there were significantly fewer tanks available to help with the assault. They were also limited by certain terrain, like forests, and rubble-choked streets stopped them cold. Although they proved an extremely useful tool for the 62nd Division in this battle, they were not the revolutionary weapon Byng or the tank prophets had hoped.⁶¹⁰ Nevertheless, brief though it had been, the joint training facilitated by Braithwaite before the operation created an environment for close liaison with the infantry that was necessary for the successful employment of tanks in action.

There were also problems with the 62nd Division's attack that were not its own making. Continually pushing the 62nd Division forward and then bringing it back into the line again ended with predictable results. The brigades had suffered significant casualties and to expect them to be able to continue attacking was not realistic. Artillery found it impossible to move up and keep pace when so much new ground was gained and the guns could not be registered onto their new targets accurately, considerably reducing the effectiveness of the fire support, whether barrages or counter-battery fire, that the gunners could provide the infantry.

⁶¹⁰ Tanks were planned as the "break in" weapon. If the attack had gone according to plan cavalry would have been used as the "breakout" weapon. The 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Cavalry Divisions had been allotted to the Third Army for this purpose. Obviously this did not happen. CAB 45/118, CA 482725, 'Notes on the Battle of Cambrai, 1917'

After the initial shock absorbed by the German defences, they recovered quickly and were able to mount more effective resistance against the British forces and rapidly bring in fresh divisions.⁶¹¹ The Third Army should have anticipated this, and the goals set for the following days should have reflected such prudence. Unfortunately, overconfidence carried the day at Byng's headquarters.

It was foolhardy to push the 62nd Division into Bourslon. Braithwaite, but especially Byng and ultimately Field Marshall Haig, should be held accountable for the rushed preparations. If any lessons had become clear to the 62nd Division in the previous year's actions, it was that a hurriedly planned attack was almost certain to fail. While the operations on the 20th and 21st had achieved almost all of its goals, the Division had suffered 1767 casualties doing so. When it was rushed back into the line between November 25th and 28th it suffered a further 1565 losses.⁶¹² It should have been realized that without appropriate preparation where all ranks understood their objectives, without the element of surprise, and with much reduced numbers, the chances of success were going to be slim.

The 62nd Division had suffered 3332 casualties over the eight days that it participated in the Battle of Cambrai, similar to the number lost in the Second Battle of Bullecourt. But unlike at Bullecourt, the 62nd Division, only six months later, showed that among the BEF forces it could be an excellent division.

⁶¹¹ Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Cambrai* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2009), 184

⁶¹² Braithwaite had few options with the renewed attacks between the 25th and 28th of November as he was directed to launch the attacks by his superiors. See the war diaries for the end of November. WO 95/3070, '62nd War Diary, November 1917'

A sad footnote to the Cambrai operation followed the Division's removal from the line. On the morning of November 30th, as was his usual routine, Brigadier-General Bradford left his headquarters to visit his troops. When he had not returned that afternoon, a search party was sent out to locate him. Around 2pm he was found lying dead, a piece of shrapnel from a stray shell having pierced his spine.

Braithwaite acknowledged the tragic loss of a valued leader:

“He was a very exceptional man, though only a boy, and might have risen, in fact would have risen to any height in his profession. His power of command was quite extraordinary. He certainly knew every officer in his Brigade, although he had only commanded it for quite a short time, and I honestly believe he knew every non-commissioned officer, and a great many of the privates. He had an extraordinary personality, and that personality, linked with his undoubted military genius, made him a very extraordinary character and very valuable commander of men. His services during the battle can hardly be too highly appraised.”⁶¹³

Lieutenant-Colonel H.E. Nash, formerly commanding the 2/4th Duke of Wellington Regiment, took temporary command of the 187th Brigade.

The 62nd had a very challenging introduction to the Western Front in 1917. The first half of the year was defined by the failures of attacks at the First and Second Battle of Bullecourt. Though there were reasons for the 62nd's shortcomings which were not in their power to control, leadership inadequacies were also apparent. Two brigadiers were replaced as well as many more officers of lower rank. By November of 1917, the officers occupying all of the senior positions in the 62nd Division had seen fighting on the Western Front. All three brigadiers at Cambrai had carried out their tasks competently, with Roland Bradford demonstrating exceptional leadership both in coming up with contingency plans

⁶¹³ WO 95/3084, 'War Diary 186th Brigade, Dec 1st 1917'

and motivating his troops by leading from the front. By and large all of the Division's battalion commanders at Cambrai had proved their worth, as well, not only in leading during the heat of battle but in diligently promoting and monitoring the training regime that had prepared the infantry so well for their combat role.

In light of Cambrai, the focus in the aftermath of Bullecourt placed on the new small-unit assault tactics had been proven a success. Similarly, the emphasis Braithwaite had put on mastering infantry weapons, mopping up and the basic elements of an infantry attack: ensuring combat units knew their objectives and would react independently to the exigencies of the battle, can be seen not just as following the new BEF doctrine but as reactions to the debacle of Bullecourt. Braithwaite and his staff officers and senior commanders had seen where they were lacking and had been determined to rectify these deficiencies. Cambrai was a vindication for the 62nd Division, though not a complete vindication as the outcome of the battle also showed that there were still areas that called for improvement, in the Divisions as well as the BEF as a whole.

The roles played by the Canadian 4th Division and the British 62nd Division at Passchendaele and Cambrai, respectively, were both successful. There were, however, major differences. The 4th Division's attack was not a surprise; both the 1st Canadian Division and the 1st Australian Division had previously attacked the same position. General Currie and his senior staff dictated the role that the 4th Division and Major-General Watson would play in the operation. Currie had scouted the lines at Passchendaele and had told GHQ what his demands were before his Corps would attack. Crucially, he got to set the parameters for the attack: it would have a fixed series of limited goals with a final objective that was readily achievable with any luck at all. Perhaps most importantly, GHQ would give the Canadian Corps the time it needed to prepare adequately. It's an understatement to say that a British Corps commander would have found it difficult to make such demands, and regardless would have been unlikely to see them granted. Currie was able to do this because of the unique position that he and the Canadian Corps occupied within the BEF. Currie always had recourse to his government in Ottawa if he disagreed with an order issued by a superior officer. And Haig would have also had to go through Ottawa to remove Currie from his position, something that was impossible by the fall of 1917. In this sense Currie did command a 'small national army' with the operational prerogatives of an ally.⁶¹⁴

Neither Watson nor Braithwaite decided where their division was to attack or what its final objectives would be, as this was determined at the Corps or Army level. However, within certain constraints they were able to decide what tactics

⁶¹⁴ See Desmond Morton, *Peculiar Kind of Politics* (University of Toronto: Toronto, 1982), 161

would be used. The 4th Division's assault on Passchendaele was a fairly straightforward grind with limited objectives employing an artillery-intensive attack. The Germans knew the Canadians would be attacking and the 4th Division had little room for maneuver. The focus on small-unit infantry tactics drawing primarily on the employment of the firepower of rifle grenadiers and Lewis gunners to deal with enemy strongpoints was similar to the tactics that the infantry in the 62nd would be subsequently utilizing at Cambrai. In contrast, however, the 62nd Division would be using a modified tactical approach to the extent that the preliminary bombardment would be all but absent, lifting rather than rolling barrages would be employed, and tanks would be used instead of intensive artillery bombardment at the beginning of the operation.⁶¹⁵ And surprise would be sought, indeed was a key component of the plan, whereas this had been impossible to achieve at Passchendaele. The 62nd Division did not get to determine the overall operational parameters to be employed in the operation, but were granted a considerable degree of tactical flexibility. Unlike the 4th Canadian Division, they had options and Braithwaite and his staff officers and subordinate commanders generally used them well, most notably in determining the application of the tanks. When operable, the latter played their role well and clearly added significant strength to the 62nd's attack.

During this period both Divisions had focused much of their time training the infantry in small-unit tactics focusing on firepower specialists within the group and

⁶¹⁵ That said, at both Cambrai and Passchendaele artillery was a fundamental part of the offensive. Tactics incorporated in training to be subsequently employed in battle on the Western Front demanded close co-operation between the artillery and the infantry if they were to garner any success.

the combined arms approach (with artillery) that was key for a successful operation against an entrenched enemy by 1917. Following the now established practices, they also both had a policy of informing all ranks of the details of the attack, strengthening their capacity to improvise on the battlefield when a plan broke down. Both Divisions were, for the most part, being allowed adequate time to train for Divisional attacks in the fall/winter of 1917⁶¹⁶. The Passchendaele and Cambrai operations were distinctive from each other and the problems that they encountered were different as well. In the end both Divisions had achieved the goals that had been set out for them. Small unit leadership, and hence, tactical flexibility in the attack, were key points being stressed in 1917 throughout the BEF (including Dominion forces). These battles were vindications not of individual units but of the training regimes being handed down from GHQ. Given capable divisional commanders and staff officers and a reasonable Corps plan, both British and Canadian units could succeed in attacking German trench defences in the latter half of 1917, something that could not have been said at the beginning of the year.

⁶¹⁶ Obviously, once the attack at Cambrai started, the 62nd was asked to do more than what they had originally be told to do and not given sufficient time to address their new situation.

Chapter 7: 62nd Division in the spring of 1918

From January to August of 1918 both the Canadian 4th Division and the British 62nd Division would continue to focus their training on small-unit tactics, and generally emphasizing the offensive. Unlike the 4th Division, whose manpower would be augmented, the 62nd Division's would shrink dramatically. And in contrast with the Canadian 4th Division's experience that will be discussed in Chapter 9, the 62nd Division would see intense fighting throughout the spring and early summer. During these engagements, it would demonstrate that a year after Bullecourt, now battle-tested and competently led, it had matured into a veteran division that was capable of carrying out complex operations under the most trying circumstances the Western Front had to offer.

In December, after Cambrai, the 62nd Division moved west of Arras to reorganize, rebuild, and continue its training. It was shifted through many different Corps during the month.⁶¹⁷ The training mostly focused on the offensive elements of the infantry attack, specifically working on how to employ machine guns more effectively. One of the more significant points was that the gun teams and all NCOs would show more initiative and react rapidly to circumstances instead of waiting for direct orders. In fact, having infantry NCOs take simple tactical decisions on their own was an overall theme for the Division's training in December. Senior officers were well aware of the difficulty in teaching their NCOs and Lewis gun teams to

⁶¹⁷ On December 6th it was moved from XVII Corps to XIII Corps. On the 8th it was transferred from XIII Corps to I Corps and on the 17th of December it was transferred back to XIII Corps. See the December War Diaries for the 62nd Division. WO 95/3070

make these decisions - not the least because heretofore they had often been discouraged from doing so - and that reading the terrain would require plenty of practice.⁶¹⁸ Other areas of focus were the importance of ground reconnaissance, the use of ground, and keeping all the attacking units in contact so that they would not become lost during action. This was especially emphasized to the Vickers machine gun companies whose firepower was now becoming indispensable to a successful assault. Drawing on lessons learned at Cambrai, one training memorandum stated:

“This applies especially for the original ‘jump-off’ at Zero. It is probably best for machine gun teams to follow slightly in rear of the Infantry wave which they are advancing, to prevent confusion, but they should not form isolated groups, which are more easily picked out by the enemy as M.G. teams.”⁶¹⁹

This was just a sample of what the 62nd Division was incorporating to improve its training, something that was happening across the B.E.F. One important change for the 62nd Division was the reorganization of its Vickers heavy machine guns. It had been decided in December by GHQ to combine the four machine gun companies which were often under brigade command in the Division, into a machine gun battalion under divisional control.⁶²⁰ For the most part, the 62nd was analyzing at the divisional level what had not worked effectively in 1917, and was always keen to improve how its infantry would operate in the offensive. They were taking the training manuals issued by the War Office as their starting point, and proactively fine-tuning the training based on their own experience.

On the 5th of January, the Division moved from the reserve area of the XIII Corps and took over the front previously held by the 56th Division south of Gavrelle.

⁶¹⁸ WO 95/3070, ‘Notes on Machine gun use during operations of November 20th -27th’

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ WO 95/3077, ‘62nd Machinegun Company war Diary December 24th 1917’

The 62nd's war diaries reported the front quite quiet, with the exception of the inevitable shelling and a lone failed German raid.⁶²¹ The 62nd Division was also relatively inactive, not raiding intensively, as it was waiting for reinforcements to build up the battalions decimated at Cambrai. Late in the month it officially heard that the number of battalions in British divisions would be reduced from twelve to nine.⁶²² In December of 1917, the Cabinet's Manpower Committee had made the decision that the reinforcements wanted by Field Marshall Haig would not be forthcoming.⁶²³ With the number of men the British Expeditionary Force had available, and given that no reduction in divisions would be countenanced by GHQ, it meant that to bring battalions up to strength others would have to be broken up.

The 62nd Division, like the majority of divisions in the BEF, would be reorganized into nine battalions,⁶²⁴ and received instructions from GHQ that the 2/6th West Yorkshire, the 2/6th Duke of Wellington and the 2/5th York and Lancaster Battalions would be disbanded. The regimental history of the 2/6th West Yorkshire Battalion explained what happened:

“A farewell dinner was arranged by companies and on the 31st of January the Battalion was actually disbanded, nine officers and 200 other ranks were transferred to the 2/7th, seven officers and 150 other ranks to the 2/5th, and four officers and 100 other ranks were held in readiness for transfer to the 1/6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, which they subsequently joined. The remainder, except for thirty four men of transport and twenty other ranks of Battalion Headquarters were transferred to Corps Reinforcement Camp.”⁶²⁵

⁶²¹ WO 95/3075, '312 Brigade R.F.A war diary- January 5th 1918'

⁶²² WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Headquarters War Diary- Jan 26th, 1918'

⁶²³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of Lloyd George Volume V* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1936), 2602

⁶²⁴ The only divisions that were not reorganized on the nine-battalion plan were the New Zealand Division and the four Canadian Divisions.

⁶²⁵ E.C. Gregory, *History of the 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment Volume II. 2/6th Battalion* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd., 1923), 150

Though disappointment was evident among the officers and men, the break up of the 2/6th West Yorks was carried out professionally. The experience of the two other disbanded battalions was similar. The end had come abruptly, however, and was less stressful than it might have been given the large majority of the affected troops were at least distributed to other units within the 62nd Division.

Furthermore, the 1/5th Duke of Wellington Battalion, the 1/8th West Yorkshire Battalion and the 1/5th King's Own West Yorkshire Battalion from the 49th West Riding Division were amalgamated with their sister Battalions in the 62nd Division. The amalgamated battalions became the 8th West Yorkshire Battalion, 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion and the 5th King's Own West Yorkshire Battalion.⁶²⁶ The 62nd Division also received a pioneer battalion from the 50th Division, the 9th Durham Light Infantry (DLI),⁶²⁷ which had been serving on the Western Front since the Second Battle of Ypres and had previously been commanded by Brigadier-General Bradford, who had lost his life while serving with the 62nd at Cambrai. This Battalion, unlike the ones in the 62nd Division, was still organized on a four-company basis; it was switched to three companies and was taken on strength of the Division on the 27th of February.⁶²⁸ A British infantry division would now have a nominal strength of around 15,000 troops; significantly smaller than a Canadian Division's complement of over 22,000 officers and men.⁶²⁹ The smaller British divisions would have to carry out the same responsibilities as before, including covering similar

⁶²⁶ WO 95/ 3072, ' 62nd HQ "A" War Diary, Jan 30th 1918'

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Martin Middlebrook had put the size of a British Division in the summer of 1916 at 19,630. Martin Middlebrook, *Your Country Needs You: Expansion of the British Army Infantry Divisions 1914-1919* (Barnsly: Pen and Sword Books Limited, 2000), 10. The growth of Canadian Divisions will be discussed in Chapter 9

frontages, and the remaining battalions would have to hold the line for longer periods of time.⁶³⁰

On the 7th of February, the 62nd Division was relieved by the 56th Division and moved into the Corps reserve, where it would spend the rest of the month training. Captain Parkin, one of the Division's officers, wrote of this reshuffling of battalions and the training:

"... all Divisions in the B.E.F. had been reorganized on the 9 battalion principle - hence one Batt[alion] per Brigade disappeared. In our case the 2/6 Dukes and some of their officers were posted to us... as soon as the Batt[alion] had settled down in the camp the object for which we went there- i.e. work began in earnest. There was nothing else to do, for it was a perfect wilderness"⁶³¹

The focus continued to be on small-unit operations (paying particular attention to the more effective employment of the firepower of rifles and machine guns) and training schools for the NCOs and junior officers. On the 28th of February, the 62nd Division relieved the 31st Division on the left sector of the XIII Corps' front. In the previous three months, the 62nd had trained hard, focusing their attention on elements which they felt would help aid them in an attack rather than on a defensive role,⁶³² which at this stage of the war had been deemed a lower priority. Nevertheless, as they entered the line again in March, GHQ warned them that a massive German offensive could be in the offing.

⁶³⁰ The increased firepower of a battalion, considerably more Lewis and Vickers guns, gave a smaller 1918 B.E.F. division more firepower than a bigger 1914 B.E.F. division - their attacking (or defending) power was actually greater.

⁶³¹ IWM, 3359, 86/57/1, 'Private papers of Captain BD Parkin'

⁶³² Ibid.

The 62nd Artillery was very active in the first half of March, however, other than numerous enemy aircraft raids, the German forces remained relatively quiet.⁶³³ On the 12th, Braithwaite was alerted by XIII Corps Headquarters that a German attack was imminent and his Division should adopt a state of immediate readiness. As Brigadier-General Anderson, commander of the 62nd's artillery, wrote:

“It was generally expected that the Boshe [sic] would begin his long threatened offensive on the 13th and all preparation[s] were made to meet it. This night - of the 12th - the Hun again worried us at 2.A.M. there were two tremendous explosions close to my hut followed by a hail of earth and stones on my roof. All troops - artillery and infantry were standing by at an hour before dawn, but the attack did not come off.”⁶³⁴

During the night of 12/13th, the 62nd artillery followed an intensive harassing program on the German trenches opposite them, and continued this until the 31st Division relieved them from the Rolincourt lines on March 19th. The Germans were also firing quite heavily on the 62nd lines that week, and were employing gas as part of their program.⁶³⁵ The 62nd was not pulled from the line, but moved to the right and took over a sector previously held by the 56th Division, a sector now under constant German artillery and mortar fire.

The Germans had planned to launch a massive, three-pronged offensive in the spring of 1918 to force the British and French armies out of the war before the full weight of American numbers could decisively tip the balance. Crown Prince Rupprecht's Eighteenth Army would open the campaign with an advance on both sides of the Scarpe River. General Otto von Bulow's Seventeenth Army was to attack

⁶³³ WO 95/ 3073, '62nd Divisional Artillery-March 1918'

⁶³⁴ Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anderson Diary, March 13th 1918'

⁶³⁵ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Headquarters War Diary, March 1918'

towards Bapaume, and General Georg von der Marwitz's Second Army was to advance southwest from Cambrai. If all went according to plan, the German Seventeenth, Second, and Eighteenth Armies would break through the British Third and Fifth Armies in a pincer movement and trap sizable British forces in the Cambrai salient. From there they planned to roll back the remaining forces of the BEF towards their Channel bases. The Germans would be attacking with almost 1.4 million troops organized into 192 (mainly understrength) divisions, supported by masses of artillery.⁶³⁶

On the 21st of March, the Germans attacked the British Fifth and Third Armies with ferocity. The noticeably understrength and overstretched Fifth Army almost immediately began to falter, many units being quickly overrun, and the thin line of defenders started to retreat. On the Third Army front the Germans launched attacks deep into each shoulder of the Flesquières Salient, their goal being to capture or kill all the soldiers within the now all but encircled Third Army.⁶³⁷ After a series of confusing messages throughout the day, orders were finally received transferring the 62nd Division to the XVII Corps that was attached to General Byng's Third Army. The 3rd Canadian Division moved to take over the vacated sector and the move was completed by the night of the 24th/25th.⁶³⁸ The 62nd Division marched south to the XVII Corps' position, with the former's headquarters to be placed near the town of Warlus. As well, the 187th Brigade was removed from the Division and temporarily placed at the disposal of the 15th Division. However, the 62nd Division

⁶³⁶ Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London: Arnold publishing, 1997), 401

⁶³⁷ Peter Hart, *A Very British Victory* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 96

⁶³⁸ RG9, V. 4854, '3rd Canadian Division Operation Order No.151'

was promptly transferred again, this time to the IV Corps, and moved to take up its new position at Bucquoy, the 187th Brigade remaining behind with the XVII Corps. On the morning of the 25th, Braithwaite went forward and met with the 40th and 42nd Divisions' commanders and staffs and tried to get a grasp on the tactical situation.⁶³⁹ Orders were received later that morning for the 62nd Division to hold itself in readiness to move at short notice.

The 19th, 41st, 25th, and 51st Divisions were positioned in front of the 62nd Division, holding the line which ran from Biefvillers to Loupart Wood. The latter pushed forward from Bucquoy and began to dig in just east of Achiet-Le-Petit. In what amounted to a fighting withdrawal, the 19th, 41st, and 51st Divisions gradually withdrew through the lines now held by the 62nd and 42nd Divisions. By 7pm, the 187th Brigade had rejoined the 62nd Division and the Divisional artillery was beginning to take up its positions. The 185th and 186th Brigades were holding the line just east of Achiet-Le-Petit while the 187th Brigade was in Divisional reserve at Bucquoy. That evening, Braithwaite received a call from the IV Corps commander, Sir George Harper, that the right flank of the Third Army was in the air and the whole Corps line would have to withdraw. This was carried out successfully that evening and placed the Division just north of Puisieux and east of Bucquoy.⁶⁴⁰ A runner serving in the 62nd Division later recalled the chaos experienced by the infantry during this time:

⁶³⁹ Laurie Magnus, *The West Riding Territorials in the Great War: The Story of the 49th and 62nd Divisions and other Territorial Troops From The West Riding of Yorkshire* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Tauber, 1920), 172

⁶⁴⁰ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Headquarters War Diary, March 1918'

“Our division had been ordered to the North of the 43 mile front which extended from Arras in the North to La-Fere (?) in the South. Pack mules were used to carry our guns. Unlike trench warfare there were no fixed positions then as we were continually on the move. General Byng’s 3rd Army held on in the North for a time but finally on his own initiative fell back to keep in line with General Gough’s Army on his right. The situation was fluid and as a runner I found it difficult to locate or find the section or unit I was seeking.”⁶⁴¹

While the 62nd Division was carrying out this withdrawal, its right flank, held by the 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion, began to receive probing attacks from the enemy. However, the Battalion, which suffered no casualties in this engagement, did manage to capture two prisoners, and dealt with the probing attacks effectively.⁶⁴² It is an understatement to observe that the 62nd Division, and especially the Divisional staff, reacted with cool efficiency during this chaotic period. Over the five days from March 21st to March 26th, GSO1 Lieutenant-Colonel C.R. Newman and many other staff officers could be seen personally racing from Brigade to Brigade to update the units and their commanders on the situation and newly formed plans.⁶⁴³ To have to move the whole Division – repeatedly - on congested roads and not be delayed while the BEF was in retreat shows just how competent the 62nd Divisional staff were. That this Division was so responsive, able to carry out numerous marches, as well as construct new defensive positions and then to pull out scant hours later, demonstrates it was operating at a high level of both competence and initiative and one might add spirit, too.

The night of the 25/26th passed relatively quietly for the 62nd Division, however, the situation early the following morning was grim for the British

⁶⁴¹ IWM, 11955, PP/MCR/1, ‘Memoirs of PG Ackrell’

⁶⁴² WO 95/3086, ‘5th Duke of Wellington War Diary, March 26th 1918’

⁶⁴³ WO 95/3070, ‘62nd Division Headquarters War Diary, March 21st-26th 1918’

defenders. The Division's right flank (where the 187th Brigade was located) was lightly held by a ragtag group of around 1000 men from various units of the 19th Division as well as a similar number of 41st Division troops. Further south of these forces was a three or four mile gap between the 62nd Division and the 12th Division of the V Corps. The New Zealand Division was being rushed forward to try to fill this yawning hole in the British line, but was not expected to reach the scene until the afternoon. The 187th Brigade extended its line as best it could, but around 8:45 am advancing German forces made contact in force.⁶⁴⁴

The 187th faced the brunt of the German attack on the 26th. The Germans were trying to outflank it, widening the gap, and the Brigade, with the pioneer battalion, valiantly kept on extending its front. As the war diary for the 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion tersely wrote: "The enemy's attempt to outflank us was frustrated."⁶⁴⁵ With the immediate goal of securing the right flank, the left flank of the 187th had to pull back to straighten the line throughout its front and "during this withdrawal the [Germans] pressed very hotly and the movement was carried out with considerable difficulty."⁶⁴⁶ In the late morning, Major-General Braithwaite received a most welcome surprise, when the former GSO 1 of the 4th Canadian Infantry Division, Brigadier-General Ironside, now commandant of the BEF machine gun school in France, entered the 62nd Division headquarters. As Braithwaite explained their meeting:

⁶⁴⁴ WO 95/3089, '187th Brigade War Diary- March 26th 1918'

⁶⁴⁵ WO 95/3086, 'Narrative of Operations in which the 5th Bn. Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment Territorial Force was engaged March 1918.'

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

“I was sitting in my hut at Fonquevillers when an enormous figure appeared in the doorway, carrying in his hand an alpine stock about 7 feet high, he himself being about 6 feet 6 inches. This was Ironside... His question to me was: ‘Have you any use for one hundred of the best machine gunners in the world?’ My reply was: ‘Have I not!’ it appears that Ironside, who at the time was Commandant of the Machine-Gun School in France had been ordered up with every available man and gun and had lost his way and he found himself near my Headquarters and, knowing I was hard pressed, came to offer his services. It was a perfect Godsend. We went out there and then I showed him the position I wanted him to occupy and was also able to show him some excellent targets, in fact targets that made many machine-gunners’ mouths water.”⁶⁴⁷

The extra machine gunners were thrown into the four-mile breach, and with eleven tanks, the 187th were able to consolidate their new line. In the afternoon, the Germans were seen attacking from Rossignol Wood, an area just north of Bucquoy, but as “they endeavored to advance towards our positions in small bodies [they] were easily driven off by Lewis Gun and Rifle Fire, considerable casualties being inflicted.”⁶⁴⁸ By the end of the 26th, the 187th Brigade’s line was tenuous but holding.

“We got into position in front of the village and dug like fun for two hours before the first lot of Boche came up. Then we had a really good time, a real solid fight with rifles and machineguns and no infernal artillery or bombs. Most interesting – we knocked out scores of Boches and he desisted but during the afternoon he got his guns up and absolutely went mad and blew up and down and from side to side and after each dose he attacked. We held on and beat him back time and time again....”⁶⁴⁹

The German forces by this time were not the elite *sturmtruppen* that had wreaked havoc on British units in the earliest days of the offensive, but regular

⁶⁴⁷ Ironside and the added machine gunners were with the 62nd Division for a couple of crucial days before General Headquarters found out his whereabouts and ordered him off elsewhere. Everard Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd (West riding) Division 1914-1919* volume 1 (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1926), 149

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ University of Leeds, Liddle Collection, ‘AE Green: April 1st, 1918’

German infantry sent forward with no clear objectives.⁶⁵⁰ The last large-scale attack against the 185th Brigade was launched in the late afternoon, and the Brigade War Diary summarized its results: “At about 5:30 pm an attack was launched by the enemy with the object of capturing our trenches and the village of Bucquoy, [but] this attack was completely repulsed by rifle and machine gun fire: only two enemy entered our lines [and] these, were taken prisoner.”⁶⁵¹ Unfortunately, one of the British losses was the commanding officer of the 8th West York Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. James.⁶⁵² The rest of the night passed quietly for the 185th Brigade. The 186th suffered five attacks throughout the day. Its war diary with some confidence, noted:

“The enemy attacked the village of Bucquoy. Three were feeble and easily driven off by Lewis gun & rifle fire and two - the last two - which were made in greater strength threatened to make a gap in the line of troops on the immediate left of the Brigade front. However, although the enemy gained footing on the edge of the village of Bucquoy he was immediately driven off by counter attack and our line remained firm as before”⁶⁵³

The evening of the 26th/27th was relatively calm with no German attacks. The 62nd had successfully survived its first day against this powerful German offensive.

The Division as a whole had carried itself well, not only organizationally but also tactically. Commanders and their staff figured out where the men and supplies needed to be and got them there, and equally importantly, managed to keep communication within the Division, as well as with neighboring divisions and Corps

⁶⁵⁰ David Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A case study in the operational level of war* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 170

⁶⁵¹ WO 95/3080, ‘185th Brigade War Diary, March 1918’

⁶⁵² WO 95/3086, ‘Narrative of Operations in which the 5th Bn. Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment Territorial Force was engaged.’

⁶⁵³ WO 95/3085, ‘War Diary 186th Brigade, March 26th 1918’

headquarters, open. The 62nd's unit diaries mention time and again how effective the use of aimed rifle and machine gun fire were in stopping the German assaults. It bears repeating that this was the sort of small-unit training that the 62nd had been focusing on obsessively since December, and on the 26th of March, it had paid off handsomely, albeit not in the offensive role for which it had been originally undertaken. Of course, the extra machine guns from the Machine Gun School were a godsend and greatly aided the 62nd Division in holding its precarious line. A German historian paid stark acknowledgment to this fact, later writing that during the morning of the 27th, "before Bucquoy and Hebuterne the blood of Below's division flowed in torrents; in vain had enormous sacrifices been made. The Seventh Army had been pinned to the ground."⁶⁵⁴

During the 187th's struggle to close the gap between itself and the V Corps, reinforcements finally began to arrive. On the evening of the 26th, the first elements of the 4th Australian Brigade appeared, and they were promptly placed under Braithwaite's control, taking over shattered lines that were barely being held by the remaining elements of the 19th and 41st Divisions which soon after retired from the front.⁶⁵⁵ Also during the course of that evening the New Zealand Division arrived and was quickly slotted into the line south of Puisieux. Because of the chaos on the battlefields and confusion at V Corps headquarters, it took until 7 a.m. on the 27th for the Australian and New Zealand Brigades to report that they were in position, had

⁶⁵⁴ Richard Bechtel, *Die Ulmer Grenadiere an der Weftfront* (Stuttgart: Belferfche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1920), 129

⁶⁵⁵ John Monash, *The Australian Victories in France in 1918* (Nashville: Republished by Battery Press, 1993), 30

established contact with their neighbouring units, and had closed the dangerous breach in the British front.⁶⁵⁶

Around 7:30 on the 27th, the Germans launched an intense artillery barrage followed by attacks against the 185th's and 186th's lines, but these were beaten off by a deadly combination of artillery, machine gun and small arms fire.⁶⁵⁷ In fact, the 185th and 186th suffered attacks throughout the day but were always able to break them up. As the British Official History of the war noted:

“A most determined attack, after heavy shell-fire, was made on Bucquoy held by the 62nd Div[isio]n; but the British machine gunners, popping up out of shell holes, shot down the bulk of the Germans, while an artillery barrage, dropping ‘like a blanket’, finished off the survivors. For two hours the Germans’ artillery continued to pour more heavy shell-fire into the village, without, however, dislodging the 62nd Division.”⁶⁵⁸

In the afternoon the enemy would mount even larger attacks than they had during the morning. By using the old trench systems, the German forces filtered their men close to the 186th's and 187th's positions and began trying to bomb the defences. The Yorkshiremen, being short of supplies (and bombs in particular), had a very difficult time repulsing the assault.⁶⁵⁹ Both Brigades remained under constant attack from German bombers throughout the afternoon. By 4 pm the 2/4th York and Lancaster Battalion had been driven back, causing a gap to open in the line between the 187th Brigade and the Australian 4th Brigade at Hebuterne. This was made worse when the 2/4th KOYLI, under a heavy attack supported by enemy airplanes, were driven from

⁶⁵⁶ H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs Limited, 1921), 351

⁶⁵⁷ WO 95/3080 ‘185th Brigade War Diary, March 27th 1918’

⁶⁵⁸ James Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1918* (Nashville, Battery Press, reprinted 1995), 35

⁶⁵⁹ The 62nd Division finally did receive some bombs, unfortunately they turned out be ‘instructional’ painted white and without charges.

the high ground in front of Rossignol Wood.⁶⁶⁰ The development was grim news for the 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion, whose post-battle narrative simply stated that “the battalion on our right was seen to be bombed out of its position by the enemy and our right flank again became completely exposed.”⁶⁶¹ Braithwaite ordered an immediate counter-attack from the 187th Brigade, and for the Australian 4th Brigade to fill in the breach and block any German exploitation of it. Brigadier-General Brand, the commanding officer of the Australians, sent his 14th (reserve) and 15th Battalions forward to seal the gap, which they managed to accomplish by 7pm.⁶⁶² In conjunction with the 4th Australian Brigade’s move, the 187th Brigade was supposed to launch a counter-attack by the 2/4th KOYLI and the 5th KOYLI to regain the high ground in front of Rossignol Wood. In the understated words of the 62nd’s war diary: “... at this time the situation was becoming critical.”⁶⁶³ The effort was complicated by the great difficulty the 187th Brigade had in getting orders to its two battalions, with the result that the 187th attack did not go forward. By 8:30 pm the situation had reached such a critical stage that the commanding officer of the 186th Brigade personally got in touch with the two 187th Brigade battalions and ordered them to attack with four tanks that had somehow been found. This they did, only to find Rossignol Wood relatively quiet. However, because of confusion in their orders the force promptly pulled back, leaving two tanks that subsequently broke down in the

⁶⁶⁰ WO 95/3089, ‘War Diary 187th Brigade, March 27th 1918’

⁶⁶¹ WO 95/3086, ‘Narrative of Operations in which the 5th Bn. Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment Territorial Force was engaged March 1918’

⁶⁶² C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of the Australian in the War of 1914-1918 Vol. V The A.I.F. in France, 1918* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson Limited, 1939), 136

⁶⁶³ WO 95/3070, ‘War Diary- 62nd March 27th 1918’

forest. Recognizing the critical situation his division faced, a grim Braithwaite promptly reissued the order for Rossignol Wood to be recaptured.

