‘They learn best by teaching and making their own mistakes, not by lectures from superiors.’
An assessment of the British Expeditionary Force’s Infantry Tactical Progress on the Somme Front, September 1916 – April 1917

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Abstract

The notion that the British Expeditionary Force's infantry underwent a learning process during and following the Somme campaign of 1916 is now well established. This thesis has explored that process by case-studying ten divisions in action between September 1916 and April 1917, with particular focus on the early 1917 actions on the Somme front and the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line. The four main objectives of this research have been to examine the relationship between experience and doctrine in tactical development; to establish the extent of tactical progress within the examined time period; to qualify certain existing terms within the study of the history of the First World War; and to contribute to the understanding of a series of actions on the Somme front in early 1917 which have yet to be studied in detail.

This research has found that broadly speaking, several assertions regarding tactical progress in the BEF made by historians such as Gary Sheffield, Peter Simkins, Paddy Griffith and William Philpott have been essentially accurate. That is to say, a development process did occur as a result of the lessons of the Somme campaign, but it was not carried out in a uniform fashion. Different divisions with different experiences and leadership learned different lessons. In an effort to raise standards, best practice was codified for dissemination after having been tested in action by the apparently highest-performing BEF divisions. This thesis has found a discernible improvement in performance among those divisions which had the opportunity to train in the latest tactical methods following their late 1916 actions. It sheds light on a crucial period of development in the BEF, exploring the nature of their progress towards the all-arms fighting style of 1918. Furthermore, it demonstrates the performance of the BEF in early 1917 was more creditable than previous assessments have shown.

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Writing a thesis between 2019 and 2023 has been an intensely challenging experience. Carrying out detailed study on a battlefield I know well but a period I do not, while negotiating a pandemic and the temporary transition to life online, and all the other trials that came with the very early 2020s, has been eye-opening. I would firstly like to thank my supervisory team at the University of Suffolk, Dr Lisa Wade, Dr Harvey Osborne, and Dr John Greenacre for their support, guidance, and ability to 'roll with it' as challenges have presented themselves. I am particularly indebted to John for encouraging me to apply to carry out my research at UoS. It has been a point of pride to study at the young university in my home town of Ipswich, and I hope the department continues to go from strength to strength.

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> So far, then, all the minor operations had been successful. Their interest lies chiefly in that fact. They represented a steady pressure, by means of the capture of one commanding point after another, to secure observation, and in some cases to deny it to the enemy, in view of a larger offensive. From the tactical point of view, they are worthy of more detailed study than it is possible to devote to them here, study which would bring out the increase in skill in warfare of this type gained by the British Armies in the past six months. This can be observed in command and troops alike, but it is particularly apparent in the leadership of the battalion, the company, and the platoon, as well as in the support of the field artillery.[1]

This excerpt from Cyril Falls’s volume of the *Official History of the Great War,* which covers the actions of early 1917, references the actions on Redan Ridge, north of the river Ancre, in January and February of that year. British 7th and 32nd Divisions, which had both been involved in the opening day of the Somme campaign, had led the way in the new year in capturing positions which had held out since 1 July 1916, and again defied capture in November 1916, as the battle of the Somme notionally wound down. As Falls observes, his work left scope for additional research into the actions themselves, and the reasons for the improvements in fighting capacity, which he perceptively recognised had occurred within the BEF during this period. Though Falls’s observation was made over 80 years ago, these studies have not yet been carried out, and this thesis will explore both these themes. The best-known actions detailed in this volume of the Official History are those at Arras in April and May 1917. Even these actions, as Gary Sheffield has observed while discussing the context of the concurrent

[1] C. Falls, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations, France & Belgium, 1917 Volume 1* (London, Macmillan, 1940) p. 73.

operations of the Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge, can be termed a 'forgotten battle'.[2] The Ancre actions and the pursuit of the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, therefore, have received little attention from historians of the Great War. They do, however, provide a valuable and hitherto underexploited opportunity to examine the fighting prowess of the infantry of the British Expeditionary Force in the wake of the Somme campaign, and prior to the implementation of significant doctrinal changes.

Historiography

Though the official history is still the most comprehensive study of these early 1917 actions, there have been recent steps taken to bridge this gap, with the latest edited volume by Spencer Jones, *The Darkest Year; The British Army on the Western Front in 1917*, published in 2022, addressing certain previously under-researched elements in depth. Of particular interest to this thesis is Nigel Dorrington's essay on III Corps's pursuit after the German withdrawal, which tracks the experience of a single corps from its relief of the French forces South of the river Somme, to the battles for the outpost villages in front of the Hindenburg Line. Dorrington provides a valuable, focused overview on the preparedness for an advance from both a tactical and logistical point of view, and then the mixed results of the actions while on the pursuit.[3] There are a number of essays in Jones's volume which also address points relevant to this research, and one which has drawn from elements of this thesis while in production, to further the discussion on the BEF's progress in 1917.[4]

In broader historiographical terms, the work of Jones and others reflects currently dominant trends in interpreting the First World War. Significant strides have been made in challenging the narrative of futility and thoughtlessness surrounding the conduct of the great battles of the conflict since the 1990s. While there is no shortage of written work on the 1916 Battle of the Somme, the opening day of the offensive still captures the public imagination in a manner which overshadows the continued campaign. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson's work on the

[2] G. Sheffield, 'Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras; A British Perspective' in G. Hayes, A. Iarocci & M. Bechthold (eds), *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 2007) p. 15.
[3] N. Dorrington, '" I could not persuade myself it had been great fun"; The Operational Experience of III Corps During the German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line, Spring 1917' in S. Jones (ed), *The Darkest Year; The British Army on the Western Front 1917* (Helion, 2022) pp. 225-254.
[4] A. Lock, 'Patchy Progress and Powerful Performances; Tactical Development in 8th British Division and 2nd Australian Division during the Pursuit to the Hindenburg Line' in S. Jones, *Darkest Year*, pp. 255-278.

Somme is a well-researched exploration of the narrative of the campaign, and although it touches on tactical matters, it necessarily places much of its focus on higher command.[5] More recently published, and narrow enough in scope to present an extremely useful level of detail, Meleah Hampton's *Attack on the Somme* concentrates on I ANZAC Corps in action around Pozières from late July to early September 1916. It is a well-researched analysis, featuring two of the divisions case-studied in this thesis (Australian 2nd and 4th Divisions), and addresses factors affecting performance such as training and morale, as well as actions on the battlefield themselves.[6] Additional research in the style carried out by Hampton would be of enormous benefit to understanding the nature of the learning process, as well as the dynamic of different command levels in major offensives during the Great War.

Even if the public understandings have not yet caught up with the current state of Great War scholarship, modern studies, and especially those which focus on the Battle of the Somme in 1916, stress the 'learning process' on which General Sir Douglas Haig's armies embarked. Such improvement was noted by the first generation of historians to write on the First World War. Falls's own single volume on the conflict, published in 1960, states that 'the British had made a considerable improvement in tactical skill since the Battle of the Somme', when discussing operations at Arras in 1917.[7] Little work was done to fill Fall's identified gap in the literature until the 1990s, and Paddy Griffith, Gary Sheffield and Peter Simkins in particular have led the way in more recent studies. Works such as Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory; The First World War Myths and Realities*, first published in 2001, have helped reframe the debate on tactics and operations during the conflict. Few historians have been more prolific than Sheffield in producing work on the learning process, and volumes such as *The Chief; Douglas Haig and the British Army* from 2012 and *Command and Morale; The British Army on the Western Front* from 2014 are both valuable studies on the BEF in general terms.[8] *Forgotten Victory* remains one of the best-known modern works in shaping discussion of the British Army's performance in the Great War, providing a common starting point for modern students of the conflict, but by virtue of the size of the task and the scope of the work, tactical progress in the wake of the

[5] R. Prior & T. Wilson, *The Somme* (Yale University Press, 2005).
[6] M. Hampton, *Attack on the Somme: 1st ANZAC Corps and the Battle for Pozières Ridge, 1916* (Helion, 2016)
[7] C. Falls, *The First World War* (Longmans, London, 1960) p. 258.
[8] G. Sheffield, *The Chief; Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London, Aurum, 2012) and *Command and Morale: The British Army on the Western Front* (Pen & Sword, 2014).

Somme campaign is discussed in fairly broad terms. Sheffield provides a brief narrative of shifting tactical methods during the Somme campaign, such as the dawn assault on 14 July 1916 with intensified artillery fire, and the employment of tanks on 15 September. Infantry methods are discussed in relation to operations at Delville Wood in late July and the improvisation of battalions and their employment of supporting weapons, and that adaptation was consolidated into the training pamphlets which 'appeared after the campaign had concluded'. These were the documents *SS143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* and *SS144 The Normal Formation for the Attack*, both issued in February 1917, which Sheffield describes as representing 'a significant step forward from the tactical doctrine that existed before the battle'.[9] Additionally, Sheffield has stressed the increased flexibility of small units such as the platoon, and asserts that 'the Somme taught the BEF how to fight'.[10] Superficially, therefore, Falls's assertion on tactical progress is supported in modern historiography, however Sheffield also establishes that production of doctrine does not necessarily translate to its instruction or its adherence. This thesis will address the existing historiographical shortage in detail and depth.

Griffith's work *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, published in 1996, has perhaps yet to be superseded as the preeminent single work on the British Army's offensive methods during the Great War. In his chapter on the lessons of the Somme, Griffith draws attention to the infantry's move away from the dependency on the bayonet, and 'cult of the bomb', and the identification of the need for greatly-improved musketry standards.[11] Progress in infantry-artillery cooperation is also noted, as well as a recognition of the need for methodical preparation of offensive operations. Griffith also examines the new doctrinal documents of late 1916 and early 1917, such as the aforementioned *SS143* and *SS144*, but also *SS135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*. *SS135* is described as being a starting point for a methodical combination of modern weapons, with an emphasis on the importance of following an effective creeping barrage.[12] *SS143*, meanwhile, is described as 'a

[9] G. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory; The First World War Myths and Realities* (London, Headline, 2001) pp. 142-151.
[10] Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, p. 157.
[11] P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front; The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18* (Yale, 1996) pp. 65-73.
[12] Ibid, p. 77.

vital milestone in tactics, marking a change-over from the Victorian era of riflemen in lines to the twentieth-century era of flexible small groups built around a variety of high-firepower weapons'.[13] Griffith is similarly cautious, however, in declaring uniformity of uptake among the BEF in these new methods as different divisional commanders employed different methods, but there is also an acceptance that standards of leadership rose during this period. Griffith's work on tactical progress continued with his edited volume *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, published in 1996, which also includes essays by Sheffield and Simkins, as well as an introduction to the work of the SHLM Battle Assessment Study 1914-18 [Simkins, Hammond, Lee, McCarthy, the initials of the principal figures involved]. This was an extremely ambitious project attempted in the mid-1990s by a team of historians which included Simkins, John Bourne, Bryn Hammond, Chris McCarthy and John Lee among others, to assess battle performances across divisions. Various metrics were to be used, including the battle-worthiness of the enemy and the weather, in order to build a database and plot learning processes across the BEF's units. Ultimately, the matrix proved to be too complicated, and as a result the project did not fulfil its potential.[14]

Simkins has also taken a more unit-focused approach than Sheffield or Griffith, charting the progress of 18th (Eastern) Division in his chapter 'The War Experience of a Typical Kitchener Division: The 18th Division, 1914-1918' in Hugh Cecil & Peter Liddle's edited volume *Facing Armageddon; The First World War Experienced,* published prior to Sheffield's work, in 1996. Simkins selected what may have been described as a typical Kitchener division to demonstrate the learning process in practice, but by virtue of 18th Division's results, could be seen as an exceptional BEF formation. Simkins has provided plentiful examples of skill and soldierly professionalism in his praise of the division, while also asserting the division's role in an 'improvement in small unit infantry tactics and changes in platoon organisation'. Great value is placed by Simkins on 18th Division's ability to reorganise around its combat veterans, as well as integrating the latest fighting methods as part of a highly effective weapons system.[15] Simkins also leans heavily on individual units, such as 18th and 32nd Divisions, in discussing the

[13] Ibid, p. 78. Griffith refers to Lewis light machine guns and the increasingly prevalent use of rifle grenades.
[14] J. Lee, 'The SHLM Project – Assessing the Battle Performance of British Divisions' in P. Griffith (ed), *Battle Tactics of the Western Front; The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18* (Yale, 1996), pp. 175-181.
[15] P. Simkins, 'The War Experience of a Typical Kitchener Division: The 18th Division, 1914-1918' in H. Cecil & P. Liddle (eds) *Facing Armageddon; The First World War Experienced* (London, Leo Cooper, 1996) pp. 297-309.

improvement in the BEF's effectiveness between 1916 and 1918 in his 2014 work, *From the Somme to Victory; The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918*. Simkins also provides an historiographical overview of the debate on the conduct of the war, praising myriad authors such as Bill Rawling, Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson, John Bourne, Brian Bond and William Philpott for their contributions to the understanding of the impact of the Somme campaign.[16]

Philpott's *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century*, published in 2009, is singled out by Simkins as 'the most comprehensive survey' of the recently-published studies of the Somme campaign.[17] *Bloody Victory* is vast in its scope, summarising the key events in 1914, 1915 and 1916 that led to the launching of the Somme campaign, and examining strategy, operations and tactics during the period of the offensive. Philpott's study also includes an analysis of later actions on the battlefield, serving to emphasise the importance of the 1916 campaign, and the ground itself. Incorporated in this work is an assessment of tactical challenges and logistical concerns during the late Somme period, and an acknowledgement of significant improvement in elements such as infantry and artillery cooperation between 1 July and mid-November 1916. These improvements, however, are followed by hefty caveats regarding inflexibility and the capacity for attacks to stall.[18] Like Sheffield, Griffith and Simkins, Philpott draws attention to the training pamphlets issued in the weeks after the offensive was closed down for the winter in 1916, and their value in codifying the experience of the Somme into a 'systematic battle doctrine'. [19]

Additionally, Philpott states that 'the first stage of the British army's learning process, the development of effective battlefield method, was complete'. Throughout *Bloody Victory*, Philpott indicates a lag in tactical prowess between the BEF's infantry and that of their co-combatants on the Somme, the more experienced French army, but acknowledges the lessons being learned by the BEF from the start of the offensive. Accepting that the term 'learning curve' may be imperfect for a multi-faceted process of acquiring new knowledge and skills

[16] P. Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory; The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Pen & Sword, 2014) pp. 36-56.
[17] Ibid, p. 55.
[18] W. Philpott, *Bloody Victory; The Sacrifice on the Somme* (Abacus, London, 2010) p. 416.
[19] Ibid, p. 440.

and bringing them to practical use, Philpott favours the term 'development process', which seems entirely appropriate.[20]

Understandably, given the breadth and depth of the work, Philpott is content to summarise the early 1917 operations on the Ancre and the following pursuit to the Hindenburg Line fairly swiftly. Therefore, like the other studies discussed, and in common with most of the Anglophone literature on the Great War, the prosecution of these post-Somme actions is somewhat obscured by focus on concurrent strategic and global events. Philpott's interpretation of the German withdrawal in Spring 1917 is an 'admission of disadvantage, an acknowledgement of [Germany's] unsustainable rate of loss on the Somme and [at] Verdun'.[21] This view is echoed in more blunt terms by Sheffield in his short work on the Somme, in which he describes the German withdrawal as a 'tacit admission of defeat'.[22] While this thesis does not seek to reframe the results of the Somme campaign, a clearer understanding of the narrative history of the events of early 1917 on the Somme front is beneficial to any later work endeavouring to improve our understanding of the operational situation on the Western front in the wake of the Somme campaign.

Aside from those publications listed as having historiographical significance to this thesis and to the conflict as a whole, there remain myriad other works which have had an impact on this research. Various memoirs and biographies, such as *Far from a Donkey*, John Baynes's 1995 study of 18th Division's commander, General Sir Ivor Maxse, has been valuable for context.[23] Maxse is a particularly significant figure, both for the BEF's development and particularly during the period of study in this research. As commander of one of the BEF's highest-performing divisions and renowned as an excellent trainer of men, Maxse went on to Corps command and eventually to take over as head of the BEF's training directorate. His influence on the tactical progress made by the BEF's infantry was, therefore, profound. Works such as Simon Robbins's *British Generalship on the Western Front* from 2005 and Andy Simpson's

[20] Ibid, p. 246.
[21] Ibid, p. 462.
[22] G. Sheffield, *The Somme* (Cassel, 2003) p. 155.
[23] J. Baynes, *Far from a Donkey; The Life of General Sir Ivor Maxse* (Brassey's, 1995).

Directing Operations from 2019 have also been also valuable in providing context and guidelines in an analytical sense, but also historiographically.[24]

The most relevant recent work focused on development of the British army during the First World War is Aimée Fox's *Learning to Fight; Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918*, published in 2018. Fox's business-like study examines the value of experience across different theatres, the way that lessons were learned and transmitted between officers in the British army, and the value of external influences such as civilian experts in transport roles. The way that the BEF learned from the French after the end of the Somme campaign is also a subject discussed by Fox, who concludes that the production of new attack doctrine in early 1917 was both a result of studying French offensive methods, and a realisation that the new methods actually resembled the training of the pre-war British army and certain skills needed to be re-learned.[25] Fox also makes an important point on the balance between flexibility and uniformity at this important stage of the war, suggesting 'drill attack formations' were regarded as valuable guides for junior officers, without being too restrictive. Early 1917 was, as Fox explains, an important period for the BEF in establishing a method of standardising the school system for various skills, and formalising training methods. Fox cites various officers, particularly from within Fourth Army, as calling for greater standardisation in the late 1916 – early 1917 period. However, as Fox notes, 'difference of method persisted throughout the war'.[26] Though Fox establishes certain principles of disseminating learning within the British army, *Learning to Fight* is too broad in its focus to answer the questions posed by this thesis. How different divisions adopted lessons and then put them into practice is still very much open to discussion.

There is therefore a strong consensus among modern historians of the British army in the First World War that a learning or development process took place, following the rapid expansion of the BEF in 1914-15. However, quantifying and qualifying this process is a complicated and

[24] S. Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-18: Defeat in to Victory* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2005) and A. Simpson, *Directing Operations; British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Helion, Warwick, 2018).
[25] A. Fox, *Learning to Fight; Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2018) p. 150.
[26] Ibid, pp. 152-153.

challenging task. The view that infantry methods played a very small part in the BEF's successes in 1917, with dominance in artillery being the deciding factor, is still expounded by some historians. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, for example, in their 1996 work *Passchendaele; The Untold Story*, make little mention of infantry tactics when comparing the Somme with Arras, focusing instead on the concentration of artillery to be deployed in action, measuring frontage to be attacked and number of guns with which to support the assault.[27] Even in more modern work such as Nick Lloyd's *The Western Front; A History of the First World War*, published in 2021, the role of the infantry is largely relegated to that of barrage-followers and moppers-up.[28] Lloyd scarcely explores the question of tactical progress, favouring a more classically pre-revisionist interpretation of the BEF's approach to tactical challenges in the years 1916-1917. Lloyd attributes success at Arras to artillery superiority, which was indeed crucial. However, the fact that even Lloyd's modern and much acclaimed publication on the Western front omits any exploration of the BEF's learning process, serves to highlight the need for further investigation.

Themes for Study

This thesis will therefore address these gaps in the literature and explore the existing and largely accepted assertions regarding the BEF's tactical development process. It will survey ten BEF divisions, which will be identified and described later, throughout their early 1917 actions and during training periods between operations. It will explore the influence of their experiences during their 1916 operations in identifying their main difficulties or areas for improvement, how they reported these elements, and ultimately what efforts they made to ensure improved performance in the future. In order to establish a base from which to assess progress in these divisions, their most recent and relevant actions of 1916 have also been examined, and in most cases these took place during the 1916 Somme campaign. The early 1917 actions were principally located in the Ancre valley in January and February 1917, in the vicinity of the Butte de Warlencourt and Le Transloy in February and March 1917, and on the advance to the Hindenburg Line in March and April 1917. Providing a fresh analysis of these

[27] R. Prior & T. Wilson, *Passchendaele; The Untold Story* (2nd Edition, Yale, 2002) p. 56.
[28] N. Lloyd, *The Western Front; A History of the First World War* (Penguin, 2021) pp. 297-298.

actions and thereby closing the gap in the literature originally identified by Falls is one of the central tasks undertaken in this research.

This thesis has four main themes and objectives: The first is a study of the relationship between experience, doctrine, and learning in between September 1916 and April 1917, and the phases in which learning took place. While the training pamphlets of early 1917 were certainly important in disseminating best practice, particularly to inexperienced divisions, experience was yet more valuable in terms of tactical development. This thesis will demonstrate that over the winter of 1916-1917, the BEF divisions on the Somme front had different priorities at different stages, and practical concerns, such as accepting reinforcement drafts and raising general standards of soldierly skill, were a higher initial priority than assimilating new doctrine. Furthermore, there were practical challenges in training and learning over what was an infamously harsh winter, coupled with the demands placed on divisions taking over sections of the line from the French. This meant that few divisions had adequate time to assimilate this new doctrine before the resumption of offensive operations, and had to fall back on the experience they had gained during the previous months' fighting, and during the actions in which they took part through January and February 1917.

Two distinct training periods have been identified, following the divisions' last actions of 1916; an initial reorganisation and assimilation of reinforcement drafts, and the development of more sophisticated offensive methods once that period was sufficiently advanced. The dynamic of creating the key training pamphlets *SS135* and *SS143* remains an important subject, and this thesis will show that divisions with a record of success were identified and their offensive methods studied, codified and then demonstrated to other divisions, as well as simply being disseminated in pamphlet form for army-wide consumption. In addition to training pamphlets, the period following offensive actions and the writing of post-action reports is an important focus of this thesis. It will be shown that those divisions which compiled the more comprehensive after-action reports and sought to learn from their own actions quickly, could often then modify their offensive methods to successful ends.

The second theme is an assessment of increased tactical sophistication, fighting ability and flexibility within the British infantry. This research will demonstrate that this development

stemmed from experience in combat as well as greater specialism in training. As German defensive methods shifted away from holding a front line in strength in response to allied artillery firepower, demands on the infantry increased. This study will show that numerous units adapted quickly to those demands, and took to a more open form of warfare more readily than has been appreciated in the past, aided by appropriate training emphases. Furthermore, innovative but practical methods were employed to overcome tactical challenges which had previously withstood determined assaults. The aim is to qualify and quantify the extent of the lessons learned from the Somme campaign by examining the offensive actions carried out in its wake, on the Somme front in early 1917. Of particular interest are changes in fighting style to suit terrain and circumstance, and British Fourth and Fifth Armies' pursuit to the Hindenburg Line is important in this regard. Historians have disparaged the BEF's ability to adapt to open warfare in the past. Paddy Griffith states that, considering the four occasions when open warfare became a reality for the BEF, namely the retreat from Mons, the advance to the Hindenburg Line in 1917, the Spring retreats of 1918 and the advances of the Hundred Days, the BEF was 'essentially unprepared for the sudden shock to its system'. Only on the last of these occasions does Griffith credit the BEF with 'rising to the occasion'.[29] Griffith's assessment, as this thesis will show, is harsh, and does not give the BEF enough credit for its progress and achievement.

This study will assess tactical progress made by the infantry by examining their tactical actions away from major operations, which benefited from months of planning and instruction. British Fifth Army's attacks around the river Ancre, and Fourth Army's actions near the Butte de Warlencourt, in front of Le Transloy and east of Bouchavesnes in early 1917 in the same period are essential operations of this study. All of these actions have received little scholarly attention and, like those on Redan Ridge identified by Falls, there is significant scope for original research. In researching these smaller actions, improvements in the infantry's effectiveness which might otherwise be attributed to the increasing scale and complexity of artillery bombardments, can be more accurately assessed. Skills such as consolidation of a locality and rapid digging, while not being particularly glamorous or captivating to later historians, were, nevertheless, accorded a high priority in certain units, to impressive effect.

[29] Griffith, *Battle Tactics,* p. 160.

Integral to this aspect of research is the performance of units below divisional command. The ability of commanders at all levels, but particularly at platoon, company and battalion command, to react to circumstances, adapt plans and use initiative where appropriate is crucial in challenging the idea that senior officers were unnecessarily over-prescriptive, and that their subordinates simply followed orders by timetable.

A third aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of tactical methods. Reference to techniques such as 'bite and hold' and 'peaceful penetration' have been used predominantly in connection with later fighting. 'Bite and hold', or making a limited advance with a view to inflicting damage on enemy counter-attacks, is strongly associated with British Second Army's operations during the Third Ypres campaign in September and October 1917. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson suggest that the term was coined by General Sir Henry Rawlinson in 1915 as commander of IV Corps after the assault at Neuve Chapelle in March of that year. In a letter to Earl Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, Rawlinson wrote:

> What we want to do now is what I call 'bite and hold'. Bite off a piece of the enemy's line, like Neuve Chapelle, and hold it against counter-attack. The bite can be made without much loss, and, if we choose the right place and make every preparation to put it quickly in to a state of defence, there ought to be no difficulty in holding it against the enemy's counter attacks and inflicting on him at least twice the loss that we have suffered in making the bite'.[30]

Paddy Griffith qualified the term in his essay on the tactics employed at the third battle of Ypres, by stressing the halt made by the BEF after capturing the first German position, and avoiding an over-extension which the German defenders would prefer.[31] Despite Rawlinson submitting a plan for the opening of the Somme campaign which encompassed elements of a 'bite and hold' style of fighting, the approach was not adopted as policy or in practice at the Army level of command until September 1917 in Flanders.[32] There, a definite policy of staged 'bounds' was carried out, with a concerted effort to destroy enemy counter-attacks with massed and thoughtfully-targeted artillery fire. The process as it became later in 1917 is well

[30] Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, p.78
[31] P. Griffith, 'The Tactical Problem: Infantry, Artillery and the Salient', in P. Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective; The Third Battle of Ypres* (Pen & Sword, 1997), p.70
[32] Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, p.144

described in several works, but Simon Shepherd's recent assessment is worthy of mention, alongside authors such as Griffith, and Prior and Wilson. 'Peaceful penetration', or the process of advancing the line with patrols rather than under artillery barrages, however, is thought of principally as a technique employed by Australian troops in 1918. This thesis will demonstrate that versions of both offensive methods were in use in British units in early 1917, either on a smaller scale or in an improvised manner.

A fourth and final objective is filling an historiographical gap, by examining the Ancre operations and pursuit to the Hindenburg Line in greater detail than previous studies. Notionally falling between the Somme and Arras campaigns of 1916 and 1917 respectively, the actions on the Somme front between January and April 1917 are less thoroughly studied and documented, but present a valuable opportunity to assess tactical progress. Furthermore, as Falls noted, these actions merit further study in their own right, not least for the purposes of improving understanding of the wider conflict. This thesis will show that the battlefield performance of the BEF in early 1917 was, in many cases, highly creditable, and that tactical progress and effectiveness was clearly detectable in units which had toiled through 1916's battles.

Methodology

Ten BEF divisions have been examined in detail for the purposes of this thesis; two each of new army, pre-war regular, and territorial divisions have been selected, as well as three dominion (Australian) divisions and 63rd (Royal Naval) Division. The previous experiences of certain divisions have elements in common. Of the ten, four took part in the opening day of the Somme offensive, two attacked at Fromelles later in July 1916, and elements of four divisions had experience of fighting on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915-1916 (see table 1 for an overview of relevant actions and experiences). Essentially these were ten of the most active divisions either following the official closure of the Somme campaign, or on the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line. The divisions selected are as follows.

1. 7th Division: With an infantry force initially made up of pre-war regular army battalions, 7th Division was involved in many of the major actions fought by the BEF from the First Battle of Ypres in October 1914 through 1915, and took part in the main assault on the

Somme on 1 July 1916, at Mametz. By the end of 1915, one of its regular brigades, 21 Brigade had been taken to form the core of one of the new army divisions (30th Division). 21 Brigade was replaced by 91 Brigade, made up of four new battalions of the Manchester Regiment. Two of 20 Brigade's Guards battalions also left the Division in 1915 to join the Guards Division, being replaced by 8th & 9th Battalions of the Devonshire Regiment (hereafter 8/ & 9/Devons). 7th Division was commanded at the opening of the Somme campaign by Major-General Herbert Watts.

2. 8th Division: Formed in a similar manner to 7th Division, 8th Division arrived on the Western Front slightly later, missing the First Battle of Ypres in October-November 1914. The division was heavily involved in 1915's major actions and also took part in the opening of the Somme offensive, attacking towards Ovillers. 70 Brigade from 23rd Division spent 9 months with 8th Division between October 1915 and mid-July 1916 in place of 23 Brigade, but in July 1916 that transfer was reversed. The division's commanding officer through most of the Somme offensive was Major-General Havelock Hudson.
3. 18th (Eastern) Division: Part of the second wave of new army or 'Kitchener' divisions, 18th Division was largely made up of infantry battalions from Eastern England and was transferred to France in July 1915. Its first major action was the opening of the Somme offensive where it enjoyed considerable success between Mametz and Montauban. Indeed, 18th Division was arguably the finest performing British Division during the Somme campaign, with high-profile successes on the first day and at Trônes Wood two weeks later. During the Somme campaign, 18th Division was commanded by Major-General Ivor Maxse.
4. 32nd Division: 32nd Division was part of the fourth wave of the British new army divisions. The opening of the Somme campaign was also 32nd Division's first major offensive, but with approximately five months less time in France than 18th Division and with a tougher task to carry out, their assault at Thiepval on 1 July 1916, fighting alongside 8th Division to the immediate south, was checked with heavy loss. The Division was commanded by Major-General William Rycroft until late 1916.
5. 48th (South Midland) Division: This division of the Territorial Force was sent to France under the command of Major-General Robert Fanshawe in March 1915, and was largely used for line-holding for the duration of the year. Although 48th Division was in

the line on 1 July 1916, it was in the sector between Third Army's attack on the Gommecourt Salient and 31st Division's attack at Serre. Only two battalions, 6 & 8 Battalions Warwickshire Regiment (6/ & 8/Warwicks) were employed on the day, having been attached to 4th Division. 48th Division joined in the attacks to the west of Pozières later in July and into August, without achieving notable success.

6. 61st (2nd South Midland) Division: 48th Division's second-line sister division arrived in France in May 1916, commanded by Major-General Colin Mackenzie. Though they took no part in the Somme offensive itself, they were one of the two divisions which launched the notorious diversionary attack at Fromelles on 19-20 July 1916, concurrent to the main action on the Somme.
7. 63rd (Royal Naval) Division: Following the Royal Naval Division's actions at Ostende in 1914 and Gallipoli in 1915, the decision was taken to add an army brigade and make the RND up to full divisional strength on the Western Front under the command of Royal Marine officer, Major-General Archibald Paris. Paris was seriously wounded as the Division arrived on the Somme front, and Major-General Cameron Shute took over just before 63rd Division's first major action in France, attacking along the river Ancre on 13 November 1916.
8. Australian 2nd Division: Formed in mid-1915 in Alexandria, elements of Major-General Gordon Legge's Australian 2nd Division saw action on the Gallipoli Peninsula, before being evacuated back to Egypt for retraining. The division was sent to France in March 1916, and was first employed in offensive action on the Somme against the Pozières Windmill site in late July of that year.
9. Australian 4th Division: After the nominal but understrength New Zealand and Australian Division was broken up after its time on Gallipoli to allow the creation of a New Zealand Division in its own right, Australian 4 Brigade was combined with the new Australian 12 & 13 Brigades in February 1916 to be brought to Western Front divisional strength. Under the command of Major-General Vaughan Cox, Australian 4th Division was also involved in action in the Pozières and Mouquet Farm area, in August and early September 1916.
10. Australian 5th Division: Concurrently with the formation of Australian 4th Division, the existing Australian 8 Brigade was combined with the new 14 & 15 Brigades (themselves created from elements of Australian 1 & 2 Brigades) to create Australian 5th Division.

Major-General James McCay assumed command in March 1916, and in June the division were sent to France. Despite being the latest of the Australian divisions to arrive in France, coming into the line near Fromelles on 10 July 1916, they were the first to see significant action, attacking the line alongside British 61st Division.

Actions / Theatres:	Western Front	Gallipoli	Somme Opening	Fromelles	Pozières / Ovillers / Mouquet Farm	Delville Wood	Thiepval	Gueuedecourt / Warlencourt	Ancre
Period:	1915	1915	1-14 July 1916	19-20 July 1916	Late July – Sept 1916	Late July – Sept 1916	Late Sept 1916	Oct – Nov 1916	Nov 1916
7th Div.	✓		✓			✓			
8th Div.	✓		✓					✓	
18th Div.	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓
32nd Div.			✓						✓
48th Div.	✓				✓			✓	
61st Div.				✓					
63rd Div.		✓							✓
Aus 2nd Div.		✓			✓			✓	
Aus 4th Div.		✓			✓				
Aus 5th Div.		✓		✓					

Table 1: Summary of the Experience of the Divisions being Studied during 1915/16

Many of these divisions have their own published histories, usually compiled in the years immediately following the war. Of the units case-studied here, 7th, 8th, 18th and 63rd Divisions had histories published soon after the conflict ended.[33] Although these histories do cover the actions in which the divisions were involved, and can often impart more detail than the official histories, all due caution must be employed in their use as sources. Those written in the immediate wake of the conflict were mostly written by officers of the respective divisions, and

[33] C.T. Atkinson, The Seventh Division 1914-1918 (N&M Press, 2001, originally 1927), Lt-Colonel J. H. Boraston, *The Eighth Division 1914-1918* (Naval & Military Press, 2015, originally 1926), Capt. G. H. F. Nichols, *The 18th Division in the Great War* (N&M Press, 2004, originally 1922), D. Jerrold, *The Royal Naval Division* (Naval & Military Press, 1995, originally 1923).

are understandably disposed to stressing the bravery with which the men fought, rather than addressing their potential shortcomings. Additionally, 48th Division had K. W. Mitchinson's history published in 2017, 32nd Division was the subject of a 2013 PhD thesis by Stuart Mitchell, and 8th Division was the focus of Alun Thomas's PhD thesis, completed in 2010.[34] There are also memoirs which cover the period in question, each presenting their own perspective; Hubert Gough's *The Fifth Army* represents the views of the army commander, while others such as those from Edwin Campion Vaughan, Sidney Rogerson and Charles Carrington represent accounts from lower ranks.[35]

In order to fill in the gaps in the extant literature noted above and to contribute to Falls's study, relevant primary sources will be examined in depth, principally the unit war diaries held in the WO 95 series at the National Archives in Kew. Unpublished papers held in other archives such as the Imperial War Museum, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College London, and Churchill College, Cambridge have also been examined in order to close the gap in the literature. Units down to battalion level kept daily diaries reporting on their locations and activities or actions, and these records are vital in understanding events and operations of the period. Each division kept war diaries for their twelve respective infantry battalions, organised in 3 brigades, each with their own headquarters war diary. The divisional general staff also kept their own diary along with records from additional divisional units, such as engineers, artillery, medical services, pioneers and other attached units. Across the ten divisions, this research has surveyed the diaries of over 120 infantry battalions during an 8-month period between September 1916 and April 1917, in addition to 30 infantry brigade diaries, the 10 divisional diaries, and various references to other divisional units. Such a sample size, though still not covering the majority of BEF divisions, is nonetheless valuable for observing patterns and trends across the British army's infantry.

[34] K. W. Mitchinson, *The 48th (South Midland) Division 1908-1919* (Helion, Solihull, 2017), S. B. T. Mitchell, 'An Inter-Disciplinary Study of Learning in the 32nd Division on the Western Front, 1916-1918' (University of Birmingham, 2013) and A. M. Thomas, 'British 8th Infantry Division on the Western Front, 1914-18' (University of Birmingham, 2010).

[35] H. Gough, *The Fifth Army* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1931), E. C. Vaughan, *Some Desperate Glory; The Diary of a Young Officer, 1917* (Leo Cooper, 1981), S. Rogerson, *Twelve Days on the Somme* (Greenhill, 2006), C. Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning* (Arrow, 1965).

Their usefulness does, to a degree, depend on the level of detail provided by the officer keeping the record, which in the case of the battalion war diary, would typically be the adjutant. War diaries can be highly detailed, with precise descriptions of the locations of the formation, the weather and conditions, names of men who left and joined the unit on any given day, visiting officers, passing aircraft, and myriad other points of interest. At the other end of the spectrum, adjutants may simply record 'location: trenches; Daily routine followed', which is hardly illuminating. As such, while a quantitative analysis of days spent in various activities can be a useful guide for compiling data, the lack of uniformity in the composition and content of the diaries would make such an analysis too problematic. Instead, a qualitative approach has been adopted, surveying and collecting all relevant details and comments recorded between 1 September 1916 and 30 April 1917, in order to identify key information relevant to this research.

In addition to the daily diary, appendices of these documents can include maps, training instructions, after-action reports, casualty returns and memoranda from higher command. After-action reports have proven to be essential points of reference both in terms of establishing a narrative for respective operations, but more importantly in assessing the quality of each unit's feedback on actions up the chain of command. Generally speaking, one tends to see more objectivity the further up the chain a series of after-action reports is followed, as battalion war diaries can be somewhat partisan in the presentation of their own efforts, both in victory and defeat. As with any source, there are considerations in the use of war diaries, and particularly battalion diaries, as reliable sources. By using a broad sample of 10 divisions (and therein 120 infantry battalions) it is expected that anomalies in reporting can be identified and moderated, and any examples of especially partisan record-keeping can be mitigated with the use of multiple accounts for single actions.

In theory at least, brigade and divisional diaries and reports should be more objective in their analysis, and less likely to simply fall back on the 'valour' or 'spirit' of the men carrying out an assault. Particularly on occasions where an action was carried out unsuccessfully, the resulting feedback and subsequent modification of plans is of vital importance to this research. Divisional diaries, however, carry the additional challenge of being further removed and distant from the actions they are describing. Generally speaking, brigade-level reports often

appear to offer a medium between the battalion and divisional records, providing the best blend of proximity to the action and objectivity, and on the whole are the most reliable when building narrative and analysis of operations. The value of honest feedback, taking responsibility for errors, and then astutely and energetically attempting to remedy mistakes or overcome problems for future actions is often clear to be seen, even though these values and measures are rarely attributed to BEF officers of the Great War at any command level in the historiography of the period. In studies of the German army in the conflict however, scholars such as Robert Foley and Tony Cowan have pointed out the value of after-action or lessons learned reports.[36]

Although the primary focus of this research is on the division and its components, it is understood that higher command had a bearing on tactical methods. This was particularly evident in setting training objectives, disseminating best practice, and ensuring the best officers were given divisional command, and could be put in a position to have the most impact on infantry training. Where there is evidence of influence from higher command, either at Corps or Army level, that influence has been considered in this research and assessed in a similar manner to the published training pamphlets of the period. More specifically, the direction given by General Sir Henry Rawlinson and General Sir Hubert Gough to the divisions of Fourth and Reserve/Fifth Armies respectively, suggests a difference in ethos across the two armies. Rawlinson has broadly been presented, by among others his biographers Prior and Wilson, as a pragmatic and efficient army commander, whose loyalty to his Commander-in-Chief General (and later, Field Marshal) Sir Douglas Haig, may have led to an unfortunate lack of conviction in his own ideas and methods.[37] Gough, on the other hand, has been heavily criticised both in the aftermath of the conflict and in more modern works, particularly by Commonwealth historians such as Tim Travers and Charles Bean, over the impetuous conduct of his offensives in France and Flanders in 1916 and 1917, and his lack of awareness of the problems facing his troops.[38] This research will confirm the findings of previous studies, that

[36] T. Cowan, 'The Introduction of New German Defensive Tactics in 1916-1917', *British Journal for Military History,* 5.2 (2019), pp. 81-99 and R. Foley, 'Learning War's Lessons: The German Army and the Battle of the Somme 1916, *Journal of Military History*, 75/2 (2011), pp. 471-504.
[37] R. Prior & T. Wilson, *Command on the Western Front; The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2004), pp. 396-397.
[38] T. Travers, *The Killing Ground; The British Army, the Western Front & the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918* (Pen & Sword, 2009), p. 188; J. Walker, *The Blood Tub: General Gough and the Battle of Bullecourt, 1917*

Rawlinson and Gough had different challenges and approaches. Moreover, it will also argue that during the period of focus in this thesis, Gough's more aggressive mindset and more controlling command style were both more effective than Rawlinson's allowance of greater freedom to his divisional commanders. Indeed, this research will argue that Gough contributed materially to the BEF's tactical progress during the period under consideration in a more obvious manner than Rawlinson did. Ultimately, however, divisional commanders bore significant responsibility for the performance of their troops. An energetic, attentive and inventive approach to training by higher commanders could bring about success in trying circumstances.