To cover the 187th's lines, the 14th Australian Battalion was brought forward further and at 4:15 on the 28th the attack was finally launched.⁶⁶⁴ During the delay the Germans had moved up into the old trenches and had fortified themselves using the two derelict tanks as strongpoints. The 62nd's first Victoria Cross was awarded during this action to Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver Watson, the commanding officer of the 5th KOYLI, a farmer before the war, who showed outstanding leadership under fire. As was subsequently reported in the *London Gazette*: "Both in the assault and in covering his men's retirement he held his life as nothing and his splendid bravery inspired all troops in the vicinity to rise to the occasion and save a breach being made in a hardly tried and attenuated line."⁶⁶⁵ Tragically, Watson was killed during this action. Fierce fighting continued, and the Germans cut off the battalions by craftily using the old trench system to maneuver, resulting in the capture of three companies of the 5th KOYLI and one of the 2/4th KOYLI.

The attack had been a disaster, the 187th Brigade was shattered, and the tired 41st Division, which had been reorganizing after the retreat on March 21st/22nd, had to send elements forward to strengthen the British line. In contrast, the attacks launched by the German forces on the 27th, though making slight inroads on the 187th's front, were successfully beaten off. In fact, the Germans suffered severe casualties and the 62nd had captured two hundred prisoners.

⁶⁶⁴ C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of the Australian in the War of 1914-1918 Vol. V The A.I.F. in France, 1918* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Limited, 1939), 136

⁶⁶⁵ *London Gazette*, May 8th, 1918

The 62nd Division as a whole had conducted itself well on the 27th of March. Aided greatly by the unexpected appearance of Ironside and his machine guns, they had repelled a series of concentrated attacks. The soldiers and officers, already exhausted by days of marching and without adequate food and ammunition, little time and no sleep, had built credible defences, and had been able to secure Bucquoy. Against superior German numbers, the small-unit tactics they had mastered in strenuous training, which had specifically focused on the employment of their own infantry weapons paired with excellent artillery support, were put to good use during the day's action, and teamed with cool-headed command decisions by Braithwaite and most of his brigade and battalion officers, and the enterprise displayed by all ranks, had led to success. The 62nd Division was holding one of the most tenuous lines on the British front and yet had been able to prevail against the German maelstrom.

The failed counter-attacks by the 187th must be seen in the light of exhausted men pushing forward after having been on the move and fighting for 96 straight hours. The orders to these attacking units were either unclear or contradictory. Lieutenant-Colonel B.J. Barton, who had taken over command of the 187th Brigade earlier in the month, did not measure up.⁶⁶⁶ The lack of direction he gave to the battalions in his Brigade in the afternoon and evening of March 27th led to Brigadier General J.G. Burnett, the 186th's commander, being temporarily required to take over the leadership of both Brigades. Though none of the documents mention why Lieutenant-Colonel Barton was replaced, it would have to be assumed that his

⁶⁶⁶ Brigadier-General Taylor had been convalesced sick to England earlier in the month.

actions, or lack thereof, demonstrated either that he had proven unfit to command a brigade in action or had broken down under the strain. On the 28th of March, the 187th Brigade had a new acting CO, Lieutenant-Colonel W.K. James, heretofore the commanding officer of the 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion. He would stay in temporary command for six days, when the new Brigadier General, Anthony Reddie, who had been expected to take over the Brigade before the March offensive, finally arrived. Reddie was forty-five years old and had previously fought on the Western Front with the 1st Battalion of the South Wales Borderers.⁶⁶⁷

The 28th of March was also a hard day of fighting for the 62nd Division. A heavy German bombardment continued in the morning, deluging the Yorkshiremen's line. German forces again attacked, but the 186th Brigade's improvised defences were able to withstand the onslaught. The 5th Duke of Wellingtons' subsequent narrative explained how the day unfolded:

"At 9:25 the enemy put down a very heavy barrage on our frontline systems and trenches and ridges in rear. The enemy was then seen to be massing between Fork Wood and the ridge S.W. of the wood. At 10:30 am a message was received that the enemy was attacking along the whole battalion front, the barrage continuing to fall on the trenches around [The] Battalions... Our artillery put down a counter barrage... and a stiff fight ensued and in no case did the enemy succeed in getting to our line. Time after time the enemy massed to make fresh attacks but was decimated by our accurate rifle and Lewis gunfire at each attempt. During the rest of the day the enemy could be seen crawling back towards Fork Wood."⁶⁶⁸

This account accurately describes the experience shared by the whole 186th Brigade on the 28th of March. On the same day the 187th's line was pummeled by German

⁶⁶⁷ South Wales Borderers Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anthony Julian Reddie Papers'

⁶⁶⁸ WO 95/3086, 'Narrative of Operations in which the 5th Bn. Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment Territorial Force was engaged, March 1918.' Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Limited, 2005) gives a compelling account on how the German regular infantry attacked in massed waves and were cut down.

artillery fire and multiple attacks, and only tenuously held. A narrative of the 5th Battalion Duke of Wellington Regiment detailed the situation:

“In conjunction with the attack in the open a very strong enemy bombing attack took place east of Rossignol Wood and a platoon of D Company became isolated. At 1.50 pm this platoon was reported to be still holding out. Several attempts were made to bomb to their rescue, however, when they were finally reached the location it was found the platoon under 2nd Lieutenant A. Cowthra had been overwhelmed and none were left alive.”⁶⁶⁹

Braithwaite contacted IV Corps Headquarters and asked for the remnants of the 41st Division to take over the line running through Gommecourt. The 41st Division was then ordered to launch an attack in Rossignol Wood between the Australian and 62nd lines. Poor staff work and equally poor communications between the 62nd's Headquarters and the 41st Division saw the latter's 122nd and 124th Brigades attack on the west side of the woods instead of the south. The 185th Brigade, taking over the 187th Brigade's lines that evening, also launched an attack on Rossignol Wood, but only succeeded in taking a small section of it.⁶⁷⁰ Better organization and communication between the Divisions could have led to a properly organized attack that might have carried the day. Perhaps the undeniable chaos at the front - three days of intense fighting from improvised positions, where they had been barely able to hold the line - led to breakdowns in communication. However, the attacks launched by the brigades on the woods could not have succeeded in the way they were planned. Nevertheless, the 62nd War Diary pointed out that “though neither Brigade obtained their objective, the situation was much eased by these

⁶⁶⁹ WO 95/3086, 'Narrative of Operations in which the 5th Bn. Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment Territorial Force was engaged, March 1918'

⁶⁷⁰ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division War Diary, March 28th 1918'

attacks.”⁶⁷¹ Perhaps this is true, however, the 62nd Division’s precarious position was relatively unchanged at the end of the day and the surviving British forces were utterly exhausted.

As the 29th dawned, all three Brigades of the 62nd Division were still holding the line. The Australian 4th Brigade on the 187th’s right came under determined bomb attack. But for the 62nd Division, the front was relatively quiet, with some small actions taking place but no large-scale attack. On the 30th and 31st the Division again saw little action, and that evening it was relieved by the 37th Division and retired near Souastre. In March, the Division had suffered 2182 casualties, most of which were incurred between March 25 and 31st.⁶⁷² Without doubt the losses inflicted on the Germans, attacking over open ground and given the tenacious defence, had been much more severe.⁶⁷³

The 62nd Division, like all BEF divisions that fought in the March Offensive, took part in a defensive battle. It was an understatement to say that the 62nd had trained very little in the last year for such a role, instead focusing largely on training soldiers, NCOs and officers in offensive tactics. Even the new emphasis on taking the initiative, which had been so strongly stressed, was taught with the offensive in mind. In fairness, many of the tactics could be – and were – adapted to a fighting defence. Certainly, the 62nd Division deserves credit for being so quickly able to adapt to a role for which they, like all BEF forces, had not spent most of their time training.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² WO 95/3070, ‘62nd Division War Diary, March 29th 1918’

⁶⁷³ Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Limited, 2005), 87-89

The 62nd Division played its role in the March offensive very effectively. It was quickly called upon to move and fight, shift between sectors, dig in with little idea of where the enemy or its flanks were located, and hold onto these positions, often with scant logistical support.⁶⁷⁴ In particular the staff work which allowed them to be able to carry out these operations was exemplary. The combat leadership at the junior level was also first rate, as the 62nd's platoons and companies, with little but the direction these officers could provide, worked effectively in holding the line under intense pressure and in the most fluid situations imaginable. The 62nd Division's battalion war diaries often mention the excellent work done by such men.⁶⁷⁵

In his after battle report, Braithwaite wrote that:

"A marked feature of the operation was the use made of the rifle and Lewis gun. The enemy never succeeded in pushing home an attack across the open in the face of our rifle and Lewis Gun fire. The confidence of the men in these, the primary arm of the infantry soldier has increased enormously as a consequence."⁶⁷⁶

He went on to say that:

"These were the first operations in which the machine gun battalion had taken part since the reorganization took place. The results fully justified the change.... The country was ideal for machine guns and, the enemy attacking in masses, presented splendid machine gun targets which full advantage was taken."⁶⁷⁷

Artillery was also seen to have been highly effective in breaking up the attacks. In

Braithwaite's own words: "The artillery was working under great difficulty as

⁶⁷⁴ WO 95/3073, 'War Diary of the 62nd Division Quarter Master- March 26th 1918'

⁶⁷⁵ For the most detailed example please see WO 95/3086, 'Narrative of Operations in which the 5th Bn. Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment Territorial Force was engaged March 1918.'

⁶⁷⁶ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division Notes on the Operations, March 1918'

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

regards to communications, but the field artillery barrage was in most cases good and on several occasions completely broke up enemy concentrations.”⁶⁷⁸ In conclusion, the 62nd Division’s focus in their infantry training during the previous months was a fundamental key to their success, as was the general excellence of BEF artillery by this stage of the war.

That said, the 62nd’s failings were certainly revealed. The leadership of Lieutenant-Colonel Barton was found wanting, but replacing him with Lieutenant-Colonel James quickly rectified it. And on the evening of the 28th/29th the Division could have made significant gains against Rossignol Wood, but because of a failure of staff work, attacks went in at the wrong places and at different times. Though this could be chalked up to exhaustion and the confusion gripping the whole IV Corps, in these situations it is also telling of the divisional headquarters’ effectiveness.

April started for the 62nd in Corps reserve, however, on the night of April 6/7th the Division reentered the line, taking over the position east of Bucquoy previously held by the 42nd Division. The front lines were in poor condition and the men spent most of their time either constructing new defences or burying cables to ensure reliable communications for the various positions in the event of German shelling.⁶⁷⁹ On the nights of the 23rd/24th and 24th/25th the 62nd Division was relieved and again moved into Corps reserve. However, tensions remained high and Braithwaite’s Headquarters was told that it should “be prepared to move... from 9p.m. to 9.a.m. daily at one hour’s notice; [or] from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily at two

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Fraser Skirrow, *The Massacre on the Marne: The Life and Death of the 2/5th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2007), 182

hours' notice."⁶⁸⁰ Behind the lines the 62nd Division could catch its breath and devote time to absorbing badly needed reinforcements and training.

Throughout May, a major focus was placed improving marksmanship, which most senior commanders lamented was sadly deficient by this time in the war, as well as specialist training or lectures. Braithwaite and his Brigade commanders continued their practice of closely monitoring the training. In the afternoon, morale-building recreational games would be played followed by evening entertainment such as a show or boxing match.⁶⁸¹ The specialist training usually comprised complex, realistic schemes outlining how to advance over varied terrain with the aid of bombs or machine guns. One such tactical exercise involved the infantry in concert with the machine gun battalion. As the instructions specified, "the advance of the infantry against the enemy position will be covered by the fire of 3 sections - 2 with direct fire and one with indirect fire. As a larger part of the fire is direct and in enfilade it can be maintained until the infantry approaches closely to this area."⁶⁸² The senior command of the 62nd Division had rightly concluded that the key to success on the battlefield was the more intensive use of infantry specialists and firepower in all forms, and their training syllabus in the year since the Second Battle of Bullecourt had consistently demonstrated this focus.

Presumably as a practical application of this training regimen, and to raise morale after the setbacks of April, the 62nd Division also began to renew its practice of constant raiding that it had been carrying out before Cambrai. One example of

⁶⁸⁰ WO 95/3070, '62nd Division War Diary, April 23rd 1918'

⁶⁸¹ WO 95/3080, '185th Brigade War Diary, May 1918'

⁶⁸² WO 95/3077, '62nd Machine Gun Battalion Tactical Exercise'

this was the 2/5th West Yorkshire Battalion's minor operation against a German outpost near Bucquoy launched on May 23rd. Though the Germans outnumbered the raiders, in hand-to-hand fighting the 2/5th West Yorks killed numerous of the enemy and destroyed the outpost before retiring, bringing back fourteen prisoners, two machine guns and a flamethrower. This raid garnered the attention of Third Army Commander General Byng who wrote to the 2/5th Yorks' commanding officer: "I consider this raid to be one of the most successful that has been accomplished. It reflects the greatest credit on 2/Lt Kermode. His initiative and leadership are most commendable."⁶⁸³ Not all raids of the 62nd Division were overwhelming successes, an example being one launched in tandem with tanks on the 22nd of June which was a debacle, but the willingness to carry them out at all reflected the determination of commanders to re-instill their men's 'attacking spirit'.⁶⁸⁴

Reinforcements to make good losses suffered in March were still reaching the 62nd Division in June. Instructions were received that the 2/7th West Yorkshire Battalion (185th Brigade) and the 2/7th West Riding Battalion (186th Brigade) were to be disbanded and the men used to reinforce sister battalions of their regiments in those Brigades that were still markedly understrength. The unfortunate battalions were disbanded on the 15th of June. As replacements, the 1/5th Devonshires would join the 185th Brigade, while the 2/4th Hampshires would join the 186th Brigade.⁶⁸⁵ The 1/5th Devonshire Regiment, which had most recently seen action in Egypt and Palestine, arrived at Marseille on June 1st and entered the 62nd Reserve four days

⁶⁸³ WO 95/3080, '2/5th West Yorkshire Regiment War Diary, May 1918 - appendix'

⁶⁸⁴ WO 95/3070, 'General Braithwaite to Fourth Corps Headquarters, June 24th 1918'

⁶⁸⁵ See the War Diaries for the 185th Brigade and 186th Brigade on June 15th, 1918. WO 95/3080, WO 95/3085

later.⁶⁸⁶ The 2/4th Hampshire Regiment, which reached Marseille in the same convoy as the 1/5th Devonshire Regiment, had earlier been deployed to India, then taken part in the Gallipoli operation, and most recently also fought in Palestine.⁶⁸⁷ The composition of the 62nd West Riding Division as a Yorkshire formation had certainly been changing in 1918 - the combined impact of the shuffling of battalions and conscription meant that the Division was now composed of men from across England.

The 62nd Division was relieved by the 37th Division on the evening of the 26th/27th and went into GHQ reserve on July 1st. There, they would spend two weeks training until they abruptly received orders on July 13th that they would be moving by train the next day to join the British XXII Corps on the French Army's front northeast of Paris.⁶⁸⁸

A total of four divisions - the 15th, 34th, 51st, and 62nd - began their move south to join the French Army on, appropriately enough, July 14th. The 51st and 62nd Divisions, which constituted the XXII British Corps, would join the French Fourth Army.⁶⁸⁹ The Germans in May and June had kept up pressure on the French lines, and Marshal Foch, commander of the allied forces, feared the potential for a major attack that would seriously weaken the French position. He therefore withdrew the

⁶⁸⁶ C.T. Atkinson, *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918* (Exeter: Eland Brothers, 1926), 376

⁶⁸⁷ C.T. Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment: Volume Two 1914-1918* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose & Company Limited, 1952), 353

⁶⁸⁸ WO 95/3070, 'HQ 62nd Division War Diary- July 13-14th 1918'

⁶⁸⁹ Michael Neiberg, *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 95

French forces (eight divisions) from Flanders and also asked for British aid, to which Haig responded positively.⁶⁹⁰

Once the 62nd arrived at Mailley-Le-Camp on July 17th, Braithwaite reported to the Fourth French Army Headquarters where he was told that all the Germans' attacks on their front (east of Reims) had been stopped, and that the XXII Corps would be moving to the Fifth French Army the following day.⁶⁹¹ The troops, having no motorized transport, faced a 20- to 30-mile march.⁶⁹² The following day, July 18th, Foch launched a massive counter-attack against the German forces that left Ludendorff and the Germans reeling. As he subsequently wrote of this attack:

“Our infantry had not stood firm at all points, and in particular the division southwest of Soissons, that had been considered so reliable, had given way. The gap rapidly widened, especially towards Soissons. Farther south there were other deep dents in the line.... Between the Ourcq and the Marne the attacks were repulsed.”⁶⁹³

The XXII Corps would be attacking at the junction of the French Fifth and Sixth Armies and passing through the Second Italian Corps. The plan for the XXII Corps would be to fight its way up the valley of the Ardre River (more appropriately called a stream in the 62nd War Diary) to a final objective seven kilometers away. The 62nd and 51st Divisions would be supported in this attack by French and Italian artillery on a front of about 5 miles, with the former on the right and the latter on the left, with the dividing line between the two divisions being the Ardre River

⁶⁹⁰ Eds. J.H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1920), 254

⁶⁹¹ WO 95/3071 '62nd War Diary, Situation and plan of Operation, July 19th-30th 1918'

⁶⁹² Ministère De La Guerre, *Les Armées Françaises dans La Grande Guerre Tome VII: La Campagne Offensive de 1918 et la Marche Au Rhine 18 Juillet 1918-28 Juin 1919* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1923), 11

⁶⁹³ Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story August 14th - November 1918: The Great War from the Siege of Liege to the Signing of the Armistice as Viewed from the Grand Headquarters of the German Army Volume II* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919), 313

itself.⁶⁹⁴ The 2nd Italian Division would be attacking on the 62nd Division's right. Braithwaite decided that on his frontage the 62nd Division would advance two brigades abreast (the 187th on the right and the 185th on the left), and once the first objective was reached the remaining Brigade (the 186th) would pass through them and take the second objective. Fighting in this area was dramatically different from what the 62nd had experienced in the previous 18 months of the war, and needless to say, from what they had trained for. As Braithwaite and his staff were well aware, this was not going to be trench warfare, as they would now be assaulting through thick forests riven with hidden strongpoints.⁶⁹⁵ Justifiably concerned, he could only comment ominously: "I have seen nothing thicker since I fought thirty-five years ago in the Burmese Jungle."⁶⁹⁶ The villages of Marfaux, Chaumuzy, and Bligny that the 62nd would be attacking in the coming days lay on the slopes of the valley, bordered by heavily wooded hills. At 8pm on the 19th, the 62nd Division headquarters began to inform its brigades that the attack would go in the following morning at 8:00 am. This was very hurried for a division that had just travelled a considerable distance and then been forced to march up to thirty miles. On top of this, the 62nd Division had to operate within a new system, not to mention attack with allies with whom it had never fought.

Confusion set in immediately, as the guides who were to direct the troops to their jump-off lines were Italian, and spoke no English. The War Diary of the 185th

⁶⁹⁴ WO 95/3080, 'Concentration of the 62nd (West Riding) Division in the French Fifth Army Area'

⁶⁹⁵ WO 95/3071, '62nd War Diary- Situation and plan of Operation July 19th-30th, 1918'

⁶⁹⁶ Everhard, Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd West Riding Division 1914-1919* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1922), 178

Brigade's 1/5th Devonshire Battalion recounted the ordeals the troops endured that night:

"My Battalion marched at 10pm from St. Imoges. Guides were met at the Farm Courtagnon; near French Regimental Headquarters. Tracks very steep and rough; heavy shellfire experienced en route. Casualties, one officer and twenty-three other ranks wounded, and two other ranks killed. The Battalion formed up at the point of assembly on 20th of July at 5:30 am. Men very tired by hard climb and rough road."⁶⁹⁷

After a confusing night where French, Italian, and British guides all managed to get lost in the forest, amazingly the battalions were in position by 800 am.

At Zero Hour the infantry line moved forward under heavy German artillery fire. Though suffering significant casualties, the 187th and 185th Brigades continued to advance, soon meeting heavy opposition from the German 50th Division:

"The German barrage came down heavily ... about 10 minutes after zero, but failed to prevent the troops from pushing on through it until they came under strong volumes of machine gun fire from numerous nests in advance of the enemy's main line. This was held in considerable strength and defended with great determination. These nests, situated in standing corn and under cover of numerous banks or the thick undergrowth in the woods were impossible to locate with accuracy, and as the barrage furnished by French and Italian guns had fallen well behind the majority of them, they were able to maintain a deadly fire upon our advancing infantry."⁶⁹⁸

Clearly the 62nd Division was going to have a challenging day.

In spite of the enemy machine gun fire, the right flank of the 187th Brigade made it to Bouilly village and began to clear it, capturing a handful of German prisoners in the process. In this advance, the 2/4th York and Lancaster Battalion showed great determination, demonstrating their ability to work effectively in sections and platoons to take out machine gun nests and other obstacles that the

⁶⁹⁷ WO 95/ 3083, '1/5th Devonshire Regimental War Diary July 20th, 1918'

⁶⁹⁸ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

German defences presented, and which their own supporting barrage had failed to neutralize. However, the Commetreuil Châteaux at the top of the village of Commetreuil could not be overcome.⁶⁹⁹ The left flank of the attack, led by the 5th KOYLI, was also held up by machine gun fire, but once again, a company showed great initiative, and despite serious casualties, moved up to the south side of the Châteaux. This company, however, was caught by enfilade fire, and after losing four officers, was compelled to fall back. The remnant joined the reserve company and other 62nd troops separated from their units and pressed forward to reach the base of the Châteaux where they managed to overcome a nest of four German machine guns and began to dig in. However, with their right flank falling back, the left flank had to retire to straighten out the line.⁷⁰⁰

The 185th Brigade assault also encountered significant German machine gun fire. Unhappily for the British infantry, Italian and French artillery were not very effective in suppressing the German defenders on the 62nd Division's front, leaving the latter "great freedom of action."⁷⁰¹ Small groups of British troops would attempt to work their way through the wheat fields trying to infiltrate into the village of Mareux but were beaten back. The problem was simple, but deadly:

"The enemy, who was in considerable strength and showed great determination were not only holding the line of the village itself, but had pushed forward numerous machine gun nests into the standing corns and banks in front of it. These nests were impossible to locate accurately, and swept the whole of the forward slopes leading down to the village."⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁹ WO 95/3089, '187th Infantry Brigade narrative of events - July 19th-30th 1918'

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ WO 95/3080, '185th Infantry Brigade narrative of events - July 19th-30th 1918'

⁷⁰² Ibid.

The 185th Brigade suffered very heavy casualties in this operation. The reserve Brigade (the 186th) was put in the line on Braithwaite's orders and decided to attack at the position where the 187th was attempting to exploit the meager gains it had made. Moving forward in small independent units, the 186th made headway towards the village of Mareux, and forced their way into the village of Marfaux. The leading elements eventually made it to the southeast portion of the village, but with the onset of dusk, they wisely pulled back so as to conform to the remainder of the British line. After dark, the Divisional front was reorganized with the 186th Brigade taking over the 185th Brigade's line.⁷⁰³ Overall, the day's fighting was deemed a success, the Division having advanced a considerable distance and in the process tied down a large number of German soldiers, thus denying them the ability to move west towards the main French and American attack being mounted at Soissons.⁷⁰⁴

The 51st Division's attack also labored under poor artillery support from its allies, but initially it did not meet the same resistance as the 62nd faced in its sector.⁷⁰⁵ However, its attacking brigades soon came up against the German machine guns in the woods, with predictable results: "The going in the wood was desperate, tangled effort of advancing very considerable. In addition, the facility for ambushing the most advance troops. In these circumstances the keeping of direction became a matter of the greatest difficulty." With the help of French colonial

⁷⁰³ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

⁷⁰⁴ Michael Neiberg, *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 95

⁷⁰⁵ F.W. Bewsher. *The History of the Fifty First (Highland) Division 1914-1918* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1921), 332

(Senegalese) troops, the 51st Division achieved some of its objectives, yet fierce counter-attacks eventually forced them back about 1000 yards to the south.⁷⁰⁶

On the 21st, the 62nd Division pioneer battalion launched an attack on Bois du Petit Champ to shore up the flank before the 62nd Division could continue up the Ardre valley. Initially, the attack went well as the 9th Durham Light Infantry progressed through the forest, but, when they began to cross the fields, the enemy machine guns again ripped through their ranks.⁷⁰⁷ The attack promptly fell apart and the battalion had to pull back to its start lines. The Chateau was also attacked again on the 21st by the 2/4th York and Lancasters, but after a day of hard fighting they, too, were forced to retire to their original lines, a disheartening experience for any infantry. However, prisoners captured during the day reported that heavy losses had been inflicted on the defenders, as well. Indeed, "the units of the 103rd and 123rd German Divisions had been so reduced in strength that they had to be completely withdrawn and replaced by Regiments of the 50th Division."⁷⁰⁸ After a tumultuous and bloody day, the night passed relatively quietly for the 62nd Division.

The capture and clearance of Bois du Petit Champ was still fundamental for the 62nd Division's advance, and the 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion (186th Brigade) was now tasked with this objective. On the night of the 21st/22nd, the battalion sent out officers to scout the enemy positions, the result of which was a decision to attack in two separate columns which would move up on the north and south sides of the woods in a pincer fashion to turn in together at the final objective. Also a chain of

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid. 338

⁷⁰⁷ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

strong points anchored by machine guns would be established during the advance and patrols would be sent into the woods to locate the enemy machine gunners, who, once found, would be engaged and eliminated. With sufficient artillery support in hand, the attack started at 12:30,⁷⁰⁹ and went well, small, independent combat teams dealing with German strong points as they advanced. As the 62nd narrative of the fighting recounted:

“Once the attack had been launched the success of the operation depended entirely upon the initiative of the subordinate leaders and their quickness to grasp and cope with novel situations. Isolated machine gun posts were mopped up one by one....”⁷¹⁰

The success of the Duke of Wellingtons did not come without losses, and the 1/5th Devonshire Battalion was sent up to give added weight to their attack. In very hard fighting the 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion had advanced through 700 yards of thick forest, and by that evening the woods, save one machine gun nest, had been cleared. The 187th Brigade had also advanced during the day and consolidated their new line to conform to the 186th Brigade’s line. With the area now cleared, the 62nd Division could begin to move up the valley.

On the 23rd, the 8th West Yorkshire Regiment, under the temporary command of the 186th Brigade, cleared what remained of Bois du Petit Champ. With this spur captured, the Durham Light Infantry, supported by the New Zealand cyclist battalion, attacked Cuitron and nearby Marfaux again. The objectives were quite

⁷⁰⁹ WO 95/3085, ‘Narrative of operations - July 19th-30th 1918’

⁷¹⁰ WO 95/3071, ‘Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne’

limited, and the 62nd Division finally took Marfaux village and the ridge beyond it, three days after they had first attacked it.⁷¹¹

In its first four days of fighting under the French Army, the 62nd Division had a challenging time, with many of the factors outside its control. It had been rushed down to join the French Fifth Army and then compelled to complete a lengthy forced march to its start positions. Upon arriving at its destination, it and the 51st Division were directed to attack a position of which neither the troops nor officers had any knowledge. Not only did they lack the time to go over plans or scout, let alone practice on mock courses as was the norm in previous operations like Cambrai, but they also were attacking over terrain - heavily wooded, hilly country - for which they had no experience. Finally, there was little time for liaison between the French and Italian gunners and the 62nd's infantry. Rather, the 62nd Division had to attack, trusting that their allies (in tandem with their own artillery) would be firing barrages in the same manner that they were used to. Unhappily, this was not the case.⁷¹² The XXII Corps as a whole raised concerns about the efficacy of the supporting artillery barrage but to no effect. Unquestionably the odds were going to be stacked against the 62nd Division when its officers and men were put in such a situation. Lastly the XXII Corps had no means of recourse to dispute its orders.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bastow, the commanding officer of the 1/5th Devonshire Battalion, added an amendment on the Battalion's narrative of these four days of

⁷¹¹ H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division: 1916-1919: A popular history based on Official Records* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs Limited, 1921), 380

⁷¹² Fraser Skirrow, *The Massacre on the Marne: The Life and Death of the 2/5th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2007), 191

fighting in which he outlined eleven points that he felt would make such operations more successful in the future. The points are very telling, and included:

“1. The absolute necessity of giving a battalion commander time to reconnoiter the terrain thoroughly before they issue their orders to attack. 2: The grave danger in trying to capture strong points in a valley before making good the heights on either side. 3: The necessity of the closest liaison between the infantry and artillery and especially so when the artillery is that of another nation. 9: The value of small M[achine] G[un] or Lewis Gun posts placed in corn fields in advance of the main M[achine] G[un] or strong point.”⁷¹³

Overall, they did accomplish their objectives in the first four days, albeit, they took longer to achieve them and suffered heavy casualties in doing so. Their success was in no small part due to their training, and especially the focus on small-unit operations and the use of Lewis guns to support these. These units were also able to operate on their own initiative to carry out the objectives tasked to them, again a capacity much reinforced by repetitive training. It is certainly worth noting that the way they had achieved their goals here was a far cry from their tactical deficiencies manifested fourteen months earlier at Bullecourt, clearly confirming that the 62nd Division had matured and become a much more efficient and effective fighting Division in the interval.

There was a lull in the 62nd Division's offensive, and over the next three days, it confined itself to sending out minor patrols but launched no major operation. After this short break the 62nd and 51st Divisions were tasked with attacking the Germans on the left bank of the Ardre River. The 187th Brigade was assigned to carry out the 62nd's role in this attack, and in marked contrast to their recent attacks, officers had the luxury on the 25th and 26th of reconnoitering the ground over which

⁷¹³ WO 95/ 3083, '1/5th Devonshire Regimental War Diary appendix B, July 1918'

they would advance. The 187th Brigade would attack at 6:00 am between the 153rd Brigade on their left and the 152nd Brigade to their right, accompanied by five French tanks, though in the event, given the marshy conditions over which they were advancing, the tanks “... were reported to be unable to function.”⁷¹⁴ Despite this misfortune, the 187th Brigade’s assault went extremely well, and by 9:30 am they were consolidating their final objectives. Indeed, the “infantry opposition had been so feeble as to cause the impression that the enemy [having] been surprised in the midst of a withdrawal.”⁷¹⁵ In the face of such light resistance, “preparations were made to push the attack further home....”⁷¹⁶ The 153rd and 152nd Brigades of the 10th Division had similar experiences.