Structure

This thesis is divided into five roughly chronological, but also thematic and overlapping sections. The first chapter is, by necessity, partly contextual. It will assess the latest and most relevant actions carried out by the case-studied divisions during the Somme period, in order to establish where there may have been clear tactical failings and essential lessons to learn. The period covered by this chapter largely stretches from the beginning of September 1916 through to the official close of the battle of the Somme in mid-November 1916, although a few of the divisions being studied did not see significant action in this period. As a result, some earlier actions such as that at Fromelles in July 1916 have been examined, with the caveat that a significant period of time elapsed prior to the next actions these divisions fought, and that therefore by the end of 1916, their most relevant lessons and training may not have come from those actions.

Chapter one will identify the changing tactical challenge for the BEF divisions as the German army modified its defensive methods in October and November 1916, holding positions in greater depth with increased reliance on strong points rather than a strongly-held front line. A number of questions will be explored in this chapter; How did each BEF division approach tactical challenges in this period? How much preparation did the infantry carry out, what strength did they commit, how much effort was put into the assault relative to consolidation

(Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1998) pp. 196-197. Walker provides a brief overview of Gough's travails against journalists, politicians and historians including Charles Bean.

of the objective thereafter? How much attention was paid to cooperation between the infantry and artillery, and when difficulties were encountered, how were they resolved, and what influenced success or failure? Chapter one will also identify certain divisions which had enjoyed more success than others during the Somme campaign, and examine their process of analysing their actions in order to learn from them. 7th and 18th Divisions in particular are shown to have demonstrated tactical methods which were worth encouraging in others, as well as adopting functional but flexible formations which could be emulated by divisions which had struggled during the same period. Examples of success were not simply to be copied blindly, however. 63rd Division's advance along the Ancre on 13 and 14 November, for example, raised as many points to improve upon as it did elements of best practice to share. Identifying techniques which could assist with the capture of a position, minimise casualties, and then help inflict loss on the enemy, were the tasks for every division in this study, and chapter one is principally concerned with examining the evidence of that process.

Chapter two will examine training in each of the divisions following their actions explored in chapter one, and therefore will highlight what these divisions had learned in their wake or felt they needed to learn. In terms of chronology, the period covered by chapter two broadly extends between October 1916 and February 1917, and is largely focused on after-action training and lessons learned from fighting, rather than from disseminated training materials. However, certain documents were published during this period, and there was intervention from commanders above divisional level and the impact of these contributions is discussed, particularly when they involved the removal of divisional staff and commanders who were deemed unsuitable. Furthermore, the impact of initiatives to share information from high-achieving divisions among those which had not performed so impressively, or were new arrivals into the Somme area, will be explored. This in turn gave certain figures considerable influence in how infantry trained for action, and Major-General Sir Ivor Maxse was prominent in this period, enjoying considerable patronage from General Gough, leading to his promotion to GOC XVIII Corps.

The key questions investigated in chapter two are how divisions internalised and processed their most recent actions, how they articulated what they had learned about changing German defensive methods and what steps did they take to strengthen their battalions for

future operations? How did attention shift from training soldiers to take ground, to an emphasis on defeating the enemy counter-attack? Did attack formations change, was there a change in priorities in training, and how much was this influenced by General Headquarters (GHQ) or higher command? How did the arrival of substantial reinforcement drafts affect the training that was possible during the winter, and what skills were deemed the most important? How were the first of the new training pamphlets such as *SS 135*, *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* received and assimilated, if they were at all?

Chapter two will also explore the first steps in extended-order or open-order training carried out by the BEF's divisions examined in this study. Although extended-order training may seem premature, its consideration by certain divisions demonstrates that they were considered to be proficient enough in what may be termed 'the basics' to progress with their training into more complicated techniques. Though many challenges were common across the BEF's divisions around this time, such as supply during assaults, there were diverse solutions to recurrent problems. In certain divisions, the leadership itself was deemed to be part of the problem, and there were widespread changes of divisional commanders and senior staff. The impact of these changes will be assessed in this and subsequent chapters. With regard to the literature, prominent figures during this period of training, Ivor Maxse and Hubert Gough, each have their own biographies, respectively that mentioned previously by John Baynes, and *Goughie* by Anthony Farrar-Hockley, published in 1975.[39] While both are somewhat partisan, they contain useful insights into the men themselves and their mindsets. On the whole though, this chapter has limited support from secondary literature, as very few general works have continued to track the progress of divisions on the Somme front after the fighting died down in late November 1916. There will therefore be heavy reliance on primary sources, such as battalion and brigade war diaries from the National Archives in Kew, and personal documents such as Ivor Maxse's personal papers held at the Imperial War Museum.

Chapter three will explore the actions between January and March 1917 on the Somme front, focusing on how approaches to tactical challenges had changed since November 1916. It will show that reasonably small, but important gains were made by the BEF in early January 1917,

[39] A. Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie: The Life of General Sir Hubert Gough* (Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, London 1975).

including positions which had been objectives on 1 July and again on 13 November 1916. Chapter three will therefore explore how these positions which had held out for many months, and against a number of assaults, were taken in conditions which by any measure were difficult ones in which to work. Understandably, the literature of this period is dominated by worldwide events such as the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, the entry of the United States of America into the war on the side of the allies, and Russia's March revolution. Even those works which concentrate on the Western Front tend to lean heavily on important contextual events such as the Calais conference of 26 February 1917, General Nivelle's rise to prominence and subsequent allied offensive planning for the Spring. However, these actions around the Ancre deserve to be seen with the same significance as the actions during the 1916 Somme campaign, as they materially contributed to the German withdrawal which followed. Trevor Pidgeon's study of the actions towards Miraumont in February 1917, in his work in the Battleground Europe series, represent one of the few published pieces besides the Official History itself which feature the fighting at this time.[40] The one significant event on the Western Front which was in preparation at this time, was the German retirement from the old Somme battlefield to its new, and in some places still under construction, defensive positions to the rear. Chapter three will also therefore assess the reaction of some of the BEF divisions in line to the first German moves towards the Hindenburg Line, or *Siegfriedstellung*, which came in stages after the capture of the Redan Ridge by British Fifth Army in January and February 1917. It will assess the offensive operations carried out by the BEF divisions involved in them, and explain how preparation for offensive action became far more detailed and was more patiently conducted in the wake of the Somme campaign.

Chapter three's initial focus is on the resumption of the offensive in the second week of 1917, capturing the main resistance line on Redan Ridge on 11 January. It describes how the BEF divisions on Redan Ridge changed their fighting style to suit the condition of the ground and the state of the enemy, shifting to an outpost-based style of advancing, without heavy protective artillery bombardments. It will also explore both Fourth and Fifth Armies' minor operations, before the latter's assault towards Grandcourt and Miraumont on 17 February 1917 made the defenders' positions in those villages untenable. Within a week, the main

[40] T. Pidgeon, *Boom Ravine* (Pen & Sword, 1998).

German resistance line withdrew from the Gommecourt salient to the first of their support lines, giving up the remainder of the 1 July 1916 battlefield. Although short, this withdrawal presented challenges to Fifth Army, and the initial pursuit was patchy in its progress. The first credible offensive actions against the new position were made towards Irles on 6 March 1917, with the village captured four days later; in doing so, the German R.1 line was breached. This precipitated the full withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, with 16 March 1917 being the main 'marching day'. Due to the similarity of objectives and short space of time between the November 1916 and January - February 1917 fighting on the Ancre, an argument could quite reasonably be made for these actions to be considered in line with the Somme offensive. The resulting German withdrawals could therefore be even more closely linked to the previous year's actions than is often reflected in the literature. Though the first German withdrawal occurred during this period, the actions therein still mainly took the form of set-pieces planned over at least a few days; the largest of these being the attack towards Miraumont on 17 February 1917.

The emphasis in chapter three is therefore largely on General Gough's Fifth Army, as Fourth Army extended to the south, taking over approximately 10 miles of line from the French; however, limited offensive actions were carried out by General Rawlinson's army, which also showed significant improvements in attention to detail from the previous year. Chapter three assesses evidence of enhanced planning between infantry and artillery relative to the previous year, particularly in the use of standing protective bombardments and SOS signals, but also in infantry methods themselves. The proliferation and improved skill in the use of rifle grenades and Vickers and Lewis guns in consolidation is also considered in this chapter, along with evidence of greater proficiency among specialists during this period.

Additional literature of interest in the compiling of chapter three has included Cyril Falls's own general history of the conflict, published in 1960.[41] Having been the man responsible for compiling the Official History, Falls had a great deal of correspondence with eyewitnesses, much of which is still in the care of the National Archives at Kew, in the CAB 45 series. It is therefore understandable that he should devote more space and energy to detailing these

[41] Falls, Cyril, *The First World War* (Longmans, London, 1960).

events. In his Official History volume of 1917 and general history of the War, Falls gave very acceptable descriptions of the new defensive positions taken by the German Army after Operation ALBERICH and their withdrawal. However, better descriptions of the enemy facing the BEF in early 1917 are to be found in Captain G. C. Wynne's *If Germany Attacks; The Battle in Depth in the West,* and Ralph Whitehead's *The Other Side of the Wire (Vol III).*[42] *If Germany Attacks* was published in 1940 and is based largely on German sources, including the memoirs of Colonel Friedrich von Loßberg, whose expertise formed the basis of the German Army's tactics of defence in depth. Whitehead's third volume of *The Other Side of the Wire* focused on German XIV Corps between July 1916 and August 1917, and is of particular interest to this research for its coverage of the defence of Beaumont-Hamel in late 1916 and the withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line on British Fifth Army's front.

Chapter four will further examine training methods, this time in the late winter 1916 and spring 1917, as the platoon training pamphlets such as *SS 143* were published. This chapter will focus on a wider range of divisions and sources, as well as questioning the rationale of the training pamphlets themselves, and where the recommendations made therein originated. This chapter will demonstrate the desire across the BEF to prepare for a more open style of warfare, to devolve enhanced firepower further down the chain of command, and to improve the fighting efficiency of the platoon in particular. How an ever-increasing supply of support weapons such as Lewis guns were integrated, along with reinforcement drafts and the need for specialists, is as much a question for chapter four as it was for chapter two, as a new wave of experience was assimilated from recent battles such as those on the Ancre. How were platoons modified to accept the additional weapons, and what was the rationale behind the changes? Were the changes uniform? Was there an effort to maintain a degree of homogeneity in formations, and was it in line with the ideas of figures such as Ivor Maxse? Training emphases often gave way to practical matters during this period. I ANZAC Corps' winter training period for example, was heavily curtailed by Fourth Army's extension to the south, as Lieutenant-General Birdwood was forced to put all four Australian divisions in the line. Other units were pressed into work parties repairing roads, as logistical concerns

[42] Wynne, Captain G.C. If Germany attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West (Faber & Faber, 1940) and R. J. Whitehead, *The Other Side of the Wire; Volume 3: With the XIV Reserve Corps: The Period of Transition 2 July 1916 – August 1917* (Helion, 2018).

trumped infantry training priorities. In short, there was considerable variety in the divisions' opportunity for tactical progress by training. The impact of practicalities must be considered in any judgement of how effective the training for action was, as well as how reasonable an expectation of significant improvement might be. Though Fourth Army's pursuit to the Hindenburg Line following the German retreat was initially slower than Fifth Army's, the two weeks between the retirement and the infantry closing with the outpost villages could have been an opportunity for further training. Was this opportunity wasted, or gainfully used in training for outpost and open warfare?

In assessing the new training pamphlets in more detail, chapter four draws on work such as John Lee's essay in Brian Bond's edited volume, '*Look to your Front'; Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History*, published in 1999.[43] Entitled 'Some Lessons of the Somme: The British Infantry in 1917' Lee has explained in more detail the *SS143* and *SS144* training pamphlets, which were disseminated after the actions on Redan Ridge in January 1917. Though Lee did not detail the uptake of the GHQ pamphlets by individual divisions, he described with admirable detail GHQ's aims with the information's distribution, and how in principle the pamphlets might have been adopted by divisions to modify their platoon and company formations. Jim Smithson's *A Taste of Success* has also engaged to an extent in describing the BEF's tactical progress prior to the battle, and the efforts to learn from the experiences of the Somme. This work develops an examination of the Stationary Series training pamphlets beyond Sheffield's introduction in *Forgotten Victory,* but also does not detail the uptake of the message of these pamphlets, beyond stating that they were adhered to in training by the Canadian Corps.[44] Martin Samuels has also written on British and German offensive and defensive methods, and in *Command or Control? Command Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* and *Doctrine or Dogma: German and British Infantry Tactics in the First World* War, Samuels endeavours to measure British and German tactical aptitudes. Samuels's case studies are rather one-sided, outdated, and present an unfavourable picture of the BEF while accentuating German successes, but the work contains

[43] J. Lee, 'Some Lessons of the Somme: The British Infantry in 1917' in B. Bond (ed), '*Look to your Front'; Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History* (Spellmount, 1999) pp. 79-87.
[44] Smithson, *Taste of Success*, pp. 78-79.

useful research nonetheless.[45] Added to the work done by Jack Sheldon on the German army during this period, these texts form a sound base from which to examine the BEF's tactical challenge in Spring 1917.[46]

Chapter five will analyse the transition in fighting style from set-piece, or at least planned and prepared attacks to more open warfare. Following the German retirement to the Hindenburg Line, both Fourth and Fifth Armies formed their advanced guards, but had different approaches to their pursuit, with General Gough's Fifth Army the more vigorous of the two. This was not simply down to the difference in command style between Gough and Rawlinson. Fourth Army had further to advance away from their defensive line, had to construct or repair bridges over the River Somme, and were most at risk of suffering loss from any potential German counter-attack. There was no hint of surprise in the BEF high command when the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line was carried out, prisoners had been taken in the preceding weeks, and escaped labourers recovered who had given full details of the retirement and the extent of the new defensive lines. These lines had been well photographed and much was known about their siting, construction and the timing of the withdrawal, to the extent that Fourth Army engineers were preparing bridging materials for the River Somme ahead of marching day on 16 March 1917. General Rawlinson's own diary entry for 17 March opens with 'as I anticipated, the Bosh (sic) has retired today'.[47] The advance began, with Fifth Army closing to the outpost villages within three days, while elements of Fourth Army took up to two weeks to meet the resistance line.

Both General Rawlinson and Field Marshal Haig were rightly concerned over their potentially vulnerable advanced guards with stretched supply lines, and therefore a more methodical approach was adopted to the south. Chapter five will show that some of the best examples of open warfare actions carried out by the BEF in this period of March and April 1917 were undertaken by units from Fourth Army. How the infantry pressed the German rearguards and

[45] M. Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies 1888-1918* (Frank Cass, London, 1995) and *Doctrine or Dogma: German and British Infantry Tactics in the First World* War (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992).
[46] Sheldon, Jack*, The German Army in the Spring Offensives 1917; Arras, Aisne & Champagne* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2015) and *The German Army on Vimy Ridge 1914-1917* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2013).
[47] Churchill College Cambridge, RWLN 1/7, diary entry for 17 March 1917.

cooperated with other arms of the pursuit force is a key concern of this chapter, and it will therefore explore how artillery bombardments were coordinated in open and semi-open action, around villages which had little in the way of prepared defences to attack. Were timetabled shoots in the style of a set-piece assault appropriate, or was more flexibility necessary? Was there any cooperation with cavalry forces, cyclists or armoured cars, and if so, how were they employed? Chapter five will also show how quickly Fourth Army progressed after bridging the Somme, and how they reacted to meeting the German army out of trenches. By comparison, it will also explore Fifth Army's response to its own challenge, namely a shorter distance to cross to find the Hindenburg Line outposts, and a shortage of space for manoeuvre. With a great variety of conditions, and potentially inconsistent training across Fourth and Fifth Armies, it is essential to try and identify patterns of progress and what may have brought them about – whether they had been centrally mandated and disseminated from GHQ, or a product of each division's own experiences in the war to date.

Another function of chapter five is to provide a more detailed understanding of a period which has scarcely been covered in the literature of the conflict. Only in the last thirty years have a few dedicated works on the actions of Spring 1917 been published, and although these principally focus on the Battle of Arras and Nivelle offensives. Many of these contain some element of either training and progress following the Somme campaign, or a brief description of the retreat to the Hindenburg Line. Works such as Jonathan Nicholls's *Cheerful Sacrifice*, published in 1990, Andrew Rawson's 2017 work *The Arras Campaign 1917,* and *A Battle too Far* by Don Farr, published in 2018, are useful narratives to the fighting at Arras, but do not analyse the battle in any greater depth than the Official History, and are of no genuinely greater value to this thesis than Cyril Falls's work.[48] Chapter five therefore has an additional role alongside its analysis of tactical progress in the BEF's infantry, in providing a narrative history which does not exist beyond that of the official historian, published over 80 years ago.

This thesis in its entirety will ultimately demonstrate that many of the recent assertions around the improvement in the BEF's performance by historians such as Sheffield, Philpott

[48]J. Nicholls, Cheerful Sacrifice: The Battle of Arras 1917 (Leo Cooper, 1990), A. Rawson, *The Arras Campaign 1917* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2017), D. Farr, *A Battle too Far; Arras 1917* (Helion, Warwick, 2018).

and Simkins, are correct. The BEF's infantry became more skilled and more flexible as a result of its fighting on the Somme, and moreover, became much more adept at training new reinforcement drafts as they arrived and avoiding further episodes of 'deskilling', as had occurred in 1915. However, this research will show that significant tactical progress was made either before GHQ's training pamphlets were published, or before they could be fully assimilated by divisions. Therefore, while the training pamphlets of late 1916 and early 1917 were important as reference tools and guidelines, this thesis will argue that fighting experience was the most valuable driver of progress, followed by demonstrations and training from experienced units and officers. As the number of units to experience success on the Somme front grew, so the number of officers who could disseminate knowledge of that success also grew, and their methods shared more efficaciously. Where units were more insular, such as in I ANZAC Corps and 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, this transfer of information was less readily carried out, and there is therefore a discernible, if temporary, lag in tactical progress.

Even these units, however, made progress in distinctive ways, principally in the assault and the counter-attack. The British units which enjoyed the most success not only improved in these aspects, but also demonstrably made progress in defeating German counter-attacks. This was a task principally achieved by unglamorous skills, such as digging, wiring, organising carrying parties, and arranging protective supporting fire from artillery, mortars or machine guns. As German defensive methods shifted away from holding a front-line trench in strength, so the BEF's infantry prioritised musketry training in order to defeat the isolated German machine gunners firing from shell holes or outposts. This ability was demonstrably important as 1917 wore on. Artillery could not always be relied on to knock out every threat. The infantry had to be able to solve some of their own problems too. As a result of the experience of the Somme campaign, the BEF's infantry training became more specialised, more professional, and more systematic. The fighting ability of the BEF reflected these advances as early as January 1917, and with an optimistic focus on extended-order training, BEF divisions acquitted themselves on the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line more capably than has been hitherto understood.

Chapter One

Learning the Lessons of the 1916 Somme Campaign

An understanding of the BEF's tactical improvement in the Spring 1917 advance to the Hindenburg Line requires an examination of the previous actions carried out by the divisions involved. All bar two of the ten divisions studied in this thesis took part in the Somme offensive of 1916, and those two exceptions (61st Division and 5th Australian Division) were both in action at Fromelles in July of that year. This chapter will examine the offensive methods used by each of the divisions in late 1916 and the results of those actions, as well as an assessment of the reporting and feedback process following these operations. Whether the divisions made an assessment or report on the lessons to be learned from their experience is of paramount importance; progress is in no small part dependent on the ability to identify areas for improvement. Though secondary literature on the battles of Fromelles and the Somme is plentiful, this chapter relies heavily on the respective battalion, brigade and divisional war diaries.[49] . Through the daily diaries, received and sent messages as well as operational orders and post-action reports, it is possible to gauge the skill in preparation for assaults, as well as the sophistication of the training undergone. Personal files from commanders such as Major-General Ivor Maxse, commander of 18th (Eastern) Division, are also illuminating.[50] Maxse specifically was heavily involved throughout the Somme offensive, and kept detailed notes on his reflections as the various phases of the battle were carried out. 18th Division have been described as 'a typical Kitchener division' by among others, Peter Simkins, but in reality, and

[49] Reports such as that compiled by 20 Brigade, from 7th Division, after their actions at Guillemont in early September alongside the narrative of the actions from the respective unit daily war diaries. Such reports are usually held in the appendices to the war diary at the National Archives in Kew, in the WO 95 series. In this case, the reference number is WO 95/1653/4.

[50] Maxse's papers are held in the Imperial War Museum archive. The collection is vast, with some duplication across the files, but of particular interest for this research are file 23.3 'Miscellaneous official papers relating to the operations of the 18th Division January -December 1916, mainly relating to the Battle of the Somme, July-October 1916', file 27 'Official papers relating to operations against Thiepval by the 18th Division on the Somme, September 1916' and file 53.1 'Files of official papers relating to organisation and training, during Maxse's command of 18th Division and XVIII Corps, April 1916-February 1918 and Maxse's appointment as Inspector General of Training, June-July 1918.

as clarified by Simkins and Paddy Griffith, 18th Division was at the cutting edge of the British Expeditionary Force's 'assault élite'.[51]

Griffith himself has written at length on the BEF's tactics, and was one of the leading scholars in demonstrating progress between 1915 and 1918. Like Simkins, Griffith leant heavily on the allied successes of 1918 as evidence of tactical progress in 1916 and 1917, and has also drawn attention to the new training pamphlets made available to BEF divisions during this period.[52] An examination of the training pamphlets, their contents and rationales will come later; the primary focus of this section is to outline the experiences of the divisions themselves, and explain the lessons of the actions undertaken by these divisions. This principally concerns the later stages of the Somme offensive, from early September to mid-November 1916, as offensive techniques had already moved on from the Somme campaign's notorious opening day. This later period of the same offensive involved several different phases of fighting, and has been described at different points as a time of 'attrition and attempted breakthrough', and 'mud and muddle'.[53] While not seeking to entirely recast the narrative on the Somme offensive, this chapter will demonstrate that significant progress was made by certain divisions in this time, and that their results may not be as pitiable as they are sometimes portrayed. In this period, for example, it is possible to detect the adoption of an early, small-scale version of the 'bite and hold' technique which was employed by General Herbert Plumer's Second Army to good effect in inflicting heavy loss on the German counter-attack units in September and early October 1917 in the Ypres Salient. It is also possible to identify room for improvement at all command levels, and a number of efforts to correct errors and improve tactics; some with more success than others.

German Tactical Developments

It is important to consider the actions of the German defenders during this period, and how their defensive methods changed. Robert Foley and Tony Cowan have both identified changes

[51] P. Simkins, 'The War Experience of a Typical Kitchener Division: The 18th Division, 1914-1918' in H. Cecil and P. Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon; The First World War Experienced* (Pen & Sword, 1996) p. 301.
[52] P. Griffith, 'The Extent of Tactical Reform in the British Army' in P. Griffith (ed), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (Cass, London, 1996) p. 18.
[53] These are chapter titles covering the period September-November 1916 in: G. Sheffield, *The Somme* (Cassel, 2003) and R. Prior & T. Wilson, *The Somme* (Yale University Press, 2005).

made in defensive tactics by the German army in 1916 and early 1917 as a result of their experiences on the Somme. Foley draws attention to the manner in which German defenders on the Somme were forced by heavy losses, due to heavy French and British artillery fire, to abandon the defensive schemes which had served them relatively well in the early stages of the Somme campaign. On the British sector of the Somme, bombardments intensified significantly after 1 July 1916, with the attack on 15 September supported by double the weight of firepower per yard of trench, relative to the campaign's opening day. 10 days later the intensity was increased by a further 40% for the attacks at Morval and Lesboeufs.[54] Not only were the defenders of front line trenches killed or suppressed by the intensified allied artillery, but machine guns were destroyed or buried, making it necessary to either hold them further back, or to stay silent until the moment of the enemy infantry assault so as to avoid being targeted.[55] Foley also suggests that rather than doctrinal change which came in the German army in late 1916, the main engine for this tactical change was the circulation of *Erfahrungsberichte*, or after action reports, which suggested lessons to be learned from the German armies' defensive battles. These reports then led to tactical shifts, and a greater reliance on defence in depth. Cowan, in building on Foley's work, has explained how this process led to patchy and inconsistent tactical reform, and that the German high command was pressed into codifying these lessons in doctrinal form through late 1916 and early 1917, most notably in the eighth instalment of their new training pamphlets, 'Principles for the conduct of the defensive battle in trench warfare', published on 1 December 1916. This document was revised through the remainder of the conflict, but even the first edition is described by Cowan as a 'turning point'.[56] There seems, therefore to be an interesting parallel between the British and German armies during late 1916 into early 1917, particularly as the respective armies' experiences were shared both horizontally within units and formations, and fed back to higher command. While the publication of British training pamphlets has been noted by historians, the process of reform without doctrinal direction has received less attention, and is a core element of this chapter and the thesis as a whole.

[54] Prior & Wilson, *The Somme*, p. 226 & p. 244.
[55] R. Foley, 'Learning War's Lessons: The German Army and the Battle of the Somme 1916, *Journal of Military History*, 75/2 (2011), pp. 471-504.
[56] T. Cowan, 'The Introduction of New German Defensive Tactics in 1916-1917', *British Journal for Military History,* 5.2 (2019), pp. 81-99.

Jack Sheldon's extensive work on the German army during the Somme campaign and the 1917 Spring offensives has proved valuable in understanding the challenge to the BEF's infantry as German defensive doctrine and methods shifted in late 1916 and early 1917. Sheldon's 2017 work *Fighting the Somme* describes how directives were issued on such aspects of defence by General Max von Gallwitz after his transfer to the Somme front from Verdun in mid-July 1916. Sheldon references an order dated 27 July 1916, which states:

> Unsuccessful attacks in recent days against villages and sections of trench captured by the enemy, cause me to stress the following points once more:
>
> 1. If the enemy forces his way into parts of our position, the best chance of success comes from an immediate decision by a subordinate commander to launch a counter-stroke. To this end, all subordinate commanders must be schooled to hold reserves close by.
> 2. If, for whatever reason, the immediate counter-stroke is unsuccessful, then only a counter-attack, carefully planned in fullest detail, will achieve success. Plans and preparations must be checked by higher headquarters and changes made if necessary.[57]

Von Gallwitz went on to list additional aspects of counter-attacks which required attention, such as reconnaissance, infantry roles and artillery tasks. This renewed German focus on either immediate or prepared counter-attacks for maximum effect was recognised by British divisions. As a good demonstration of tactical awareness in II Corps and 18th Divisional HQ, the changes were referenced in brief tactical notes from which predate the Thiepval actions of September 1916.[58] 18 Division's G630, dated 3 September, stresses the importance of consolidation of a position in order to defeat counter-attacks which may come quickly, or several hours after the capture of a position.

Following the actions of 25-26 September 1916, when both British Fourth and Fifth Armies made significant gains including the capture of Thiepval, a new directive was issued by Generalleutnant Hermann von Kuhl, Chief of Staff to Army Group commander Crown Prince

[57] Sheldon, *Fighting the Somme* pp. 102-103. Sheldon references *Kriegsarchiv Munich* HGr Rupprecht Bd 216 *HGr Gallwitz Ia Nr 115 Geheim*.

[58] IWM, Documents 3255, Private Papers of General Sir Ivor Maxse KCB CVO DSO, file 17.3, 18/ Div G630; 'Notes on consolidation of captured positions' dated 3 September 1916.

Rupprecht. This directive included a section on 'construction of positions and conduct of the battle', which stated:

> Currently, only experience on the Somme is relevant. Experiences derived from earlier battles must be amended from now on. Positions located on hill tops or forward slopes are generally condemned. Wherever possible, in order to obtain protection from the effect of artillery fire, the position must be placed on a rear slope. In connection with the choice of the infantry positions, the location of artillery observers, who must be placed behind the line is most important.
>
> The front line of the position is effectively indefensible in the face of overwhelmingly powerful artillery fire. The garrison is either buried alive or captured. The front line trench must therefore be very thinly manned and only equipped with observation and machine gun posts, together with shelters for sentries. It should not have numerous deep dugouts to hold a strong garrison. It is only possible to maintain the front line trench by means of counter-attacks launched by reserves held ready in the support line. That is where the dugouts should be. This second line should not be too far distant, so that timely counter-attacks can be launched.[59]

The same day, Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff issued a *Betrachtung* ('consideration'), stating:

> All previous enemy offensives have failed more or less quickly in the face of the tenacity of our infantry and the effect of our artillery. For the first time, here on the Somme, unprecedented artillery fire means that the infantry has suffered such bloody losses and its morale has been so badly affected that, without suffering great losses, inferior enemy infantry has been able to force its way into our positions. Our artillery has also suffered heavy losses in equipment and personnel.
>
> The enemy has achieved this despite the fact that we have increased both weapons and ammunition many times over compared with earlier [practice] and our infantry has almost everywhere performed in a superhuman fashion. It is not reasonable to attribute this lack of success merely to the enemy's numerical superiority in infantry

[59] Sheldon, *Fighting the Somme*, referencing *Kriegsarchiv Munich* HGr Rupprecht Bd 216 *Heeresgruppe 'Kronprinz v. Bayern' Oberkommando Abt Ia Nr. 609.*

> and artillery. The failure seems to lie more in the system itself. We need to examine, therefore, how we can deploy our forces on the Somme more effectively and with fewer casualties.[60]

British and French tactics after 1 July had therefore been at least in some measure successful. Not being able to rely on the British infantry in particular to advance after a heavy bombardment, firepower had been intensified for the attack on Bazentin Ridge on 14 July 1916, to the extent that leaving the main strength in a forward position was far too dangerous and difficult in the face of allied attacks. With that intense firepower also extending to counter-battery work, German tactics had to change. More practically, this meant a shift away from their defensive tactic of holding a front line in strength, to holding a forward area in shellholes with machine guns, and retaining strength in depth. Sheldon makes reference to German Reserve Infantry Regiment 74's record from early October 1916, which stressed the value of crater fields in front of the main position for making machine gun crews more difficult to hit with artillery fire and holding up the enemy to prevent surprise attacks. Linking the craters up was emphasised as a priority in order to ease the challenges of communication between the outposts, and a second line with machine gun nests built 100 meters to the rear. It was felt that this would give even an understrength and tired unit the means to defend a position effectively.[61] As the German defences became more fragmented and dispersed in the face of increasingly fierce British and French artillery bombardments as the Somme campaign wore on, so the British and French infantry in the assault would have to accept that reliance on the artillery to remove all defenders was simply unreasonable. Rather than an emphasis on trench-to-trench attacks and clearing dugouts with bombs and bayonets, the priority in action became the ability to engage these machine guns in a more open setting. They would therefore have to develop the ability to eliminate isolated and not deeply-entrenched, but well-armed, and well-hidden and dispersed enemy defenders.

[60] Ibid, referencing *Kriegsarchiv Munich* HGr Rupprecht Bd 216 *Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres II Nr. 200 op. geh. Betrachtung* dated 27 October 1916.
[61] Ibid, referencing *Kriegsarchiv Munich* HGr Rupprecht Bd 216 *213. Inf.-Division I.17.x.geh Erfahrung in der Somme-Schlacht 22.-30. IX. 16* dated 6 October 1916.

British Divisions:

In order to examine the extent of tactical progress in early 1917, it is important to look at offensive methods employed in 1916. Though the narratives of the Somme campaign and the attack at Fromelles on 19-20 July 1916 are well-explored in other works, there are certain points of detail that are worth expressing in the context of this research. This particularly concerns preparation for offensive action, the infantry assault, and measures taken to consolidate captured ground.

Fromelles; 61st (2nd South Midland) Division and Australian 5th Division:

In the case of British 61st Division and Australian 5th Division, the best-known and only significant action carried out prior to the advance to the Hindenburg Line in March 1917 was the attack at Fromelles on 19-20 July 1916. Descriptions of 61st Division around the time of the Fromelles attacks are rarely flattering, either at the time or more recently; Charles Bean described the South Midlanders as not 'fit for present use in the Somme offensive' and 'a numerically weak…'second line' division, used to supply reinforcement drafts to other divisions in France, and had thus been depleted of some of its best elements'.[62] The British official historian, Wilfred Miles stressed the recent arrival of 61st Division, stating 'its training had been delayed owing to lack of arms and equipment', and interrupted by the necessity of supplying drafts to its 1st line division and its responsibilities as part of the home defence forces.[63] Australian 5th Division were similarly untested; having been the latest of the Australian divisions to arrive in France with 3rd Division still to land in the country, and were only moved into the line in front of their intended action site five days before the attack was to be launched.[64]

Tactically, the allied assault was uncomplicated, but not thoughtlessly planned. With almost perfectly flat ground in the area offering virtually no cover for the attacking troops, as Peter

[62] C. E. W. Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1916* p. 336.
[63] W. Miles, *Official History of the Great War; Military Operations, 1916* Vol. II (London, IWM,1992) p. 122.
[64] P. Barton, *The Lost Legions of Fromelles* (Constable, 2014) p. 155.

Barton has stated in his 2014 work *The Lost Legions of Fromelles*, the only chance of achieving surprise was with a night attack.[65] This was not carried out; with poor weather in the preceding days removing the opportunity for observed fire, in a similar manner to the opening of the Somme campaign, the aim was to barrage the enemy breastworks with observed fire, and then assault with the infantry. Zero hour was modified several times in the days leading to the attack, but was eventually set for 6pm on 19 July 1916. The first waves were ordered to form up in no-man's land, as close as they dared to the dropping shells, while the bombardment was being fired, indicating some awareness of what had worked on the Somme front on 1 July. Additionally, lessons had been learned on the value of deception, so dummy lifts of the barrage were employed prior to the assault itself, so as to condition the defenders to stay under cover.[66] The infantry formations employed were also simple, with two waves of two platoons after the barrage on the enemy first line lifted. Company bombers in 61st Division were directed to follow behind the first waves of riflemen to 'clean up' the trenches and brigade machine gun sections were placed at the disposal of attacking battalions. Trench mortar companies, meanwhile, were given orders to knock out enemy machine guns.[67] Supply would be crucial in the aftermath of the infantry assault to ensure supply of material and ammunition to the advancing troops, assuming a break-in was made. This provision was left to brigade arrangements, with half a battalion per brigade being employed in this role, while pioneers dug and built a communication trench connecting the British and Australian front lines with the newly-won ground.[68] No more detailed plans were made for consolidation of the captured positions, and no clear instructions were given other than to capture and hold the enemy second line. The Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General Richard Haking, offered the following advice:

> Don't let the position go when you have once got it. Above all, look after, block and wire the enemy's communication trenches leading in to the position and prevent the enemy from bombing you out there.[69]

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[65] Ibid, p. 175.
[66] TNA WO 95/3033/1, 61st Division General Staff diary, July 1916 Appendices, '61st Division Order No.28, dated 16 July 1916.
[67] TNA WO 95/3054/2, War diary for 182 Brigade, July 1916, Appendix X, '182nd Infantry Brigade Order No.23', dated 16 July 1916.
[68] AWM: AWM4 1/50/5 Part 2, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, July 1916, Appendix C, '5th Australian Division Order No.39' dated 18 July 1916.
[69] TNA WO 95/3054/2, War diary for 182 Brigade, July 1916, Appendix XII, note from R. Haking, Lieutenant General, Commanding XIth Corps, dated 18 July 1916.

There was more than one reason for the failure of the attack at Fromelles, but as had been the case with the assault on the Somme on 1 July 1916, the German defenders were able to bring machine guns into action on or near to their front lines even while the assaulting infantry lines formed up. 61st Division made small break-ins to a strong salient called the Sugarloaf, but without strong counter-battery or suppressive artillery fire, German machine guns and supporting artillery hit the assaulting troops as they emerged from their sally ports. [70] Uncut wire held those who did make progress into no-man's land, and through the evening those units which had made small lodgements in the enemy lines were deemed unsupportable and withdrawn. The most severe consequences of the defeat were felt by Australian 5th Division, who did actually breach the German front lines with two of their brigades (8 and 14 Brigades). However, on pressing past the German front line, the assaulting troops found there was no second position to speak of, much less to consolidate. Neither brigade were able to maintain parity with the Germans in their supply of ammunition, principally of hand grenades, and were driven away from a partly-constructed supply sap.[71] Unable to hold the left flank of the attack, 8 Brigade withdrew ahead of 14 Brigade.[72] The third Australian brigade, 15 Brigade, were checked outright and made no progress. Australian 5th Division at Fromelles recorded the heaviest casualty numbers for any 24-hour period in Australian military history, with 5,355 men killed, wounded and missing, despite achieving more than 61st Division in the assault.[73]

Many of the hallmarks of failure on 1 July 1916 on the Somme are evident at Fromelles. Insufficient weight of artillery fire caused a multitude of problems, leaving machine guns and artillery unsuppressed and barbed wire intact. From the infantry's perspective, communications broke down and the number of challenges to overcome may well have been beyond the abilities of the strongest BEF divisions. However, break-ins were achieved, and for want of attention to consolidation and supply, all were eventually lost. Though some appreciations from 1 July had reached the two attacking divisions ahead of their assault, there were simply too many areas of weakness for success to be likely. Little blame for failure at

[70] W. Miles, *OH 1916 part II,* pp. 118-135.
[71] Barton, *The Lost Legions of Fromelles,* pp. 250-260.
[72] Bean, *The AIF in France 1916*, p. 433.
[73] AWM: AWM4 1/50/5 Part 3, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, July 1916, Appendix E.

Fromelles lies with divisional commanders, either Major-General Colin Mackenzie of 61st Division, or Major-General James McCay of Australian 5th Division. However, the particularly heavy casualty figures on the part of the Australians led to questioning of how many men it was appropriate to send forward. 61st Division's attacks did cease after initial failure, which seems to have been a responsible decision, but it does make assessment of divisional command and tactical skill difficult to undertake. In the aftermath of the action, 184 Brigade's commander, Brigadier-General Charles Carter, was dismissed, which at first glance seems harsh, although a subordinate later wrote 'the Brigade were heartily glad to be rid of a commander in whom they had no confidence [and] who demonstrated daily his ignorance of the requirements of war'.[74]

The fact that communications between two inexperienced divisions were patchy is not surprising, nor is the fact that uncut wire and heavy MG fire checked the attack across most of 61st Division's front. On balance though, with a similarly inexperienced division attacking alongside and managing a much greater degree of initial success, the assumption must be that 61st Division's failure to make any progress at all was at least in part to poor performance. Across both divisions, little time was allowed for reconnaissance, which when combined with a lack of experience, absence of cover, paucity of artillery, and strong opposition in experienced Bavarian troops, the prospects for success were scarce. In terms of lessons to learn, lack of consolidation on the left flank was highlighted by the Corps commander Haking, who had orchestrated the attack, as a primary cause for failure.[75] Ultimately, responsibility for the failure at Fromelles is not within the scope of this investigation, although the action itself can be compared with concurrent offensive action on the Somme. The attack at Fromelles was conducted hastily, after a postponement, by units which had not taken part in a major offensive before. It therefore has elements in common with the actions being carried out during the mid-July to early September period on the Somme. Clearly, improvements were needed in both divisions if they were to be used again in an offensive role, but both would have a number of months away from significant offensive action, in which to retrain and learn from their actions at Fromelles, and the actions of other divisions further south.

[74] P. Pedersen *Fromelles* (Pen & Sword, 2015) p. 114. The private papers of Colonel Sir Geoffry Christie-Miller are referenced, and are held by the IWM.
[75] AWM: AWM4 1/50/5 Part 3, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, July 1916, Appendix E.