The 51st and 62nd Divisions sent forward patrols around 1:30 pm followed up by stronger forces, the 62nd Division having been allocated the Corps cavalry which Braithwaite promptly sent forward in an attempt to exploit the apparent weaknesses in the German defences. The 185th and 186th Brigades followed the cavalry in support. By evening, both Divisions were consolidating new lines north of Chaumuzy. The 62nd Division continued to put the pressure on the German forces and launched an attack at 4:00 am on the 28th, the 8th West York Battalion being tasked with assaulting up a very steep slope. The after action report was effusive in its praise of the men’s performance:

“The valuable factor of surprise coupled with the élan displayed by this unit in the pressing home the assault resulted in the capture of a position of great tactical importance in the face of enemy machine gun defence. This attack was made

⁷¹⁴ WO 95/3089, ‘187th Infantry Brigade narrative of events- July 19th-30th, 1918’

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

without artillery support, was brilliantly carried out by Platoon and sectional rushes under covering fire, and in spite of serious casualties the hill was finally rushed.”⁷¹⁷

In taking the hill, the 8th West Yorks had again demonstrated the competence of the 62nd's infantry platoons in the attack and the value of relying on Lewis guns to help them consolidate objectives.⁷¹⁸ The progress made by this battalion had carried them far in front of the general Allied line, and the 185th Brigade rushed reinforcements up to help strengthen the position before the inevitable German counter-attacks fell on them which, when they materialized, were quickly beaten off. Throughout the day the 62nd Division continued to push forward, taking part in skirmishes against a much weaker German force, until by nightfall, the Division was occupying the old French trench system at Bligny.

On the 28th of July, the troops were given a much needed rest day as the “... continuous and arduous nature of the fighting precluded any further advance ... partly owing to the exhaustion of the troops and partly to the tenacity of the opposing forces...” The later had now been reinforced by a comparatively fresh Division – the 240th - “which had received, and certainly obeyed, orders to hold on at all costs.”⁷¹⁹ The German forces were now digging in. On the evening of the 28th, the 2/5th West Yorks carried out a small – and successful - attack on Montaigne de

⁷¹⁷ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

⁷¹⁸ The 8th West Yorks received the French Croix de Guerre. As the citation noted: “a most distinguished battalion. Under the energetic command of Lieutenant Colonel Norman Ayrton England it took a brilliant part in the hard fighting between the 20th and 30th of July which resulted in the capture of the valley of Ardre. On the 23rd July 1918, after forcing a way through the thick undergrowth of the Bois du Petit Champs, it carried an important position in the face of sustained fire of enemy machine guns. On the 28th July, 1918, it captured the Montagne de Bligny with magnificent dash though this hill was strongly defended by superior enemy forces, and held it in spite of heavy losses and the determined efforts of the enemy to recapture it.”

⁷¹⁹ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

Bligny to consolidate the British lines. The following day Braithwaite received orders that the XXII Corps was being withdrawn for entrainment to another area which turned out to be the British sector between Amiens and Ypres. With those orders the 62nd Division's role in the Second Battle of the Marne was over.

On July 27th, the 62nd Division was chasing an enemy in retreat, but they had to stop their pursuit once the German resistance stiffened, an indicator of just how exhausted and battered the Division had become. From July 20th through July 29th it had suffered 4,177 casualties, or between 40 and 50 percent of its combat strength. It is of interest when examining the 62nd Division's record during the Second Battle of the Marne to compare the performance of the two new battalions recently arrived from the Middle East against the Division's veteran units. The 1/5th Devonshire and the 2/4th Hampshire Battalions arrived at the beginning of June, so they had a mere six weeks to train, reorganize and adapt to Western Front conditions, and in particular fighting Germans rather than Turks.⁷²⁰ In other words they had neither the training nor the experience that the remainder of the 62nd Division had acquired through hard-fought battles. However, as most of the war diaries in the 62nd Division complained, the terrain on the Marne was dramatically different from what even the veteran units had previously experienced. One war diary lamented the "... density of the undergrowth which was so thick as to be likened to a tropical jungle."⁷²¹ The regimental history of the Devonshire Battalion described the terrain as "both hilly and thickly wooded", and while "there was not much the 5th Devons

⁷²⁰ Apart from the obvious, one of the major differences was that a BEF battalion on the Western front comprised three companies instead of four.

⁷²¹ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

did not know about hill-fighting after Palestine, with woods they had been long unfamiliar, and it was a high trial... to have to make its first attack on the Western Front in such specially difficult terrain.”⁷²² But in fact, this at least was true for all the battalions.

It is hard to analyze how the 1/5th Devonshire Regiment did on July 20th compared to any of its fellow battalions in the Brigade. All of them advanced forward through the grain fields and were decimated. No experience on the Western Front or in Palestine seemed to give the battalions an advantage on the Marne. After that, the 5th Devonshires was put in reserve and was only used as a supporting unit until the early morning of the 28th of July, when they effectively supported the 8th West Yorkshire Battalion as the latter attacked and took Montaigne Bligny. Brigadier-General Viscount Hampden wrote to the battalion that “the operation was difficult owing to the exposed conditions on your right flank, but it was carried through - a result which reflects great credit on the leadership of the officers and the courage and devotion of the men.”⁷²³ The Hampshire Battalion had a similar experience as the Devonshires for it, too, was thrown into the grain fields on the 20th of July and suffered significant losses. It was then held in reserve, playing a supporting role before being pushed back into action on the 28th.

On the whole, the 62nd Division had conducted itself well on the Marne and it left the French Fifth Army as victors. The French government offered well deserved “thanks and admiration which the great deeds that it [XXII Corps] has just accomplished deserve.... Marfaux, Chaumuzy, Montaigne de Bligny [all places taken

⁷²² C.T. Atkinson, *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918* (Exeter: Eland Brothers, 1926), 379

⁷²³ WO 95/3080, ‘185th Brigades narrative of operations July 19th-July 30th 1918’

by the 62nd Division] will be written in letters of gold in the annals of your regiments.”⁷²⁴

Since December 1917, the 62nd Division had been completely reorganized. Each Brigade had lost a battalion, two serving battalions had been disbanded for lack of reinforcements and two new battalions transferred from the Middle East had been added. The regional homogeneity of the Yorkshire Division had been significantly altered. In both March and July the 62nd Division fought until exhaustion. It undoubtedly would have been able to do more had it been at its 1917 strength.

As with the rest of the BEF the 62nd's training continued to focus on small-unit action and the employment of machine guns to isolate and overcome German strong points, in other words, the platoon fighting tactics outlined in *SS 143*. In February, the 62nd Division incorporated the new Machine Gun Battalion structure, which permitted more concentrated use of its existing Vickers gun batteries, and which played a crucial role, during both the German March offensive and the Second Battle of the Marne. As General Braithwaite wrote:

“[In both defensive and offensive situations]...There can be no question that the M.G. Battalion has more than justified its existence... and an offensive battle on the Marne, and it is an undoubted fact that this Division was at least 60 percent better served by its Machine Guns in these battles than in former battles under the old system. A good deal of the success of the [M]achine [G]un Battalion is due to the fact that the Commanding Officer is not a Machine Gun expert, but just a very good Infantry [C]ommanding [O]fficer with a knowledge of tactics, an eye for country and power of command.”⁷²⁵

⁷²⁴ Ministère De La Guerre, *Les armées Françaises dans la grande guerre, Tome VII: La campagne offensive de 1918 et la Marche Au Rhine 18 Juillet 1918-28 Juin 1919* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1923), 13

⁷²⁵ WO 95/3071, 'Operations in the Ardre Valley July 19th-30th 1918 - Second Battle of the Marne'

The 62nd Division had handled its responsibilities well in the last eight months, while at the same time suffering over 10,000 casualties. An obviously proud Braithwaite succinctly summed up his Division's performance in a statement he wrote for distribution to his officers and men:

“The Division made a great name for itself at the Battle of Cambrai. It enhanced that reputation at Bucquoy where it withstood the attacks of some of the best German troops, up to that time flushed with success. It has, in this [recent] great battle, set the seal on its already established reputation as a fighting force of the first quality... It is with intense pride that once again after a great victory, I have the honour to sign myself as Commander of the 62nd West Riding Division.”⁷²⁶

After the Marne, the 62nd would need a period to be reconstituted before it would play its final role in the forthcoming Victory Campaign. Unfortunately, its rest would be short, for the 62nd Division would continue to be heavily engaged until the end of the war.⁷²⁷

⁷²⁶ WO 95/3080, 'War Diary of the 185th Brigade, July 1918- Appendix 1'

⁷²⁷ Some historians have argued for the "100 days" as the final offensive of the Allies. Units like the 62nd Division demonstrate that their campaign started at the Second Battle of the Marne, 120 days until the armistice.

Chapter 8: The 62nd Division and the “Victory Campaign”

For the 62nd Division, the Last Hundred Days would see the culmination of two years of fighting on the Western Front. Major-General Braithwaite would depart, promoted to command a Corps in August, and be replaced by Major-General Robert Whigham. However, the success the 62nd Division enjoyed in the final months of the war was largely due to the training regime implemented by Braithwaite and the strong team of subordinates he had assembled. The 62nd would fight almost constantly from mid-July through November, suffering heavy casualties as they forced their way forward, and without the benefit of adequate reinforcements to make good their losses. These achievements demonstrated how capable this Second-line Territorial formation had become in the field, one that appears to have matched any in the BEF.

The 62nd arrived back in the British zone from the Marne on August 1st and 2nd, detraining in the Somme area. Soon, 4000 much-needed reinforcements arrived to rebuild its depleted combat strength, but even with all of these replacements, the 2/5th West Yorkshire Battalion still had to be disbanded.⁷²⁸ Divisional HQ received this news on the 8th of August, and five days later the Battalion was broken up.⁷²⁹ As a saddened Captain Arthur Green of the unfortunate unit wrote:

“The worst thing ever is about to take place, our battalion is to be broken up and to be distributed among other Yorkshire battalions in the Division. The fact is there are so many men on munition work in Yorkshire that reinforcements are

⁷²⁸ WO 95/3072, ‘Reinforcements received during August 1918’

⁷²⁹ Officially it was broken up on the 18th of August when its War Diary stops.

difficult to keep up and they have to do with one battalion less. We are all sick but there is nothing to do but see it through.”⁷³⁰

The replacement battalion joining the 185th Infantry Brigade was the 2/20th London Regiment. In May, the 2/20th had been launching raids along the Jordan River against the Turks when it had been reassigned to the Western Front, arriving in France in mid-July.⁷³¹

In August of 1918, all five British Armies as well as the French and American forces would launch a massive offensive at various points in Northern France and Flanders.⁷³² Beginning on August 8th, the BEF commenced a series of devastating attacks across the German front. The enemy was soon in retreat, with the BEF hot in pursuit.⁷³³ The 62nd would spend the first part of August rebuilding and training. Between August 19th and 23rd, it was switched between the IV and XI Corps three times as the British forces continued to push forward. The confusion at the front, clogged traffic on the roads, the hurried (and inadequate) scouting of positions to be attacked by the divisions and poor communication all led to chaos. Six British and French Armies would be attacking between the 26th and 30th of August on a seventy-five mile front extending from Soissons to Arras. Initially the 62nd Division saw no action, initially having been assigned to the Army reserve.⁷³⁴

⁷³⁰ University of Leeds Liddle Collection, 'Captain Arthur Green papers, August 10th 1918'

⁷³¹ W.R. Elliot, *The Second Twentieth: The history of the 2/20th London Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale & Olden, limited, 1920), 221

⁷³² Tim Travers, *How the War was Won: Factors that Led to Victory in World War One: Command and Technology in the British Army on the western Front, 1917-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military Classics, 2005), 118

⁷³³ Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 128

⁷³⁴ Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24

The staff officers of the 62nd Division were working hard, but their best efforts were often frustrated by conflicting orders on where and when they were to move. The confusion they faced is amply illustrated in the following report:

“At 2:30 pm a warning order was received from Division that the Brigade had to be prepared to move that evening to the 6th Corps area... At 11pm further instructions were received from Division to be prepared to move in the early morning to the vicinity of Courcelles and at 3:30 am orders were received to the effect that the 6th Corps were continuing their advance, 62nd Division to move forward at 8:30 am to the neighbourhood of Gomiecourt, 187th Infantry Brigade to take over from the 9th and possibly 8th Brigade of the 3rd Division.”⁷³⁵

The rapidly changing situation at the front, coupled with the poor communications and traffic congestion on all routes in the rear areas, would be a considerable stress that would inevitably lead to mistakes.

On the afternoon of August 23rd, the 2nd Division's 99th Brigade captured Mory Copse. The 62nd Division began to take over their lines when another message was received from Corps headquarters that the 2nd Division was to attack the villages of Behagnies and Sapignies in order to facilitate the 62nd Division passing through their lines the following morning.⁷³⁶ The 2nd Division carried out their attack successfully, and the 62nd Division prepared to follow up as ordered, with Zero hour set for 9:00. The Guards Division on the 62nd's left flank was to join in the attack. The 62nd was to capture the villages of Vaulx-Vraucourt and Longatte. This was an area already known to the Division's veterans, as during the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in March of 1917, they had followed them through the country. The 187th Brigade was to capture the ground east of Mory with

⁷³⁵ WO 95/3089, '187th Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations August 23rd to September 3rd 1918'

⁷³⁶ WO 157/387, 'Fourth Corps War Diary, August 20th 1918'

the 186th Brigade in support. Although the attack had been planned for 9:00 am, the roads were swamped with traffic and progress was complicated by poor communication between the Brigades and Divisional Headquarters. A message from VI Corps reached Brigadier-General Reddie at his 187th Brigade Headquarters at 5:30 am informing him that he could pick his own time to attack. Reddie held a conference at the headquarters of the 5th KOYLI and altered the jump off time to 10:30. However, the 2/4th Yorkshire and Lancaster Battalion did not get the message about the conference until 8:30, and their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel L.H.P. Hart, rushed to the meeting but was too late.⁷³⁷ The staff officers had done a reasonable job in getting the Division where it needed to be on time and in good order, but with the rush, planning mistakes were inevitable.

The 2/4 Yorks and Lancs launched their attack according to the original schedule at 9:00 am with close artillery coverage, but without the support of the Guards Division which would not be ready to attack until 10:30 because of all the changes of plan. The 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion (186th Brigade) was also able to improvise an attack at 9:00 in support of the 2/4th Yorks and Lancs. The attack, surprisingly, went well, with the 62nd's narrative of the operations briefly stating that it "progressed favourably in spite of a determined resistance by the enemy," adding that "the whole of the First Objective (the line of the Favreuil-Mory Road) was in our hands by 10:30."⁷³⁸ Both of the brigades had achieved their first objectives, which speaks to how quickly and independently the 62nd's battalions, companies, and platoons could operate at this stage of the war. If ever there was an

⁷³⁷ South Wales Borderers Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anthony Julian Reddie Papers'

⁷³⁸ WO 95/3071, 'Narrative of Operations, August 24th - September 3rd 1918'

attack thrown together, it was this one on Mory. Its success also demonstrated the German forces' disarray; they were giving ground rapidly to what was basically an oversized battalion assault.

After reaching their first objective, the 2/4th Yorks and Lancs tried to push forward, but came under heavy machine gun fire. The German defenses were quickly dealt with by 62nd Divisional artillery, and the battalion continued to push forward.⁷³⁹ The Brigades quickly closed in and took their final objectives, and had just begun to consolidate the ground won when the Germans launched a series of powerful counter-attacks. As the after-action report described it:

“At 5pm the enemy put down an intense barrage with guns of all calibers over the whole area. This continued until after 7p.m. At about 6:15 the enemy launched a powerful counter attack. About two companies of the enemy attacked frontally from the Vraucourt-Beugnatre road. They were plainly seen by our troops on the left. As they came down the slope of the hill they were met with rifle and Lewis gun fire and when their officer who was seen to be vainly trying to get his men on, was shot, this attack collapsed and the enemy fled in disorder. The main attack came from the right.”⁷⁴⁰

This, however, was also broken up. As Brigadier General Anderson, commanding officer of the 62nd's Divisional artillery, wrote dismissively:

“After I got back at about 6.p.m. the Boches delivered a strong counterattack all along our front and I have just heard- at 7:30 that it has been repulsed with heavy losses to the attackers. During the night the enemy again attacked us in the north end of Farreuil village and was driven back with loss; on this occasion we took a battalion commander and about 30 savages. They are a poor looking lot, Bavarian and very young.”⁷⁴¹

⁷³⁹ WO 95/3073, '62nd Divisional Artillery Headquarters War Diary, August 25th 1918'

⁷⁴⁰ WO 95/3071, 'Narrative of Operations, August 25th 1918'

⁷⁴¹ The Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anderson Papers, August 25th 1918'

Braithwaite's men had responded brilliantly to the very trying situation in which they found themselves on the 25th of August. The training focus on small-unit action, battalions and companies being able to work independently in the attack, and the employment of Lewis guns were all cited as reasons for success in the after-battle reports.⁷⁴²

During the 26th, 27th, and 28th, the 62nd Division kept up the pressure on the German forces by pushing strong patrols forward. They did not, however, launch any major operations, as they had been directed by the GOC VI Corps not to do so. In fact, the VI Corps was planning to use the 62nd extensively in the coming days. Then, on the 28th of August, the Division was shocked to learn that General Braithwaite had suddenly been promoted to take over command of the IX Corps after its commanding officer, Lieutenant-General Alexander Hamilton-Gordon, was relieved.⁷⁴³ Braithwaite had proven a very able commander of the 62nd Division. Returning from the Dardanelles after serving as Ian Hamilton's Chief of Staff, his chances of commanding in the field must have seemed slim. However, his friendship with Field Marshall Haig had likely aided him in receiving the 62nd Division, one that had been picked clean of its best officers and men, leaving a contingent well-stocked with second-raters. The 62nd and Braithwaite had not had much time to get accustomed to the Western Front before they were thrown into the First and Second Battles of Bullecourt. The 62nd Division was given orders that were unlikely to see any division succeed, and was provided almost no time to prepare. It was these two

⁷⁴² WO 95/3071, '62nd War Diary, August 25th 1918'

⁷⁴³ WO 95/3071, 'Narrative of operations, August 24th - September 3rd'

factors, more than any shortcomings in the officers and men, that had led to the poor showing in May of 1917.

From the summer of 1917 until his promotion to Corps command the following year, Braithwaite focused with great energy on training his officers and men, specifically in the small-unit offensive tactics adopted as BEF doctrine in the aftermath of the Somme operations: the use of specialist infantry weapons, combined arms tactics with artillery, and independent action at the platoon, company and battalion level. In the aftermath of Bullecourt, he relieved two of his Brigade commanders and many lower ranking officers and was given replacements who had experience on the Western Front. Braithwaite became an ardent supporter of raids, and the 62nd Division, when holding the frontline, constantly carried out these small attacks to polish training skills and build *élan*. He was also a commander who was keen on using new technology and applying it to suit his specific needs, which was clearly demonstrated with his decisions on the employment of tanks at Cambrai. By the time Braithwaite departed, the 62nd Division had earned victories at Cambrai during the March Offensive, at the Second Battle of the Marne, and most recently at Mory. Braithwaite's leadership and tutelage had been instrumental in his command becoming a first-rate combat division. Brigadier-General Anderson undoubtedly expressed the view of many in the Division when he said of Braithwaite's promotion: "General Braithwaite hears today that he has got command of a Corps - a well deserved promotion, I'm glad for his sake but we are all dreadfully sorry to lose him; in dealing with men he has the 'Nelson Touch'."⁷⁴⁴

⁷⁴⁴ The Royal Artillery Museum, 'Brigadier-General Anderson Papers, August 27th 1918'

Clearly he was a man well respected by the officers and men of his Division, and the success that followed the 62nd Division in the Last Hundred Days owed much to the legacy of his time as its commanding officer.

Major-General Sir Robert Whigham arrived at 1pm on the 28th and assumed command. Whigham had been commissioned into the Royal Warwick Regiment in 1885 and subsequently seen service in Sudan and the Second Boer conflict. For most of the war he had been Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, however, in June of 1918 he was promoted to take over command of the 59th Division, and on August 28th he was moved laterally to become GOC of the 62nd.⁷⁴⁵

The 185th and 186th Brigades were both used on the 29th to cover attacks by the 3rd Division which had replaced the Guards Division on the 62nd's left flank earlier that morning. On the night of the 29th, it was decided at Corps headquarters that the 186th and 185th Brigades would attack the villages of Vraucourt and Vaux-Vraucourt and the high ground to their east. This was common practice in the Third Army at this time - in place of prepared set-piece operations, attacks were now improvised with little time given to reconnaissance and detailed planning. Orders generally were given verbally or scribbled on pages torn from a book.⁷⁴⁶ The attacks went off without a hitch. As one battalion war diary recounted: "At zero [5:00am] the leading platoon advanced, keeping well under the barrage. Very little opposition was met with and several prisoners were captured before the first objective was

⁷⁴⁵ National Library of Scotland, 'Alymer Haldane Diary, August 28th 1918'

⁷⁴⁶ Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 27

reached.”⁷⁴⁷ After capturing the first objective, the remaining two platoons pushed forward and passed through to the second objective. Again no heavy opposition was met until nearing the final line when a hostile machine gun opened up, but a Lewis gun quickly silenced it, and the consolidation was done without enemy interference. This attack demonstrated the high level of skill the 62nd Division possessed – indeed, historian Peter Simpkins points to this attack as an example of how effective British units were by this time in comparison to their allegedly superior Dominion brethren.⁷⁴⁸ The attack across the entire 62nd front met with similar success.

On the night of the 30th, it was decided that the following day the 185th Brigade (with the 186th in support) would spearhead an attack on Vraucourt and Vaux-Vraucourt, a complement of eight tanks aiding them. That night, in preparation for the assault, the 62nd Divisional artillery heavily shelled the villages. Zero hour was set for 5:30.

The attack on the 31st started out promisingly, with the first objectives being seized by 7:30. However, when the 1/5th Devonshire Battalion tried to push into Vaux village, they found the enemy putting up stiff resistance. “Owing to the speed of the Tanks and the infantry being disposed in insufficient depth to mop up enemy machine guns in the village”, the Battalion reported, “a further advance was not found possible.”⁷⁴⁹ As the after-action report acknowledged, the 2/20th London

⁷⁴⁷ WO 95/3086, ‘5th Duke of Wellington’s Regiment: Narrative of Operations, August 24th to September 2nd 1918’

⁷⁴⁸ Peter Simpkins, “Co-stars or Supporting Cast? British Divisions in ‘The Hundred Days’. 1918” *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 63

⁷⁴⁹ WO 95/3071, ‘Narrative of Operations, August 24th-September 3rd’

Battalion tried to push forward in the afternoon, however they again met heavy German machine gun fire, and a mêlée ensued:

“It appeared that soon after the opening of the attack the company [D] had been held up by a nest of machine-gun posts which had caused many casualties. Almost the first to be killed had been the O.C. Company, Captain Jones. The posts had been knocked out, largely as a result of the gallantry and initiative of the Lewis gun section commanders. Ten of the machine guns had been captured, but the delay and casualties had inevitably broken up the company.”⁷⁵⁰

Similar results befell the other two companies, and it was decided to halt operations for the day. The 3rd Division on their flank had achieved their objectives, and the 186th Brigade bombed their way down the German trench systems to link up with them. The 187th Brigade was ordered forward and relieved the 186th Brigade that night.

The 8th West Yorks attacked the village again on September 1st and quickly cleared it. However,

“Clear of the village ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies made a gallant effort to reach Vaux Trench, but again a murderous machine-gun fire swept the line of advance and all ‘A’ and ‘B’ captured was the small trench running parallel with Vaux trench. At this period the bravest men in the German Armies were the machine-gunners, who held their ground with marvelous tenacity.”⁷⁵¹

The IV and VI Corps would be launching a major attack the following day. The 187th Brigade would be leading the attack for the 62nd Division, with the 185th and 186th in reserve and prepared to move forward in support.⁷⁵²

⁷⁵⁰ W.R. Elliot, *The Second Twentieth: The history of the 2/20th London Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale & Olden limited, 1920), 221

⁷⁵¹ Everard Wyrall, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War, 1914-1918: A History of the 14th, Prince of Wales’ Own (West Yorkshire Regiment.) and of its special reserve, territorial and service Battalions in the Great War of 1914-1918*, Volume II (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, 1926), 319

⁷⁵² WO 95/3071, ‘Narrative of operations August 24th - September 3rd’

At 5:30 on September 2nd, the 187th Brigade pushed through the 185th and 186th Brigades' lines. A hostile barrage of considerable intensity came down almost immediately after zero hour. This was probably due to the enemy being alerted by the 5th Division's attack on their right having gone in at 5:15. The first objective was quickly reached despite the usual heavy enemy machine gun fire, but when the 187th Brigade promptly began to move on to its second objective, the attack began to falter. The 3rd Division on their left had not achieved its objectives, having also met with strong opposition,⁷⁵³ so that the left flank of the 187th Brigade had to become a defensive flank. As the 2/4th Yorks and Lancs regimental history explained:

"The troops in the front wave were soon almost surrounded, but the survivors held the line they had reached with great gallantry till night came. The 9th/D.L.I. came into action in the afternoon and cleared Vaulx Wood. When this was accomplished the situation in the front became less critical. The line was established along the high ground which the front troops had held on to so tenaciously."⁷⁵⁴

Orders were received from Whigham for all battalions in the 62nd to stop their advance and consolidate. However, their final objective became unreachable because the 3rd Division was not able to push forward. Though the objective was not gained, the day had been a success for the 187th Brigade. As they had advanced over 1500 yards, they captured five hundred prisoners, three field guns, and over seventy machine guns.⁷⁵⁵ The following morning, the 2nd Division took over the 62nd Division's frontage, and the latter withdrew to the VI Corps' support area. Between August 24th and the 3rd of September, the 62nd Division had captured over 1,450

⁷⁵³ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁴ Reginald Bond, *The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914-1919 Volume III* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Company Limited, 1929), 995

⁷⁵⁵ WO 95/3071, 'Narrative of Operations, August 24th - September 3rd'

prisoners, and inflicted substantial losses on the enemy, but at the heavy cost of 2,423 casualties.⁷⁵⁶

Overall, the 62nd's role around Mory had been a success. They had not been able to achieve all of the objectives given to them on August 30th, however, and this had consequences for the whole VI Corps' front. The reason was pure exhaustion, as the battalions could only suffer so many casualties before they became ineffectual. There was no magic solution to getting through the German machine gun defences and the battalions had only a narrow frontage on which to attack. When the assault was restarted the following day by a fresh battalion, the village of Vraucourt was quickly overrun and consolidated. The 62nd Division was not alone in being unable to carry all of its objectives immediately, as demonstrated by the 3rd Division on the 1st and 2nd of September, whose failure to seize all of its goals undermined the 62nd's own efforts. The 62nd had suffered heavy casualties in the week of fighting which clearly demonstrated the intensity of the combat. Nevertheless, they had advanced a considerable distance, keeping up with the Corps, capturing a significant number of German prisoners and killing many more. The attack across the whole of the Third Army's front, as demonstrated by the 62nd Division's performance, was now largely undertaken in a loosely organized and ad hoc fashion. As Haig had told Byng:

“... the most resolute offensive is everywhere desirable. Risks which a month ago would have been criminal to incur, ought now be incurred as a duty. It is no longer necessary to advance in regular lines and step by step. On the contrary, each division should be given a distant objective, which must be reached independently of its neighbor, and even if one's flank is thereby exposed.”⁷⁵⁷

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ WO 158/227, 'Third Army Operations, August 22nd 1918'

Through the confusion and series of grinding operations outlined, the 62nd Division had been successful in adapting to this new form of semi-open warfare. And they would have only a brief respite before they were forced back into the fighting.

They spent the next five days re-grouping, absorbing reinforcements and resting, but on September 8th, the VI Corps commander called Major-General Whigham and told him that it had been decided that his Division should begin preparations to attack Havrincourt.⁷⁵⁸ There was some irony here, as during the battle of Cambrai, the 62nd division had taken Havrincourt, but it had subsequently been recaptured by the German forces. The Third Army was given the task of piercing the Hindenburg Line and the 62nd Division would be the unit to carry out this assault. The 62nd was supposed to attack on the 11th, but after some discussion, it was decided that the attack would be delayed a day. Whigham argued that the earlier date would leave the 62nd unprepared.⁷⁵⁹ Given an extra day, Whigham sent his battalion and company commanders to look over the ground they would be assaulting while engineers taped the routes they would be crossing. They also consulted with senior officers of the 37th Division, as they would be attacking through the latter's line. While the 62nd's front was not opposite Havrincourt, it was felt by the Corps (commanded by Lieutenant-General Aylmer Haldane) that with their past knowledge of the sector, Whigham's men would have an extra advantage attacking the objective.

On the evening of the 10th, the 62nd Division marched into position. As Lieutenant I.R.S. Harrison remembered, "... at midnight we set north to Havrincourt

⁷⁵⁸ National Library of Scotland, MS 20250, 'Haldane Diary, September 8th 1918'

⁷⁵⁹ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division Narrative of Operations - Havrincourt, Part 1'

- a nineteen mile march. The guides naturally lost us, but we were eventually to arrive I believe about 3:00 am.”⁷⁶⁰ Corps wanted them to commence their assault at midday, as it would help with nearby operations, but Whigham felt that this was too risky, and after scouting the line with Lieutenant-General Haldane, the latter agreed that it would be impossible for the attacking troops to remain hidden during daylight and zero hour should be pushed back to 5:25. The 62nd Division operation would be carried out over challenging terrain, and involve assaulting the Hindenburg position directly.⁷⁶¹ The attack would be carried out by two brigades - the 186th on the right and the 187th on the left, with the pioneer battalion attached to the former and the 185th Brigade held in reserve. One company of the Divisional Machine Gun Battalion would be allotted to each assaulting brigade, with the remaining two being kept in divisional reserve for barrage work along with two more machine gun companies drawn from the Guards and 2nd Divisions. The Divisional machine guns in tandem with artillery would lay down a barrage in front of the infantry. No tanks would be available, however, the artillery support for the 62nd Division was impressive – its infantry would be advancing under barrages from twenty-seven brigades of field artillery.⁷⁶²

The operation commenced at Zero hour and the 187th and 186th Brigades surged from their lines, hugging the creeping barrage. The 187th Brigade’s attack started off shakily; the enemy had put down his own barrage on their line, catching

⁷⁶⁰ IWM, IRS Harrison, *Mainly about myself from January 1917 to April 1919*, unpublished memoirs, 64

⁷⁶¹ James Edmonds, *The Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1918: Volume 4* (London: Shearer Publications, 1947), 471

⁷⁶² WO 95/3077, ‘62nd Battalion Machine Gun Company War Diaries, September 11th 1918’ and Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 30

troops as they formed up. However, this did not affect the initial success of the assault, and the 187th reached their first objective by 6:20. This was due in large part to the enterprise and courage of Sergeant Calvert. Boggart's Hole was a heavily fortified section of defensive line, and intense machine gun fire from this position, as well as enfilade fire, was holding up the British troops. With no thought for his life, Calvert single-handedly rushed this position and began bayoneting the machine gun teams. "This feat so dumbfounded the enemy that the whole crew was captured without further resistance, four officers and eighty other ranks, besides machine guns and six trench mortars, being taken."⁷⁶³ Deservedly, Sergeant Calvert was awarded the Victoria Cross.

By 10:50 am the 187th Brigade was reporting that their final objective had been taken, though at heavy cost. The war diaries do not give a detailed description of just how taxing the attack was over such challenging terrain, stating only that:

"At 12 noon the situation as reported by the right battalion showed our troops to be definitely on the final objective, a very good piece of work being done by the support company, the officer in charge seeing all officers of the leading company had become casualties pushed through and gained the objective, the village being now reported clear and our troops in touch with the 186th Infantry Brigade on its final objective."⁷⁶⁴

Although the 187th had enjoyed considerable success, the link with the 186th Brigade was tenuous.