The Somme, 1916:

7th Division

The division was led through the Somme campaign by Major-General Sir Herbert Watts, and had a good measure of success in that time. 7th Division achieved the capture of Mametz in early July, and took part in the Bazentin Ridge assault later that month, capturing Bazentin-le-Petit but potentially missing the opportunity to occupy High Wood at minimal cost.[76] After repeated attempts to clear the wood in cooperation with other units in the days that followed, 7th Division was withdrawn by 21 July, having suffered over 7,500 casualties since the opening of the offensive.[77] On their return to the Somme front at the end of August, 7th Division joined in the frantic and destructive action which was continuing on the eastern side of Delville Wood and in front of Ginchy. Little ground was gained, despite Ginchy having been reached; German counter-attacks drove out those of 20th Battalion Manchester Regiment (20/Mancs) who had broken into the village, and then resisted or repelled various disjointed attacks, made by a number of the division's battalions. Efforts at clearing the eastern corner of Delville Wood enjoyed no lasting success, and by 8 September, 7th Division's infantry were withdrawn, having suffered a further 3,626 casualties.[78]

The recent operations were discussed at a conference of brigade commanders, held by Watts, on 13 September 1916 and documented in the divisional general staff diary. Attention was drawn to a number of matters, and proposed action to strengthen the division:

- The 'serious lack of experienced officers'. Establishment of a divisional school was deemed 'advisable' in the forthcoming fortnight.
- Men without understanding of 'the object of their elementary training'. At least one battalion-level training exercise to take place each week, and one brigade-level exercise to be carried out each fortnight, ensuring some advanced work had been carried out before future operations.[79]

[76] Capt. W. Miles, *Official History of the Great War; Military Operations, 1916* Vol. II (London, IWM,1992) p. 83.
[77] C.T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division 1914-1918* (N&M Press, 2001) p. 289.
[78] TNA WO 95/1631/2, 7th Division General Staff Diary, September 1916, Appx A: 'Accurate casualty return for the period 23rd August 1916 to 12 noon 8th September 1916'.
[79] TNA WO 95/1631/2, 7th Division General Staff Diary, entry for 13 September 1916.

After a brief rest, 7th Division moved north to the Ploegsteert sector, coming into the line on 19 September. A number of raids were carried out, and an entirely new infantry battalion, 2nd Battalion Honourable Artillery Company (2/HAC) joined the division in place of 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Regiment (2/RI Reg), which moved to 16th (Irish) Division. Their next deployment to the Somme came in late November, as 7th Division relieved 32nd Division at Beaumont-Hamel.[80]

8th Division

At the opening of the Somme offensive, 8th Division's greatest hindrance was the huge expanse of no-man's land separating them from the enemy lines at Ovillers. The lesson from their failure was swiftly learned across the BEF, and every effort in future actions would be made to close the distance that assaulting troops would make; this was evident as early as 14 July, when troops of 9th (Scottish) and 3rd Divisions closed to within 200 yards of the enemy positions in front of Bazentin Ridge in the hours before the dawn assault.[81]

8th Division, led by Major-General Havelock Hudson, were relieved immediately following their action on 1 July 1916, and dispatched to the comparatively quiet sector north of Loos-en-Gohelle, where they held a section of the line through August and September and undertook a number of raids. The division was transferred back to the Somme front in mid-October, by which time the weather and the condition of the ground were significant concerns, and progress to the front lines was slow and exhausting. 8th Division took part in an assault on 23 October between Gueudecourt and Le Transloy, with the objective of pushing the XIV Corps lines forward sufficiently to bring Le Transloy within range of an assault at a later date. The attacking troops had protective fire in the form of a creeping artillery barrage; a technique not widely used on 1 July, and not used by 8th Division that day, but had become standard practice by that stage of the campaign. The barrage would advance at a rate of 50 yards every minute; not rapid, but an ambitious pace in the near incessant rain which had paused only occasionally

[80] Atkinson, *The Seventh Division*, p. 326.
[81] TNA, WO 95/1735 'Narrative of Events, Part II; Dispositions and assembly for the attack of 26 & 27 Bdes'. From 9th (Scottish) Divisional Diary.

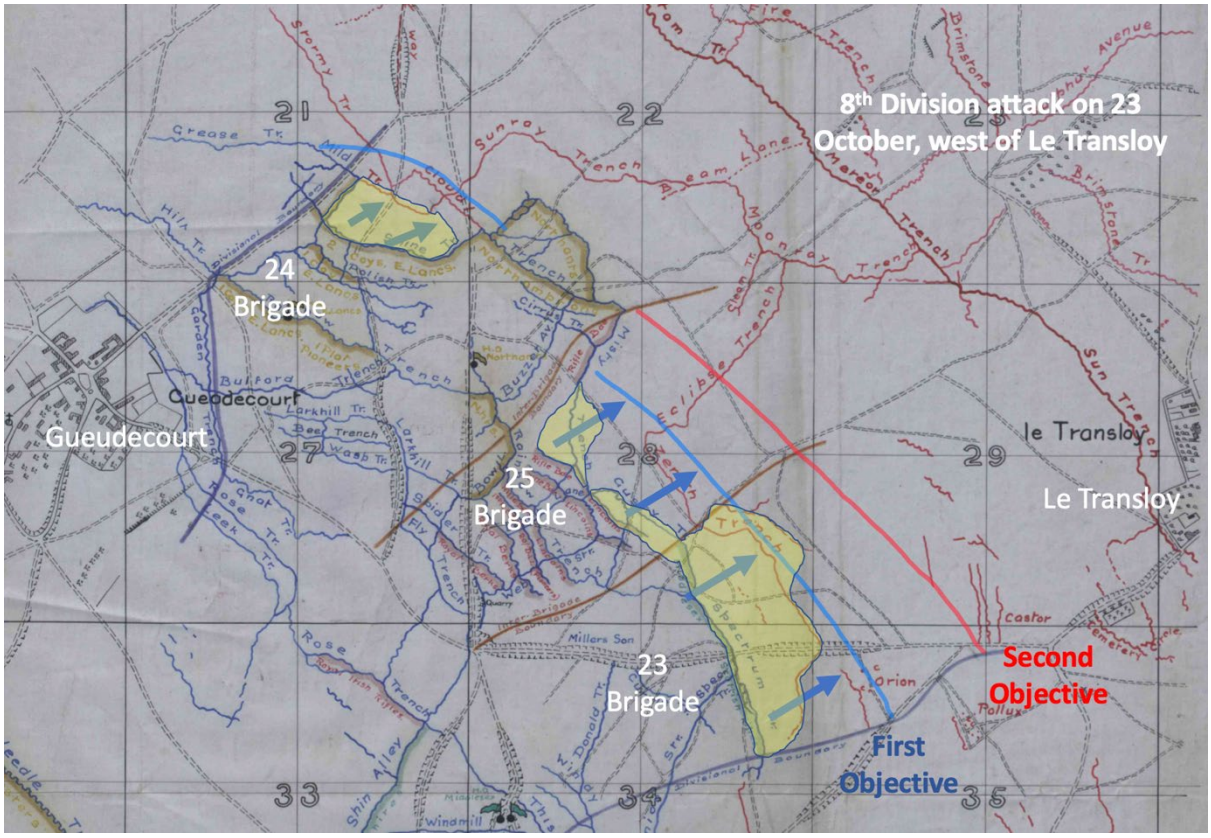
in the previous few weeks.[82] All three brigades were placed in line, with 23 Brigade on the right closest to Le Transloy, 25 Brigade in the centre, and 24 Brigade on the left. As 24 Brigade on the left flank had a simple aim of capturing a trench in front, straightening the line and not directly pressing towards Le Transloy, the following analysis concentrates on 23 Brigade and 25 Brigades.

Both brigades attacked with two battalions in line, one in support and one in reserve. Three of the four battalions involved in the initial assault claimed in their war diary entries for the action to have advanced with two companies in line, followed by two companies in a second wave. 2nd Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment (2/Lincs), on the right of the centre brigade, claimed to have advanced in four waves, with two halves of a company in each wave. 25 Brigade orders made no specific instruction as to the formation to be adopted, whereas 23 Brigade explicitly stated that the assault was to take place in two waves.[83] Whilst the right-hand brigade made good progress and achieved its first objective, the neighbouring division (4th Division) attacking on their right flank and 25 Brigade on their left failed to make progress, leaving their flanks exposed; thereby making progress to the second objective impossible (see map 1).

25 Brigade's difficulties lay chiefly with 2/Lincs' failure to break into Zenith trench near its junction with Eclipse trench, where a German strong point held both 2/Lincs and 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade (2/RB) on the left of the Brigade advance. German machine gun fire from further up Eclipse trench inflicted heavy casualties on 2/RB. 2/Lincs attributed the immediate stalling of their attack to the actions of a single 'very gallant German officer' on his parapet, directing rapid rifle fire.[84] With the attack having begun at 2.30pm, by 5pm 2/Lincs were effectively 'wiped out', and so were recalled by the Brigadier General.[85] The intention was to put the supporting battalion, 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (2/R Berks) into make a fresh attack after a new bombardment of Zenith trench, and this attack was made at 3.50am on 24 October, after a night of rainfall. The assaulting troops of 2/R Berks and 1st Battalion Royal Irish

[82] Lt-Colonel J. H. Boraston, *The Eighth Division 1914-1918* (Naval & Military Press, 2015), p85
[83] TNA WO 95/1709/2 '23 Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 80', 22 October 1916 & WO 95/1726/4 '25th Brigade Operation Order No. 133' 22 October 1916.
[84] TNA WO 95/1730/1, War Diary for 2/Lincs, 23 October 1916 entry.
[85] TNA WO 95/1726/4, 25 Brigade 'Report on Operations, 23/10/16', 5 November 1916.

Rifles (1/R I Rif), despite leaving their trenches early in a bid to keep up with their barrage, failed to do so and the attack halted swiftly.[86]



Map 1: 8th Division, 23 October 1916. Gains shown highlighted in Yellow.[87]

The individual actions of a German officer notwithstanding, it is possible to draw some conclusions on the flawed tactics of this assault. Firstly, that the barrage was too fast for the attacking troops in the heavy conditions. Secondly, we can question the deployment of 2/Lincs in four half-strength waves, by comparing them with the attack on the far right of the divisional front, that of 2nd Battalion Scottish Rifles (2/Sco Rif). This battalion attacked in two waves, the first initially being held by machine gun fire. Despite heavy casualties, they were able to press on when the stronger reinforcing second wave arrived, and a positive example of leadership was shown by three men, including one officer, breaking into Zenith trench and knocking out a machine gun.[88] Largely, however, the conclusion is that the attack was too big a task for tired

[86] TNA WO 95/1675/3, 'Report of the Operations carried out by the 8th Division west of Le Transloy from the 23rd to 30th October 1916', 15 December 1916.
[87] Map from WO 95/1675/3, Appendix 'Y'.
[88] TNA WO 95/1715/1, War Diary for 2/Sco. Rif., entry for 23 October 1916, reference to 2nd Lieutenant Ferguson, Sergeant Hawkins & Private Murray.

troops in poor weather conditions, without a sophisticated plan for dealing with the tactical challenge. Alun Thomas has highlighted the despair within the division at the second costly disappointment in the year in his PhD thesis, citing Alan Hanbury-Sparrow's reflections that the division had not captured a yard of enemy trench since Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, and sustained 20,000 casualties in that time.[89] Following the actions at Le Transloy, 8th Division remained in line until the end of the month in the hope the weather would improve and the attack could be repeated. After a few days to clean up in early November they were back in the line in the middle of the month, but the only action was an artillery demonstration to assist with the renamed Fifth Army's attacks on 13 November. Whilst not a breakthrough as such, a break-in to the German positions north of the Ancre was affected. Following this attack, 8th Division held the line for a few days, before being withdrawn to refit and to take on replacements.

32nd Division

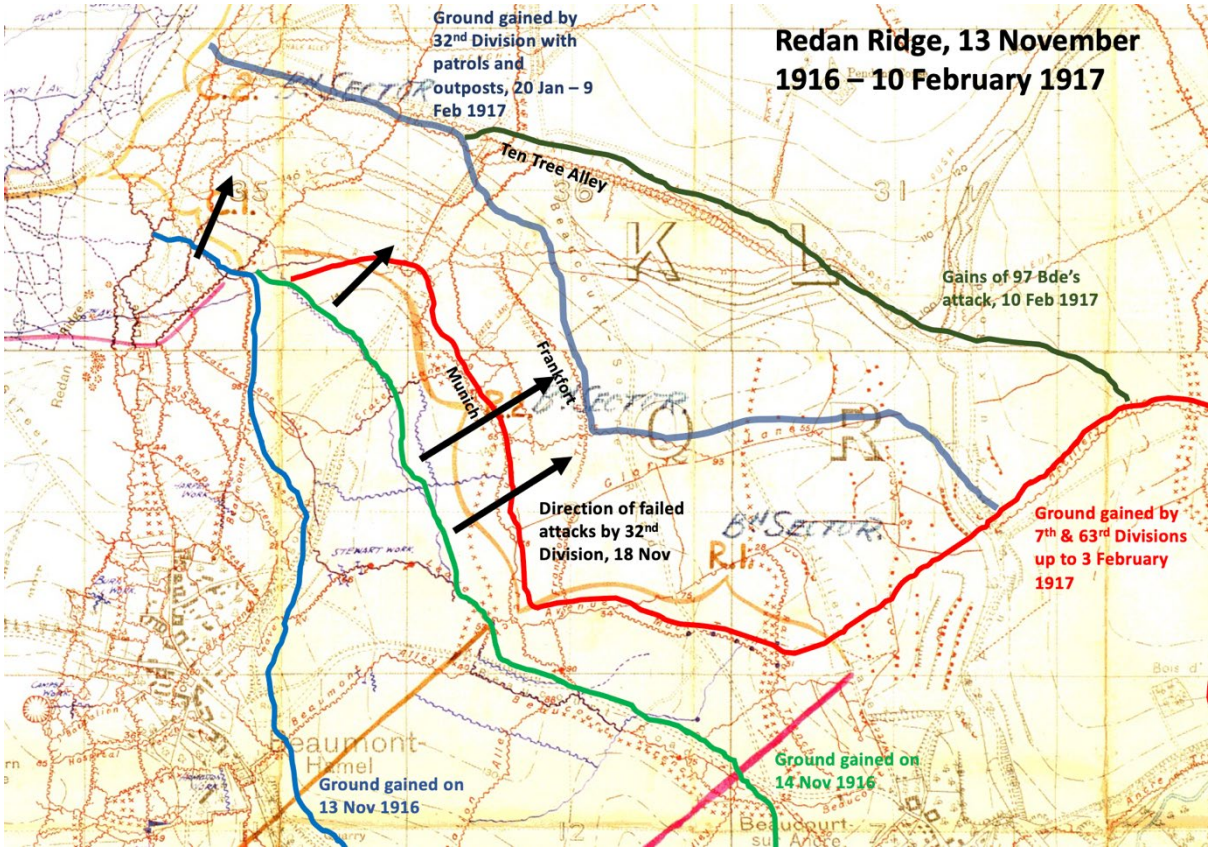
1 July 1916 saw failure for 32nd Division to break into the village of Thiepval. Stuart Mitchell's PhD thesis on 32nd Division during the Great War examines this action in some detail, and suggests a combination of exhausted infantry, overworked in the days leading up to the attack, lack of oversight from the commander in the planning of the assault, and insufficient resources for the task available, as reasons for the defeat.[90] The sequence of events for 32nd Division following 1 July 1916 is similar to that of 8th Division, although Major-General William Rycroft's men were kept in line for a few days longer than 8th Division, as attempts were made to expand on the small territorial gains north of the Albert-Bapaume road made in the opening attack. These duly failed to make significant progress, and the division was withdrawn to the Cambrin / Cuinchy sector, where it periodically carried out raids over the ensuing three months. Though 32nd Division returned to the Somme sector around the same time as 8th Division, in mid-October, they were not put into action concurrently. Instead, they had a spell of training lasting

[89] A. M. Thomas, *British 8th Infantry Division on the Western Front, 1914-18* (University of Birmingham, 2010), citing A. A. Hanbury-Sparrow, *The Land-locked Lake* (Arthur Barker, 1932), pp. 205-6.
[90] S. B. T. Mitchell, *An Inter-Disciplinary Study of Learning in the 32nd Division on the Western Front, 1916-1918* (2013) p. 52.

approximately three weeks, which incorporated brigade field days, attack practices and more general company training.[91]

32nd Division's next action was an effort to build on the gains made by Fifth Army's attack along the Ancre on 13 November, and secure the high ground northeast of Beaumont-Hamel. Once again, the division failed to advance, and following this disappointing performance at Redan Ridge as well as that at Thiepval in early July, there were significant changes made to the divisional leadership; Rycroft, his GSO1 and two brigade commanders were all removed in the week following the actions of 18 November. These actions, the reasons for 32nd Division's difficulties and the immediate consequences of the failure are more than adequately detailed by Peter Simkins in *From the Somme to Victory*, but a brief description is appropriate:[92] Having been rushed across the broken ground of the July attacks, further cratered by 51st Division's attack a few days earlier, some units were led into an incorrect position some 200 yards short of their planned jump-off trench. All attacking units were exhausted, having been hauled away from fatigue parties and some without hot food in 15 hours, some only arriving at the start line ten minutes before zero, having lost direction on the way. The barrage was patchy and inaccurate, in no small measure due to the conditions; the attack started at 6.10am in sleet and snow, which thawed out to rain, making the ground slippery and yet more difficult to negotiate. Several units managed to break into the German lines nonetheless, although there was no lasting success; two companies of 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment (2/Mancs) were lost altogether as they pressed through and lost contact with Brigade HQ, and a party of some 120 officers and men of the 16th Battalion Highland Light Infantry (16/HLI) and 11th Battalion Border Regiment (11/Borders) remained trapped in Frankfort trench for five days after the attack until they were killed or captured.[93] Map 2 shows as black arrows the direction of the attacks made; apart from a small extension of the line on the left flank of the attack, there were no gains to report.

[91] TNA WO 95/2402/1, War Diary for 2/KOYLI, entries for period 24 October 1916 to 9 November 1916
[92] Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory* pp. 103-120.
[93] TNA WO 95/2368/3, 32nd Division HQ Diary, 18-19 November 1916 and Simkins, *Somme to Victory*, pp. 109-120.



Map 2: 32nd Division, 13 November 1916 – 10 February 1917

In the days that followed, an effort was made immediately to gather feedback from officers involved in the attack, most notably in 14 Brigade, which received reports from its Battalion commanding officers detailing 'lessons learned'.[94] The Divisional report stressed the need for depth in attack and a reserve of men kept back for the commander, the need for forward observation officers (FOOs) to be much further forward than they were, cohesion between the lines of attack and hot food, as well as the need for more time to prepare. This final point was echoed by 1st Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment (1/Dorsets) and 2/Mancs. All surviving reports emphasised reasonable expectations to be made of carrying parties, especially in bad weather, and communication was a common cause of complaint, with pigeons described as 'useless' by 2/Mancs, runners being available in insufficient numbers by 2/Mancs and

[94] TNA WO 95/2368/3, 32nd Division HQ Diary, Reply from Brigadier General W.W. Seymour 'Reference your G.S.1302 dated 29th Nov', 3 December 1916; WO 95/2392/2, War Diary for 2/Mancs, 'Lessons to be learnt from recent operations', N Luxmoore, OC 2/ Mancs. (undated); WO 95/2392/1, War Diary for 1/Dorsets, handwritten note, headed by 'I DORSET REGT' H C Butcher, Lt & Adjutant, 1/ Dorsets, 1 December 1916; WO 95/2393/3, War Diary for 15/H.L.I., handwritten note headed with 'I drew the following minor conclusions', H.N. Davis, OC 15/H.L.I., and WO 95/2368/3, 32nd Division HQ Diary, 'Lessons derived from experiences of 32nd Division in the recent Operations' (undated).

1/Dorsets, and rockets described as 'cumbrous' by 15/HLI. Communication difficulties blighted commanders throughout the war, although the officers of 14 Brigade did make a few suggestions, namely running armoured cables through communication trenches and coloured Very lights for signalling.

On their return to the line in February 1917, 32nd Division demonstrated significant progress, with different offensive methods, as Map 2 suggests. The division, under new command and with the benefits of another training period which will be discussed later in this thesis, were able to expand on the work of two of the other divisions featured herein. Also fighting in this sector, but with more visible success in the November actions were 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, taking part in their first offensive action on the Western Front.

63rd (Royal Naval) Division

Following the transfer of the Royal Naval Division from Gallipoli to France and its completion to 12 infantry battalions with an Army brigade (190 Brigade), 63rd Division spent a quiet spell holding the line between Lens and Vimy Ridge. In the words of the divisional history, 'the life of the division in the new sector was almost uniformly without incidents of individual importance'.[95] Such small-scale actions as took place in this period were not enormously revealing, although elements of 1st Battalion Honourable Artillery Company (1/HAC) did show an overt fondness for the hand grenade over the rifle, as a patrol was fired on by an enemy patrol, before having a grenade thrown their way. 'As bombers, their professional instincts were outraged by [the enemy] not throwing his bomb first'.[96]

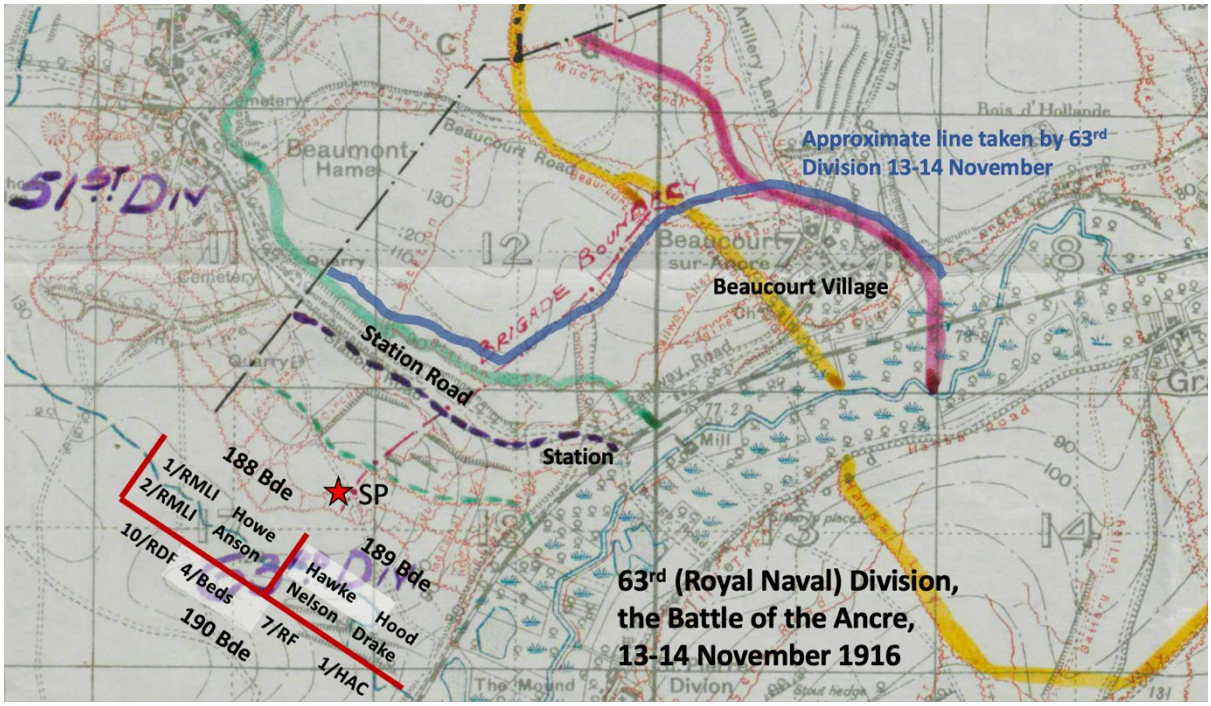
Training through September was focused on offensive action, and was quite ambitiously expectant of a switch to open warfare. 188 Brigade's battalions record regular attack practices on trench lines in waves and artillery formations.[97] Field days were run at all organisational levels between platoon and division, and feedback was given on how well these training exercises were conducted.[98] Creeping barrages were simulated, and although problems were

[95] D. Jerrold, *The Royal Naval Division* (Naval & Military Press, 1995) p. 178.
[96] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, 10 September 1916.
[97] TNA WO 95/3110/2, War Diary for 2nd Battalion Royal Marine Light Infantry (2/RMLI), 22 – 29 September 1916.
[98] TNA WO 95/3114/1, War Diary for Drake Battalion, 21-30 September 1916.

identified, they were not immediately fixed; the men of Hood Battalion were repeatedly seen to advance too far behind their barrage, and officers were unable to complete their administrative tasks on successive days in late September.[99] An alarming instruction was issued by the divisional commander, Major General Sir Archibald Paris, to 1/HAC while practicing attack formations, that 'all officers and NCOs must be level with the line of skirmishers'.[100] This hints at a worrying lack of experience of Western Front action, and a lack of awareness of the risk to battalion leadership. In the event, Paris himself became a casualty before the division came into the line, as he was hit by a fragment of shell, which also killed the divisional GSO2. Also wounded in October was Brigadier-General Charles Sackville-West, 190 Brigade's commander, who had only assumed his command five days earlier, having replaced Brigadier-General Charles Trotman who had also been wounded that month. 190 Brigade went on to have four commanders in the space of two months, and although 188 and 189 Brigades retained their commanders through this period, high casualties among the battalion leaders caused a lack of continuity across the division. Archibald Paris's absence was initially covered by the CRA, Brigadier-General de Rougemont, before Major-General Cameron Shute took over on 17 October. The same day, the initial warning order for the division's attack along the Ancre was issued.

Repeated postponements for bad weather caused weeks of delays, resulting in some lengthy spells in the line in poor conditions for the infantry. With the attack postponed indefinitely on 7 November, the rain stopped the following day and on 10 November, Fifth Army commander General Gough set the morning of 13 November as the date of the operation. 'X' day artillery plans were carried out on 11 November and 63rd Division moved into assault positions the following day, during which Anson Battalion's commander was killed.[101] The formation used for the assault reads very much like an attacking division on 1 July 1916; two brigades (188 & 189) made the attack on the first three German trenches, then were to reassemble in the third line, while 190 Brigade passed through and attacked the next objective (green line). The waves were to alternate taking the lead on successive objectives until the village of Beaucourt and the red line was secured (see map 3).

[99] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, 25-26 September 1916.
[100] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, 26 September 1916.
[101] TNA WO 95/3111/1, War Diary for Anson Battalion, 12 November 1916.



Map 3: 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, the Battle of the Ancre, 13-14 November 1916

Zero hour was 5.45am on 13 November, and problems arose very soon thereafter as a German strong point in the centre of the divisional front was missed by the heavy artillery, then passed by the leading waves. This point was the cause of heavy casualties in the centre battalions, and confusion mounted as increasing numbers of officers were killed or wounded. Hawke, Drake and Nelson each lost their battalion commanders and various officers as casualties in these early stages.[102] 51st Division on the left were slow to press past Y-Ravine, leaving the two battalions of Royal Marines caught in enfilade fire from both left and right. 1st Battalion Royal Marine Light Infantry (1/RMLI) had all its company commanders killed before it crossed the German front line, and may have suffered as many as 50% casualties crossing no-man's land.[103] Howe Battalion's signals officer and an attached artillery observation officer were both killed as the battalion advanced. Howe's commander, W.G. Ramsay-Fairfax survived the action unwounded although he too put himself in danger, personally leading bombing attacks in the German second line.[104] The tendency of leadership figures within 63rd Division to put

[102] TNA WO 95/3114/1, War Diary for Drake Battalion, 13 November 1916; WO 95/3114/2, War Diary for Hawke Battalion, 13 November 1916; WO 95/3114/3, War Diary for Nelson Battalion, 13 November 1916.
[103] TNA WO 95/3110/1, War Diary for 1/RMLI, 13 November 1916.
[104] TNA WO 95/3111/2, War Diary for Howe Battalion, 13 November 1916.

themselves in harm's way does indicate inexperience in the style of fighting on the Western Front, and did little to help the progress of the assault.

Units disintegrated in the fog and under heavy fire, but small parties from 188 Brigade manages to reach the yellow line, from which they had to withdraw back to Station Road, having become isolated. Hawke and Nelson were also badly hit, as Hawke lost its Adjutant and three company commanders as well as its CO, and Nelson 'ceased to exist as an identity'.[105] However, small groups from these battalions continued to function under those officers who survived the early stages, and battalion HQs moved forward as control of the German trenches up to the third line was secured (the central strong point notwithstanding). Isolated parties of Royal Marines on the left flank had even managed to advance as far as the yellow line, but judging themselves to be too weak to hold their position, withdrew back to Station Road. Consolidation of the positions taken on 13 November was largely carried out only with entrenching tools, as insufficient thought had been given to the need for proper tools such as picks and shovels.[106] Consolidation was further complicated by persistent enemy rifle fire, which made wiring in the remaining daylight hours impossible.[107]

The actions on 14 November were also carried out in a high degree of confusion, but two tanks were deployed to good effect against the strong point in the centre of the divisional front. The tanks were led in by an officer from one of the divisional Trench Mortar batteries, and although both became stuck, their presence in conjunction with infantry from Howe and 10th Battalion Royal Dublin Fusiliers, (10/RDF) was enough to force the German garrison to surrender.[108] Hood Battalion's CO on the right flank captured Beaucourt shortly afterwards with a composite force of men from Hood, Drake, Hawke, Nelson, 1/HAC and 13th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps (13/KRRC) from 37th Division which had arrived in support.[109] The initial waves were beaten back by machine gun fire, but slow progress was able to continue on the left flank of the attack on the village, which caused the defenders' fire to slacken.[110] On

[105] TNA WO 95/3114/3, War Diary for Nelson Battalion, 13 November 1916.
[106] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, November 1916 Appx 'A', ''B' Coy's Narrative'.
[107] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, November 1916, 'Letter of Capt Hon Lionel Montagu DSO'.
[108] TNA WO 95/3111/2, War Diary for Howe Battalion, 13 November 1916.
[109] Jerrold, *The Royal Naval Division,* p. 202.
[110] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, November 1916 Appx 'A', ''C' Coy's Narrative'

breaking through to Beaucourt, approximately 500 Germans surrendered, in addition to 400 taken at the central strong point and another 200 captured by 188 Brigade as they advanced on Station Road.[111] Some casualties were suffered in Beaucourt Village as the consolidation went on, including Hood Battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Freyberg who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his part in the actions. With the exception of some work parties left to help clear the battlefield, the division was relieved in the morning of 15 November.

Douglas Jerrold's history of the division, first published in 1923, is quick to emphasise that the actions on 13-14 November should not be seen 'as a failure, redeemed by one brilliant, even astonishing, success.' Jerrold emphasises that by the time of Freyberg's assault on Beaucourt, the whole divisional front was on the green line, and a way was open to the yellow line.[112] The capture of the strong point is stressed as an achievement, and certainly its surrounding and blocking-in while the tanks moved into position appears to have been a mature and correct course of action. It is worth noting that morale among the defenders appears to have been more fragile than that of 63rd Division; no noteworthy counter-attack developed, and surrenders occurred freely when and if the distance to the enemy could be closed, and when the tanks arrived. However, there were also significant problems. Confusion dogged the assault, and units fragmented quickly. Loss of leadership was doubtless a significant factor, and high officer casualties can only have contributed to the lack of unit integrity. 1/RMLI suffered 20 casualties from 22 officers that took part in the attack, while Nelson endured 19, Anson 20, 2/RMLI 14, 7/R. Fus. 16, and no battalions suggested 'light' casualties even if precise details are not recorded. It may be worth noting that one of Nelson's officers, Sub Lieutenant Edwin Dyett, became one of only three officers executed in the course of the war, adjudged to have deserted on 13 November. While Freyberg's leadership certainly was a leading cause in 63rd Division's success on the right flank, and Ramsay-Fairfax's bombing attacks helped establish blocks which contained the garrison of the central strong point, the formations employed on 13 November were not sustainable. Altogether the division suffered

[111] W. Miles, *Military Operations, 1916* Vol. II (London, IWM,1992), pp. 505-506.
[112] Jerrold, *The Royal Naval Division,* p. 205.

approximately 4,000 casualties over the two days in action, leaving this assault very much with the feel of a 'First of July' attack.

The lack of attention given to the consolidation of captured positions was a cause for concern, and featured in the divisional commander's tactical notes on the action, as well as in the diaries of individual battalions. Cameron Shute produced two documents in the wake of the actions, 'Tactical notes by the Divisional Commander' and 'Some lessons which may be deduced from the Operations on the Ancre', both of which highlight room for improvement in the consolidation process. Awareness of the danger of simply holding a captured line is evident, with the point being made that a support line should be dug enabling the infantry to shelter from the anticipated bombardment of the taken position. Furthermore, 'Battle Patrols' should be formed with a proportion of tools to advance beyond the captured line, regain close touch with the enemy and dig in strong points.[113] This technique was disseminated further, as William Heneker took it with him when he left 190 Brigade to take over 8th Division in December. Shute's tactical notes underline that trenches should be reversed, cleared, and made as strong as possible no matter how exhausted the men may be, and reinforced with every available Lewis and machine gun. This would both form part of a defensive scheme, and provide cover for wiring parties, lessening casualties from enemy rifle or sniper fire. It is perhaps a measure of how this aspect of trench warfare had been neglected under Paris's command that this needed stating so explicitly. At battalion level, 1/HAC drew up concurrent lessons from the action, stating the need for more organised carrying parties in reserve for bringing up essentials, including water, ammunition and tools.[114]

Other points made by Shute are also valid, such as not attacking strong points frontally but working around them; not advancing battalion HQs too early and losing contact with brigade HQs; officers taking every opportunity to reform the units under their command.[115] This latter point depends on those officers not having become casualties, and no advice or instructions were mentioned in Shute's comments regarding minimising risk to battalion leadership. In

[113] WO 95/3093/4, 63rd Division General Staff Diary, November 1916, No G.211/22/1, 'Tactical Notes by the Divisional Commander'.
[114] WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, November 1916, 'NOTE The operations have shown:-'.
[115] WO 95/3093/4, 63rd Division General Staff Diary, November 1916, 'Some lessons which may be deduced from the operations on the Ancre', 22 November 1916.

summary, the qualified success of this attack may have masked problems which required urgent attention. Although the division could, for the most part, adequately follow a creeping barrage, they lacked the skills and training to eliminate a stubborn strong point without tank support, and unit cohesion ceased to exist very swiftly on going into action. While the division may not have been unique in struggling against a particularly well-sited and constructed strong point, other difficulties exacerbated matters. Insufficient reserves were kept for use either as carrying parties or to work through points of resistance. Although Stokes Mortars were available, they were pushed to the flanks and therefore apparently not used against the main point of difficulty. The plan therefore lacked flexibility, and typical battlefield communication troubles left the initiative with the few unwounded officers who could cobble a force together from the fragmented battalions. That some success was achieved this way speaks to the quality of those officers, and the skill and morale of the men they commanded. There was room for improvement, but there were also reasons to be optimistic.

The gains made along the Ancre in 63rd Division's initial assault on 13 November were made possible by territorial gains made on the south side of the river in late September and early October, which gave Reserve/Fifth Army observation of the north side of the Ancre valley. The breakthrough at Thiepval, leading to the capture of the Schwaben Redoubt on the high ground behind the village was made by II Corps on 26 September, with 18th Division playing a significant role.

18th (Eastern) Division

18th Division were involved in the opening days of the campaign, and took part in the battles for Trônes and Delville Woods. After a spell away from the lines in August and early September, the division returned to the Somme in Fifth Army's sector, and played leading roles in the attacks on Thiepval, the Schwaben redoubt, and Regina and Desire Trenches, between late September and mid-November 1916. Their performance throughout was commendably strong and several of the Division's unit commanders have been highlighted as providing examples of exceptionally innovative and successful leadership.[116] 18th Division's attack on

[116] Peter Simkins's previously-listed work leans heavily on 18th Division's performances.

Thiepval on 26 September 1916 by 53 and 54 Brigades was a well conducted and successful assault. That they made use of tanks, and at least one of the armoured vehicles made a useful intervention in the château grounds, makes this an obvious example of progress from the July actions in the area. However, the final prize of the Schwaben redoubt, to the north of the village, remained in German hands. The battalions of 55 Brigade were brought into the line to capture the redoubt, but without the same sophistication in technique from their supporting artillery, were reduced to using hand grenades as their primary weapon. This resulted in some costly and largely fruitless actions at the end of September and in early October, as German bombing parties could often outrange their British counterparts by virtue of their use of the smaller 'egg' grenade.[117] After attempted assaults with creeping barrages failed on 28 and 30 September, 55 Brigade used all four of its battalions in line with repeated bombing attacks and defence against counter-attacks. The decision was taken to use the 7th Battalion East Kent Regiment (7/Buffs) and 6th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (6/R Berks) to attack the redoubt with bombs all through the day and night of 4-5 October, whereupon a strong bombing force from 8th Battalion Norfolk Regiment (8/Norfolks), 53 Brigade, would attack the following morning.[118] Although some progress was made, the north face of the redoubt remained in German hands, and on the afternoon of 5 October, the division was relieved. 55 Brigade had, in its attacks on the Schwaben redoubt, suffered casualties amounting to 46 officers and 1,250 other ranks, for limited gains.[119] This shows that although the division was proficient in set-piece attacking on known ground, its commanders, even in as highly a regarded division as the 18th, could still struggle in less formally-organised actions; a fact not lost on Major General Maxse, its commander, who remarked 'in my opinion the 55th Brigade was not handled with firmness and the attacks were too partial. The situation should have been grasped more firmly by the brigade commander concerned [Brigadier-General Thomas Jackson] and he was so informed.'[120]

[117] TNA WO 95/2050/2, War Diary for 8/E Surreys, 'Report on the Attack of the North Face of the Schwaben Redoubt – September 30th'.
[118] TNA WO 95/2046/4, 55 Brigade HQ Diary, 'Report on Operations for week ending 6pm October 6th 1916', dated 7 October 1916.
[119] TNA WO 95/2046/4, 55 Brigade HQ Diary, 'Report on Operations from 24th Sept to 5th October 1916', dated 5 October 1916.
[120] TNA WO 95/2015/3, 18th Division General Staff, 18th Division No.G.274, Narrative of the actions at Thiepval and Schwaben Redoubt, sent to II Corps HQ, 14 January 1917, 'The 18th Division in the Battle of the Ancre'.

18th Division were used twice more before the campaign was officially closed on 18 November; on 21 October on the western section of Regina Trench, and at Desire Trench, to the south of Grandcourt on 18 November. These attacks were much more orthodox assaults than the bombing actions at the Schwaben redoubt, and even when the need arose for bombing attacks to be made, a supporting assault across open ground took place simultaneously.[121] Although not as grand in their scope or importance as the division's gains in July and September, relative to the performance of other units in action in late October and on 18 November, 18th Division's performance was creditable and decent gains were made. With a large portion of Desire Trench secure, the division was withdrawn and spent all of December and early January in training. Before starting their training routine, Maxse compiled a report on the division's actions, with notes on aspects that had worked well and others where improvement was needed. Points included:

- Artillery: Early and close cooperation between artillery and general staff officers was essential, so that the necessary negotiations between the divisional commander and the artillery staff can be concluded to provide brigade commanders with the information they need in plenty of time. Word of mouth communication is better than telephonic communication, especially while the attack is taking place.
- Distant objectives: Unit disintegration is difficult to avoid over advances greater than 1,000 yards, especially after fighting at three or four points in the advance, and so objectives more distant should be avoided.
- Digging: The intensive digging technique used appears to have involved one man in three digging, while the other two rest and keep watch. This was deemed to have been effective in consolidating positions, especially as 'the two men looking on are wont to urge their comrade to greater efforts for their own safety.'
- Carrying parties: Companies and platoons should furnish their own carriers, as they know their own positions. It was deemed 'unreasonable' to expect other units to attempt to locate them, especially in the dark.[122]

[121] TNA WO 95/2015/3, 18th Division General Staff, 18th Division No.G.432, '18th Division report on Operations from 17th to 24th November 1916', dated 25 November 1916.
[122] TNA WO 95/2015/3, 18th Division General Staff, 18th Division No.G.274, Narrative of the actions at Thiepval and Schwaben Redoubt, sent to II Corps HQ, 14 January 1917, 'The 18th Division in the Battle of the Ancre'.

It should be noted that fighting prowess during the Somme campaign was deemed to be very satisfactory, and congratulations were heaped on 18th Division by all command levels including the Commander-in-Chief, who visited the division in October.[123]

Maxse kept substantial files through the Great War, during his time as Corps Commander, in his role at the head of the BEF's training directorate, and also while commanding 18th Division. The principal archive documents of use in this chapter are from the actions at Thiepval, and Regina & Desire Trenches, from which extensive records are kept. Although there are several documents which are replicated from the divisional diaries, there are other documents written after a lengthier analysis and with the benefit of additional sources to those included in the unit war diaries.