At zero hour, the 186th Brigade's attack started off much better than the 187th's, and they quickly reached their first objective by 6:30. Encountering

⁷⁶³ Everard Wyrall, *The Story of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919* Volume II (London: John Lane and Bodley Head Limited, 1921), 49

⁷⁶⁴ WO 95/3089, 'War Diary of the 187th Brigade, September 12th 1918'

considerable opposition, they moved through the village of Havrincourt, and in fact the inevitable German machine gun defence stopped the lead battalion.⁷⁶⁵

Nonetheless, the follow-up battalions continued to push forward, and by midday were consolidating their final objective, the forward defences of the Hindenburg system. Divisional headquarters decided to see if the 186th could push deeper into the Hindenburg defences, and sent the 9th Durham Light Infantry to try and carry out this task, but after suffering severe casualties, the battalion was forced to retire. The war diary of the 186th Brigade simply states that “the 186th began to consolidate and dig in at Havrincourt.”⁷⁶⁶ The 187th Brigade received a message at 4:15pm to take over the entire Havrincourt front.⁷⁶⁷ Early that evening, the German forces, using fresh troops, launched a powerful counter-attack against the 62nd Division’s line, heavily bombarding the village and as far west as the Canal du Nord:

“... Lewis gun and machine gun fire was at once opened and the attack was completely broken up before reaching our line. A flight of low flying enemy airplanes also took part in this counter-attack... Great credit is due to the 2/4th Hampshire regiment and the right of the 187th Brigade for beating off this counter attack and retaining their position intact. From prisoners captured during this attack and on the following day, it has been ascertained that a fresh Division (20th Hanoverian) had been brought up to restore the situation and had carried out the attack with portions of two regiments.”⁷⁶⁸

The 62nd Division had achieved impressive results on the 12th. They had attacked an enemy that occupied a heavily fortified line, one of the strongest on the Western Front, and who were committed to the fight. Lieutenant-General Haldane, the VI Corps commander, extended hearty congratulations to the officers and men of

⁷⁶⁵ WO 95/3085, ‘War Diary of the 186th Brigade, September 12th 1918’

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁷ WO 95/3089, ‘War Diary of the 187th Brigade, September 12th 1918’

⁷⁶⁸ WO 95/3071, ‘62nd Division Narrative of Operations - Havrincourt Part 1’

the 62nd Division, pointing to the capture of Havrincourt under circumstances of considerably greater difficulty than on the first occasion they carried it out was a fine feat of arms of which the Division might well be proud.⁷⁶⁹ Haldane subsequently wrote in his memoirs, apparently forgetting that Whigham had convinced him to change many aspects of the attack,

“It happened that with the Corps this time was the 62nd Division which, with the help of tanks, had captured the canal many months earlier, but which place had changed hands at the time of the March attack. This division was now ordered to retake the village, but no tanks could be spared for the attack. Their absence was not looked upon with favour, and moreover it was uncertain, as the German barbed wire would be penetrable or not. As the commander of the division, a brigade of which would carry out the attack, had misgivings regarding the prospect of success, I did what I could to give him confidence... As it turned out, the fears proved to be groundless, the wire was not so impenetrable as imagined, and the division won its objective and added a feather to its cap. On the day following its success, Sir Douglas Haig appeared at my camp and expressed his satisfaction with [what] the Sixth Corps had been doing.”⁷⁷⁰

As a new divisional commander, Whigham deserves credit for standing his ground with Haldane and altering the plans given to him so that the 62nd Division was not pushed foolishly forward without adequate preparation. The counter-attack by a fresh German division confirms how important this sector of their defences was to them. The 62nd Division had advanced a mile, and while there was other success on the Third Army’s front, not all of the British divisions reached their final objectives that day.⁷⁷¹ Once again, the 62nd had shown that it could be relied upon to carry out tasks assigned to it.

⁷⁶⁹ WO 95/3072, ‘Special order of the day, September 12th 1918’

⁷⁷⁰ Aylmer Haldane, *A Soldier’s Saga: The autobiography of General Sir Aylmer Haldane* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons LTD., 1948), 358

⁷⁷¹ James Edmonds, *The Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, Volume 4: 1918* (London: Shearer Publications, 1947), 472

Apart from the shelling, the evening of the 12th passed relatively quietly. At 7:00 am the following morning the Germans launched another major counter-attack to re-take Havrincourt, and for the next three hours the enemy heavily shelled the village and sent waves of infantry against it. During this time communication broke down and it was very difficult for the Brigade and Divisional headquarters to follow events. By 10am the attacks were mostly beaten off, but the German forces had succeeded in pushing into the village cemetery. The lost ground was fought over throughout the day and was finally recovered that evening. Elsewhere, the Division wisely decided “not to continue the attack further but to hold the ground captured.”⁷⁷² The 13th had been a day of very bitter defensive fighting for the 62nd Division as the Germans tried to evict the British from their recently won positions.

The 62nd Division’s success at Havrincourt had obtained for the Third Army the necessary jumping off line to punch through the Hindenburg Line. At 8:30pm that evening, the VI Corps issued an order for the relief of the 62nd Division by the 3rd Division two days hence. On the 14th of September there was some small-scale but stiff fighting.⁷⁷³ That day, the 185th took over the 187th’s front and during the night the Germans launched still another substantial counter-attack that was also repelled.⁷⁷⁴ As planned, the next day the 62nd Division was relieved from its frontline position.

The 62nd Division had performed admirably at Havrincourt. They had led the vanguard of the VI Corps against a thoroughly prepared and determined enemy,

⁷⁷² WO 95/3086, ‘5th Battalion Duke of Wellington Regiment, September 13th 1918’

⁷⁷³ W.R. Elliot, *The Second Twentieth being the History of the 2/20th Bn. London Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden limited, 1920), 238

⁷⁷⁴ WO 95/3071, ‘62nd Division Narrative of Operations - Havrincourt, Part 1’

achieved their objectives, and then held on through a series of powerful German counter-attacks. General Byng concurred, and in a letter to Haldane was profuse in his praise of the 62nd's work. As the Army commander reminded the Corps commander:

“I set the 62nd Division a very hard task yesterday, but the importance of it was so great that I determined to try it. The Division has done it, and done it splendidly, and so I write to let you know how proud I am of their achievements.”⁷⁷⁵

The 62nd Division had never operated more effectively. The War diaries of the various engaged battalions consistently stressed that machine guns – both Lewis and Vickers - were a fundamental part of their success: “Free use was made both Rifle and Lewis Gun Fire and the enemy were engaged at greater range than formerly”⁷⁷⁶ and

“Machine guns should be pushed well forward to assist the Infantry with direct fire on reaching their objective. One Section S.E. of Havrincourt after inflicting heavy casualties with their machine guns during the enemy counter-attack on the 13th September, used their rifles and revolvers in close fighting and maintained their position intact. Without the close support of this section the Infantry might well have been driven back.”⁷⁷⁷

Once again, the tactics, and specialized employment of infantry weapons, paired with effective artillery support that had been stressed in the 62nd Division's training over the last fourteen months, demonstrated their effectiveness in the attack on the village and its environs.⁷⁷⁸ During the operation in and around Havrincourt between the 12th and 15th of September, the 62nd Division captured 884 prisoners and

⁷⁷⁵ WO 95/3072, 'Special Order of the Day, September 12th 1918'

⁷⁷⁶ WO 95/3085, '186th Infantry Brigade - Remarks on Operations between August 23rd and 15th September 1918'

⁷⁷⁷ WO 95/3071, 'Narrative of Operations - Havrincourt, Part 1'

⁷⁷⁸ See the training pamphlet War Office, General Staff: "Instructions for the training of Divisions for Offensive Action" printed December 1916, 66

numerous artillery pieces and machine guns, suffering 1,537 casualties in the process.⁷⁷⁹

After their operations at Havrincourt, the 62nd Division moved to the Gomiecourt area to rest, refit and train. On the 17th, Major-General Whigham received instructions that the First and Third Armies intended to continue operations on their respective fronts. These would broadly focus on the Canadian Corps' forcing the Canal du Nord in the Inchy sector (on the First Army front) and subsequently pushing through Bourlon Wood to advance on Cambrai. The XII Corps would support the Canadian Corps by crossing the canal east of Moeuvres and capturing a section of the Hindenburg Support Line. The VI Corps, to which the 62nd Division was attached, would also assault a section of the Hindenburg Support Line and try to force a crossing at the Canal de St. Quentin east of Marcoing, with the IV Corps attacking the same objectives in tandem.⁷⁸⁰ It was decided at the Corps conference that after the 3rd Division achieved its objectives and took the village of Ribecourt, the 187th and 185th Brigades would push forward. Zero hour was set for 5:20 am on the 27th of September. On the 25th and 26th, the 62nd Division completed its move forward to the staging area just behind the 3rd Division's lines.⁷⁸¹

As in its previous attacks earlier in the month, the 62nd would be advancing through division lines. The difference with the attack on the 27th was that the 3rd Division had not secured the jump-off line by the time the 62nd's Brigades were in position to commence their assault. The 187th and 185th Brigades expected to be

⁷⁷⁹ WO 95/3071, 'Narrative of Operations - Havrincourt, Part 2'

⁷⁸⁰ WO 95/3085, 'Narrative of Operations - 62nd (West Riding) Division, September 25th- October 1st 1918'

⁷⁸¹ Ibid.

joined in the attack by a brigade of the 3rd Division to force the Germans out of the village of Ribecourt. The 2/4th KOYLI became intermixed with companies of the 4th Royal Fusiliers of the 9th Brigade. The fighting was brutal and costly.⁷⁸² The 2/4th Yorks and Lancs and the 2/4th KOYLI tried to push beyond the village to the Hindenburg Support Line, but their attack had begun to falter. The 127th Brigade of the 42nd Division was supposed to have taken the high ground to the right of the 62nd Division's lines, but they were not able to carry out this task and that left the route which the 187th Brigade had to follow under heavy machine gun fire. Also the delay in clearing Ribecourt had caused the forward battalions of the 187th Brigade to lose contact with the creeping barrage. Whigham had little choice but to halt the whole operation until the right flank of the 42nd Division's sector could be dealt with.⁷⁸³

The misfortune of the day, the 42nd Division's inability to keep pace with the 62nd Division, was the result of how battles were being fought by the BEF in the autumn of 1918. To keep the German forces on their heels, attacks were being quickly launched without the time and thorough practice-training that had been the norm for Vimy Ridge and Cambrai in 1917. Inevitably operations were commenced without troops and their officers being fully aware of all the terrain features or where the bulk of the enemy's defensive positions were situated. If a division could not keep up in these frenzied operations, there was little time to re-organize, communicate and come up with new arrangements. Rather, the attack would continue to be pushed forward with the hope that the individual battalions and

⁷⁸² WO 95/3089, '187th Infantry Brigade, Narrative of Operations, 25th September - 1st October 1918'

⁷⁸³ Ibid.

brigades could come up with workable solutions on their own. Lieutenant-General Haldane had nothing but praise for the 62nd Division during this operation, writing in his diary the following day: “The 62nd Division, are doing well... Two companies of 8/W. Yorks reached outskirts of Marcoing yesterday at noon, in spite of fire from flank where the IVth Corps ought to have been. They showed great dash (i.e., the Yorkshire men, not the IVth Corps!)”

The 186th Brigade’s attack was eerily quiet compared to that of the 187th, its battalions advancing quickly up the valley in the almost complete absence of hostile shelling. By 10:00am they had reached their objectives and were waiting for the 187th Brigade on their right flank to move forward and shore up the lines. However, with the failure of the 187th to achieve its objectives that day, the 186th could not push forward any further. Instead, it was decided at 7pm to continue the attack the following day, employing the 186th and 187th Brigades in conjunction with the 2nd Division. As had been the practice since the Second Battle of the Marne, each attacking brigade would receive a company from the divisional Machine Gun Battalion with the two other companies remaining under Divisional command to provide enfilade fire on the flanks. Zero hour was set for the following morning at 6:30.

The objective for the 186th Brigade was the occupation of the village of Marcoing, which necessitated crossing a flooded section of the Canal du Nord. The 8th West Yorkshire Battalion (185th Brigade), attached to the 186th Brigade for this action, crossed the Canal and fierce fighting began to take place.⁷⁸⁴ The narrative of

⁷⁸⁴ WO 95/3085, ‘186th Brigade, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918’

the operations does not fully communicate how complicated and difficult their task was, merely commenting that “on approaching the Canal, considerable enemy Machine Gun and Rifle fire was opened from the railway East of it, but, after some difficulty, this was overcome, and Captain Cottam, with a small party, crossed the Canal and established a post on the eastern bank.”⁷⁸⁵ In the early morning, with the bridging of the Canal and the intense fighting on its banks carried out by the 8th West Yorks, the path to Marcoing was open. The 8th West Yorkshire Battalion suffered heavy casualties to achieve this, but their success exemplified the complicated tasks battalions in the 62nd Division were now able to carry out routinely.

The 186th Brigade Headquarters received a message that the commander of the 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion could not find his unit’s jumping off point in the dark:

“The battalion moved off [at] 4:30 am. It was an extremely dark night, the men were heavily laden and tired and it was very difficult to keep a path. Time was very short for the long distance covered and it was not possible to reach the ‘starting off point’ east of Flesquières until 7.am.”⁷⁸⁶

Instead, the attack on Marcoing was carried out by the 2/4th Hampshire Battalion whose men had been positioned 2000 yards behind the jump off line, and were rushed forward to reach it for Zero hour and the commencement of the rolling barrage:

“The Dukes did not arrive and therefore the 2/4th had to go forward, with the disadvantage of being a mile behind the barrage. However, the battalion set off at a brisk pace. A (Captain Cave) and C (2Lt. Young) leading on a two-platoon front, and

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ WO 95/3086, ‘5th Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment, September 28th 1918’

by great exertion overtook the barrage just short of the first trench taken... .The passage of the canal proved difficult as machine-guns and rifles behind the embankment beyond had to be silenced...."⁷⁸⁷

The 2/4th eventually fought their way across the waterway and took the village of Marcoing, consolidating it soon after. The 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion then pushed passed through them on its way to the Marcoing Switch:

“Our troops attacked with vigour and found a battalion of the enemy in Marcoing Switch and Marcoing Support who greatly outnumbered the attacking troops and were themselves preparing to attack. Our right company captured their objectives and were immediately supported by the remaining platoons (40 strong) they claimed 300 prisoners and 9 machine guns.”⁷⁸⁸

The enemy, however, launched a counter-attack that night and retook it. During this counter-attack, the 186th Brigade was trying to get all their prisoners back to divisional rear:

“It had not been possible to provide adequate escorts for the large number of prisoners (450) and when the counter-attack from the left developed, these prisoners commenced to pick up rifles and to open fire into our men on the rear. This caused considerable confusion, but the reserve platoon on the line of the railway restored the situation.”⁷⁸⁹

The 186th Brigade was not able to hold Marcoing Support trench and fell back closer to the village itself. Brigadier-General Burnett again received orders that they would be continuing the assault the following day with the 187th Brigade, under an artillery barrage starting at 7:30 am.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁷ C.T. Atkinson, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment 1914-1918 Volume II* (Glasgow: University Press Glasgow, 1952), 376

⁷⁸⁸ WO 95/3086, '5th Duke of Wellington (W.R.) Regiment, September 28th 1918'

⁷⁸⁹ WO 95/3085, '186th Brigade Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918'

⁷⁹⁰ WO 95/3075, '312 Brigade Royal Field Artillery War Diaries, September 27th 1918'

Crossing the Canal du Nord and taking Marcoing was an exceptionally difficult maneuver, made even more arduous when one of the attacking battalions had to be rushed forward, unexpectedly playing a leading role in the attack, a role for which officers and men alike had no preparation whatsoever. Lieutenant-General Haldane wrote to Whigham on the 28th:

“Please convey to the survivors of the two companies 8th West Yorkshire Regiment my high appreciation and admiration of their initiative, dash, and gallantry in pushing up to the outskirts of Marcoing yesterday in spite of all of the obstacles. It is by resolution and bravery much as they displayed, that great victories have been won in the past history of the British Army. I heartily congratulate the whole battalion yourself, and your splendid Division of the inspiring incident in front of Marcoing.”⁷⁹¹

Despite the now ‘boilerplate’ form of such congratulatory messages, Whigham and his officers and men had earned the praise. Earlier in the war, such improvisations would have made a bad situation worse and surely ended in disaster, indicating how proficient the 62nd Division had become as a fighting formation in a matter of months.

The 187th Brigade’s night attack on September 28th at 2:30 am surprised the German forces, and the entire 62nd Division began to push forward.⁷⁹² By 8:06am, the 187th Brigade had captured all of its objectives and begun to dig in. Later in the morning, despite the 42nd Division on its right reporting that they had also achieved their objectives, the 187th Brigade ominously continued to report active fire coming from the German lines opposite the 42nd Division. The 187th Brigade faced counter-attacks throughout the day, and in the evening, the 5th KOYLI launched a small

⁷⁹¹ WO 95/3071, ‘62nd Division, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918’

⁷⁹² WO 95/3089, ‘187th Brigade, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918’

operation and took the heavily defended Marcoing Copse, suffering bloody losses in the process.⁷⁹³ Later, the 187th Brigade received orders that they would be again attacking the following morning.

According to this plan, the 187th and 186th were to take the Green Line, which represented the final objective for them during this operation against the Hindenburg Line. The 187th Brigade would take the village of Masnières and the 186th to their left would attack the village of Rumilly. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the New Zealand Division would advance on the right of the 187th Brigade, and would push through the 42nd Division. The New Zealanders' attack started off poorly:

“Almost as soon as our barrage opened, the enemy's heavy artillery bombarded the obvious assembly place in Couillet Valley... Nearer to La Vacquerir machine gun fire became heavy, and the leading Canterbury companies cleared the ruins only after a lengthy and considerable struggle.”⁷⁹⁴

While the New Zealand Division's attack met with more success in the afternoon, at Zero hour, when the 187th Brigade attacked, its right flank was still not secured. There was a dense fog hanging over the battlefield and it was due to the excellent work of company commanders that the attacks did not become completely disoriented. Nevertheless, confused messages between the assaulting Battalions (2/4th KOLYLI and the 5th KOYLI) and Brigade headquarters, in addition to the fog, made it hard to know what was happening on the 187th Brigade's front. By 1300, however, it was clear that the Brigade had successfully taken its objectives.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹³ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918'

⁷⁹⁴ H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916-1919* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs Limited, 1921), 496

⁷⁹⁵ WO 95/3085, '186th Brigade, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918'

The 186th Brigade's attack started off better than the 187th's, and little opposition was met until the men reached Rumilly Trench, whereupon German machine gun fire became very heavy. This trench was overcome after a short but intense fight, and the leading companies surged on to Rumilly Support Trench. The left and right flanks, under heavy machine gun and rifle fire, tried to force their way in, however, the 2nd Division on the 186th's left flank had not advanced as far as the 186th Brigade, leaving the latter's left flank "... very much exposed."⁷⁹⁶ The 186th Brigade tried to seal off its left flank, capturing three German machine guns in the process, but was unable to advance further once the enemy began to launch counter-attacks. Though the 186th would try to push attacks towards Rumilly and across the Canal, they were repulsed. The 186th Brigade, arguably through no fault of its own, had failed to achieve its objectives.

Both assaulting brigades of the 62nd Division were let down by the divisions on their flanks, whose own failures made their task that much more challenging. Great credit was due to the 187th Brigade for achieving its goals despite this. The 186th Brigade, let down by the slow progress of the 2nd Division, fell just short of its final objective. This was a major problem, as they discovered that afternoon, for the area in front of them was very heavily defended and an innovative approach would be needed to capture it without incurring heavy casualties.

That night it was decided that the 185th Brigade, which had not seen action yet during the assault on the Canal du Nord, would be brought up from reserve to clear the village of Rumilly. The 2/20th London, 1/5th Devonshire, and the 8th West

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid.

Yorkshire Battalions crossed the canal at 3:30 am. They were heavily shelled while moving into position at the Rumilly Support Trench and suffered casualties. In a surprising move that would have serious consequences, the 2/20th Londons attacked the village frontally across shallow trenches, instead of attacking from the flank. The German machine guns had plenty of targets as they raked this exposed area, with predictable results. Pinned down, "... it was impossible [for them] to move without having casualties."⁷⁹⁷ The 8th West Yorkshire and 1/5th Devonshire Battalions also became caught in the maelstrom of German bullets, and the whole attack in front of Rumilly collapsed .

Knowledge of what lay ahead would have been appreciated by Brigadier-General Viscount Hampden (CO of the 185th Brigade) and Lieutenant-Colonel W. St. A. Warde-Aldam (CO of the 2/20th London Battalion).⁷⁹⁸ Perhaps because of the time line given them by their Divisional or Corps commanders, they were rushed to plan an attack along a new route, which likely led to the failure. The planning lacked originality and was tactically unsound, and could have been predicted to break down as it did. On the first of October, the New Zealand Division and the 3rd Division passed through the 62nd Division's ranks, finally capturing the village of Rumilly that had thwarted the 62nd's efforts. A New Zealand history recounts that in taking the village they had encountered a certain amount of opposition, "... but this was speedily overcome," and goes on to say that "... as expected was strongly garrisoned with at least forty machine guns, and heavy fighting ensued before it was

⁷⁹⁷ W.R. Elliot, *The Second Twentieth being the History of the 2/20th Bn. London Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden limited, 1920), 247

⁷⁹⁸ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918'

cleared.”⁷⁹⁹ During the 62nd's operation at the Canal du Nord and the Hindenburg Line, the 62th Division had captured 1,519 prisoners and inflicted substantial casualties on the Germans, at the cost of 1705 of its own men killed or wounded.⁸⁰⁰

Once again, the 62nd Division had achieved most of its goals and shown with the crossing of the Canal du Nord that it was a very capable component of the BEF. As shown, this had not been without challenges, including the failure of the flanking divisions to reach their goals which posed serious challenges for the 62nd's operations. That said, the 62nd Division itself fell short of a few objectives, making the flanking divisions' goals that much more difficult to achieve. It had not been able to take Rumilly, which fell the following day to a two-division attack (the 62nd had attacked with a single brigade two days in a row). German opposition during the last days of September was stiff, with the result that the 62nd Division was having a harder time achieving its goals, something that had not been the case two weeks earlier at Havrincourt (although it is worth remembering that every attack during the First World War was challenging). By this time, the 62nd had suffered 5,605 casualties in the month of September; almost a third of its strength, and a far higher proportion of its infantry. They had been fighting well during September, but the Division was exhausted, which necessitated them being removed from the line.

During September and October, the 62nd Division would receive 5316 reinforcements which had to be rapidly integrated into depleted units almost as the

⁷⁹⁹ W.R. Elliot, *The Second Twentieth being the History of the 2/20th Bn. London Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden limited, 1920), 247

⁸⁰⁰WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Narrative of Operations, September 25th - October 1st 1918'

fighting raged on.⁸⁰¹ The Division was moved into the VI Corps' reserve on October 1st and spent the coming days reorganizing its units, properly absorbing the new drafts and carrying out training to bring the masses of inexperienced men up to speed. On October 15th, Major General Whigham, in consultation with Corps commander, Lieutenant General Haldane, was ordered to force a crossing of the Selle River, capture the town of Solesmes and the nearby village of St. Python, and establish his forward units 3000 yards further northeast. The attack was to be launched on the early morning of the 20th.⁸⁰² This was a welcome novelty in the Last Hundred Days, some time to prepare for an attack. The 186th Brigade was tasked with forcing a crossing of the Selle and taking the town of Solesmes, and the 185th Brigade would continue to push past it to take St. Python as well as the final objective just east of it, while the 187th Brigade would be in divisional reserve and the 42nd and Guards Divisions would attack separate objectives on either flank. The 62nd Division used its time well, scouting out the area and formulating a plan.

Indeed:

“It was possible by means of a large scale mosaic photograph of Solesmes and large scale maps to allot definite objectives to each platoon of the Hants and York & Lancaster Battalions in their task of clearing the town. This arrangement proved of the greatest value and avoided confusion which would almost inevitably have otherwise arisen.”⁸⁰³

Although time for such concerted planning had not been available to the 62nd Division during its operations in September, it was definitely needed now as the

⁸⁰¹ WO 95/3072, '62nd Division, Reinforcements received during September and October'

⁸⁰² WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, H.Q. War Diary, 15th October 1918'

⁸⁰³ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Operations round Solesmes, 19th/20th October 1918'

attack would be carried out at night. Needless to say it spoke highly of the standard of infantry training to be able to carry out such a complex operation.

Brigadier-General Anderson's divisional artillery faced some difficult problems in drawing up a suitable barrage plan:

"... not only because it had to be accurately coordinated with the barrages of the Guards Division and the 42nd Division on each side of us, but also owing to the fact that large numbers of French civilians were known to be living in both the town and the village, and we were naturally anxious to put them into as little danger as possible. It was finally decided not to direct any artillery on Solesmes itself, but only on its suburbs on our side of the river, and on the village of St. Python."⁸⁰⁴

Reconnaissance showed that the average width of the stream was twenty feet bank to bank, with a depth of four to six feet, so it was a significant obstacle. The 42nd Division on the right flank (south of Solesmes) had already forded the river and set up posts about 800 yards away from the town. All three battalions of the 186th Brigade would be attacking abreast. Some battalions would have footbridges (constructed by the 62nd's Pioneer Battalion) and others would be forced to wade across the river before moving into the town. Zero hour had been set for 2:00 am. The 5th Duke of Wellington Battalion, which had also constructed footbridges across the Selle, surged ahead following the rolling barrage that had been well laid down, "... the men [attacking] with a will and dash beyond all praise, tackling little opposition with great initiative and resources."⁸⁰⁵ By 4:00 am, all Battalion objectives had been taken. Using Lewis guns to provide suppressing fire, they had quickly gained their objectives, the Battalion suffering a mere ten casualties.⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰⁴ A.T. Anderson, *War Services of the 62nd West Riding Divisional Artillery* (Cambridge: 1920), 105

⁸⁰⁵ WO 95/3086, '5th Duke of Wellington War Diary, October 20th, 1918'

⁸⁰⁶ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Operations round Solesmes, 19th/20th October 1918'

The 2/4th Hampshire Battalion had been tasked with clearing the northern half of the town and began to carry out their task at 2:00 am. Intense machine gun and trench mortar fire, as well as the inevitable difficulties encountered in fighting through a built-up area, slowed their advance significantly. However, by 7:15, they had gained all of their objectives and had only suffered 24 casualties.⁸⁰⁷ The 2/4th York and Lancs had been assigned the southern half of the town, which they attacked at 2:15. Upon entering, they also came under heavy machine gun fire. Sergeant J.B. Daykins and his men in B Company met vicious resistance and had to bomb their way down one of the streets. On numerous occasions Sergeant Daykins rushed machine gun nests single-handedly. As the *London Gazette* wrote of his action:

“The tactical effect of this astounding deed was considerable. ... Although it appeared, owing to the previous strenuous opposition, almost certain death, [it] undoubtedly saved many casualties to the remainder of is company, and enabled the village to be carried at an earlier hour of the operations.”⁸⁰⁸

Daykins received the Victoria Cross for his actions, the second awarded to a soldier of the 62nd Division. By 5:00 am the 186th Brigade had gained the town and all of its objectives, and the second phase of the battle, utilizing the 185th Brigade, was now ready to be launched.

The 185th Brigade’s attack would encompass the village of St. Python and the high ground overlooking Romeries. It would be a two-battalion assault consisting of the 2/20th London and the 8th West Yorkshire Battalions. They moved through the 186th’s newly consolidated positions and launched their attack at Zero hour which had been, set for 7:00 am. The 2/20th quickly reached their final objective, and they

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁸ *The London Gazette*, 6th January 1919

spent the rest of the day consolidating their position under constant German artillery fire that accounted for substantial casualties.⁸⁰⁹ The 8th West Yorkshire Battalion met much stronger opposition. As Lieutenant Harrison wrote later about the day:

“A splendid barrage was put down... we passed through D Company at 8:30 which was correct to the minute. Then we came to a brook, which turned out to be much wider and deeper than appeared from the map. Numerous bullets were splattering near it making things more unpleasant. I had to cross first so jumped in the middle and floundered to the other side unharmed.”⁸¹⁰

Brutal fighting continued and the 8th West Yorkshire men did not carry their final objectives until 10:30 am.⁸¹¹ The Germans shelled the 186th position throughout the day and launched a series of counter-attacks, the biggest coming against the 2/20th London Battalion late in the afternoon, but all were repulsed. On the 22nd, the 62nd Division moved back into Corps reserve.⁸¹²

During the battle for Solesmes, the 62nd Division was carrying out very complex tasks. Almost all of the war diaries for the brigades and battalions involved mention the excellent work undertaken by the artillery, stressing that this was one of the key factors permitting them to ford the river and enter the town so rapidly. Brigadier-General J.L.G. Burnett took pains to send a congratulatory note to the head of the 62nd field artillery, Brigadier-General Anderson:

“As I know that you people like to know what the infantry who attacked thought of the barrage: both the left attacking battalion and the one which took the railway station wish me to say that it was the most accurate barrage which they

⁸⁰⁹ WO 95/3071, ‘62nd Division, Operations round Solesmes, 19th/20th October 1918’

⁸¹⁰ IWM, IRS Harrison. *Mainly about myself from January 1917 to April 1919*, unpublished memoirs, 72

⁸¹¹ WO 95/3085, ‘185th Brigade War Diary, October 20th 1918’

⁸¹² WO 95/3071, ‘62nd Division, Operations round Solesmes, 19th/20th October 1918’

have yet to advance under. Would you please convey our thanks to the men behind the guns who so largely contributed towards the success.”⁸¹³

Excellent artillery work had become a standard of the BEF by 1918, and the 62nd Division was no exception. The 62nd's facility in small-unit infantry tactics was also impressively displayed during this battle. However, it was obvious that the Germans were in retreat, and diehard resistance, though it was encountered on occasion, was no longer the order of the day. The German machine gunners were notorious for their tenacity, but otherwise increasing numbers of German soldiers seemed to have lost the stomach to continue the fight. The war diaries of the 62nd Division relate that after moving into Corps reserve it went back into training. However, in reality the troops were given a rest, and “training” often consisted of football and rugby matches much enjoyed by the men. During this operation, the 62nd Division killed an unknown number of German soldiers and captured 699, suffering 452 casualties of their own.⁸¹⁴

On the 30th of October, Major General Whigham received notification that the VI Corps was going to continue the advance on the 4th of November in the Avesnes-Maubeuge-Mons sector as part of the First, Second and Fourth Armies' continued push towards the Franco-Belgian frontier. The attack on the VI Corps' front at Maubeuge was going to be carried out by the 62nd Division on the right and the Guards Division on the left. The New Zealand Division, on the 62nd's right, would

⁸¹³ A.T. Anderson. *War Services of the 62nd West Riding Divisional Artillery* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Limited, 1920), 107

⁸¹⁴ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Operations round Solesmes, 19th/20th October 1918'

also be participating.⁸¹⁵ Happily, the 62nd Division again had been given the luxury of some time to plan for this new operation.

On November 2nd and 3rd, the 62nd Division relieved the 2nd Division and took over the line in front of the village of Ruesnes. The 186th and 187th Brigades' Zero hour for the launch of their attacks was set for 5:30. The former was attacking on a one-battalion front, and once the lead battalion reached its objective, a second would leap frog it. As the 2/4th Hampshire Battalion surged forward from their jump off line:

“The left company almost at once met opposition from a strongpoint in the copse. This strong point was overcome, after sharp fighting, the crews of the enemy machine guns being killed or captured. The Ravine was strongly held, but the opposition was overcome, and some machine guns, 1 officer, and about 80 O.R prisoners were captured.”⁸¹⁶

Although both Brigades experienced some hard fighting throughout the day, the assault had gained all of their objectives by 6pm.