18th Division's circular of 3 September 1916 which clarified the pattern of German counter-attacks highlighted principles to employ in the consolidation of a variety of types of position, namely trenches, villages and woods, and clarifies the roles of officers in selecting positions for consolidation.[124] Though not an overly prescriptive document which does not describe in detail the precise methods of cutting a strong point or slit trench, this is useful as an indicator of Maxse's own realisation of the importance of consolidation, how it became such a priority in training, and how, after 18th Division's strong performances late in 1916, it came to be pushed across other divisions in Fifth Army. Further to this are notes from II Corps which seek to disseminate some of the lessons learned in the Somme campaign up to mid-September, the main points being:

- Every individual being 'perfectly clear' about his own particular task ahead of an attack.
- Eight individual tasks for assaulting troops:
    - Trench clearers
    - Moppers-up
    - Consolidators (turning & deepening trenches)
    - Carriers

[123] TNA WO 95/2044/1, War Diary for 12/Middlesex, 11 October 1916.
[124] IWM, Documents 3255, Private Papers of General Sir Ivor Maxse KCB CVO DSO, file 17.3, 18/ Div G630; 'Notes on consolidation of captured positions' dated 3 September 1916.

    - Communication openers (digging communication trenches to rear)
    - Signallers
    - Coverers (covering the consolidation)
    - 'Exploiterers', tasked with bombing down the enemy's lines of retreat
- The importance of staying with the protective barrage.
- Notes on the enemy defensive style in depth, with a weakly held front line.[125]

These notes are basic, but astute in their compiling, and it is reasonable to assume that the fact they were disseminated shows a need for their articulation in certain divisions. 18th Division appears to have been ahead of the curve at this time and keen on learning lessons from wherever they could, particularly from the French army, as is demonstrated by a document dated 5 September 1916 which explains 'the French as a general rule suffer less casualties in the attack than do the British and this is due without question to the fact that their troops have been trained to keep closer to the barrage than ours.'[126] Advance under a barrage was therefore accorded top priority, followed by consolidation of a position and rapid digging-in. Both of these aspects are primarily designed to reduce casualties, and therefore maintain fighting strength. More specific instructions on digging in are covered in a note from a demonstration of intensive digging conducted on 13 September; this was carried out in two stages. Firstly, a three-man demonstration of intensive digging, with each man taking turns at working hard for two minutes and then resting for four. Secondly, construction of tunnel dugouts over a spell of around five hours.[127] Further documents issued prior to the attacks in September include SS 109, *Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, from May 1916, which identifies five aspects of an attack (form-up, bombardment, crossing no-man's land, capturing and consolidating enemy systems, and exploiting success) and two categories of focus for training, namely instruction for the attack and consolidation, and training for exploitation of success after a breakthrough.[128] This document makes reference to FSR part 1, and while certain points are valid, such as holding reserves, passing fresh units through tired ones, maintaining close liaison with supporting units and being prepared to move divisional HQ

[125] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 17.3, II Corps G.1266 'Notes on the attack', dated 12 September 1916.
[126] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, Untitled document with obscured reference number, possibly '18th Division No. G.868', signed by Wallace Wright, dated 5 September 1916.
[127] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, 'Programme of Demonstration in INTENSIVE DIGGING, 13th September 1916'.
[128] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, SS 109, 'Training of divisions for offensive action', 8 May 1916.

forward, on the whole this document lacked sufficient detail to be of use, and an update was required.

Following the successful operations at Thiepval in late September 1916, reports were compiled, principally from the various unit war diaries across 18th Division, although there were also reports from wounded officers and NCOs feeding back their thoughts on the assault, intelligence from German prisoners, and conclusions from the final divisional conference ahead of the attack.[129] Some officers' contributions to reports are quite illuminating, and appear to question the effectiveness of 18th Division's training, while also highlighting the positive influence that relatively junior officers had. A Captain from 53rd Trench Mortar Brigade went forward to the Schwaben Redoubt on 29 September in a reconnaissance role, and found very little digging and consolidation taking place, until he instructed the men around him to get working. There was also an occasion where men were barricading a trench when the enemy were nowhere near, rather than pushing forward as far as possible, as per instructions.[130] Once orders were issued, the report states that the men worked well, but it seems that working on one's own initiative in the forward areas was not always common, even in 18th Division. One final point of note on the Thiepval attacks is that the note is retained authorising the change of tactics in the attack on the Schwaben redoubt, from an attack across the open, to a bombing attack. It states that the suggestion for this change was made by Brigadier-General Thomas Jackson, BGOC 55 Brigade, whose unit carried out the assault. John Baynes's biography of Maxse details Jackson's refusal to assault over the ground due to a shortage of men, and an insistence on a bombing attack instead.[131] When this attack failed, Jackson was swiftly relieved of his command and replaced with Lieutenant-Colonel G. D. Price from 7/Bedfords. The actions at Regina and Desire trenches in October and November are also recorded and reports are provided, but not to the same extent as those at Thiepval, and not of any great additional value to those in the unit war diaries.

[129] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 27, various documents.
[130] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 30, 'Report of reconnaissance Sept. 29th, 1916'.
[131] Baynes, *Far from a Donkey*, p. 162.

48th (South Midland) Division

Major-General Robert Fanshawe's 48th Division campaign on the Somme won far less renown than that of 18th Division, and they did not play a leading part in any of the large offensive actions early in the campaign. However, two of the division's infantry battalions did take part in the assault on 1 July 1916, with 6th and 8th Battalions Royal Warwickshire Regiment (6/ and 8/Warwicks) attacking the Heidenkopf while attached to 4th Division on the campaign's opening day, suffering high casualties even by the standards of 1 July.[132] The early days of the campaign for the other battalions were spent supplying carrying parties for other units and taking casualties from gas and enemy artillery.

On 13 July 143 Brigade was loaned to 25th Division in action near Ovillers, and the rest of the division joined the action three days later.[133] Over the following two weeks, 48th Division launched numerous small-scale actions to the west of Pozières before being withdrawn for just over a week's rest. These actions have been termed 'a relentless series of surprise bombing assaults', in Bill Mitchinson's modern divisional history, and these attacks aimed to 'nibble away at the enemy's positions and morale'.[134] By 12 August, 48th Division was back in action, not far from where they had fought in July, and fighting in much the same attritional style. With little time to assimilate the lessons of their actions, and few opportunities to attack on a scale where a creeping barrage was deployable, there were only occasionally noteworthy tactical points in July, such as the attempted use of phosphorus grenades, or 'P bombs' in an attempt to prevent reinforcement of a German strong point just before the attack went in.[135]

The division came out of the line in the first half of September, whereupon they moved back for a spell of training and incorporating reinforcement drafts. This period lasted between three and four weeks, depending on the unit, and the battalions had very similar training programmes. 7/Warwicks listed their activities particularly clearly, and show a focus on

[132] TNA WO 95/2754/3, HQ diary for 143 Brigade, 3 July 1916. 6/Warwicks suffered a total of 462 casualties, including their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Franklin, severely wounded. 8/Warwicks casualties were even higher, with their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Innes among the dead, and 584 others killed, wounded and missing.
[133] K W Mitchinson, *The 48th (South Midland) Division 1908-1919* (Helion, Solihull, 2017), pp. 92-93.
[134] Ibid, p. 99.
[135] TNA WO 95/2754/3, HQ Diary for 143 Brigade, note from Brigade Major 143 Brigade to 7/Warwicks, dated 25 July 1916.

physical fitness and skills such as musketry, bombing, bayonet fighting and extended order drill in the early part of September, later moving on to attack formations and assault practice across country, combined with lectures when the weather was poor.[136] The Division returned to the line for a planned attack in the Gommecourt sector in October which did not take place, and moved to the area of Martinpuich in November. Again, there was no offensive action larger than a raid, and 48th Division came out of the line in mid-December. Though very much involved in the Somme fighting, opportunities to learn from success were few and far between for 48th Division. By the end of the Somme campaign, they could count themselves as experienced bombers and trench fighters, but as the trend for larger-scale offensives involving a number of divisions and creeping barrages grew, Fanshawe's division were away from the line. If 48th Division were to keep up with the latest tactical methods, they would have to learn from the experiences of others.

Australian 2nd Division

I Anzac Corps fought with three divisions on the Somme, Australian 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions. 2nd and 4th Divisions played the most significant roles of the three in the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917 and so these, along with Australian 5th Division which joined I Anzac Corps in mid-November 1916 and was also involved in the pursuit, are assessed in this thesis.

Australian 2nd Division toiled in the Pozières sector after the capture of the village by Australian 1st Division on 23 July 1916. The 2nd Division's first attempt to capture the high ground of the Windmill site and the two OG lines to the northeast of Pozières on 29 July ended in failure and heavy casualties, with the divisional commander, Major-General Gordon Legge's overconfidence and poor planning cited as reasons for the disappointing performance.[137] The Commander-in-Chief took an interest in the division's shortcomings, making his own notes on the reasons for their failure:

[136] TNA WO 95/2756/1, War Diary for 7/Warwicks, entries for dates 1-15 September 1916.
[137] M. Hampton, *Attack on the Somme: 1st ANZAC Corps and the Battle for Pozières Ridge, 1916* (Helion, 2016) p. 75.

1. Attacking troops 'not formed up square against their objectives', and gaps forming between the units in attack.
2. Advance made in the dark over much too great a distance, 700 yards, when experience showed that 'about 150 yards is the limit for a successful charge'.
3. Too great a distance to march up before the attack.
4. Too short a bombardment, only one minute in duration.[138]

Legge's own report from the actions on 29 July was a one-page document, which briefly described the wire-cutting artillery fire as ineffective, and the infantry assaults as having been partially successful, but without being able to hold on to the positions taken.[139] The infantry themselves were praised for their conduct during the attack, but Hampton has highlighted the difficulty they faced, with companies divided into waves, rather than making up single larger waves, and being followed by supporting companies in their own waves. This gave company commanders an impossible task in 2nd Division, as they were expected to maintain control of troops in different stages of the assault.[140] For their second attempt at capturing the Pozières windmill site on 4 August, Australian 2nd Division were supervised more closely and were successful in taking the position and holding it, albeit at a high cost. The supporting artillery was more effectively employed, with four hour-long wire-cutting bombardments fired each day in the three days leading up to the attack.[141] Still, infantry tactics had progressed little, as for the second time in a week, they launched a second 'infantry-heavy assault', and although Legge escaped serious censure for the moment, there was concern over the slow progress made by the division.[142] Furthermore, the casualties were, by any measure, extremely high; in 12 days in line in late July and early August, Australian 2nd Division suffered 6,846 men killed, wounded and missing, which would have a significant impact on the capability of the division in the near future.[143]

[138] G. Sheffield & J. Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005) pp. 210-211.
[139] AWM: AWM 4 1/44/12 Part 2, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, July 1916, Appx CXIV, 'Second Australian Division. Report on Operation 28/29 July 1916'.
[140] Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, p. 65.
[141] Miles, *OH 1916*, p. 209.
[142] Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, p. 86.
[143] Bean, *AIF in France 1916,* p. 724.

The division returned to the line on 23 August, and attempted to advance the line towards Mouquet Farm, an obstacle on Reserve Army's push north to capture Thiepval. Five days were spent in line, with only Brigadier-General John Gellibrand's 6 Brigade capable of serious offensive action; even this formation was significantly understrength, and the actions that ensued were piecemeal in nature. Unable to coordinate their efforts well enough with the artillery to properly subdue the German garrison at the farm, casualties mounted again, this time to approximately 1,300.[144] On 28 August the front was handed over to Australian 4th Division once more, and the 2nd Division moved up to Flanders, holding the line for a little over a month from mid-September to mid-October. While battalions were out of the line they engaged in training, giving attention to the training of specialists such as signallers, snipers, bombers and wiring parties, as well as general training with the division's newly-issued box respirators.[145] Courses were offered to officers on aerial photography, additional Lewis gunners were trained, and tactical schemes were carried out with contact patrol aircraft, and at night.[146] Australian 2nd Division returned to the Somme sector in early November, and took part in actions in support of the recently renamed Fifth Army. On 5 November 7 Brigade, under the notional command of Major-General McCay of Australian 5th Division, attacked a German-held salient south of Le Barque. Though their supporting artillery barrage was certainly impressive, the conditions, coupled with a shortage of trench climbing ladders, made it very difficult to keep up with the advancing artillery fire. Ultimately the attack failed with just a toehold taken in the German lines, which was lost a few days later.[147] 25/AI formed a list of points from this action:

1. The barrage was effective but moved too quickly.
2. The second wave was unable to form up quickly enough, on account of difficulty climbing out of the trench.
3. A third wave would probably have 'intensified the failure'.
4. Men can not cross wet, shell-holed ground at the rate of 50 yards per minute.
5. 3 minutes is insufficient time for the barrage to hold for the infantry to form up behind.

[144] Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, p. 182.
[145] AWM: AWM 4 23/38/13-14, War Diary for 21/AI, entries for 27 and 29 September, and 2, 4 and 10 October 1916.
[146] AWM: AWM 4 23/41/13, War Diary for 24/AI, entry for 2 October 1916, and AWM 4 23/43/15, War Diary for 26/AI, entries for 11, 18 and 27 September.
[147] Bean, *AIF in France 1916,* pp. 911-915.

6. Additional stretcher bearers are required.[148]

A further assault was made by Australian 2nd Division on 14 November, in cooperation with Fifth Army's actions on the Ancre. Conditions on Fourth Army's front by this stage were highly inconducive to offensive action, with men regularly needing to be dug or pulled out from the thick mud in trenches and shell-holes.[149] Legge employed 5 Brigade on this occasion, but again, the attacking units lost the creeping barrage and failed to gain their objectives. The division was relieved on 21 November, and went into the rear areas for training and reorganising. During the division's periods in line, tactical improvements are discernible, and further lessons had been identified, although few of them related to the conduct of the infantry. Those that were for the infantry to act upon, were principally concerned with practical matters, such as making sure the jump-off trench was viable and could be exited swiftly, allowing a prompt assembly and enabling a protective barrage to be followed. These factors were certainly important, but were not helpful for developing infantry skill, which would become especially important in the near future with significant reinforcement drafts to assimilate.

Australian 4th Division

Both British and Australian official historians were complimentary about Australian 4th division's performance in pushing on after the capture of Pozières village and the Windmill site from 5 to 15 August 1916, with Wilfred Miles praising the efforts made by both the fighting troops and carrying parties.[150] Charles Bean's history singles out the preparation made by 4 Brigade ahead of their first attack towards Mouquet Farm by 15th Battalion Australian Infantry (15/AI) on 8 August, especially with regards to provision of food for the men, and highlights certain officers' actions as being particularly meritorious. Tactically, however, enthusiasm for Australian 4th Division's first action is a little muted, as the attacking troops, advancing in three waves, ran into their own barrage, 'by reason of excitement or want of instruction, or possibly

[148] AWM: AWM 4 23/42/15, War Diary for 25/AI, B107 'Report on attack on morning of 5th', dated 7 November 1916.
[149] Bean, *AIF in France 1916,* pp. 918-919.
[150] Miles, *OH 1916,* p. 220.

by some battery being late in lifting its fire'.[151] Part of the objective was secured by 15/AI, although their left company was withdrawn to its starting position. Operational tempo was kept high, and late on 9 August, 16/AI succeeded in rushing a strong point which had held 15/AI's left and 7th Battalion Suffolk Regiment, from 12th Division, the previous day. Although these actions were notionally successful, the gains were small and costly, and as Meleah Hampton states, 'did not meet any strategic requirement, nor did [they] meet or advance any particular tactical need', however, they 'cemented in the headquarters of the 4th Australian Division the idea that these smaller, close-range operations could be successful.'[152]

Efforts made to press on to Mouquet Farm on the night of 10-11 August and 12 August struggled due to communication difficulties and heavy casualties even on the way to the jump-off positions, as the battered and shallow communication trenches provided little shelter. With supply to attacking troops proving dangerous, bombing parties were able to make little headway. When Australian 13 Brigade relieved 4 Brigade, the logical tactical objective was Mouquet Farm itself, although the remains of the buildings seem not to have been appreciated as objectives by I Anzac Corps being 'almost wilfully ignored' by General Birdwood and his staff.[153] As such, orders were somewhat vague, and 13 Brigade's attack on 14 August was carried out with a high degree of confusion and made no lasting gains.[154] Australian 4th Division was withdrawn until the end of the month when 4 Brigade unsuccessfully attacked Mouquet Farm at close range on 29 August. Despite two weeks out of the line, 4 Brigade had not been able to reinforce sufficiently and were too weak to attempt another assault, therefore they were immediately relieved by 12 Brigade. This unit held the line and worked on the trenches ahead of the next and final attack made by I Anzac at Mouquet Farm, by 13 Brigade on 3 September. While theoretically in support of Fourth Army's attacks around Delville Wood, they were not coordinated to take place at the same time, and only slight gains were made, which did not include Mouquet Farm itself.

[151] Bean, *AIF in France 1916,* pp. 735-736.
[152] Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, p. 103.
[153] Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, p. 121.
[154] Bean, *AIF in France 1916,* p. 770.

The attacks made by Australian 4th Division in the Pozières area reflect the nature of the Somme fighting from late July to early September 1916; small-scale (no more than a brigade attacking from any one division at a time), hastily-conducted and often disjointed, with other attacks taking place nearby on a similar magnitude, but little in the way of communication between them. Close objectives meant that divisional and corps commanders could keep a steady stream of 'objective captured' messages heading back to Army and GHQ level, but these gains were of limited value in a tactical sense. Although it seems the infantry could fight, heavy casualties in the lead up to and during these actions severely hampered their abilities to hold on to gains. Furthermore, cooperation between neighbouring units and artillery was questionable, even to the point of misunderstanding the way that protective barrages were to be fired. Hampton highlights that rather than firing creeping barrages in front of the infantry to protect it, the bombardment would simply drop on the objective, potentially 300 yards distant. This gave little or no protection to the advancing infantry from enemy rifle and machine guns sited between the jump-off point and the objective.[155] Australian 4th Division's casualties for its two spells on the offensive numbered 7,248, with 1,861 killed and missing.[156] Preparation and fighting methods required significant refinement for future actions.

As Australian 2nd Division had done, 4th Division returned to the Somme sector and moved into the line between Gueudecourt and Le Transloy in mid-November, after the actions in support of Fifth Army had been suspended. There they held the line until early December, whereupon they were relieved and resumed training.

Conclusion

Though it is challenging to draw clear conclusions on attacking prowess across the BEF from the actions carried out by these ten divisions during the period September to November 1916, the aim of this thesis is to examine progress. If the key process that this thesis is to examine is that of tactical progress, it is important to state that before progress can be made, identification of what needed to change must have happened first; it is therefore essential to

[155] Hampton, *Attack on the Somme*, p. 136.
[156] AWM: AWM4 1/48/5 Part 3, Australian 4th Division HQ Diary, Casualties up to 16 August 1916; AWM4 1/48/6 Part 2, Appx 12, Casualties from 27 August to 4th September 1916.

establish how that occurred. The division examined in this thesis which enjoyed the most success in the Somme campaign's early stages was 18th Division, who's staff kept detailed after-action reports and examined their operations thoroughly. Though broadly successful, their performances were not flawless, and failure to capture the Schwaben Redoubt led to dismissal for the brigade commander concerned, and further examination of the men in both the assault and consolidation phases of the attempted advance. This in turn led to more attention on the consolidation of positions in particular, in a bid to both reduce casualties on their own side, but also to inflict loss on the enemy when the expected counter-attack was delivered. With something akin to a 'bite and hold' technique developing on a small scale during the Somme campaign, 18th Division led the way in understanding that the 'hold' was as important as the 'bite', if loss was to be inflicted on the enemy. Their efforts at consolidation appear to be ahead of those made by the other divisions examined here, and when one considers the number of attacks which were made successfully, only to be ejected from their gains by German counter-attack, the emphasis on rapid digging and consolidation may be seen as an important element of 18th Division's successes. The adoption of increased numbers of Lewis guns and rifle grenades would also see the infantry platoon's firepower increase, and managing that additional potency would be an element to consider in both the assault and the consolidation of a position.