That night it was decided that the 185th Brigade would advance through the lines of the 186th and 187th Brigades with the Guards and New Zealand Divisions, both first-class assault units, once again on its left right, respectively. Similarly to the previous day, the 185th Brigade encountered intense machine gun fire, but these posts were largely overcome by the adroit tactical action of battalion commanders.⁸¹⁷ Between the 4th and the 7th of November the Division continued to advance in this semi-open warfare style, with the only thing slowing them being errant German machine gun nests that had to be silenced by what were now routine

⁸¹⁵ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Battle of Maubeuge, November 4th- November 11th 1918'

⁸¹⁶ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Battle of Maubeuge, November 4th- November 11th 1918'

⁸¹⁷ Ibid.

(if still dangerous) infantry methods. The 62nd Division's last operation was against the ancient fortress town of Maubeuge. Attacking with the Guards Division on the 9th, they quickly captured it. During this final six-day advance they inflicted substantial losses on the enemy including the capture of another 913 prisoners while suffering 899 casualties themselves.⁸¹⁸ Only, three days into this operation, General Whigham had written this special order of the day:

“The 62nd (West Riding) Division has in three days advanced 9 ½ miles capturing eight villages, over 800 prisoners, several guns including two 8” inch Howitzers, and a large number of machine guns. During this advance, troops of 8 enemy Divisions, comprising elements of no less than 17 regiments, have been encountered and defeated. This splendid achievement, in spite of the miserable weather conditions of the last two days, could not have been attained but for the constant care and forethought of Brigade and Unit commanders and above all, the indomitable resolution and endurance of the men under their command. The enemy is retreating everywhere in front of us and the Division has been called on to maintain this same relentless pressure for a little while longer to hasten his ultimate defeat. In thanking all ranks for the steadfastness and loyalty by which I have always been supported and for their wonderful indifference to hardship, I know I can rely on them once more to respond to the call and to add yet again fresh luster to the glorious records they have already won.”⁸¹⁹

The 62nd Division's war was now over, surely none too soon for the exhausted infantry.

During the Victory Campaign, the Division fought in a number of the difficult operations. Though not always successful in its initial assaults, the 62nd always managed to secure the objectives given to it, demonstrating in the process that it could be consistently relied upon to carry out what were still very challenging tasks despite the decline of the enemy's capabilities. Like all of the divisions in the Third Army, the 62nd was fighting a series of smaller battles for which, with rare exception,

⁸¹⁸ WO 95/3071, '62nd Division, Battle of Maubeuge, November 4th- November 11th 1918'

⁸¹⁹ IWM, 10751, Misc 19, 371

they had had little time to prepare. Unlike at Cambrai this was not the set-piece 'bite and hold' style of warfare. With no time for rehearsals, and little for rest or resupply, the 62nd Division was rushed forward time and again to attack in order to deny the Germans any respite. Written orders were few and communication both within the Division and especially with Corps and Army staffs was extremely poor. During these last battles the 62nd's success was due to tactical effectiveness at the battalion, company and platoon level. These units, from commanders to junior officers, NCOs and ordinary infantry, repeatedly demonstrated that they were able to overcome difficult obstacles and fight their way forward. Capable officers led the 62nd Division's units. Whigham took over in the middle of the Victory Campaign and led effectively, drawing on the excellent staff he had inherited from Braithwaite. Well-trained and battle-seasoned soldiers were able to use their initiative, and skilled weapons specialists were masters of their tactical roles, these being the very elements that the 62nd Division had consistently focused on in its training. However, the 62nd's victories did not come without a serious price. During its participation in the Victory Campaign, it suffered a staggering 7915 casualties, accounting for fully 34% of all casualties it had suffered during the Great War.⁸²⁰ If including the 4000 casualties incurred in July, when the Division's offensive operations actually commenced, the losses amount to almost the entire division having to be replaced in the span of only four months. Even against a 'beaten' foe, none of the remarkable victories that the 62nd Division achieved came easily.

⁸²⁰ See the 62nd Division's casualty reports for August, September, October, and November WO 95/3072

Chapter 9: The 4th Division and the 'Last Hundred Days'

In the last year of the war, the 4th Division, now deemed by the Germans as one of twenty-seven 'elite' BEF divisions, restructured its battalions and brigades like the rest of the Canadian Corps, and took part in the deadly fighting of the Last Hundred Days.⁸²¹ Unlike the 62nd Division it entered these climactic engagements fully rested, not having fought a major battle for ten months and with a significant continuity of leadership, many of the senior leadership positions having been held by the same officers since the Somme in 1916. The 4th Division had spent this hiatus fine-tuning its fighting units in accordance with Canadian Corps (and BEF) training doctrine. The proving ground for the 4th Division would be the Victory Campaign, or as Canadians generally refer to it, the 'Last Hundred Days,' where much of the operational decision-making would be taken at Corps level, and the 4th Division would just have to execute those plans. With only a few missteps, Watson's Division would do this competently, once again demonstrating that it had matured into a veteran fighting formation, very much the equal of other divisions within the Canadian Corps.

For ten months between the Battles of Passchendaele and Amiens, the 4th Division (and Canadian Corps) would not take part in any major fighting. For the 4th Division this was a time to train and make some leadership changes at the battalion, brigade and senior staff level. After Passchendaele, Major-General Watson decided to replace Edward Hilliam, commander of the 10th Brigade. As related in Chapter 6,

⁸²¹ Bundesarchiv-Militararchiv, 'News about the British Army - Number 4, January 7th 1918'

the 10th Brigade had mis-stepped, both at Lens and Passchendaele, and the blame (for Lens especially) had much to do with Hilliam continuing to push the attack forward when sound judgment would have dictated otherwise. His hot-tempered manner of command unnecessarily undermined his working relationship with his subordinates, a situation made worse by the fact he came across as “too ‘English’ in his approach, always a potential source of difficulty when British officers worked with Canadians.”⁸²² As historian Patrick Brennan concludes, after Watson gave him the option of mending his ways or transferring back to the British army, a stern lecture from Currie decided the issue.⁸²³ It was first suggested that Brigadier-General Embury take over the 10th Brigade, however, because he had not served on the Western front for fifteen months and frankly was an officer whose social and political skills outweighed his military ones, he had been detailed to the 5th Division in England, and was deemed unsuitable.⁸²⁴ Instead, Hilliam’s replacement was Brigadier-General Ross Hayter. Though raised in Canada, and a graduate of Royal Military College, Kingston, he had served as a British regular and was, at the time of his promotion, the GSO 1 of the Canadian 1st Division. Lieutenant-General Currie, knowing that Hayter was on the verge of being given a brigade in the BEF, pressed Watson to take him, with the recommendation that Hayter was “an extremely valuable officer ... [and] the Corps could very ill afford to lose him.”⁸²⁵ This was not

⁸²² Patrick Brennan. “Major-General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War,” in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great war Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 127

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ MG 30, E 100, V. 2, ‘Arthur Currie papers, General Correspondence 1915-1918, 10th November 1917’

⁸²⁵ MG 30 E100, V.2, ‘Arthur Currie papers, General Correspondence, 1915-1918, Currie to Perley, 10 November 1917’

the only change in the top ranks of the 4th Division - GSO 1 Edmund Ironside was also to leave the 4th Division. Ironside had been with Watson, helping create and lead the 4th Division, from the outset. Now, he had been appointed commandant of the BEF's Machine Gun School in France. Ironside wrote in his diary that "... 'Dave' Watson, the General, treated me very well indeed and I could not have had a more happy and successful two years than I had with the Canadians."⁸²⁶ However, in 1946, he confided to a friend a rather different story, asserting that "... I always wished that we had had a better man than [old?] David Watson (who) ...couldn't stand the responsibility of command."⁸²⁷ Regardless of how Ironside, a man of notoriously strong opinions, viewed Watson, or the extent to which he had initially compensated for the latter's command inexperience, in 1918, Watson would have the opportunity to prove how competent he had become. Watson's diary, usually full of descriptions of people he worked with, was very quiet about Ironside's departure, his entry for December 26th merely stating that: "Ironside said good bye as he goes on leave in the morning and then he is going to take over command of the Machine Gun School at Camieres."⁸²⁸ Watson was a masterful handler of men, and understood that there was no room on a successful team for individualists, no matter how talented. Perhaps he was not disappointed at Ironside's departure, knowing the latter had mentored an excellent Canadian replacement, Brigadier-General Édouard Panet, a Canadian Permanent Force officer who had completed the British staff college course before the war. Panet had been with the 4th Division from

⁸²⁶ Edmund Ironside, *High Road to Command: The Diaries of Major General Sir Edmund Ironside 1920-22* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), 71

⁸²⁷ IWM, 92/40/1, 'Field Marshall Lord Ironside Papers, Ironside to Lindsey, 23rd October 1946'

⁸²⁸ Military Museums, 'Watson Diary, December 26th 1917'

its infancy as Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General, and was respected as a very capable staff officer.⁸²⁹

In the shake-up of the 4th Division leadership after Passchendaele, Lieutenant-Colonel John Warden, who had raised the 102nd (North British Columbia) Battalion in 1915 and had led them ever since, also chose to depart. Warden was a capable and aggressive battalion commander, someone who was a plain talker and admired by his men.⁸³⁰ However, he was not impressed by either of his commanding officers, Watson and Brigadier-General Odlum. Warden, who was part of Odlum's 11th Brigade, asked for a transfer out of the Canadian Corps because he was no longer prepared to work with either man. According to Warden, Odlum refused because it would have forced Currie to launch an embarrassing investigation into the running of the 4th Division. Frustrated, he took his complaint directly to the Corps commander, fulminating in the New Year's meeting that Odlum and Watson were "Mercenary Men" who used their commands to gain fame. Odlum, he argued was the more clever of the two, "a most avaricious decoration hunter" bent on gaining Watson's job, with the latter being "not smart enough to know it."⁸³¹ Currie's, Watson's, and Odlum's papers do not discuss these incidents, but Warden soon after got his wish and was transferred out of the Corps. The regimental history of the 102nd merely notes that on the 11th of January:

"... he left to take up special service in Mesopotamia. Though he anticipated his early departure his move orders came in so suddenly that he had no time to take

⁸²⁹ RG 150, Acc. 1992-1993/166, 'E de B Panet file'

⁸³⁰ Patrick Brennan. "Major General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War," in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 128

⁸³¹ MG 30, E 192, 'Lt Colonel J.W. Warden Papers, Diary, January 2nd 1918'

farewell of his men on parade.... The departure of the colonel came as a great surprise to most of the Battalion and was genuinely regretted.”⁸³²

On the 19th of January, Major Fred Lister, who had been second in command of the Battalion, was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and given Warden’s job.

After Passchendaele, rather glossing over some difficulties and facts, Currie wrote to the Premier of Ontario that:

“The Year 1917 has been a glorious year for the Canadian Corps, we have taken every objective from the enemy we started for and have not had a single reverse. Vimy, Arleux, Fresnoy, Avion, Hill 70 and Passchendaele all signify hard fought battles and notable victories. I know that no other Corps has had the same unbroken series of success. All of this testifies to the discipline, training, leadership and fine fighting qualities of the Canadians.”⁸³³

Currie’s roseate view aside, the Canadian Corps and the 4th Division had suffered significant casualties throughout the year. A major restructuring of how the Corps would operate during the coming campaign was about to be undertaken. In early 1918, the BEF was altering its own establishments because of chronic manpower shortages. While Canadian Corps did not yet face the same reinforcement problems, British changes would affect the Canadian 4th Division and the Canadian Corps as a whole.

The War Office approached the Canadians about reducing the size of their battalions to match the new British regime, and use the men freed to form an additional division. As well, the War Office strongly suggested that the 5th Division be brought from England to France. The two measures could justify the creation of a First Canadian Army, comprising two corps and six divisions each consisting of nine

⁸³²L. McLeold Gould, *From B.C. to Baiseux: Being the Narrative History of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion* (Victoria: Thos. R. Cusack Presses, 1919), 77

⁸³³ MG 30 E100, V.1, ‘Currie Papers, Currie to Sir William Hearst, 14th November 1917’

battalions, instead of their current twelve. After considering its merits, Currie rejected this idea, and conveyed his opposition to the Minister of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada. In talks with politicians and senior British generals, he vigorously proposed instead to break up the 5th Division in England and amalgamate its troops into the existing four divisions in France, with each of their battalions receiving an extra hundred men. He wrote to Prime Minister Robert Borden and to the Overseas Ministry defending his plan: "This would increase the fighting strength of the Corps by 1200 more men than the new organization gives, without the increase in staffs, employed men mentioned above, Battalion Headquarters and transport."⁸³⁴ Under Currie's scheme, which was in fact adopted, the Canadian 4th Division would now include 12,000 infantrymen, 4,000 more than the 62nd Division. Overall, the Canadian 4th Division would have almost 22,000 troops compared to the 62nd Division, which under the latest reshuffling of BEF establishments was limited to around 15,000, a difference which should have had a significant impact on their respective combat capabilities.

As well, the machine gun organization of the Canadian Divisions changed in early 1918. As with the 62nd Division, their machine gun companies were amalgamated into a single battalion, consisting of 64 Vickers guns. However, during the March offensive, the Canadian Corps would add to this establishment the Vickers guns from the 5th Division as well as acquiring additional ones, so that the 4th Canadian Division would have at its disposal ninety-six heavy machine guns overall. Thus, the 62nd Division's Machine Gun Battalion of sixty-four Vickers guns

⁸³⁴ Ibid.

and 1,039 men was almost a third smaller than the 4th Division's complement of ninety-six heavy machine guns in a machine gun battalion of 1,558 men,⁸³⁵ or an impressive one-and-a-half-fold superiority in firepower.⁸³⁶ When factoring in each division's additional field artillery and light machine guns, the Canadian 4th Division and the Canadian Corps as a whole would be entering March 1918 with significantly greater firepower than any similar unit in the BEF.⁸³⁷

In the winter of 1917-1918, the Canadian Corps were deployed to the north of Vimy Ridge. For January and most of February, the 4th Division, holding its old stomping grounds, the Lens sector, took part in minor raids and had constant artillery exchanges with the German forces opposite them. Neither the Germans nor the Canadians, however, launched any large-scale attacks.⁸³⁸ During their time at the front, the 4th Division, like all divisions in the BEF, had to take care of repairing and expanding the forward trench systems. It would seem that the 10th Brigade was very thorough in January in attending to these tasks, its war diary proudly noting that

⁸³⁵ Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 178 and WO 95/3077, '62nd Battalion Machine Gun Company War Diary, February 1918'

⁸³⁶ Historian Denis Winter writes that in 1918 the Canadian divisions had one automatic weapon for every thirteen soldiers. The British on the other hand had one for every sixty-one soldiers. Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2004), 148. The Lewis gun in post-Somme platoon fighting tactics was ubiquitous. All infantry units in the 62nd Division and 4th Canadian Division highlight the value of Lewis Guns in dealing with strongpoints in 1917 and 1918. This is also seen with the use of the Vickers Machine gun for barrage work. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that additional automatic weapons were a distinct advantage.

⁸³⁷ Artillery in the Canadian Corps had also increased significantly. Bill Rawling wrote that by 1918 the Canadian contingent had 12.6 guns for every 1000 infantrymen, a doubling of the guns available to the Canadians in 1915, and a higher standard than smaller British divisions maintained. Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 170

⁸³⁸ *The Story of the Fourth Canadian Division 1916-1919* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden Limited, 1919),

“the Divisional commander is exceedingly pleased [with] the amount of wiring done [which] has surpassed all expectations.”⁸³⁹

At the end of February, the 4th Division’s diary mentions the “usual training by all units,”⁸⁴⁰ however, analyzing the Battalions’ war diaries sheds more detail on what this ‘usual’ training consisted of. The 47th Battalion war diary for the 1st of March provides a typical example: “Training was carried out in the morning. All N.C.O.s were under the R[egimental] S[argeant] M[ajor] for half an hour. One company carried out Musketry at the ranges, Another bombing, and the remainder were engaged in parade ground work. Specialists carried on under their own syllabus.”⁸⁴¹ Though their respective focuses differed at times, both the 62nd and the 4th Canadian Divisions were carrying out broadly similar training, and the days were broken down in generally the same fashion.⁸⁴²

The German March offensive was launched at the end of that month and found the Canadian Corps still holding its position immediately north east of Vimy Ridge. The 4th Division and the Canadian Corps as a whole did not suffer any major attacks in their sector; the few hostile raids were easily beaten back. However, the German and Canadian forces carried out ferocious artillery duels, and harassing machine gun fire was very active during the last days of March and the early days of April. As British Divisions on the Canadian Corps’ flanks moved to help stop the German forces to the south, the Canadian Corps began to take up and defend more and more of the line. On March 28th, a composite brigade led by Victor Odlum

⁸³⁹ RG9, V. 4902, ‘10th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary, January 1918- Appendix A’

⁸⁴⁰ RG9, V. 4860, ‘4th Division War Diary, end of February to Mid March 1918’

⁸⁴¹ RG9, V. 4940, ‘47th Battalion War Diary, March 1st 1918’

⁸⁴² RG9, V. 4905, ‘11th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diaries, February 26th 1918’

consisting of the reserve battalion from each of the three brigades was rushed by light railway to the vicinity of Mont St. Eloi. However, this composite brigade was a short-lived enterprise and the battalions returned by the 29th to the 4th Division's ranks.⁸⁴³ By March 31st, the 4th Division was manning a front of 5,500 yards. Less than two weeks later, the Canadian Corps as a whole was holding what amounted to one fifth of the entire BEF frontage.⁸⁴⁴ The German March offensive largely bypassed the Canadian Corps, and the 4th Canadian Division continued to hold the line until May 7th when the 51st Division relieved them. The great battles were waged elsewhere, and April passed without any serious incidents, though the shelling of Canadian lines remained intense.

From the end of May through June and most of July, the 4th Division's war diary has a single entry for the day: "training as usual." One officer in the Canadian Corps expanded on the training being carried out at this time:

"These were tactics which called for an exceptional degree of daring and resource in the infantry. Front line men had not only to close with the enemy in circumstances of comparative isolation - that is, without the moral support of the old close order formation - but they had to think and co-operate skillfully with the other troops engaged alongside them; there could be no more blind charging. 'Cannon fodder' had to give place to a high type of disciplined manhood, if attacks, under new methods, were to carry the day in the face of determined enemy."⁸⁴⁵

The way the 4th Division meant to deal with the problems of crossing no man's land and engaging the enemy was very similar to what the 62nd Division's training was

⁸⁴³ RG 9, C-1, Folder 120-file 10- 16, 'Interim Report on the Operations of the Canadian Corps during the year 1918'

⁸⁴⁴ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 396

⁸⁴⁵ Hugh Urquhart, *History of the 16th Battalion (the Canadian Scottish) Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932), 262. Urquhart served both as a battalion commander and a staff officer at Currie's headquarters.

attempting to instill. Drawing on the standard BEF training manuals as guides, the 4th Division, using specialist groups such as Lewis gunners, rifle grenadiers and bombers, would seek out weak points in the enemy lines and penetrate them. They would then push past any strong points that had not been destroyed by artillery which would be dealt with later by mopping-up units. Infantry companies and platoons in both divisions were trained to advance to a designated line where they would stop and consolidate their gains while a follow-up unit would leapfrog them and carry on the attack to their designated line, thus maintaining the momentum of the assault.⁸⁴⁶ By June, the focus emphasized smaller unit training - the company, platoon and section tactics which were common across BEF Divisions. The platoon was given special focus with an emphasis on aimed rifle fire, which was important since Lewis gunners, rifle grenadiers, and bombers all faced serious ammunition re-supply problems in sustained combat.⁸⁴⁷ In the words of Lieutenant-General Currie:

“As soon as the Corps was out of the line intensive training in open Warfare Offensive Tactics was begun. General Staff, G.H.Q., were publishing from time to time translations of captured German documents bearing on the latest tactics, and supplemented those by ‘Notes on recent fighting’ dealing with the lessons of the fighting then in progress, both from the point of view of the offense and defence. These documents were carefully studied and to a large extent inspired our training.”⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁶ RG 9, V. 4234, Folder 30, File 2, ‘12th Canadian Brigade Training Instruction No 1’ This was in essence what Paddy Griffith described as: “... a miniature version of all the functions of infantry, artillery and the Machine Gun Corps”. Paddy Griffith, “The extent of Tactical Reform in the British Army” *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 18

⁸⁴⁷ The Lewis guns were also notoriously prone to jams which could not be repaired by their crews in the heat of battle, a possibility that had to be factored into infantry training. RG9, V. 4860, ‘4th Division War Diary-June 10th-1918’

⁸⁴⁸ RG 9, V. 4958, folder 120, file 10- 16, ‘Interim Report on the Operations of the Canadian Corps during the year 1918’

The 4th Division, unlike the 62nd Division, would be able to bring more firepower forward with them, given the much larger divisional machine gun battalion and the fact that each infantry platoon would have two Lewis gun teams.⁸⁴⁹ As with the 62nd Division, the 4th Canadian Division gave all of their soldiers a general education on how to use the latter in case casualties were inflicted on the Lewis gunners, as well as focusing on bombing and other specialists' trades. The 4th's war diaries do mention that particular attention was paid to working with tanks and airplanes.⁸⁵⁰ Furthermore, Major General Watson's diaries in June and July are full of instances of his inspecting different battalions and brigades as they practiced their attack schemes. In a typical entry, Watson recorded: "This morning I went up to Bomq area and watched 2 Battalions of the 12th Brigade carryout operations with Tanks. It was very interesting."⁸⁵¹ Obviously Brigadiers MacBrien, Hayter and Odlum were also heavily engaged in overseeing the sophisticated training that was being constantly carried out at all levels of the 4th Division during these weeks of 'inactivity'.

In his article "The Myth of the Learning Curve: Tactics and Training in the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1916-1919," historian Mark Humphries points out that the 4th Division carried out a large training exercise on the 5th of July in conjunction with two brigades from the 3rd Canadian Division.⁸⁵² This exercise was to reinforce the training that had been going on in the last two months but on a larger scale, and although there was not much innovation in the tactics being used

⁸⁴⁹ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004), 148

⁸⁵⁰ RG9, V.4860, '4th Division War Diary, July 1918- Appendix A'

⁸⁵¹ Military Museums, 'Watson Diary, June 8th 1918'

⁸⁵² Mark Humphries, "The Myth of the Learning Curve: Tactics and training in the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1916-1918" *Canadian Military History*, Volume 14, Number 4, Autumn 2005, 25

by the troops (as was to be expected by this stage of the war - the doctrine being employed was largely drawn from 1916 and early 1917 and had proven its effectiveness), it demonstrated that the troops were preparing for a major assault after a relatively long rest period.

The 10th and 11th Brigades also held large individual training exercises. In the exercises the assault troops would push to the furthest objective with following units mopping up, while artillery and trench mortars played important supporting roles. After laying down its opening barrage, the artillery would shift its focus onto enemy strong points, while machine guns would provide covering and suppressing fire. The relatively recent emphasis on coordinating the infantry with airplanes and tanks added new depths to the training not seen in earlier exercises. The tactics stressed by MacBrien were how the infantry should advance and overcome machine gun defences, the fostering of initiative at the platoon level, infiltration, and liaison between the different arms. None of these concepts were cutting edge or even especially new, however, they were tried and tested and had proved their worth over years of fighting on the Western Front. In essence, highly mobile platoons under the flexible command of their own leaders, coupled with overwhelming artillery support, were felt to be the key to winning the battlefield.⁸⁵³

No doubt to the satisfaction of the junior officers and other ranks, much of the 4th Division's time spent in reserve was also used for sport, in preparation for the Canadian Corps-wide athletics day planned to celebrate the 51st anniversary of Confederation. The 4th Canadian Division had ample time to rest and train, and they

⁸⁵³ RG 9, V. 4909, File 331, '12th Canadian Brigade Tactical Scheme No. 3'

were going to need it, for from early August onwards the 4th Division was going to be constantly engaged in its heaviest, and in human terms most costly, fighting of the war.

On July 29th, the four Canadian Divisional commanders were personally informed of the upcoming attack that the Corps would launch on General Rawlinson's Fourth Army front. In the interest of maintaining absolute surprise, they were instructed not discuss the news with their subordinate commanders.⁸⁵⁴ The Canadian Corps left the First Army and without their own troops knowing the final destination, began to move southward in complete secrecy.

The Canadian Corps would be attacking on a front that extended southeast of Amiens from Moreuil to Ville sur Ancre - about 20,000 yards. On the Canadian right, the First French Army would be attacking and on the left flank, the Australian Corps, with the British 3rd Corps on the Australian flank. The major thrust of the attack would be provided by the Canadian and Australian Corps in the centre. The Canadian Corps would have three objectives: the Green, Red and finally Blue Dotted Lines. The Blue Dotted Line was not necessarily deemed the final objective as it was hoped that the offensive would completely break through German defences, thus enabling a substantial cavalry force to continue to push forward.

The distance to the Blue Dotted Line was approximately 14,000 yards. The general scheme of the attack was to rapidly overrun the German forward area to a depth of about 3,600 yards (the Green Line) under an annihilating artillery barrage. At that point, the 4th Division would pass through the 3rd Division on the right of the

⁸⁵⁴ Ian M. Brown, "Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-Piece Attack, 1917-1918" *The Journal of Military History* 58 (July 1994), 431

Canadian Corps' front.⁸⁵⁵ The 4th Division's attack would not have the artillery support the other three Divisions had, as the range of the heavy and field artillery only reached the Green Line. Though all efforts would be made to move batteries of field artillery forward, past the Green Line, gun support inevitably would be less reliable for this part of the attack. A bright point for the Canadian Corps was that the German forces being attacked were relatively weak. The Second German Army, commanded by General von der Marwitz, had not recovered from the March offensive and on top of that they were suffering an outbreak of influenza, with the result that many of their units were well below strength, having suffered significant losses to both enemy action and illness.⁸⁵⁶

At 4:20 A.M. on the 8th of August the Canadian Corps, in conjunction with the Australian forces, launched their attack. As an exuberant Brigadier-General Andrew McNaughton, the Canadian Corps Counter Battery Staff Officer, wrote to his wife that morning: "4:20 - they are off, well together and on time, all along the front. A terrific racket. The Bosche [sic] is getting his now. Long live Canada."⁸⁵⁷ The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions all advanced rapidly, aided by early morning mist which helped mask their movement across open ground, gaining their objectives and quickly reaching the Green Line. At 7:20, the 4th Division was allowed to cross the Luce River and join in the general advance. Road congestion from the heavy traffic of German prisoners and Canadian wounded led to the 4th Division's attack being

⁸⁵⁵ MG 30 E100 V. 22, 'Arthur Currie papers, The Advance to Victory, August 1918'

⁸⁵⁶ RG 9, V. 4812, 'Canadian Corps General Staff War Diary, Intelligence on German Divisions engaged, September 1918'. For one example of how weak the German units were, see the account of the German 27th Division in United States Army General Staff G-2 *Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German army that participated in the War 1914-1918* (Washington: Government Printing Press, 1920), 372

⁸⁵⁷ John Swettenham, *McNaughton*, Volume I: 1887-1939 (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1968), 143

launched at 12:40 instead of 12:10. The 4th Division quickly left its Red Line sector, passed through the 3rd Division, and continued the push forward. The 11th Brigade was attacking on the right and the 12th Brigade on the left, with the 10th Brigade serving as Divisional reserve.

The 11th Brigade's attack would prove a mixed bag, and modest support of ancillary arms and poor communications beyond the 11th Brigade's control would lead to some of the failures suffered. However, there were also mixed messages being sent by Brigadier-General Odlum which would amplify command and control problems for the attacking troops. Added to this was the position's recent reinforcement by two regiments of the 1st German Reserve Division, something that had not been anticipated by either the Canadian Corps or the 4th Army's intelligence section.⁸⁵⁸

The 11th Brigade's 54th and 102nd Battalions began to move forward, but soon came under heavy machine gun fire, and the three tanks operating with the Brigade were quickly put out of action. Eric Grisdale, a private in the 54th Battalion, related the fate of the tanks:

"There was three tanks came up, supposed to be with us, and they came up single file, one behind the other, and there was an anti-tank gun there which knocked over the whole three of them. Why, if they'd come up in a row one of them would have got the tank- the gun- before, but he just cleaned out three of them there and one of our scouts was in one of the leading tanks...- one of the three- the reason being that he would know the patches on [our] shoulders and so that he could stay with our battalion. He was the only one that got out of the tank, out of those three tanks [that] burnt up... and he happened to crawl over a little bit and it was rather peculiar that I should see him there and there was blood shooting out of his neck and he was in pretty bad shape...."⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁸ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2004), 324

⁸⁵⁹ RG 41, V. 15, '54th Battalion, 11th Brigade, 4th Division'

The entire area across which the 11th Brigade was attacking was being swept by machine gun fire, with the heaviest concentration coming from the woods in the northwestern sector.⁸⁶⁰ The cavalry that was to have supported the advancing battalions had dismounted because of the withering fire. Lieutenant Colonel A.B. Carey, the 54th's commanding officer, seeing where the main opposition lay, tried to get the troopers to advance with his battalion, but they refused to do so. He gathered his reserve platoons and rushed the forest, which was not their objective (but their sister Battalion, the 102nd's,). The 102nd Battalion, however, had been held up in their approach to the forest by the heavy machine gun fire. Using the burning tanks as a smokescreen, Carey and his reserve platoons stormed the forest. As Victor Odlum, the 11th Brigade's commander, subsequently wrote:

“... I made a reconnaissance and decided that the position could be forced from the left. I looked for the O.C. 54th Battalion intending to give him instructions to throw his weight to the flank, but I found he had already formed the same opinion and acted. Taking his reserve company he threw it against the wood, leading the assault himself.... Out of this wood, which was only carried at considerable cost, 16 machine guns were later taken, some by the 54th Battalion and the remainder by the 102nd (in whose woods it actually lay)... .As soon as it fell, the 54th made rapid progress and quickly established itself along its final objective, where it dug in.”⁸⁶¹

The 102nd, because of the help delivered by the 54th, was able to take the remainder of the woods by 430pm, capturing 159 prisoners.

At this stage of the fight, the right of the 11th Brigade was suffering severely from enemy machine gun fire. The Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade, which was

⁸⁶⁰ RG9, V. 4942, file 445, '54th Battalion War Diary Operations August 8th'

⁸⁶¹ RG9, V. 4906, file 321, '11th Brigade War Diary, Narrative of Operations August 8th and August 9th 1918 - Appendix 11'

also supposed to be supporting the advancing troops, had itself been stymied by the enemy fire because of a lack of artillery support. Odlum decided that the 87th and 75th Battalions would push past the 54th's and 102nd's lines. However, that evening Odlum was told by Divisional officers that the 12th Brigade had had greater success than the 11th Brigade, and were far in advance of his battalions. Thus, the 11th Brigade needed to straighten out its line before advancing to its final objectives.⁸⁶²

The 12th Brigade had had a successful attack, and Brigadier-General MacBrien wrote that it was due to the leadership of his assaulting battalion commanders, especially the commanders of the 78th and 72nd Battalions who had had to clear a particularly strongly defended wood. That evening, with the 11th Brigade unable to advance all the way to the Blue Dotted Line, MacBrien had to use his reserve battalion, the 85th, to build in a defensive position on his right flank. Meanwhile, the 75th Battalion tried to push forward:

“... through the town of Beaucourt ... an officers reconnaissance was then made forward of the 54th Battalion and it was found that cavalry and motor machine guns were unable to advance further up the Roe Road and the motor machine gun officer refused to make another attempt in conjunction with our attack.... It was then discovered that the French were not in Fresnoy and our right flank encountered intense machine gun fire from this direction and from the woods and outskirts of Le Quesnel. Our advance line was subjected to a very heavy whizz-bang barrage”⁸⁶³

In the face of withering machine gun fire, and lacking support, the 75th advance faltered, then stopped, and runners were sent to Brigade to request aid.

Despite the problems, for his part Major-General Watson was pleased with the overall results gained by the 4th Division on the 8th of August, writing: “What a

⁸⁶² RG9, V. 4909, ‘Canadian Infantry Brigade Report: Llandovery Castle Operation 8th August-13th August’

⁸⁶³ RG9, Volume 4906, ‘11th Brigade War Diary, Report on Action of August 8th and 9th. 1918’

memorable day this is, and a book could be written on it ... I never saw so many prisoners as taken today. They came walking down the road by hundreds.”⁸⁶⁴

That evening, Odlum wisely chose not to push his 87th and 75th Battalions forward in darkness. The latter, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Harbottle, launched its attack the following morning at 4:30 am, and pushed through Le Quesnel, the town that had evaded them on the 8th. By 5:30 they had taken it, and continued to press ahead in conjunction with the 87th Battalion to take the Blue Dotted Line, their assigned task from the previous day. This accomplished, the 3rd Division leap-frogged the 4th Division and carried on its attack as scheduled early that afternoon.⁸⁶⁵

The 11th Brigade was the only brigade in the Canadian Corps’ that failed to achieve all of its objectives on the 8th. Odlum, however, attributed the failures to a variety of factors: the delay in jump-off time and a partial breakdown of communications and the ‘failures’ of the Cavalry and the Motor Machine Gun Brigade, but he was especially critical of his battalion commanders for being too closely involved in the actual fight:

“I commend their actions, but I recognize that in so committing themselves they sacrificed the power of making full use of auxiliary weapons. I myself had already delegated that power to Battalions and had thrown the affiliated units out of my hands... The result was that neither battalion nor brigade commander could act effectively.”⁸⁶⁶

⁸⁶⁴ Military Museums, ‘Watson Papers, Diary, August 8th 1918’

⁸⁶⁵ Fortescue Duguid, *History of the Canadian Grenadier Guards: 1760-1964* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Company, 1965), 194

⁸⁶⁶ RG9, Volume 4906, file 321, ‘11th Brigade War Diary, Narrative of Operations August 8th and August 9th 1918 - Appendix 11’

But Odlum was being unfair, for earlier in his report he specifically congratulated Carey for leading from the front and making difficult decisions in action that required real-time knowledge. In fact, there were a number of factors that made the 11th Brigade's attack challenging, including the limited support of the artillery, and the ancillary arms of the Canadian Cavalry and the Motor Machine Gun Brigades refusing to move forward. Odlum had also put himself at the very front of the attack, scouting out where his Battalions should advance next. As the Brigadier-General, he should have been farther back so he could be more responsive to his battalion commanders. It was also a poor excuse to say that the auxiliary weapons were out of his hands. As the commander of the force, if he had seen a need for them, though it would have taken time, he could have easily employed them. In the end it would seem that Odlum had sent mixed messages to his battalion commanders about leading from the front, but also staying well enough behind their attacking lines so that they could be responsive to the general situation as it developed. During this battle, the reality was that Odlum's convoluted and contradictory command style was one of the driving forces behind the 11th Brigade's failure to achieve all of its objectives, and the report he wrote after the fact merely diverted blame onto others.

The 12th Brigade, on the other hand, had carried out its tasks well. As the war diary of the 72nd Battalion outlines: "The success which followed in the engagement can only be attributed to the magnificent manner in which [the men] pressed forward with platoon and sectional rushes supported by covering fire."⁸⁶⁷ These were precisely the tactics that the 4th Division had been practicing over the previous

⁸⁶⁷ RG9, V. 4943, file 450, '72nd War Diary August 8th 1918'

months and they had come together well in this operation. MacBrien also emphasized that credit was due to the strong leadership displayed by his battalion commanders in making timely tactical choices on the battlefield.

Other than the action taken by the 75th Battalion on August 9th, the 4th Division did not play a leading role in the attacks on the second day of the attack. Other Canadian divisions pushed forward, achieving the remarkable advance of six kilometers, though meeting stiffer and stiffer resistance as they did so. As Brigadier J.A. Clarke of the 7th Brigade warned Currie: “To continue to fight will break the men’s spirit.”⁸⁶⁸ The Germans were rushing reinforcements in, and the BEF’s (including the Canadian Corps’) men were exhausted. Moreover, the field artillery was not able to keep up with the unprecedented pace of the infantry’s advance, making further attacks more costly. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions, after two days of heavy fighting, were placed in Corps reserve, while the British 32nd Division was temporarily attached to the Canadian Corps, and with Watson’s Division, was to continue the attack into a third day.

The 4th Division was now tasked with taking the old Somme defence lines. The 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade would punch through Méharicourt, and the 12th Brigade would advance through the village of Maucourt. The attack on the 10th was launched at 10:15 am. The 72nd Battalion formed the right flank of the 12th Brigade’s attack, and its war diary details what ensued:

“Just east of the village strong opposition was encountered but owing to the spirit of the troops and the rapidity of movement this was easily overcome and the enemy could be seen retreating in disorder towards Maucourt: Very severe fighting

⁸⁶⁸ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 447

continued as we approached the village, but the resistance was eventually overcome.”

With the 72nd Battalion having achieved its objectives, the 78th Battalion leapfrogged them at Maucourt and strove to push the fight forward. Under heavy machine gun fire, they temporarily held the hamlet of Hallu. During this action, Lieutenant James Tait rushed a machine gun nest and killed the gunners. With his men following behind, they overran the enemy position and captured another twelve German machine guns. Tait was awarded the Victoria Cross for this action; unfortunately an exploding shell killed him later in the day.⁸⁶⁹ The 10th Brigade, however, was not able to hold Hallu due to its left flank being open, and had to fall back.

The 85th Battalion carrying out the left flank of the attack encountered severe machine gun fire as soon as it left its jump-off area. Added difficulties were encountered when the Australians did not capture their objective, leaving German defenders free to fire on them from the flank. As the regimental history explained, “the Battalion was absolutely without cover and casualties began to occur rapidly.”⁸⁷⁰ The 85th struggled forward and eventually reached Méharicourt, with the 38th Battalion passing through them there. An unpublished history of the 38th Battalion relates how they fared:

“For a time things went well, but when the regiment passed through Rosieres-en-Santerre the advancing troops encountered severe machine-gun and light artillery fire. The 85th suffered even worse. Before them the men of the 38th could see their comrades going down in bunches, but there was no check, and both Battalions went on strongly. But when they arrived at the Meharicourt-Lihons Road the 85th had lost nearly all its senior officers.... Now the situation became decidedly

⁸⁶⁹ Arthur Bishop, *Our Bravest and Our Best: The Stories of Canada's Victoria Cross Winners* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1995), 111

⁸⁷⁰ Joseph Hayes, *The 85th in France and Flanders* (Halifax: Royal Print and Litho Limited, 1920), 122

complicated. The men of the 85th would undoubtedly succeed in annihilating those Germans; but their losses had been heavy.... The objectives of both regiments lay ahead and had to be captured. Colonel Edwards took his men through the 85th front and continued the advance - determined to occupy both objectives with the 38th alone. But this was impossible.”⁸⁷¹

The 12th Brigade attack was wisely stopped in the afternoon, and the men began to dig in. Their flank was up in the air, with the Australian 2nd Division on their left being nearly three miles behind, strong German opposition having stopped their assault.⁸⁷²

The 10th Brigade, fighting for the first time under Brigadier-General Hayter’s command, also met stiff resistance. When leaving the jump-off line, the 10th Brigade’s assaulting Battalions (the 44th and 46th) met:

“... the intricate system of trench and wire from the old Somme French Defences.... These had never before been fought over or taken ... the trenches and wire in consequence, were practically intact, much grown over with vegetation and difficult to see until closely approached....”⁸⁷³

With a prepared enemy firing on the approaching Canadians, the attack was daunting. Sergeant Don McKerchar of the 46th Battalion described the tactics his platoon employed to advance:

“We ran into a battery of Fritzie guns up on a hill, we had to take those and to do so we had to take them by sectional rushes. It was the first time I’d been in a sectional rush and it was quite interesting. Eight or ten men would rush ahead; all the times they were running everybody else was lying on their stomachs and we were firing everything we could into the battery of guns to keep them from shooting. But they were still shooting shells directly into us. That was a matter of a couple of

⁸⁷¹ CWM, 31 19700215-004 58A242, ‘The 38th Battalion, unpublished manuscript’

⁸⁷² WO 95/3259, CA82725, ‘Australian Imperial Force War Diary of Second Australian Division (General Staff), August 10th 1918’

⁸⁷³ RG9, V.4903, File: 31, ‘10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations: Battle of Amiens, August 8th-11th 1918 inclusive.’

hundred yards away. As that section advanced twenty or thirty feet, the next one would go past them, and so on.”⁸⁷⁴

The 46th Battalion achieved their objectives, and the 50th Battalion was going to carry on. However, because of the failure of the 12th Brigade to gain its objectives, further 4th Division attacks were cancelled. In fact, Hayter was content with what his Brigade had achieved, pointing out that “a heavy counter-attack had been driven off with slight loss of ground but the position held at the close of the day was better, tactically, than in the morning....”⁸⁷⁵

The attack on the 10th of August had resulted in limited gains by the 4th Division. However, this was largely because of circumstances that were out of their hands. Sufficient field artillery, tanks and supplies could not be brought forward quickly enough, and as such the 4th Division’s men were attacking with limited resources, basically relying on their own weapons for fire support and frequently running low on ammunition. Also, the resistance of the German forces had solidified, Captain John Preston of the 85th Battalion undoubtedly expressing the views of many when he lamented: “Fritz has rushed up fresh guns... I think we are held up, until we can get up sufficient [of] our heavies to blow him out of his position.”⁸⁷⁶ This experience was shared across the BEF’s front; there just was not the potential for a breakout as there had been two days earlier. The 10th and 12th Brigades had fared well, demonstrating their training had been effective and that competent

⁸⁷⁴ James McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 156

⁸⁷⁵ RG9, V.4903, File: 31, ‘10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Narrative of Operations: Battle of Amiens, August 8th-11th 1918 inclusive.’

⁸⁷⁶ CWM, 1918 20030140-005, ‘John Preston papers- diary August 10th-11th’

officers and NCOs were leading them. The following day, the 4th Division was ordered to hold the line - in fact its fighting at Amiens was over.

Overall, the 4th Division had played a successful role in the great attack. Other than the 11th Brigade not reaching all of its final objectives (though it came close), Watson's men had been able to accomplish the goals set out for them. They had fought efficiently and with great courage, and though there were no overwhelmingly successful attacks, they had amply demonstrated their competence and reliability.⁸⁷⁷

From Amiens, the Canadians were transferred out of the Fourth Army and into the First Army, shifted to the Arras region and told to prepare to attack the vaunted Hindenburg Line.⁸⁷⁸ The latter consisted of a series of strong defensive positions built around suitable geographic features and littered with concrete pillboxes, bunkers and tunnels. The Canadian Corps was to attack the Drocourt-Quéant Line, which was a thick web of strongpoints built on hills and ridges overlooking the river valleys and the flat country to the west. Behind this was the defensive line of the Canal du Nord that incorporated marshes and woods and was supplemented with deep trench systems for protection.⁸⁷⁹ If all of this was overcome, then the Canadians would be in position to attack Cambrai, as the 62nd had done ten months earlier. And if this city fell, then a key railway and logistical hub would be denied the Germans. The Canadian Corps would have to overcome

⁸⁷⁷ RG9, V. 4944, '87th Battalion War Diary, August 19th 1918'

⁸⁷⁸ IWM, 'Lord Horne Papers - Report on the First Army Operations: 26th August- 11th November 1918'

⁸⁷⁹ Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2004), 98

hundreds of machine gun positions with interlocking fields of fire and unseen artillery emplacements cunningly sited on reverse slopes. It would be a challenging task.

In fact the Canadian Corps had time for only the most perfunctory preparations. Unlike Vimy Ridge, Hill 70 and Passchendaele in previous years, where they had had weeks to plan assaults of this scale, the Canadian Corps would be rushed into the attack. Field Marshall Haig wanted the assault to take place on the 25th of August, however, Currie was obstinate, and gained an extra day. Fortunately for the Canadian Corps, their first attack was going to be against Orange Hill, a position that they had been planning to attack back in July for an earlier cancelled operation, so much of the staff work had already been carried out. On the 26th of August, the 2nd and 3rd Divisions assaulted the German lines. The fighting was fierce, with very heavy losses, and on the evening of the 28th and 29th, the 1st Canadian Division and the British 4th Division began to push forward.⁸⁸⁰

It fell on the 4th Canadian Division and the 1st Canadian Division (playing a smaller role) to take the heavily defended Drocourt-Quéant Line proper. The ranks of Watson's Division had been filled with reinforcements in the weeks since Amiens, but although its battalions were up to strength, the new men were raw, with only the returned wounded having had any experience on the Western Front.⁸⁸¹ Currie met with Watson and Macdonell, the commanders of the 4th and 1st Divisions,

⁸⁸⁰ The Canadian 4th Division had still not arrived from Amiens, and until it did the 4th British Division was fighting in the Canadian Corps. Ibid. 76

⁸⁸¹ A significant minority consisted of lightly wounded veterans of the Amiens attack returning to the ranks. The rest came straight from training camps in England. Significant numbers of conscripted men only began to reach the Corps after the Drocourt-Quéant attack.

respectively, and their staffs on the 29th of August. Watson was surprised by, and doubtful of, the boldness of the plan, confiding to his diary: "It is a very ambitious programme and I doubt if it can be carried through to the extent they have laid down...."⁸⁸² Currie was under few illusions. He viewed the Drocourt-Quéant line as "the back-bone of his [the Germans'] resistance," and was convinced that the "Boshe [sic] will fight us very hard."⁸⁸³ The key to achieving this attack and the proposed breakout was taking Mount Dury. This hill was the high point of a ridge that dominated the sector and which the German forces had heavily entrenched. The 4th Division would have to approach this long sloping rise while in plain view of German machine gunners. Worse still, when the men crested the ridgeline they would be silhouetted and prey to the many German machine guns on the far side. On the 30th of August, Watson detailed the plan of attack to his Brigadiers. In this somber meeting it was acknowledged that German forces would offer a determined defence of the hill. The plan was for the 12th Brigade to attack and take the ridge and the Red Line just beyond it. Once this had been achieved the 10th and 11th Brigades would pass through the 12th's positions and hope to exploit the situation east of Mount Dury. However, with the British 4th Division severely weakened from the previous days' fighting, Watson was forced to alter the plan. The 10th Brigade would now have to take over the British line on the north flank of the Mount Dury position,⁸⁸⁴ meaning that only the 11th Brigade plus the reserve battalion of the 12th Brigade would be fighting past the Red Line. At all levels of the Canadian Corps, it

⁸⁸² Military Museums, 'Watson Papers, Diary, 29 August 1918

⁸⁸³ MG 30, E100, 'Currie Papers, Personal Diary, 1914-1919, 29 August 1918'

⁸⁸⁴ Tim Cook, "Bloody Victory: The Canadian Corps in the Hundred Days Campaign" *1918 Year of Victory: The end of the Great War and the shaping of history* (Auckland: Exile Publishing, 2010), 174

was realized that the task now laid out for the 4th Division would be even more difficult than originally expected. Currie impressed on the 4th Division's leadership that this change in plans "will interfere with the exploitation." The attack already seen as ambitious, had now become more so, indeed, dangerously so.

The final plan called for the 12th Brigade to storm to the Red Line, supported by an intense artillery barrage. Once the attacking infantry reached the Red Line the artillery would stop playing its critical supportive role, since incongruously the Red Line was at the extreme range for most of the field pieces. Instead of waiting for the artillery to be brought forward, which would slow the momentum of the push, it was decided that Canadian Independent Force under Brigadier-General Brutinel would be employed to provide the added firepower. The Independent Force was a mix of armoured cars, truck-mounted mortars and machine guns, cyclists, and British and Canadian cavalry. It was the size of a brigade and, in theory, quite mobile.⁸⁸⁵ Unfortunately, this unit lacked cross-country capabilities and hence was road bound. Also, the lightly protected vehicles, not to mention the cyclists and cavalry, were quite vulnerable to machine gun and artillery fire. It was known from intelligence that the countryside past the Red Line was bristling with German artillery (and inevitably machine gun nests), however it was felt that the Germans forces were largely disorganized.⁸⁸⁶ The Independent Force's orders called for the artillery to be "dealt with the utmost vigour."⁸⁸⁷ The 12th Brigade's seizure of the

⁸⁸⁵ The Motor Machine Gun Brigade, though in France since the summer of 1915 had not taken part in an offensive operation while using its vehicles. For more detail about this unit see Cameron Pulsifer. *The Armoured Autocar in Canadian Service* (Ottawa: Privately published, 2007)

⁸⁸⁶ RG 9, V. 4987, '2nd Motor Machine Gun Brigade War Diary, Canadian Independent Force report, September 1918'

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid.

Red Line would be the signal for the 11th Brigade and Independent Force to proceed.⁸⁸⁸ This plan was quite audacious, even risky. Watson expressed some doubt about the lack of artillery support and the utility of relying on the unproven Independent Force, however, Brutinel had Currie's and Webber's (Radcliffe's successor as Canadian Corps BGS) ears and Watson demurred.⁸⁸⁹

For such a complicated plan, the timetable the Canadian Corps, and hence the 4th Division, were working on meant that the Battalion commanders of the two assaulting Brigades were only able to brief their officers and NCOs less than twenty-four hours before they were to attack. The 75th Battalion's commanding officer went through the attack with his men "in all its details and most of its possibilities,"⁸⁹⁰ but there were undoubtedly some possibilities that he had not prepared them for.

On September 1st, as the 12th Brigade was preparing for their attack the next day, their right flank was hit by three strong German attacks. These were fought off, but gave an ominous hint of what lay ahead the following day.⁸⁹¹ Simply put, the underlying assumption at Corps headquarters was that beyond the crest of Mount Dury the German resistance would melt away. Intelligence was scarce and aerial photography in the lead up to the attack was unavailable because of the level of German fighter activity. At 5 am the 38th, 72nd, and 85th Battalions surged forward, meeting heavy machine gun fire immediately. However, as one author related, "the

⁸⁸⁸ Raymond Brutinel, the commander of the Independent Force, went so far as to request that no artillery barrage was to be laid down along the Arras-Cambrai road east of Mount Dury. He did not want friendly fire casualties or the road being shelled and limiting the use of the force.

⁸⁸⁹ Military Museums, 'Watson Diary, 8 August 1918'. Patrick Brennan. "Major General David Watson: A critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War 1914-1918," in Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 132

⁸⁹⁰ RG 9, V.4943, '75th Battalion War Diary, September 1st 1918'

⁸⁹¹ RG 9, "V.4942, '72nd Battalion War Diary, September 1st 1918'

men had known worse opposition, and good progress was made.”⁸⁹² Under the protection of an excellent artillery barrage, the 12th Brigade platoons steadily made their way up the slopes of Mount Dury, crested it, and proceeded down the other side to their Red Line objective. But the intelligence given to the 4th Division was terribly wrong. On the other side of Mount Dury was a warren of bunkers and hidden machine gun emplacements dug into sunken roads, and the German defences were constructed in depth all the way back to the Canal du Nord, six kilometers to the east. Once cresting the ridge, the 12th Brigade had just walked into a death zone beyond the range of most of their artillery, and began to be ripped apart by a murderous hail of German fire. As the 38th Battalion history recounted, when the soldiers:

“But when they attained the crest of the hill they encountered a bewildering storm of bullets. From all sides they were shot at. From the village of Dury, from the windmill on their left front, from German posts straight ahead and the woods of Villers Chateau - every gun in the neighborhood seemed trained on the small band of soldiers. To say that heavy casualties were caused is not enough. Men were dropping all over the place.”⁸⁹³

The 12th Brigade struggled forward another 600 yards, the survivors then digging in for their lives. The companies had been slaughtered. By nightfall, MacBrien’s Brigade, which had attacked over 2800 strong, had lost 48 percent of its officers and 32 percent of its other ranks killed or wounded.⁸⁹⁴

Tragically, owing to the initial success achieved by the 12th Brigade’s leading wave, runners were bringing optimistic reports back to Odlum’s headquarters. The

⁸⁹² Ibid. 36

⁸⁹³ CWM, 19700215-004, *The Thirty Eighth Battalion*, unpublished manuscript, 37

⁸⁹⁴ RG 9, V. 4230, folder 22, file 3, ‘12th Canadian Infantry Brigade Report: Scarpe Operation. Capture of Drocourt Quéant Line, 2nd Sept. 1918’

Brigadier wanted to launch his follow up attack quickly, within 90 minutes of the first assault if possible. To take advantage of the momentum achieved by the 12th Brigade and resultant German disorganization, by 6:45, he had moved forward into the outpost zone, but orders coming down from Watson's headquarters told him to hold. Only two hours later did Odlum finally receive the go ahead and the four assaulting battalions - the 54th, 75th, 87th, and 102nd - proceeded up Mount Dury, passing by casualties, stragglers and prisoners as they made their way up and over the crest. Odlum's headquarters were with MacBrien's at the bottom of the hill, and as the soldiers disappeared over the crest, direct contact was lost. As the 11th Brigade soon learned, the eastern slope of Mount Dury was devoid of cover and swept by machine guns. "It was evident that the enemy had appreciated the tactical value of Dury Hill," Odlum later wrote with understatement, "and had recognized how easily troops pouring over it could be shot down."⁸⁹⁵ Succeeding waves of 11th Brigade's men could not see what was happening and could not be warned by those had already come under fire on the eastern slopes, and so were doomed to repeat their error. By that afternoon all survivors from the two Brigades clung to the Red Line as German forces pounded them mercilessly.

The troops, who had come to count on the protection from following closely behind artillery barrages, hoped for aid from Independent Force. It was indeed pushed into action several times that day to help alleviate the pressure on the infantry, but it was only caught in the maelstrom of bullets and shells, and "... as the enemy fire was directed practically along the whole road it was very difficult to find

⁸⁹⁵ MG 30, E 300, Vol. 16, 'Odlum Papers, September 8th 1918'

any stretch not touched....”⁸⁹⁶ Brigadier-General Brutinel viewed it as suicidal to push his men and vehicles forward. It was a nightmare situation. Odlum made a forward reconnaissance and, in consultation with his officers, decided that his men had to improvise some sort of defence, but without artillery support not much could be done for the troops pinned down in open ground. Relief for the wounded and survivors could only be carried out that night. Currie was convinced that the Germans were on the verge of breaking, and Watson sent his GSO 1, Brigadier-General Panet, to discuss with his three infantry brigadiers a continuation of the operation for the following morning. But saner heads prevailed, and the attack was called off.⁸⁹⁷

There were some fairly obvious reasons why the attack had failed. Watson and his Brigadier-Generals, in their after-battle reports, pointed to the deep machine gun zones that were unknown to the attacking forces. Furthermore, there was no natural cover, and no artillery support, the latter an absolute violation of the cardinal rule of bite-and-hold attacks. This operation, because of mistaken assessments at Corps Headquarters, was simply beyond what the two brigades could overcome. The fault for this debacle lies squarely with Currie and his Chief of Staff, Brigadier-General Norman ‘Ox’ Webber, for rushing this attack. The folly of sending men into open country swept by machine gun fire without a proper barrage - or any barrage at all - had been learned on the Somme, two years earlier, and simply assuming there would not be any organized defence did not constitute prudent preparation. Currie and Webber were pushing for the assault, not Watson

⁸⁹⁶ RG9, V. 4987, ‘2nd Motor Machinegun Brigade War Diary- Narrative Sept 2nd- 5th’

⁸⁹⁷ RG9, V. 4861, file 164, ‘4th Division War Diary September 2nd 1918’

and his staff, and were responsible for this failure. The latter were given little option on how, where, or when the assault was to go in. Odlum and MacBrien, and the men under them, did their best in an incredibly trying situation, however, what they were asked to do was beyond them. As Brigadier-General MacBrien later described it, it had been “the most severe Machine Gun opposition that this Brigade had ever encountered.”⁸⁹⁸ All three Brigade commanders, in reports written after the engagement, stressed secure communication lines for artillery and command needed to be laid down and artillery brought forward before an attack could be carried out. Losses had been appalling - the assault on the Drocourt-Quéant Line had cost the 4th Division 3,588 casualties.⁸⁹⁹ The 1st Canadian Division also had a challenging time in gaining its position, though the terrain they were attacking over was “easier” than the 4th Division’s sector (there was no hill climb that crested on an enemy position which was out of the range of Canadian artillery).⁹⁰⁰

The following morning, it became clear that thousands of German soldiers had conducted an orderly retreat across the Canal du Nord the previous night, leaving the approach west of the Canal unprotected. Apparently unrepentant, or unaware of what had happened in the attack, Currie wrote on the 3rd of September:

“The 4th Canadian Division were unable to get on, but the 1st Canadian Division practically obtained their final objective... As a result of our victory of yesterday, the hinge of the German system has been broken and the Third Army enabled to advance, which they are doing today all along the line.”⁹⁰¹

⁸⁹⁸ RG 9, V.4230, folder 22, file 3, ‘12th Canadian Infantry Brigade Report: Scarpe Operation. Capture of Drocourt-Quéant Line, 2nd Sept. 1918’

⁸⁹⁹ RG9, V.4861, file, 164, ‘4th Canadian Division- Report on the Operation of the Scarpe September 2nd-September 4th 1918’

⁹⁰⁰ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 480

⁹⁰¹ MG 30, E 100, ‘Currie Papers, Personal Diary, 1914-1919, Sept 3rd 1918’

It was a manifestly unfair verdict. The 4th Canadian Division had been shattered by the attack, and would still not have received a full complement of reinforcements when their next action commenced.

The Canadian Corps immediately turned its eyes on the next objective, the crossing of the Canal du Nord (and the subsequent envelopment of Cambrai). This would be an extremely challenging attack, requiring them to advance over flooded approaches with little dry ground, then cross over the canal (which was fortunately dry in the Canadian sector). They were then to fan out and storm Bournon Wood and capture Cambrai, all the while under German fire. The Canadians did possess the advantage of having nearly a month to partially rebuild their battered units and plan for this daring assault. Also, the area that Currie wanted to attack was seen by the Germans to offer superior defensive positions and a more difficult geography for offensive operations, which made the Germans complacent so that as one intelligence report from the 4th Canadian Division stated: “ [While] the operation presented many difficulties... [at least] the enemy was not holding the front in any great strength.”⁹⁰² For the plan to work, the Canadian infantry would have to hit the section of the Canal they were attacking like a sledgehammer, cracking the German defences open. This done, reserves would have to quickly pour through this opening and spread out to take the key positions to the east. General Horne and Field Marshall Haig visited Currie to discuss his audacious plan, and despite reservations over the concentration of his entire force on a relatively narrow front, in the end

⁹⁰² RG9, Volume 4860, ‘4th Canadian Division Narrative of Operation: Battle of Canal du Nord – September 27th to October 1st 1918’

they agreed to it. The attack would be led by the 4th and 1st Canadian Divisions, and would commence on September 27th at 5:20.⁹⁰³

Major-General Watson was on leave for the two weeks leading up to the attack, and left the planning to his staff, only returning from London on the 25th of September.⁹⁰⁴ The 4th Division's staff, however, had very little leeway. The Corps would be planning most of the details of this complicated operation, and the 4th Division would basically be following detailed plans passed down from them.⁹⁰⁵ Watson's Division was to attack on the right, and the 1st Canadian Division on their left with the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division on their right. The 1st and 4th Divisions would take part in the first phase, capturing the Red, Green, and finally Blue Lines, whereupon the 3rd Canadian Division would continue the advance with the potential of a Brigade of the 4th Canadian Division participating as well. The Blue Line (just past Bournal Wood) was about 5000 yards in front of the jump-off line. The 10th Brigade would lead the 4th Division's assault across the canal with the 11th and 12th Brigades leapfrogging them and fanning out to widen the breach and take the German defences from the rear.

Artillery preparation for the Canadian Corps' attack had been intense in the weeks preceding it, saturating the German front line positions with a combination of both high explosive and gas shells. The artillery support for the 4th Division presented a special challenge, since the distance between where the batteries were located and the Blue Line was 8000 yards – well beyond the effective range of the

⁹⁰³ Peter Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 439

⁹⁰⁴ Military Museums, 'Watson Papers, Diary, September 25th 1918'

⁹⁰⁵ RG9, Volume 4860, '4th Canadian Division Narrative of Operation: Battle of Canal du Nord – September 27th to October 1st 1918'

18-pounders. For the attack to work according to plan, there could be no delay in the movement of the infantry, and as the Brigadier-Generals from the 4th Division had bitterly complained after the Mount Dury fiasco, artillery was essential for a successful attack. The scheme developed to overcome this problem entailed the use of “relay barrages.” Six brigades of British field artillery would cover the advance of the 4th Canadian Division to the Green Line. The 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisional artillery would then follow behind the advancing troops and deploy just west of the Canal to carry the 4th Division to the Blue Line. Like the rest of the plan for the operation, this portion was fraught with risk.⁹⁰⁶ In essence, this was leapfrogging artillery, and the problems of communication and ranging the guns would have to be dealt with ‘on the fly’, a tribute to the confidence Currie and his staff rightly had in the training of the British and Canadian field artillery by this stage of the war.⁹⁰⁷ In particular it was a tribute to the rigorous training supervised by Brigadier-General King, the divisional artillery commander, and his subordinates over the preceding month. Without question the 4th Division had been given the toughest role to play on the 27th. Indeed, in some Corps reports, the attack was not called the Canal du Nord operation, but rather the Bournal Wood operation, a clear reminder of the priority of the 4th Division’s role in the attack’s overall prospects.

At 5:20 in the morning of the 27th, the 10th Brigade attacked on a two-battalion front with the 47th and 46th Battalions abreast leading the assault. The initial artillery barrage by the British gunners was effective, and the leading troops

⁹⁰⁶ G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: the History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, Volume 1* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967), 358

⁹⁰⁷ Ian M. Brown, “Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-Piece Attack, 1917-1918” *The Journal of Military History* 58 (July 1994), 440

quickly crossed the Canal du Nord. At the Canal, the 44th and 50th Battalions leapfrogged the initial wave and attacked the Canal du Nord Reserve Trench, the capture of which would allow the 11th and 12th Brigades to fan out and carry the attack forward. Predictably, the advancing Canadian Battalions came under severe machine gun fire. As Private Mac Macdonald grimly noted, “the German machine gunners were really first-class soldiers and did a very great deal of damage. We had quite a few casualties that morning.”⁹⁰⁸ However, by 6:15 the assaulting infantry had reached their objectives, and the 11th and 12th Brigades successfully passed through their lines.

The 11th Brigade was soon making steady progress through Bourlon Wood, however the 63rd (RN) Division on their right had encountered serious difficulties in their attack, which caused the 102nd Battalion’s advance to stall. McLeod Gould, then a sergeant in the 102nd, would later write:

“... the imperials on the right were not up, and... their right flank (102nd) was consequently exposed to the full tempest of heavy artillery and machinegun fire. In spite of this they pushed their way forward until within about 100 yards of their objective, where they halted for cover in the shelter of the sunken road and of a line of trenches from which they had successfully ousted the Hun.”⁹⁰⁹

The attack began to fail and the 75th Battalion, which was held in support for the 102nd, pressed past them and began to push through the remainder of Bourlon

⁹⁰⁸ James McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 176

⁹⁰⁹ L. McLeod Gould, *From B.C. to Baisieux: Being the Narrative History of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion* (Victoria: Thos. R. Cusack Presses, 1919), 108

Wood. This attack at least was partially successful, clearing most of Bourslon Wood.⁹¹⁰

The 12th Brigade's attack had been more successful; they had been tasked with capturing Bourslon Village. The 85th Battalion had to puncture the Marquion trench system to get to the village. The fighting was especially vicious - with the forward companies now being commanded by lieutenants, the Nova Scotians finally managed to take the village. The 38th Battalion on their left had to push a bit farther than the 85th Battalion to take some railway tracks. As the Battalion history recounted:

"The first half a mile was not so bad; long range machine-gun fire formed the only opposition and casualties were light. Things changed though, after that. Heavy fighting took place all along the front, and many earnest Germans were killed before "B" Company on the right reached the tracks."⁹¹¹

In the end the 38th Battalion did reach their goals, and 72nd and 78th Battalions then leapfrogged the 85th and 38th to move forward and consolidate the Blue Line.

The day had been broadly successful, but the fate of key areas in Bourslon Wood was still up in the air, and occupying all of Bourslon Wood was critical to the overall attack. The Canadian commanders were only too aware of the decisive role its capture and subsequent loss had played eleven months earlier.⁹¹²

That evening the Germans were preparing to launch a series of substantial counter-attacks against the 11th Brigade's positions, one of which, involving three

⁹¹⁰ Archibald Macdonell, "The Old Red Patch' The 1st Canadian Division at the Breaking of the Canal du Nord Line" *Canadian Defence Quarterly* Vol. IX, No. 1, October, 1931, 22

⁹¹¹ CWM, 19700215-004, 'The 38th Battalion, unpublished manuscript, 42'

⁹¹² RG 9, folder 120, file 10-78, 'Interim Report on the Operations of the Canadian Corps during the year 1918'

battalions, was “crushed before it fully developed ... with very severe losses....”⁹¹³

That evening, Field Marshall von Hindenburg visited the 26th Wurttemberg Reserve Division (it had suffered heavy losses on August 27th and had been withdrawn to the Cambrai area⁹¹⁴), one of the units opposite the Canadian Forces, and urged them to hold the line to their collective deaths. There was to be no retreat, no surrender.⁹¹⁵

That evening it was decided by Corps headquarters that the 3rd Division would carry the attack forward and that the 10th Brigade would fully clear Bourslon Wood. It was predicted that the Germans would have withdrawn, and that the 10th Brigade’s advance would be straightforward. This was indeed borne out, and during the morning of the 28th the 47th and 50th Battalions quickly cleared the rest of the substantial wood, meeting little opposition. Then, supported by effective artillery barrages, they pushed forward to the outskirts of Railencourt which formed part of the Marcoing Line to the northeast. Here, the 46th Battalion and the 44th Battalion took over the advance and soon came under heavy machine gun fire.⁹¹⁶

The advancing 10th Brigade was in for a tough fight, and unknown to the men, the attack by the 3rd Division on the 10th Brigade’s left had faltered in the face of severe German resistance. The fighting was fierce as the 10th Brigade’s Battalions tried to advance. Years later Bob Stevenson, a private taking part in the attack, vividly recalled:

⁹¹³ RG9, Volume 4860, ‘4th Canadian Division Narrative of Operation: Battle of Canal du Nord – September 27th to October 1st 1918’

⁹¹⁴ United States Army General Staff G-2 *Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German army that participated in the War 1914-1918* (Washington: Government Printing Press, 1920) 367

⁹¹⁵ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 527

⁹¹⁶ RG9, Volume 4860, ‘4th Canadian Division Narrative of Operation: Battle of Canal du Nord – September 27th to October 1st 1918’

“We were going up this gradual slope, there was a village just on top of this slope and quite a number of trees. It kind of looked like they had a machine gun behind every tree up there. They were really sweeping the ground there and we had quite a few casualties. I had just started firing the gun when I got hit. I got hit through the chin and down through the neck. That kind of put me out of action.”⁹¹⁷

With the 3rd Division’s attack stymied and the 44th and 46th Battalions pinned down and suffering heavy casualties, it was a grim day. As the 46th Battalion diarist summarized it:

“The whole battalion was held up by enemy machine gun fire, and there [were] no possibilities of this opposition being flanked on the Left as he was holding the Road in strength was reinforcing from Sancourt.... On the Right enemy movement on the Douai-Cambrai road was marked and his machine gun activity was intense. Ammunition in all Companies ran out and parties were sent forward from time to time to keep up the supply and keep Lewis guns and rifles firing.”⁹¹⁸

The 10th Brigade’s attack had been halted, and as exhausted survivors tried to dig in, counter-attacks pushed the 44th Battalion back to the railway junction. The reserve battalion (the 47th) stopped this counter-attack, but could not regain the lost ground. The situation of the 44th had been precarious until the 47th intervened:

“For two hours, wave after wave of enemy troops [swept] against the 44th survivors. Finally an enemy attack along a sunken road, away to the right, penetrate[d] the Battalion line.... Strong artillery support (and probably, the exhaustion of available reserves) prevent[ed] further efforts by [the] German Command [to overrun their position].”⁹¹⁹

At 7pm, in tandem with the 3rd Division’s 7th Brigade, the 10th Brigade launched a series of determined attacks along the Douai-Cambrai road. In the evening, Corps

⁹¹⁷ James McWilliams & R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 178

⁹¹⁸ RG9, V. 4940, file 437, ‘46th Battalion war diaries, September 28th’

⁹¹⁹ E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), 198

headquarters issued orders for the 12th Brigade to press through the 10th Brigade and continue the attack the following morning at 8:00. The 12th Brigade was pushed to the centre of the Corps' attack, and the 38th and 72nd Battalions were to lead the advance through the village of Sancourt. On the 28th, while Brigadier MacBrien was scouting the lines, he was shot through the calf and evacuated from the battlefield. James Kirkcaldy, the veteran commanding officer of the 78th Battalion, temporarily assumed command of the Brigade.

All of the battalions in the 4th Division had seen vicious and costly fighting in the last three days, and both the 38th and 72nd were much reduced in fighting strength when the attack was launched. The men of the 12th Brigade, following a well-placed rolling barrage, left their trenches, only to be met with an enemy counter-bombardment falling on them. The units managed to advance through Sancourt, but with heavy casualties, and began to dig in.⁹²⁰ The 72nd Battalion was so depleted that as they were consolidating their positions and waiting for the 85th Battalion to leapfrog them, the survivors had a ratio of four prisoners to one soldier. At noon, German troops began to infiltrate the 12th Brigade lines.⁹²¹ The 85th Battalion was ordered to come to the 72nd's aid, however, before it could be deployed, the latter could no longer hold the line, and the remnant companies fell back past the Douai-Cambrai road.⁹²² Nonetheless, at about 4pm the 85th fought its way into Sancourt and established a defensive position.⁹²³ That afternoon, Watson

⁹²⁰ RG9, V. 4909, file 332, '12th Canadian Infantry Brigade- Bourlon Wood Operation 27th Sept- 1st October 1918'

⁹²¹ RG9, V. 4943, file 450, '72nd War Diary, September 29th 1918'

⁹²² Ibid

⁹²³ Also during this day the 38th's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Gardiner, had been mortally wounded. MG 30, E 100, 'Currie Papers, Personal Diary 1914-1919, September 29th 1918'

met with Brigadier-General Odlum, as well as the temporary commanding officer of the 12th Brigade, Lieutenant-Colonel Kirkaldy, and discussed the plans for the continuation of operations on the 30th. In its initial draft, the proposed assault was to employ tanks, but this fell through because of mechanical issues. As a despondent Watson wrote of the 29th in his diary: "What a different day than last Sunday: Then so peaceful and quiet, today so hellish in its intensity of war and all that that implies."⁹²⁴ Though the 4th Division, and the Canadian Corps as a whole, had been battered and had made limited gains since the 27th, it was decided to push on again.

The 4th Division's 11th Brigade would be taking part in the attack planned for the 30th, specifically taking the canal crossing at Esvars and then pressing on into the suburbs of Cambrai. They came under intense machine gun and artillery fire from two heights overlooking their advance. Brigadier General Odlum wrote that the day's attacks were the "hardest battles in which the brigade ever engaged,"⁹²⁵ bitterly, pointing out that the operation "was based on false assumptions, namely that the enemy was beaten and would withdraw."⁹²⁶ The 11th Brigade was supposed to have covering smoke screens in the hope that this would offer the men some protection, but the smoke screens provided had, in Odlum's words, been "weak". As a 4th Division narrative of the operation reported:

"Enemy resistance increased with the advent of light and the 75th, 54th and 87th Battalions after suffering severe losses, were withdrawn to the railway line. The operation was not successful for three reasons.

(i) With our left flank unprotected it was impossible to hold the position on account of heavy enfilading fire.

⁹²⁴ Military Museum, 'Watson Papers, Diary, September 29th 1918'

⁹²⁵ MG 30, E300, 'Odlum Diary, September 30th 1918'

⁹²⁶ Ibid .

(ii) It was impossible to procure sufficient smoke shells to form an adequate smoke screen, in advancing against M[achine] G[un] nests.

(iii) It was not expected that the enemy would employ such large numbers of troops in this operation”⁹²⁷

It was obvious that the enemy had no intention of withdrawing. Instead of calling off the attack, a Corps Conference was held at the 4th Division headquarters about midday where it was decided that 4th Division operations would continue the following day with the same objectives. The 1st Canadian Division simultaneously would attack on their left.

Led by the 102nd Battalion, the attack commenced at 5:00. Surprisingly, it advanced quickly through German positions, taking many prisoners. Then the 11th Brigade’s assault begun to run into stiff resistance, though they continued to advance until it became clear that the 3rd Brigade on their left had been forced to retire. The situation could not be fixed and the 11th Brigade dug in a precarious defensive position, with their left flank in the air. As the 4th Division’s summary of operations subsequently reported:

“The day’s fighting again showed that the enemy had no intentions of withdrawing. In fact, according to prisoners’ statements the enemy intended to attack shortly after our attack. This appears to be corroborated by the great number of prisoners taken, representing many units, and the heavy fighting that ensued.”⁹²⁸

That night, the 11th Brigade was relieved by the 5th Brigade, and the 4th Division was moved to Corps reserve west of Bourslon village. On October 3rd, a proud Watson wrote in his diary: “Had a long talk with the Corps Commander who

⁹²⁷ RG9, Volume 4860, ‘4th Canadian Division Narrative of Operation: Battle of Canal du Nord – September 27th to October 1st 1918’

⁹²⁸ RG9, Volume 4860, ‘4th Canadian Division Narrative of Operation: Battle of Canal du Nord – September 27th to October 1st 1918’

was loud in his praise of the Division.” But the 4th Division was a spent force. For the next two weeks it would not be playing a lead role with the Corps as it rested and worked to reconstitute its severely depleted battalions.

The 4th Division’s operations at the Canal du Nord were initially carried out brilliantly, however, as Mac McDonald, a private in the 46th, remembered, on subsequent days “we moved forward under a very sketchy barrage, I suppose it always must be in war - the first day of a big attack goes like clockwork; then, on the second, third and fourth days the staff work and organization seems to deteriorate. The longer a battle goes on, the worst it gets.”⁹²⁹ This statement was only too accurate. The Canadian Corps had predicted that after the first hammer blow the German forces, which were obviously beginning to crumble, would retreat. But on the Cambrai front, this was not the case, and the 4th Division was simply ordered to keep pushing against a prepared and determined enemy. To make matters worse, surprise, on which the initial breakthrough had been predicated, was now lost. Also, Divisions on either side of the 4th Division failed to keep pace, causing added hardship. Chronic ammunition shortages, communication breakdowns and exhaustion added to the 4th Division’s struggles, and gaining objectives became much more trying. It was attritional warfare at its worst, with the attackers suffering disproportionately. In the end, the 4th Division did what was asked of it, but just barely. Watson and his senior staff officers should not get any of the credit for the success or boldness of the plan on the first day of the operation. But neither should they receive any condemnation for continuing to push forward when the

⁹²⁹ James McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 177

advances were becoming harder to achieve and the body count was mounting. This operation was micromanaged by Canadian Corps headquarters which simply passed on plans to the 4th Division's staff and commanders to execute.

By October 17th, the 4th Division was back in the line and with the rest of the Canadian Corps, pursuing the retreating German forces towards the Belgian frontier. As the Canadian Corps passed through towns ravaged by war, they could hardly fail to notice the effect the German occupation had on the population. Germans practiced a 'scorched earth' policy as they withdrew but with discipline breaking down, there was much wanton destruction. One Canadian soldier related that "at one place a pig was eating a dead horse by the roadside and was driven away with shrill cries as women attacked the carcass with knives and stripped every shred of meat for their own consumption," adding that "we gave most of our rations to the children."⁹³⁰ The retreating Germans were determined to make a stand at Valenciennes, the last major French city in German hands. At a First Army meeting on October 27th, it was decided to take Mont Houy, a height of land dominating Valenciennes from the south, (a strategy similar to that employed at Hill 70 in 1917). The British 51st Division would capture Mont Houy on the 28th, and during the day the Canadian 4th Division would link up with the 51st Division, the two then jointly attacking the city in a two-pronged, staggered assault. A single battalion from the depleted 51st Division attacked on the morning of the 28th. Assaulting with only 500 men, they surprisingly took Mont Houy, but were unable to hold it and fell

⁹³⁰ Heather Robertson, *A Terrible Beauty: The Art of Canada at War* (Ottawa: James Lorimer & Company publishers, 1977), 96

back.⁹³¹ The 51st Division was so weak from the recent fighting that it was then removed from the line, and the 4th Canadian Division was ordered to take both Mont Houy and Valenciennes. On the 28th, the capable Brigadier-General J.M. Ross, who would lead the attacks at Valenciennes, replaced Brigadier-General Hayter who left to assume a staff position at Corps headquarters.⁹³² The initial assault on the 29th went satisfactorily - with the 4th Division occupying three sides of Mont Houy. However, because of the failure of the 51st Division, the 10th Brigade could not accomplish all of its goals. The 47th and 44th Battalions took over the line previously held by the 51st Division. On the night of the 29th, unlike the 51st Division which had used just a single battalion to attack Mont Houy, the 10th Brigade would attack with the 44th and 47th Battalions, with the 46th in support. Convinced the war was nearly over, General Currie, the mastermind of this attack, approached Brigadier-General McNaughton, recently appointed as commanding officer of the Canadian Corps' heavy artillery, and stressed to him that he wanted to save Canadian lives, and that: "... this would be the last barrage I would ask him to make in the war."⁹³³ McNaughton took him at his word, and arranged for a fire plan employing eight brigades of field artillery and six brigades of heavy artillery, a total of over 300 pieces. The assembled artillery would fire more than two thousand tons of ammunition, roughly the same amount fired during the entire Boer war.⁹³⁴ Moreover, because of the 10th Brigade's gains on the 28th, the Canadian Corps now

⁹³¹ F.W. Bewsher, *The History of the Fifty First (Highland) Division 1914-1918* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1921), 401

⁹³² RG9, V. 4903, file 312, '10th Brigade War Diary, October 28th 1918'

⁹³³ Daniel Dancock. *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1987), 187

⁹³⁴ A.G.L. McNaughton, "The Capture of Valenciennes: "A study in Co-ordination" *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Vol. X, No.3. April, 1933, 281

had three sides of Mont Houy surrounded. McNaughton could “give not only overhead and oblique fire, but enfilade and reverse as well.”⁹³⁵ Added to the artillery bombardment of Mont Houy would be a smokescreen and indirect machine gun fire from the Corps’ resources. The 10th Brigade would be assaulting, however, with very much understrength units, and the Germans still held significant advantages - they were dug in, had flat open fields of fire, and outnumbered the attacking Canadians by a ratio of at least two or three to one. Had this attack been launched in 1916 it would have been a bloodbath for the 4th Division. But this was late 1918, and Generals Currie and Watson were convinced that the morale and fighting ability of the German forces were broken. Also, massed artillery would do most of the fighting – and killing - the 4th Division’s troops were well trained and motivated to gain their objectives.

At 5:15 in the morning of the 1st of November, McNaughton’s artillery barrage shattered Mont Houy’s defences as the 44th and 47th Battalions left their trenches. Both units were dramatically understrength, with the 44th Battalion’s 300 men being amalgamated into two companies.⁹³⁶ The attack started off splendidly, the key bridges being seized with the German demolition teams still on them. Hammered by the punishing artillery barrage, the demoralized, exhausted German soldiers had no chance and hundreds were literally blown to pieces. The 44th Battalion was on its final objectives in just 45 minutes, having suffered eighty-seven killed and wounded.⁹³⁷

⁹³⁵ Ibid., 282

⁹³⁶ RG9, V. 4939, file 435, ‘44th Battalion War Diary, November 1st 1918’

⁹³⁷ CWM, 19780552-040, ‘History of the 44th Battalion, unpublished manuscript, 102’

The 46th Battalion passed through the 44th and continued to push forward. However, its depleted ranks were further weakened when between 600 and 800 German prisoners had to be escorted back under guard. The 46th Battalion had an unenviable task of pushing 2500 meters through Valenciennes with only 400 men. At any other point in the war this would have been undoable. As Lieutenant-Colonel Dawson described the day:

“The fighting that took place along the Famars-Valenciennes and Aulnoy-Marly roads was deadly work. Parties of the 46th working with bayonet, bombs, and Lewis Guns killed many of the enemy. The area was packed with Germans. Every cellar contained numbers. Those that offered any show of resistance were killed and the rest sent back as prisoners... At one point on the main road, a field gun was firing point blank at our men and also two trench mortars were in action sweeping the streets. The Lewis Guns got in their work....”⁹³⁸

As the 46th fought their way forward tooth and nail, a small party of five Canadians came upon a courtyard full of Germans. Sergeant Hugh Cairns, the last Canadian to win a Victoria Cross in the First World War, bleeding from the shoulder from an earlier bullet wound, sprayed about sixty Germans with his Lewis gun. Half a dozen went down and the rest soon surrendered. However, the leading German officer, realizing that there were only a handful of Canadians, pulled his pistol and shot Cairns, who fell backwards. As he fell he let go another burst into the German officer and surrounding prisoners. All hell broke loose as the Germans went to grab their discarded weapons. Cairns, from the ground, swept the German troops as the Canadians fought in desperation, being outnumbered twelve to one. Another bullet shattered Cairns' wrist, however, he continued to fire his gun. The Germans

⁹³⁸ James McWilliams and R. James Steel, *The Suicide Battalion* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978), 197

eventually surrendered again. Cairns died the following day at a clearing station.⁹³⁹ The 47th Battalion achieved its goals as well, but similarly to the 46th Battalion, had desperate fighting to achieve them. By the end of the day, both Battalions were positioned at a canal, firing Vickers machine guns into the city centre.

Just before noon, the 12th Brigade's 38th and 72nd Battalions pushed into Valenciennes proper, having had to cross the canal on cork bridges laid out by the Corps' engineers or on hastily prepared rafts. Under strong covering fire from artillery and machine guns, the troops of the Ottawa Battalion quickly managed to get across. As the regimental history recounted:

"At 11:45 on the 1st our fellows rushed the bridge head and began crossing. It might have been a terrible affair, for the Germans on the opposite bank were sweeping the broken girders with their machine-gun fire. But altogether it was a triumph of clever soldering. Crossing was made by small parties in quick rushes, and owing to the wonderfully smart handling of the business casualties were very light indeed. Then came a bit of work, with bayonets and bombs, and furious individual isolated fights in broken buildings and sheltered corners. With guns more or less equal that kind of thing ended only one way, and the Canadians made good their footing."⁹⁴⁰

The 72nd battalion did not have as easy a time. Their cork bridge broke in three places, and the rafts were initially pinned down by enemy machine gun fire. Finally, under a smoke screen, they were able to gain the far side and move forwards to their objective.⁹⁴¹ On November 2nd, the 12th Brigade replaced the 10th, and its 54th Battalion, pushing through Valenciennes, found that most of the German opposition

⁹³⁹ J.F.B. Livesay, *Canada's Hundred Days: With the Canadian Corps from Amiens to Mons, Aug 8-Nov 11, 1918* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1919), 365. There are different variations of Cairns actions, see *The Suicide Battalion* for another account.

⁹⁴⁰ CWM, 19700215-004, 'The 38th Battalion, unpublished manuscript, 38'

⁹⁴¹ RG9, V. 4943, file, 450 '72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion Report on Operations Oct. 22nd-November 6th 1918'

had fled during the previous evening. On the 6th of November, the 4th Division was moved into Corps reserve. Their war was over.

The 4th Division had been successful at Mont Houy and Valenciennes for the reasons Watson and Currie had predicted. An overwhelming artillery attack shattered the defences and morale of the remaining German defenders, while killing great numbers outright. Though extremely undermanned, the 4th Division's troops were motivated⁹⁴² and well trained. Though sadly depleted in numbers and bone tired, they showed that they were still an efficient (and willing) fighting force after nearly a hundred days of combat pretty much continuous. The fruits of the training, which had tirelessly focused on the section, platoon and company and stressed tactical flexibility and improvisation, were clearly demonstrated in the canal crossings by MacBrien's. Added to this were utterly overwhelming firepower and not the least individual acts of heroism that kept the attack going even in the most trying situation. The last set-piece battle launched by the 4th Division⁹⁴³ cost a mere 501 casualties, but still a disheartening number for the troops to suffer so close to the end of the war.⁹⁴⁴

During the Last Hundred Days the 4th Division took part in four large-scale battles, utilizing all its battalions and supporting arms to achieve complex goals. During these actions, Watson and Panet demonstrated that they had effective command and control over the Division and that they had gained maturity and

⁹⁴² By this point in the war, with the end so near, soldiers may not have wanted to take significant risks. They may have kept fighting for comradeship, wanting to settle perceived scores, professionalism or just to finish the job.

⁹⁴³ It was also the last set piece battle that any unit in the Canadian Corps took part in.

⁹⁴⁴ RG9, V. 3914, file 43, 'Report on the Mount Houy Operation'

professionalism from their wartime experiences, and were no longer making the mistakes that had plagued the 4th Division leadership in early 1917. That said, during the Mont Dury preparation Watson should have informed Currie more strongly that without sufficient artillery support the attack would fail - there is no mention in the records that Watson vigorously argued that point. Watson had always exhibited a propensity to follow orders of superiors unquestioningly, as if he feared earning their disapproval, or even losing his command. The Corps' senior command had pressed their man hard during the Hundred Days – accepting heavy casualties as the price which had to be paid in order to defeat the German's in the autumn of 1918. Perhaps Watson's failure to oppose Currie's judgment merely reflected that mindset.

As for Watson's position being endangered, the 'culture of command' in the Canadian Corps by late 1918 was one of loyalty to and admiration for Currie. Among those Currie liked personally and considered able – and Watson certainly fit both categories – tenure of command was almost ironclad. Senior commanders were not replaced merely for taking casualties, but for otherwise proving a lack of competence and even more lacking offensive spirit. Considerable credit must go to Watson and his senior officers who mentored their juniors, supervised training, and maintained divisional élan. Watson, whatever his flaws as a field commander, could learn. More importantly in the context of modern war, he was an adroit handler of men. Personality conflicts were the exception, not the rule, in the 4th Division's command structure, and the sense of teamwork at the top was palpable.

By the fall of 1918, as with the rest of the Canadian Corps, the 4th Division had become proficient at launching set-piece 'bite and hold' attacks. Their success really fell to the junior officers and ordinary infantrymen at the 'sharp end' who demonstrated time and again that with effective artillery support they were able to overcome practically any obstacles and achieve the goals set for them. With capable officers and NCOs leading and skilled weapons specialists who knew their tactical roles and brought their firepower to bear, the infantry units were able to improvise on the battlefield when required and drive forward. This success did not come cheaply, for during the Last Hundred Days the 4th Canadian Division suffered 7,400 casualties, about 25% of the total losses that they incurred during the entire war. No matter how far they had come, they were still going to have to pay in blood for each advance they made.

Conclusion

There are a variety of approaches that can be taken in studying and comparing divisions during the First World War. This study has chosen to look at how effective two armies were in taking masses of raw recruits (volunteer and conscript) and their thin cadre of relatively experienced senior officers and molding these into battle-worthy infantry divisions. Unit morale, élan, discipline, leadership and training (the suitability of combat tactics to be employed and the training's systematization) are all parameters of this process that could be studied. In 1915-16 the core activity of the British Army during its unprecedented expansion was getting effective divisions fighting in France as speedily as that could be accomplished, and the same held true for the Canadian Expeditionary Force. All of the preceding factors would certainly contribute to the development of these new divisions; however, there was only one test that truly mattered – could they fight successfully. For historians, then, the questions are two fold: was this accomplished and how was it done. This study examines the story of two typical infantry divisions formed in wartime – the British 62nd and the Canadian 4th.

The 62nd West Riding Division

Secretary of State for War, Herbert Kitchener, who quickly realized that the war would not be swiftly won and that Britain “must at once take in hand the creation of an army,” insisted to a dumbstruck cabinet on “one million as the

number to aim at immediately”.⁹⁴⁵ The small regular British Army and the only partially trained Territorial Forces were obviously too limited to achieve this rapid growth and the idea of the ‘New Army’ was announced in the press on August 12th. The ‘New Army’ would raise formations by the customary system of voluntary enlistment; this in essence would use traditional recruiting for the dramatic expansion of the Regular Army. As the rapid growth blurred the lines between the Territorial Force and New Army, and the BEF suffered horrendous casualties on the Western Front, divisions were swiftly trained and sent to France where they would truly learn to fight.

One such formation was the 62nd West Riding Division which started out as a raw Second Line Territorial unit authorized by the War Office about eighteen months into the war. Initially the Second Line Territorial formations were supposed to train new recruits as replacements for the Territorial units (now called First Line Territorials) already at the front. Though the Second Line Territorials usually started with less-experienced officers and inadequate equipment when compared to the original Territorial units, fourteen divisions of Second Line Territorials were ultimately raised and sent overseas. As soon as it could be arranged during their training in England, the War Office would assign experienced senior officers (divisional commanders and brigadiers who were most commonly prewar regular officers with some fighting experience in France or Belgium) to replace the all-to-

⁹⁴⁵ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 39

often unfit officers – generally men found wanting because of age or general mediocrity - who had raised the divisions and supervised their initial training.⁹⁴⁶

Major-General Walter Braithwaite was one of those replacement commanders. He had returned from Gallipoli on December 24th, 1915 to take over command of the 62nd under the personal shadow of that debacle.⁹⁴⁷ In what was a clean sweep of the 62nd 's senior command, Braithwaite replaced Major-General James Trotter, who was clearly deemed inadequate by the War Office to supervise anything more demanding than the Division's initial training, and three Brigadier-Generals who had experience in Gallipoli or on the Western Front took over command of the brigades.⁹⁴⁸ Over the next year many of the most capable junior officers would also be drawn from the Division and sent as reinforcements to France, repeatedly setting back training. Nevertheless, when the 62nd Division finally reached the continent in January of 1917 it was considered adequately prepared for combat and promptly thrown into battle.

The only test that really mattered for a division on the Western Front was fighting effectiveness, and when the initial test came for the 62nd Division with the First Battle of Bullecourt in April 1917, it did not fare well. But the failures of the 62nd (it was to play a minor offensive role in this battle) can be attributed to a botched Australian attack, as the latter failed to appear and did not even alert the Yorkshiremen that they would not be joining the assault. However, during the Second Battle of Bullecourt a month later, the 62nd Division amply demonstrated

⁹⁴⁶ IWM, 3354 86/57/1, 'Private Papers of Brigadier RC Foot'

⁹⁴⁷ He had served in Gallipoli as Sir Ian Hamilton's chief staff officer.

⁹⁴⁸ Two of these three men had no experience on the Western Front.

that while its officers and men lacked neither courage nor enthusiasm, it was not able to launch an effective attack on the Western Front.

Though the Fifth Army rushing the Division into the attack without sufficient preparation or resources provides some of reasons for its performance at Second Bullecourt, to a large extent the failure suffered at the beginning of May was of the its own making. The senior officers at the brigade and divisional level did not prepare for the attack with sufficient thoroughness,⁹⁴⁹ nor did they exercise the necessary direction over their men once the assault was launched. The soldiers of the 62nd Division were cut down by the machine guns in enemy strongpoints, both known and unknown, and with insufficient training and too often inadequate leadership at the battalion and company level, many of these officers having not served in France prior to the 62nd's deployment, the attacking infantry lost all impetus and direction and stopped advancing.⁹⁵⁰ This stunted their attack as well as those of the neighboring divisions. If the 62nd Division were to become an effective attacking formation, the way it was led would have to be changed and so would its training – both how it was trained and how much.

New officers, largely men with proven fighting experience on the Western Front, were quickly sent to replace battalion commanders and company commanders relieved of duty, and two of the three Brigadier-Generals were also replaced for failing to measure up.⁹⁵¹ Braithwaite's own position as commanding officer must have been tenuous after the Bullecourt fiasco, but Major-Generals being

⁹⁴⁹ One excellent example of this was the poor artillery barrages in the lead up to the attack.

⁹⁵⁰ This was often after an officer was wounded or killed.

⁹⁵¹ It is unclear why Brigadier-General Taylor of the 187th Brigade was able to keep his job as all three Brigades had fared extremely poorly.

in exceeding short supply in early 1917 in the BEF, he survived, quite fortunately as it turned out. During the ensuing months he diligently set about rebuilding and retraining his Division. It helped that after Second Bullecourt the 62nd Division had the luxury of being transferred to the Third Army and had the time to train, with an intense focus on offensive action and under an Army commander – Julian Byng - who took training very seriously and was especially dedicated to the mentoring of his officers. As a result of these factors, the Division began to transform itself. The real test of the merit of these changes would come at Cambrai six months after the Battles of Bullecourt where the 62nd would play a leading role in a major offensive operation in which it would be expected to perform at a competent level.

During the summer of 1917, Braithwaite demonstrated that he was a commander who was capable of both learning and teaching, and that he was willing to work as hard as was needed for the 62nd Division to be successful. Aply assisting him with training and administrative organization was his GSO 1, Lieutenant-Colonel A.G.A. Hore-Ruthven, who proved to be a gifted staff officer and ultimately went on to have a very successful career outside of the 62nd Division. Braithwaite's new brigadiers would stay with the 62nd Division for the remainder of the war, save for Brigadier-General Bradford, who was killed in November 1917.⁹⁵² Finally, his new crop of battalion commanders also proved to be effective trainers and combat leaders. As reinforcement woes resulted in the breaking up of several of the Yorkshire-based battalions in the first half of 1918, Braithwaite was given three new

⁹⁵² Brigadier-General Bradford would be killed during the battle of Cambrai and was replaced by Brigadier-General Reddie.

battalions (and their commanders).⁹⁵³ The new men brought in from the Middle East demonstrated that they were equally adept at fighting on the Western Front as their peers who had been there since the beginning of 1917. Overall, the transformation of his Division's senior officer cadre after Second Bullecourt served Braithwaite well, but at the same time they were well served by him – he built a team and his senior subordinates flourished in that environment. By and large the soldiers and junior officers under his command also admired Braithwaite and came to view him as a competent and cool-headed leader. Paternalistic though it might sound, the General would participate in many of the sporting events alongside his men, and was not viewed as standoffish or distant. From such qualities is loyalty fostered.⁹⁵⁴ In the words of Major-General Guy Dawnay, he “commanded his division from his horse, in the best open warfare style” and in “the closest personal touch with the situation”, which enabled him to “grip his command.”⁹⁵⁵ As Braithwaite matured as a divisional commander, he became an ever more effective leader both in the heat of battle and during the crucial and certainly more frequent ‘quiet’ times when training occupied the Division's time. While the fact that he was a close friend of Haig (this had aided him in getting command of the 62nd Division on his return from Gallipoli) probably meant that he got the benefit of the doubt during difficult patches in the 62nd's (and Braithwaite's own) development, the final product justified the patience. By the time he was promoted to Lieutenant-General and took

⁹⁵³ This accounted for a third of their battalions.

⁹⁵⁴ An interesting note was that Braithwaite liked to fraternize with the men and one example of this was winning third place at the New Zealand Division's horse show in 1917.

⁹⁵⁵ Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Routledge, 2005), 79

over the X Corps during the last months of the war, he had proven himself a dynamic divisional commander who had effectively trained and led a Second Line Territorial division from the rawest beginnings to the point where it could match the performance of Regular Army divisions with much longer experience at the front.

Given a remarkably short amount of time and adequate resources, the 62nd demonstrated that it could be a first-class division in the BEF, punching further in the opening days of the Battle of Cambrai than any of its flanking divisions. That said, the 62nd Division would be thrown into the battle again and again when the initial gains made by the BEF in that offensive were soon lost. Without the proper planning and the necessary resources, the fighting effectiveness of the 62nd Division, as with its flanking divisions, soon suffered. Despite the disappointing ending of the attack, the 62nd demonstrated that competent officers were now leading it and that the soldiers in the Division had been better trained and their morale reflected this.

The 62nd Division, like most divisions in the BEF, was thrown into the fray in March of 1918 during the German 'Michael' offensive, though like the rest of the BEF, now operating with significantly less infantry thanks to the reduction of divisional establishments.⁹⁵⁶ It was committed again in the summer of 1918 when it was transferred to the French Army to participate in the Second Battle of the Marne. Once again it was given little time to prepare before attacking, but overcame these disadvantages and performed proficiently.

Carrying on into the Last Hundred Days, the 62nd Division was pitched into battle again and again with little time for preparation (with the notable exception of

⁹⁵⁶ BEF divisions shrunk from 12 to 9 battalions except for the Canadian and New Zealand Divisions which chose not to implement this reduction.

the attack at Havrincourt, where they were granted an entire week to plan the operation, but only because it was viewed as fundamental for the Third Army's advance). In these operations, staff officers and commanders alike displayed admirable flexibility and nimbleness in assembling attacks so quickly. Though it suffered serious casualties and not all of its assaults were overwhelming successes, the 62nd Division certainly performed well during the "Victory Campaign".

In the end, the 62nd Division developed into a capable fighting formation. Though military historians have never regarded it as an elite division, it repeatedly proved able to carry out the tasks asked of it. This transformation from raw to polished performance can be attributed to a combination of factors, but nothing ranked higher than the systemization and content of the training regime adopted by the BEF during the winter of 1916-17 – in essence, the training techniques, and the tactical insights which underpinned them, embraced by the BEF in the aftermath of the Somme. After the initial failures at Bullecourt, Braithwaite and his officers appropriately focused their energies on training the troops, basing that training on manuals issued from the War Office. Senior officers took a leading role in this process, and the 62nd Division's infantry benefited greatly under the new approach. The Division's leadership continued to absorb the lessons learned and innovative tactical doctrine it produced which was being handed down from GHQ and this, when paired with effective, dedicated officers, built a formidable fighting organization in the BEF.

The 4th Canadian Division

In building a modern army in wartime, Canada faced the same problems as Britain, only on a proportionally smaller scale. But to all intents the Canadians lacked even the thin cadre of prewar regular professional officers the British could draw upon, making their situation even more challenging. Apart from the invaluable contributions of some excellent British staff officers seconded to Canadian service, all of the senior positions in the 4th Division had to be filled by men possessing little up-to-date military training, except, in a few cases, what they might have gained in wartime. Watson was himself a war-trained amateur soldier who while he had the better part of a year's experience leading a brigade, and had exhibited much promise as a field commander, had actually never commanded anything bigger than a battalion in battle. It was hardly surprising, then, that Watson had to feel his way as a divisional commander and initially relied heavily on his able and at times, domineering, chief of staff, Lieutenant-Colonel William Ironside. The 4th Division was assembled in England from battalions recently arrived from Canada and after only a relatively brief period of training in England and France, it was dispatched to the Somme to take part in the closing actions of that great battle. They fared relatively well during these engagements and although some of their attacks were not successful, overall they demonstrated from the beginning that they were a capably run division which was not out of its depth on the Western Front. One of the Brigadier-Generals, W. St. Pierre Hughes, was relieved after the Somme operation, but with his ex-cabinet-minister brother's star in eclipse, this was done for political reasons as much as for his failures of command.

Historians have had a tough time deciding if Watson deserved his post or was, at best, a mediocrity. Desmond Morton described him as one of the Corps' "ablest senior officers," however, more recently Tim Cook concluded that he was "one of the weakest, if longest serving, Canadian divisional commanders of the war."⁹⁵⁷ Patrick Brennan, in his chapter-length study of Watson, declared him to be "competent - good enough for the job and no more." This seems to be accurate; Watson did not have to be more as he was never in the running to be a Corps commander. He was blessed with two intelligent and accomplished GSO 1s, Ironside and Édouard Panet, and he was able to work effectively with both of them. While he probably initially relied too heavily on the excessively self-confident Ironside, he gradually established his authority over his staff and division as his own experience grew and his need to appear decisive was replaced by a more measured approach. He was also favoured with very able Brigadier-Generals in Odlum, MacBrien, and, in 1918, Hayter (and James Ross). All but Ross (and that was more a result of age and health than ability) were included among the five brigadiers that Lieutenant-General Currie deemed suitable to command at the divisional level had the war continued into 1919.⁹⁵⁸ Along with the aforementioned Hughes, Watson also felt compelled to dismiss Hilliam, Hughes' successor, but this was more due to personality problems – the Britisher Hilliam's inability to mesh with his Canadian subordinates - than inadequate leadership in the field. Overall, Watson's battalion commanders were also an effective group, and for the most part seem to have been

⁹⁵⁷ Desmond Morton, *A Peculiar Kind of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 91. and Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Penguin, 2007), 341

⁹⁵⁸ MG 30, E 100, V.8, file 51, "Turner Papers, Currie memorandum, undated [Jan 1918]"

loyal to him. The morale of the Canadian 4th Division at all levels was high and officers and men alike viewed themselves as an extremely effective fighting force, the equal of their sister divisions in the Canadian Corps and whether fairly or not, the superior to most British divisions. Nearly forty years later, Ironside wrote that the 4th Division was “one of the best [divisions] I have ever seen in any campaign.”⁹⁵⁹ From a future Chief of the Imperial General Staff that was high praise, indeed. What Watson may have lacked in generalship on the battlefield, and the deficiencies definitely seemed to decline as the war progressed, he more than made up in his abilities to identify and harness the abilities of able subordinates.

During the late winter of 1917, the 4th Canadian Division spent weeks preparing for the biggest raid they would undertake during the war. Both Watson and Ironside were culpable for the overly ambitious scheme. Poor understanding of the gas technology they were using and a general overconfidence, which in Watson’s case at least marked his own inexperience, caused this attack to fail, and demonstrated that the 4th Division’s leadership needed to temper its aggressiveness with sound judgment. They also needed to listen to battalion commanders who had almost universally concluded that the attack would be a disaster. With little more than a month to absorb the raid’s bloody lessons, the 4th Division took part in the Canadian Corps’ attack on Vimy Ridge. For reasons that remain unexplained, the most junior division was given the most arduous and challenging task, that of assaulting the ‘Pimple’ and Hill 145. Though serious mistakes were made in the 11th Brigade’s part of the attack, and particularly by its commander, Brigadier Odium, in

⁹⁵⁹ IWM, 92/40/1, ‘Ironside Papers, Ironside to Lindsey, 20th October 1955’

the end the 4th Division achieved the goals set for it, again demonstrating that earlier success on the Somme had not been beginner's luck.

Throughout the rest of the spring the 4th Division spent the bulk of its time raiding and training for offensive operations employing the same tactical manuals as the 62nd were using. In what was planned as an attritional attack to pin German reserves, they were thrown into battle again in August at Lens with poor results. Once more a failure of the Division's (as well as the Corps') senior leadership, in this instance to take into account the problems of attacking in an urban environment, led to the 44th Battalion being destroyed on the Green Crassier and heavy casualties all around. From Lens, the 4th Division moved to Passchendaele, where they performed adequately in the swamp-like environment of the Ypres salient, carrying out their responsibilities as well as could be expected in the appalling conditions of terrain and weather.

In 1918, the 4th Division had the luxury of spending most of the first half of the year simply holding the line, which gave them the time to train for offensive operations and polish those skills by taking part in a plethora of small and middle-sized raids. During this time, when the manpower of British divisions was shrinking, Canadian divisions actually grew in size, increasing their infantry complement and substantially augmenting their firepower as well. In fact the 4th Division would have ten months to hone its skills before it was to see large-scale action again during the Last Hundred Days. During this 'Victory Campaign', the Canadian Corps headquarters closely directed the 4th Division on how and where they were to attack, allowing input but little leeway in the execution of plans drawn up at the

Corps level. The success they had storming the Canal du Nord and the tragic failure at Mount Dury both need to be laid at the feet of Corps headquarters and their complex plans of attack. In its heaviest sustained period of fighting during the war, the actual combat carried out by the troops of the 4th Division was effective, and certainly demonstrated that they were the equal in skill and élan of any division within the Canadian Corps.

A key to the success of the Canadian 4th Division was the system in which it participated that focused on ‘institutionalized learning’⁹⁶⁰ and the particular passion with which the Canadian Corps, first under Byng and then Currie, embraced this BEF-wide concept. Drawing on battlefield lessons learned at all levels from platoon to Army, which were systematized in the form of the doctrine and training manuals compiled by the British Army in the field as well as the War Office, the 4th Division was able to focus on the effective employment of the new infantry attack tactics, something that was going on throughout the BEF, to be sure, but which the 4th Division, and the Canadian Corps as a whole, embraced with particular enthusiasm. Like the 62nd Division, the 4th by itself did not create any new ways of waging war, but what they did have was a sensible system that focused on the latest training methods, and officers also were willing, indeed keen, to apply it.⁹⁶¹

⁹⁶⁰ For further explanation on institutionalized learning see Patrick Brennan and Tom Leppard’s article “How the Lessons Were Learned: Senior Commanders and the Moulding of the Canadian Corps after the Somme,” in Yves Tremblay, ed., *Canadian Military History Since the 17th Century* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2001)

⁹⁶¹ There were two pillars of the new attack doctrine – new infantry tactics, with the responsibility for training falling to infantry divisions – and new artillery tactics, with the responsibility for training, despite the mass of artillery being attached to infantry divisions, falling to the Corps artillery specialists. Because this fell outside of divisional control, unlike the infantry training, it has been examined much more superficially.

Comparing the Two Divisions

Many Canadian historical accounts, both popular and scholarly, have alluded to the 'fact' that by the last year of the war, and particularly during the 'Victory Campaign,' the Canadian divisions became clearly superior in combat efficiency to their British counterparts. However, the two forces have actually never been compared in any depth prior to this dissertation.⁹⁶² Thorough examinations of their combat records have shown that both divisions steadily improved and after a year fighting had become quite proficient in offensive operations. In their ability to create effective fighting divisions in short order, the British and Canadian systems were strikingly similar – indeed, in most ways they were the same system. The real test in comparing these formations was battlefield effectiveness. It was true at the time and remains so.

Admittedly, there were undoubtedly a number of socio-cultural distinctions between the Canadian and British armies. To name some of the obvious – conscript versus volunteer manpower; different prewar class systems, experiences and expectations among officers and men alike; the presence or absence of a regular army ethos among senior officers in particular; different degrees of working class 'consciousness' among the ranks - would have played their part in defining the 'culture' of the two armies. The undeniably growing, if nascent, 'national' identity of a significant element of the Canadian soldiery would also have been a factor. For research reasons alone, these lines of investigation were not undertaken in this work. That said, the presence of large numbers of recent British immigrants in the

⁹⁶² For a particularly good example, see Shane Schreiber, *Shock Troops of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last Hundred Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2004)

CEF's ranks, and the undeniable impact of the values of the 'British world' alluded to earlier, led the author to believe that the socio-economic or socio-cultural differences, which have been exaggerated to make other historical points, likely played secondary, not primary, roles in shaping the British and Canadian divisions forged in wartime, that the real differences were nonetheless outweighed by the many substantial similarities.⁹⁶³

An unbiased comparison of the Canadian 4th Division and the British 62nd Division shows that there were both notable similarities and differences between the two. One of the most obvious similarities is that they were both produced by and were subsequently part of the same British system; the Canadian 4th Division did not have a special or different way of training and certainly did not generate a separate fighting doctrine. At the outset, these units were both underequipped and were led by a small team of reasonably experienced soldiers, however, in both divisions the leaders from battalion commanders on down were mostly 'amateur warriors' with little or no experience on the Western Front. Initial training was earnest but inevitably basic in the truest sense of the word. During their early history, a significant difference was that the 62nd Division sat in England for almost two years, and during that period had many of its most effective leaders siphoned off to refill

⁹⁶³ In the end, this was a military study of two divisions in the BEF, and further research needs to go into comparing many different aspects to get a broader sense of how similar or different divisions were in the BEF. Studies comparing territorial divisions to regular British divisions, New Zealand to Australian divisions, and finally BEF divisions to those of other nations are needed. Also, the social history of these two divisions was not examined thoroughly, and such a study might produce new insight into their differences and similarities. This is just an initial foray into this important area of research, but one structured to make the ultimate comparison possible – were they effective on the battlefield and why? The bottom line is if both divisions became proficient, it is logical that similarities in the training and management, not socio-economic or cultural differences, must have dominated.

the ranks of divisions already fighting in France. In the 4th Canadian Division's case, it was sent to France less than five months after its inception, with some of its battalions having arrived from Canada only six weeks before being deployed to the Western Front. Overall, the type of training these units had in England was similar, and minor differences though there may have been, they both left ready to fight - error-prone and very much still 'works in progress', yes - but capable of operating with battle-experienced divisions and holding their own.

As this paper has shown, throughout the war both divisions followed the same doctrinal and training directives which, broadly speaking, focused on more effective - and less costly - ways of carrying out offensive operations under trench warfare and later semi-open warfare conditions. The system they put in place was one that could be seen in the training regime of any division in the BEF (or CEF). By the fall of 1917 both divisions had experienced officers in place at all levels of command and a staff who were broadly competent and knew what was required of them and the men to be successful on the battlefield. The major observable difference in training was not content or method but rather that Canadian divisions had additional time to carry the training out, a consequence of the Canadian 4th Division being engaged significantly less often during the war than the 62nd Division. It certainly cannot be said from an unbiased assessment of the record that the troops in the former were more effective. Examining the battles in which both divisions took part, it seems the British and Canadian battalions employed the same tactics, and all things being equal, which often they were not, they met with the comparable levels of success. More often than not the attack would be successful,

however as with all else on the Western Front, nothing was easy. The margins between success and failure were always narrow, indeed.

Preparation time to familiarize all ranks with the demands of an upcoming assault was invaluable – it was seen so at the time. Both under Byng and Currie, thorough – one might even say obsessively thorough - preparation became a hallmark of the Canadian Corps. There were instances, particularly under the latter's tenure, where the Canadian Corps, because of its special (political) status, was able to ensure it obtained additional time for preparation, which obviously paid dividends. And it was an option which was very simply not available to a British Corps and hence a British Division.

Comparing Braithwaite and Watson shows that both divisional commanders had comparable leadership styles. Each embraced the hands-on approach and would spend time visiting the troops and personally observing training exercises to make sure that they were being carried out properly and could personally measure the progress being made. Watson's relationship with Currie, one presumably cemented by his role (along with Odlum) in settling Currie's embarrassing debt in 1917, surely provided 'credits' with the Canadian commander that were even more valuable than those Braithwaite gleaned from his friendship with Haig. Watson was not without ability, but there is no question that his whole career in the Canadian Corps benefited from his skills in Corps politics at which he became a master. Braithwaite, a professional military officer who was also politically adroit in his own way, was also adept at keeping his staff loyal to him, and he was admired by his officers and men, almost to as great an extent as Watson. However, while Watson

seemed to have reached his proverbial 'level of command' as a Major-General, Braithwaite proved capable of more, and was promoted to command a Corps during the Hundred Days, a role which he carried out with notable success.

There were significant differences in how these divisions were employed. The Canadian 4th Division was never thrown into a battle with little or no time for preparation and without full support from and a dialogue with their Corps, something that was certainly not the case for the 62nd Division. Being thrown back into battle at Cambrai after the attack's initial success, without any preparation time and having only just been removed from the line utterly exhausted, would not have happened in (or to) the Canadian Corps. Likewise, being diverted to take part in the French operations in the summer of 1918, literally disembarking from the trains into battle, would also never have happened to a Canadian division. Of course, the reason for such 'favoured' treatment was the growing autonomy of the Canadian Corps within the BEF. The repeated deployment of the 62nd (and all British divisions), with little input from the divisional commander, was something a Canadian divisional commander did not have to worry about. That said, though Watson did have more consultation with Byng and Currie than Braithwaite and Whigham had with their various Corps commanders, throughout 1918 Currie (and Webber, his Chief of Staff) manifested a growing tendency toward an exacting control of the division's role by Corps headquarters to the point where much of the time during the Last Hundred Days it is no exaggeration to say that the Canadian Corps operated like an 'over-sized division', with the nominal divisional commanders and their subordinates exercising less and less direction over the

employment of their units. This was a departure from the earlier Byng – Radcliffe style of Corps command.

Arguments have been made that a Canadian division benefited from the familiarity of remaining in one Corps with the same Corps commander and the same divisions.⁹⁶⁴ During the 4th Division's time on the Western Front, it operated under three different Corps commanders, one of those only briefly.⁹⁶⁵ In contrast, the 62nd served in seven different Corps, but were switched between these a total of twelve times.⁹⁶⁶ In some instances, different brigades were even assigned to different Corps during the same battle.⁹⁶⁷ The argument has been made that because Canadian divisional commanders knew (and were well known by) their Corps commander and his staff, this allowed them to have a closer and ultimately more productive working relationship, which in turn had a positive effect on battlefield performance. While a logical line of reasoning, for these two divisions, at any rate, this does not seem to have proven very significant. Watson and Currie had a close professional (and personal) relationship, however, it does not seem to have had much influence on the way the 4th Division was used nor impacted its effectiveness. The personal papers of both, as well as institutional records, show that they did discuss ideas. However, they do not demonstrate that Watson or his staff ever strongly objected to

⁹⁶⁴ For further on this see Peter Simkins chapter "Co-stars or supporting Cast? British Divisions in the last Hundred Days" in eds. Paddy Griffith *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998)

⁹⁶⁵ The Corps commanders were Claude Jacob (during the Battle of the Somme), Julian Byng and Arthur Currie. The 4th Division was also briefly a part of Frank's force in September of 1916 before being moved to Jacob's II Corps.

⁹⁶⁶ The 62nd served in the I, IV, V, VI, XIII, XVII and XXII Corps. The time in the Corps varied significantly; they only served for a few days in the I Corps; however, they spent ten months in the V Corps.

⁹⁶⁷ See Chapter 7 - the 62nd Division during the March offensive.

Corps' plans or suggested any idea to Currie or Webber that caused the latter to second-guess a decision. Even when Watson felt that a plan of attack was unduly risky, as in the case of Mount Dury operation, he and Panet demurred to the Corps' plan. While that may well reflect Watson's own deference to superiors, one gets a sense in his diary that nay saying was less welcome at this point in the war, with Canadian divisional commanders, and certainly Watson, more informed than consulted about Corps' plans.⁹⁶⁸ Braithwaite and Whigham seemed to have had very professional working relationships with their Corps commanders, and the records rarely show that they disagreed with them. If they did, that rarely held weight in how the division would be employed.⁹⁶⁹

Another argument put forward by critics of the British Corps structure maintains that the same divisions in a Corps meant the constituent divisions would have a history of battlefield cooperation, and be known 'quantities' to one another, leading to a more effective operational performance.⁹⁷⁰ But this argument, at least in the case of the 62nd and 4th Divisions, does not seem to have weight either. In the latter's case it often had other BEF divisions on its flanks and it was able to work equally well with them.⁹⁷¹ For the 4th Canadian Division there was no perceptible

⁹⁶⁸ For one example of this see Watson's diary for the Mount Dury attack. MG 30 E 69, Watson Papers "Diary Sept. 1918"

⁹⁶⁹ One example where the 62nd Divisional commander influenced an attack was Whigham in the Last Hundred Days requesting a week to prepare for his attack on Havrincourt and being granted one day more. Lieutenant-General Haldane in his memoirs does not give credit to Whigham for this extra day.

⁹⁷⁰ The British Army was the only force on the Western Front not to maintain the same divisions with a Corps; instead they rotated divisions through Corps.

⁹⁷¹ In some cases the sister divisions the 62nd Division were attacking with did not reach their set objectives and this caused ensuing setbacks for the Division. The fact that a flanking division 'failed' cannot automatically be attributed to their not having been in the same Corps; depending on the situation, a myriad of explanations can be attributed.

benefit from knowing the division on its flank that thoroughly – operating procedures and tactical doctrine, were after all, basically the same throughout both expeditionary forces. Similarly, the 62nd Division, which during its major assaults at Bullecourt and Cambrai had spent months with the same divisions in the same Corps and knew them well, showed no improved performance over the times that they had to fight with divisions that were less known to them.

If, as historian Andy Simpson argues, by the Last Hundred Days British Corps left their divisions to their own devices within the parameters set,⁹⁷² this was only partly true for the 62nd Division, as the parameters set were quite constricted. Haldane, commander of VI Corps, set restrictions for the 62nd Division so narrowly that the latter's commanders were often only given hours to prepare. They would attack on a very narrow frontage, with few options for divisional and brigade commanders to tailor their plans to suit circumstances as they saw them.⁹⁷³ Yet even the relatively small freedom that the 62nd Division could typically exercise within its Corps was not seen with the Canadian 4th Division. Currie and his staff planned the set-piece battles painstakingly – the hallmark preparatory style first introduced by Byng and Radcliffe, and which is generally seen as having served the Corps so well during 1917-18.⁹⁷⁴

⁹⁷² Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), 165

⁹⁷³ There is one case during the Last Hundred days where Haldane disagreed with Whigham's plan of attack. Given a day to prepare the 62nd Division attacked Vaulx-Vraucourt directly, Haldane commented that: "The 62nd got all Vaulx-Vraucourt....The 62nd Div. took that yesterday by direct attack, and not by working round the rear as I wished, which would have been far more effective and would have gained more ground." Haldane Papers, MS 20250 September 2nd 1918 National Library of Scotland.

⁹⁷⁴ Ian M. Brown, "Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-Piece Attack, 1917-1918" *The Journal of Military History* 58 (July 1994)

Examining senior leadership in 1918 can only be done during the Last Hundred Days, for unlike the 62nd Division, the 4th Canadian Division saw no significant combat up to that point (in 1918). Moreover, Watson had been commander of the 4th Division since the spring of 1916, whereas Whigham had taken over the 62nd Division in mid-August after the Victory Campaign had already commenced. Both showed 'hands on' concern for how their divisions were being handled.⁹⁷⁵ Furthermore, both commanders had very little freedom (though the 62nd appears to have had more than the 4th Canadian Division) in actually planning their attacks, deciding the axis of advance, and determining the roles their brigades and battalions would play. During the steady advance during the 'Victory Campaign', the 62nd and 4th Divisions were both micromanaged by their respective Corps leadership. That said, both divisional commanders, within the tactical and operational scope they were permitted, showed an aggressive offensive spirit, recognizing – and accepting - that heavy casualties would be suffered during these repeated assaults on prepared enemy positions manned by soldiers who were still, more often than not, willing to fight.⁹⁷⁶

Finally, in keeping with broader BEF practices, the commanders also scrupulously drew on lessons learned following engagements so that their respective divisions would be able to adapt for the next push. Such practice

⁹⁷⁵ See in Chapter 8th Whigham's complaint to Lieutenant-General Haldane during the Havrincourt operation and in Chapter 9 Watson voicing concern about the quick planning for the Mont Dury operation.

⁹⁷⁶ Examining Braithwaite and Whigham is a difficult process. Both demonstrated that they were effective hands-on commanders that were willing to take casualties for gains and that they both seemed to be genuinely engaged in adapting (within the scope they were allowed) plans handed down from Corps if they seemed faulty. That said, Whigham did not get a chance to train the men and did not get a break between battles, so that insight into that part of a divisional commander's ability is lacking.

confirmed that they were both conscientious commanders who were vigorously engaged in making sure their divisions would improve and maintain their sharp attacking edge, and reflected their success in inculcating these values into their subordinate field commanders and staff officers. Battlefield effectiveness meant team work, and it mattered as much at the senior level as it did at the company or platoon level.

As discussed earlier, a significant difference between the two commanders was that Watson had a much better relationship with his commanding officer, and was able to discuss battle plans, and one suspects rather more candidly, with Currie (and Webber) as he saw them quite often.⁹⁷⁷ In contrast, Whigham and Haldane's relationship was not as close. Unfortunately, Whigham did not leave behind a diary, but in Aylmer Haldane's voluminous files there are only a few brief mentions of Whigham by name, and these are invariably in a professional context, merely dictating what Whigham (and the 62nd Division) would be doing in an upcoming operation. Whereas Currie discussed and debated his plans with Watson and appears to have at least heard him and Panet out (though there is little evidence that Watson ever disagreed with Currie), Haldane just directed Whigham. In the end, both Divisional commanders in the Last Hundred Days were not military geniuses but competent leaders who ran their Divisions effectively, fully exploiting the boundaries permitted.

In both Divisions, the soldiers seemed to have had high morale, and kept it up despite the grinding fighting. That said, the author did not explore morale in any

⁹⁷⁷ The Watson diary during the Last Hundred Days is literally filled with comments mentioning discussions with Currie about some aspect of the war.

depth, for instance by a thorough examination of disciplinary records, the research for which would have required far too much time and produced a fundamentally different dissertation than the one the author chose to undertake. That said, nothing in either of the Divisions' papers at the battalion level and above questioned the soldiers' élan. Indeed, complaints about the soldier's morale did not seem to exist. Rather they seem to have wanted to continue to fight - Canadian and British, volunteer and conscript - and tellingly there did not appear to be much difference in the morale, or in the state of discipline, the latter being both a contributor to and a reflection of morale in the two units.⁹⁷⁸ Certainly, there was nothing uncovered in the research on these two Divisions that seems to undermine what G.D. Sheffield wrote in *Leadership in the Trenches* about discipline in the British Empire forces on the Western Front:

“One can conclude that Canadian and Australian discipline tended to be looser and officer-man relations a little more informal than was usually the case in many British units, but the differences between ‘imperial’ and ‘Dominion’ troops should not be overstated. The Dominion approach was rather more, and the British rather less, formal than is commonly believed, with the Canadian style perhaps more closely resembling the British than the Australian.”⁹⁷⁹

This may well be another instance where, given the large number of British immigrants serving in the Canadian Corps, and because of the desire to ‘prove’ the existence of a distinctive (non-British) Canadian identity, the tendency to stress socio-cultural differences between Canadian and British soldiers has simply

⁹⁷⁸ It is interesting at similarities in morale, as the 4th Canadian Division was largely volunteer, and the 62nd Division slowly evolved into a conscript force in 1917-1918. The only time morale was seen as an issue in the latter's ranks was with the dissolving of battalions in 1918 and this was not significant in the long run.

⁹⁷⁹ G.D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 172

understated the broad similarities. In the end, the author concluded that while matters of morale are clearly vital should be further explored, consistent success on the battlefield points logically to the conclusion that morale in both divisions, while obviously ebbing and flowing with the ups and downs of the war, did not undermine their battle-worthiness and likely enhanced it

In the end, the most significant difference between the two Divisions during the Victory Campaign was the nature and number of battles that they fought. The 4th Division was involved in four major operations, starting with Amiens and ending in the taking of Valenciennes. During these battles, it accomplished most of the tasks assigned to it by General Currie and the senior staff of the Canadian Corps.

Three of the four operations were extremely complex: Amiens, the Droqourt-Quéant Line, and the Canal du Nord. Two of these can be viewed as successes for the 4th Division, but clearly the Droqourt-Quéant Line attack cannot. The 62nd Division also participated in three battles with comparable complexity: the attack at Havrincourt, the Second Battle of the Marne, and their separate crossing of the Canal du Nord. The results of their major operations followed a very similar pattern - both enjoying initial success in their attacks, but as the German defences stiffened, gains were harder to achieve, and certainly more costly. However, the 62nd Division had also taken part in considerable fighting in the spring and early summer of 1918, which the 4th Canadian Division had not. Overall, the 62nd Division took part in double the operations during the Last Hundred Days, as well as being fully engaged in the Second Battle of Marne in late July. For the most part, the 62nd Division's battles were significantly smaller than those fought by the 4th Division, with the

Battle of Havrincourt being the only operation of comparable scale to the three major 'bite – and – hold' attacks mounted by the Canadian Corps, though perhaps not proportionally smaller attacks, given the disparity in infantry strength between the two divisions. That said, the 62nd Division did not have the luxury of preparing for their attacks with the thoroughness the 4th Division was usually permitted.⁹⁸⁰ There would be no dummy courses for the infantry to go over or extensive counter-battery barrages by the artillery during the days prior to their attacks to 'soften up' the German defences they would be facing.⁹⁸¹ The 62nd's repeated role was to be quickly put into a sector to fill a gap in the larger push. They were not, other than at Havrincourt, a division that was to break through the line at a strategic point. Rather, they were used, at least by First World War standards, in a more operationally 'nimble' manner than the 4th Division, which, as part of the Canadian Corps, played but one role - a hammer in great pounding 'set-piece' attacks.

Casualties incurred during the Last Hundred Days in the two divisions were remarkably similar, with the 62nd Division losing 7,900 men, and the 4th Division 7,400. The casualties sustained by the 4th Division were mostly from four battles, whereas the 62nd Division's losses were spread over a series of many smaller attacks. It would be hard to imagine that the significantly smaller 62nd Division could have carried out the same pounding assaults that characterized the 4th Division's battles, even had the necessary flow of reinforcements been available, because they would not have had time to train together and meld. Looking at

⁹⁸⁰ That said, the 4th Division never had ample time to prepare for attacks during the Last Hundred Days. They just had more time to prepare compared to the 62nd Division.

⁹⁸¹ Except for at Amiens, where it was decided that for secrecy no preliminary barrage would be used.

brigade and larger operations, the Canadian 4th Division was involved in offensive action for ten days during the Victory Campaign; during that same period the 62nd Division was engaged in fifteen days of fighting.⁹⁸²

The measurably greater human and material resources of the 4th Canadian Division allowed it to suffer heavier casualties and continue to grind on over several days, utterly exhausting its opponent. Since the 62nd Division was not put in the same position, it is meaningless (not to mention pointless) to surmise if the battle effectiveness of one division was 'better' than another, the age-old comparison between Dominion and Imperial (British) Divisions. The two Divisions played significantly different roles throughout the Last Hundred Days campaign. One would take part in a very large operation and would be granted (not the least because its 'national' Corps was able to demand it) time (though limited) and resources to prepare for the ensuing battle. The other would be used as a 'jack of all trades' and thrown into action with little notice, expected to respond as best it could and push forward, knowing that its manpower would be more quickly exhausted than a Canadian division's. The key is that both were remarkably successful in the roles they played. By this point in the war, both Divisions were thoroughly trained and capable of hard fighting, and it is impossible to say which division performed better during the Victory Campaign, given the differing nature of their respective operations. Without question, the 62nd would not have sustained the hard pounding that the 4th Canadian Division took, but also it is not known if the 4th Canadian

⁹⁸² This does not look at defensive battles or small skirmishes which the 62nd Division took part in to a significant degree more the 4th Canadian Division. It also does not look at the days in late July where the 62nd Division was engaged in major operations on the Marne.

Division could have undertaken such a diverse array of operations had it been thrown into one battle after another without the time to prepare that it was given in the Victory Campaign.

In the first half of 1917, the 4th Division was run more effectively and was able to carry out attacks much more successfully. However, by the fall of 1917, after the 62nd Division's 'reconstruction', it became equally as effective, though because of the size disparity between British and Canadian divisions, still incapable of undertaking the more attritional operations assigned to the 4th Division. Both divisions from this point on performed competently and largely achieved the objectives set out for them. The training throughout the war, and in particular the focus on artillery-intensive 'bite and hold' tactics, was effectively identical, not surprisingly since both training regimes were drawn from the same training manuals. Similarly, it did not seem to matter in 1918 if the middle and senior officers were pre-war regulars or 'amateur warriors' forged into professionals on the battlefield. By this time the attitude to training within both divisions was the same - thorough and professional.

By the Victory Campaign, it seems the Canadian Corps, including its 4th Division, had a specialized role to play where it was used to launch major set-piece attacks against particularly strong German defences. They required and were given the time and resources necessary to carryout these tasks (though appreciably less time than in 1917). The 62nd Division, on the other hand, was used in a different role and was thrown into battles with significantly less preparation time and resources to carryout its attacks. In effect, it was being asked to be more adaptable and nimble

than a Canadian division. By 1918, both divisions were fully integrated in the British system, with similarly experienced officers, training, and doctrine, and both were able to achieve the results asked of them. As this study has shown both became very competent fighting formations in time to make significant contributions to the war effort. Overall, the similarities in the two divisions seem to have far outweighed the differences; in an Imperial military coalition where efficiency on the battlefield dictated divisions be interchangeable parts as much as possible, this goal had been achieved.

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