It is clear that some divisions were capable of more sophisticated offensive actions than others, which is to be expected due to the varied levels of experience among the different formations. By the end of 1916, though, each of the ten divisions under consideration had taken part in at least one significant action. At an operational level it is possible to see the process of learning taking place, such as the integration of the creeping barrage, included in most attack plans by November 1916, even if the infantry were unable to follow the bombardment at times. The increased power of the Entente artillery forced changes in German defensive methods, which presented both challenges and opportunities to the BEF's infantry. A heavily-defended enemy front line became a rarer obstacle, but defenders were harder to locate and subject to heavy artillery fire. As the Somme campaign progressed, German reliance on the counter-attack, as well as defending from shellholes, made the employment of a variety of weapons by the infantry essential. As Robert Foley argued when discussing the German army, 'the battle of the Somme proved once and for all that the days

of a uniformly armed infantry were well and truly over. From this point on, infantry units would be armed with a wide array of weapons, from rifles to hand grenades to small mortars and to ever increasing numbers of machine guns.'[157]

The BEF's infantry, it seems, were reaching the same conclusions at the same time. Before the Somme offensive reached its official close, an awareness that specialists were to play an increasingly important role was evident; an effort to remedy the difficulties of battlefield communication with increased numbers of signallers was in place with among others, Australian 2nd Division. Furthermore, though effective cooperation between infantry and artillery was certainly vital, it was not a guarantee of success; an awareness of the conditions and ground was also essential, as was protecting the infantry from the worst of the conditions, setting reasonable objectives, and showing attention to detail with elements such as flank protection. Many of the elements which needed attention, however, were organisational rather than tactical. Long distances to advance such as that experienced by 8th Division on 1 July 1916, or elements of 2nd Australian Division on 29 July, were recipes for failure, as were attacks across heavy ground which slowed the progress of the infantry even before the Germans took action.

Regarding the assault, heavy casualties in the opening waves, was an experience suffered by several divisions at different times, notably the centre and left of 63rd Division's attack on 13 November, and again, Australian 2nd Division on 29 July. This caused cohesion to be lost, and attacks to lose momentum and stall. One answer to this problem was to thin out the first assault wave, but that would mean a loss of attacking power, as well as training in a new attack formation, which required time out of the line. Addressing the lack of power, increasing numbers of light machine guns were reaching divisions by late 1916, which would go some way to resolving the problem. The arrival of new weapons would increase demands in training, however, which was an issue around which there were no short-cuts. Many, if not most, of the BEF's divisions had found the means to break into the German positions by the end of the Somme campaign. What mattered next was reducing casualties among the attacking troops, inflicting loss on the enemy, and defeating counter-attacks and retaining possession of the

[157] Foley, 'Learning War's Lessons', p. 499.

ground. Those divisions that had enjoyed some success in 1916 were best placed to share their experiences, and the after-action reports and analyses of operations were valuable resources in shaping advice for further dissemination.

Chapter 2

Reorganisation, Reinforcement and Retraining

Time out of the line after the actions of 1916

If the BEF's brutal experiences of 1916 was to have formative value, lessons had to be learned. As shown in Chapter 1, progress was already being made by certain divisions, especially in the techniques of consolidation and following a barrage. This chapter will examine the ten divisions during their spells out of the line and establish their priorities for training. It will also assess the initial attempts to codify training across divisions, and establish what uniformity, if any, existed between the ten divisions. The best-known training document produced in the latter part of 1916 is *SS 135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action,* from December 1916. Divisions which were involved in the earliest actions of 1917 to be examined in Chapter 3, namely the Ancre operations in January and February, had little time to study *SS 135*. However, the pamphlet was not created in a vacuum, and many of its lessons grew from the experiences of these divisions on the battlefield. Additionally, there were other training pamphlets issued in the wake of the early Somme actions, such as *SS 112, Consolidation of Trenches, Localities and Craters after assault and capture, with a note on Rapid Wiring*, which merit examination and consideration of how they came to be created, how they were used, and how they shaped the doctrine that followed.

The ways in which armies learn has been subject to considerable discussion in general terms. Robert Foley's 2014 study on learning in the British and German armies during the Great War highlights the work of management theorist Peter Senge, identifying two types of organisational learning, namely 'generative' and 'adaptive'. These correspond to the ideas of 'innovation' and 'adaptation' in the context of military history.[158] Foley characterises the learning processes in the British and German armies by arguing the BEF's learning process was

[158] R. Foley, 'Dumb Donkeys or Cunning Foxes? Learning in the British and German Armies during the Great War', *International Affairs* 90/2 (March 2014). Foley cites P. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

less formal than the German army's. The German High Command is credited with having created a highly efficient formal system of instruction and knowledge sharing, establishing specialist *Sturmabteilungen* which would double up by training the infantry in the latest offensive methods. While the full extent of the German army's learning process is beyond the scope of this thesis, it will be demonstrated that the BEF's tactical progress following the Somme campaign's closure was not subject exclusively to formal methods. Personal connections mattered more in the BEF than in the German army, and while Foley focuses on tank development as an example of innovation, this thesis demonstrates how connected individuals had considerable influence on tactical development in a broader sense.

Several studies have been carried out in the last 35 years which address elements of the British army's experience in the First World War, such as Allan Millett and Williamson Murray's edited volume *Military Effectiveness: Volume 1; The First World War*, and *Winning the Next War* by Stephen Peter Rosen. Both have value in terms of framing the principles of learning; among other ideas, Rosen suggests that continuity in terms of personnel can assist organisational learning, citing the British Army's experience in the Suvla Bay landings in August 1915, where a lack of continuity resulted in errors of the first landings being repeated.[159] Rosen's main focus on the BEF's learning during the Great War ostensibly centres on the arrival of the tank on the battlefield, but is a product of its historiographical time, leaning heavily on the idea of an inherent dullness in British high command. Rosen's dim view of British operations, tactics and innovation stem largely from the work of Tim Travers, who in his work *The Killing Ground*, pulled few punches in outlining poor British performance. However, in describing the increased understanding of the capabilities of tanks that came with experience of them in action through 1917, Rosen appreciates that learning did occur after action; he simply does not apply this principle to the infantry in the same period. He incorrectly states that 'no new army-wide infantry training manuals were issued by the GHQ of the British armies in France from 1914 to 1917'; it is not clear whether those years are taken to be inclusive, but in any case, *SS 135* at least is ignored. *The Killing Ground* itself is an interesting work, which cherry-picks the most significant defeats and setbacks for the BEF for study in building what can, at best, be described as a perspective on British performance skewed towards negativity.

[159] S. P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War; Innovation and the Modern Military* (Cornell, 1994), p. 26.

Travers's chapter on the Somme campaign, for example, makes no mention of Fourth and Fifth Armies' advances on 25 – 26 September 1916, even when asking the question why the campaign was continued into October and November. In focusing on 1 July 1916, October 1916, the later stages of the 3rd Ypres campaign, and the successes of the German Spring Offensive in late March 1918, Travers paints an unbalanced and bleak picture of Haig and his soldiers' abilities.[160]

Paul Kennedy's essay on the British army in *Military Effectiveness: Volume 1* similarly leans on Travers's work for its thesis, and broadens the topic of discussion on to subjects such as the naval blockade, political dynamics, and air power. Any discussion of tactical progress is fixated on the early stages of the Somme campaign, stating that '…it is not surprising that the British performance in combined arms was poor. This will become even clearer when tactical aspects are examined…'[161] There is, however an acceptance that through 1917 and 1918 reforms were carried out which 'promised much greater military effectiveness', but that these were not always 'fully noticed (or perhaps even understood) at the top'.[162] Kennedy's summary of the situation on the Western Front is unsatisfactory; 'this issue is complicated by the fact that after nearly four years of failure, the British Army (along with its allies) did manage to achieve a breakthrough in the Summer of 1918'. His analysis of this conundrum does not advance beyond examining the opening day of the Somme offensive, decrying the 'futile Passchendaele campaign of 1917' and bemoaning the lack of exploitation at Cambrai later that year. Kennedy claims that there were no army-wide attempts to train tactics more complicated than 'advancing in straight lines across the battlefield', and only identifies Ivor Maxse and John Monash as Divisional commanders who took training seriously.[163] As will be seen in this chapter, and in this thesis more broadly, these claims do not stand up to scrutiny.

Academic historians of the First World War were rarely kind to British tacticians on the Western Front prior to the 1990s, and among popular historians and the lay community, that

[160] T. Travers, *The Killing Ground; The British Army, the Western Front & the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918* (Pen & Sword, 2009 – First published 1987).
[161] Paul Kennedy, 'Britain in the First World War' in A. R. Millett & W. Murray (eds), *Military Effectiveness; Volume 1: The First World War* (Cambridge, 2010) p. 51.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Kennedy, in Millett & Murray, *Military Effectiveness,* pp. 64-66.

trend continues to the present day. Approximately sixty years of historiographical polemic, peaking with Alan Clark's 1961 work *The Donkeys* and John Laffin's *Butchers and Bunglers of World War I* from 1988, and probably best illustrated in Richard Curtis and Ben Elton's *Blackadder Goes Forth* series from 1989, have painted a picture of an unthinking, disconnected, incompetent and callous class of senior officer being typical in the BEF. The last thirty years of study and effort have, however, made 'revisionism' the new historiographical orthodoxy. The manner in which the officers and men of the BEF learned from their experience and the experiences of others, and grew in capability to the point of inflicting genuine battlefield defeat on the German army, is now largely accepted. For a number of the divisions that form the basis of this study, early 1917 actions were followed by a spell of training away from the lines. For GHQ, and the respective headquarters of Fourth and Fifth Armies, this was an opportunity for discussion and sharing of information, but also a chance to refine, standardise and distribute new training documents. For individual units that had taken part in actions following the 'close' of the Somme offensive in mid-November 1916, there were further experiences to try and weave into a coherent scheme for future attacks. This period, examined in the previous chapter, covers January – March 1917, when documents such as *SS 135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, issued in December 1916, was being distributed and examined, and its principles could be adopted. *SS 143, The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* and *SS 144, The Normal Formation for the Attack* were also both published shortly afterwards, in February 1917, and made available for study and adoption by divisions of the BEF. This chapter will discuss that training period, the available documents and the extent to which their principles were incorporated into training and reorganisation of battalion, companies and platoons. It is divided in a similar manner to the second chapter; focusing on the same aspects in training, as well as looking at the substance of the latest training pamphlets, and how the lessons of the late Somme period are apparent therein. Where chapter 2 examined the work carried out on solving tactical solutions without the availability of the aforementioned training pamphlets, this chapter compares the same divisions in preparation for offensive operations, with the latest doctrine available to them.

Chris McCarthy, in his chapter in *Command and Control on the Western Front*, gives a brief outline of *SS 143* and *SS 144*, and mentions *SS 135* in conjunction with *SS 143* and *SS 144*. McCarthy's description of the essential points in all the respective pamphlets is sound, noting

minimum platoon strengths of 28 men, and a structure of one section each of bombers, riflemen, Lewis gunners and rifle grenadiers, as well as a small HQ section of the platoon commander and 4 others. McCarthy goes on to state that 'by April 1917 most battalions to be used in the forthcoming Battle of Arras had practised the new tactical doctrine'.[164] This statement is worthy of further investigation, and although the battle of Arras is outside the scope of this thesis, two of the divisions examined in this thesis (18th and 63rd) did take part in the later stages of the battle. In any case, a cross section of ten divisions and their training in early 1917 does provide insight into how widespread the adoption of the aforementioned pamphlets was. McCarthy's argument on the diffusion and uptake of *SS 143* and *SS 144* is broadly echoed across the historiography, with William Philpott stating that 'specialist sub-sections…would in future be the tactical formation on which battle doctrine was focused.'[165] Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics* describes *SS 135* and *SS 143* as 'vitally important manuals which would survive, in essence, for the remainder of the war', and goes on to establish both documents as representing significant departures from fighting methods earlier in the war.

Griffith's work does leave room for additional study, particularly on the role of infantry tactics. His assertion that the lessons of *SS 135* in particular leave the infantry little more than a 'mopping-up' task after the artillery has 'carved out the general shape of the battle', sells the task of the infantry short. However, his assessment of the importance of the documents to the infantry seems mostly to be fair.[166] A more recent examination of the role of the training pamphlets in early 1917 has been carried out by Jim Smithson, who highlights matters of particular relevance to the subject of his book on the first battle of the Scarpe, such as minimising casualties in the advance, and exploitation of success. Smithson provides a smart overview of the content of *SS 143,* and draws attention to the successes of the Canadian corps on Vimy Ridge from 9 April 1917, while correctly stating that the Canadians followed the guidelines of *SS 135* and *SS 143* in their preparation for the offensive.[167]

[164] C. McCarthy, 'Queen of the Battlefield: The Development of Command, organisation and Tactics in the British Infantry Battalion during the Great War' in G. Sheffield and D.Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-18* (Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2004) pp. 181-182.
[165] W. Philpott, *Bloody Victory; The Sacrifice on the Somme* (Abacus, London, 2010) p. 440.
[166] P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994) pp. 76-78.
[167] J. Smithson, *A Taste of Success; The First Battle of the Scarpe* (Helion, Solihull, 2017) pp. 78-79.

Taking a broader view on the British Army's progress, the development of the Tank is the focus of other works assessing tactical progress in the BEF, such as Bryn Hammond's 2013 essay in *Changing War*, edited by Gary Sheffield and Peter Gray. Though Hammond's focus is on armoured vehicles in the last 100 days, he also addresses the way combat analysis was carried out in order to refine tactics and create pamphlets to disseminate information. Hammond remarks that by 1918 tank units, and the BEF more broadly, had trained to a high state of effectiveness, based on pamphlets and experiences documented following accurate after-action reports.[168] Stuart Mitchell supports the strength of the after-action reporting system in his essay on 32nd Division's lessons from 1 July 1916 in Spencer Jones's 1916 volume, albeit with some caveats. Mitchell notes that 'lessons learned' reports were of 'inestimable value', but that 'reputation, self-preservation and preservation of others could 'soften' the honesty of reports'.[169]

The most relevant recently-published work on innovation and adaptation within the British Army during the Great War is Aimée Fox's *Learning to Fight*, which draws from her research in inter-theatre learning, and is a much more modern, thorough study of the British army's progress during the conflict. Fox's work is broad-themed, and starts from the basis that innovation certainly occurred, if not necessarily in a uniform manner. Fox identifies certain training pamphlets which demonstrate tactical progress, such as the aforementioned *SS 143* and *SS 144*, and *SS 152 Instructions for the Training of the British Armies in France*, published in July 1917, as significant milestones in the sharing of experience. Fox's 'Learning in Practice' chapter, however, leans on inter-theatre learning, rather than building on a division's own experiences.[170] Indeed, Fox seems to explore most methods of sharing knowledge apart from one's own acquired information; this includes networking with other officers, learning from allies and civilians, and the proliferation and formalisation of training schools.

[168] B. Hammond, 'After Amiens: Technology and Tactics in the British Expeditionary Force during the Advance to Victory, August-November 1918', in G. Sheffield and P. Gray (eds), *Changing War: The British Army, the Hundred Days Campaign and the Birth of the Royal Air Force, 1918* (Bloomsbury, 2013) pp. 55-67.
[169] S. Mitchell, 'Learning from Defeat: 32nd Division and 1 July 1916' in S. Jones (ed), *At All Costs; The British Army on the Western Front*, 1916 (Helion, Warwick, 2018), p. 350.

[170] A. Fox, *Learning to Fight; Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2018)

Fox identifies four distinct methods of learning in the British Army; liberal, horizontal, vertical and external. Liberal learning is identified as often the most prevalent form, but a difficult method to chart and analyse, as it is often informal and unstructured. Personal and contractual relationships, in addition to incidental interactions with individuals and resources form the basis of this form of learning. Liberal learning in this sense can circumvent more formal systems, which can occasionally be unwieldy. Horizontal learning tended to take place at group level, a position that this thesis supports in examining how divisional commanders and officers observed demonstrations described later in this chapter. Fox states that vertical learning in the form of pamphlets was founded on a comprehensive if anonymous body of experience, which was not the product of 'a single pen or even the training staff alone'.[171] Regarding external learning, while allies and enemies are mentioned, Fox highlights the contribution of civilian experts to army learning, particularly in the case where genuine innovation occurs, such as the employment of weaponised gas in 1915. One particularly important point made by Fox with relevance to this thesis, is that learning in the British Army is networked, that is to say no one element is the be-all and end-all when it comes to learning. With that said, pamphlets and more prescriptive methods of disseminating information became increasingly important as the war went on. Furthermore, the army's use of different dissemination methods represented a 'learning curve' in and of itself, although when it came to the overall process, Fox favours the term 'learning kaleidoscope'. [172]

Learning to Fight is an extremely valuable piece of work in terms of framing the discussion on progress and learning in the British Army during the Great War, but it leaves significant scope for more detailed research. Very recently, James Cook's unpublished PhD thesis from King's College London has included the appreciation that the period from late 1916 into early 1917 was a crucial one in terms of the BEF's development, with the 'dominant informal learning approach [becoming] subservient to the formal approach'.[173] Cook's work is very broad-themed, and useful in examining what training material was available to the British army, particularly the well-known training pamphlets and training directorate. Cook has examined

[171] Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p. 67.
[172] Ibid, p. 99.
[173] J. Cook, 'The transformation of the British expeditionary force on the western front 1914-1918, via a process of learning - lessons, doctrine, and training' (KCL, 2020).

the period from the Second Boer War through to 1918, giving additional weight to the final year of the war, including examining unpublished doctrine which reflected the most advanced learning made by the BEF during the war. Similar to Fox's approach, however, Cook's endeavour to cover the entire conflict and more has left scope for more detailed research, particularly in the period immediately following the Somme offensive. This thesis will demonstrate the more practical methods of knowledge acquisition and transfer, as well as examine the tactics employed by divisions around the time of publication of the earlier *SS 135* and *SS 143* pamphlets.

In terms of primary sources, battalion and brigade war diaries remain this chapter's prime source. Ivor Maxse's papers are also valuable, however; skills training is well recorded therein, and appears to have been a subject in which Maxse remained highly involved, even as a corps commander, between his times at 18th Division and the BEF's training directorate. As such, various elements of his correspondence as XVIII Corps commander are of value to this research, even though he was no longer responsible for command of one of the studied divisions.

Training Pamphlets

Prior to and through the 1916 Somme campaign, the pre-war *Field Service Regulations* [*FSR*] *Part 1* from 1909 was very much still in use as a framework for attitudes, tactics and operations within the BEF. It provided an acceptable balance between control and initiative, but as Aimée Fox states, did not provide a uniform doctrine, but provided principles by which to act.[174] *FSR1* is a lengthy series of guidelines on all aspects of operations and tactics, the principles of which were largely sound, but only to soldiers of a sufficient degree of experience and proficiency to grasp them. The grossly expanded BEF of 1915 and early 1916 was still in the process of learning the many basic elements of soldiering to properly appreciate its freedoms, and further prescription was required. In May 1916, *SS 109, Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* was published by GHQ; really too late to play a significant part in shaping the conduct of the opening of the Somme campaign, and potentially counter-productive in certain respects. It cited five key skills, on which success depended:

[174] Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p32.

1. The organization of our trenches for the assembly of the attacking force;
2. The artillery bombardment;
3. The crossing of the area between our front trenches and the enemy's;
4. The capture of the enemy's defensive systems and artillery positions, and the consolidation against counter-attack of ground won;
5. Exploitation of success.[175]

Points are made in *SS 109* about training on mapped-out trenches, and warning of the awkwardness of passing one body of troops through another to move on to a more distant objective. Without explaining precisely how, the document draws attention to the need for flank protection, and thought in the positioning of Lewis and machine guns, as well as supply for bombers and Stokes mortars. For specifics on exploitation, the reader is directed to the relevant chapters in *FSR 1*. Much is made in the document of morale; 'when we fight, we win' is a phrase used in the closing of the advice, but also the suggestion is made to expect heavy casualties. Point 4 in the document states that 'the cleaning up and consolidation of positions passed over by the assaulting columns in their advance, the formation of protective flanks, and the preparation of strong supporting points in the captured area will be carried out by other troops of the attacking force, following the assaulting columns and specially told off for the purpose.' This seemingly absolves the assaulting troops of any responsibility for preparing against counter-attack. For specifics in consolidation, the reader of *SS 109* is directed to a second document, produced concurrently, *SS 112, Consolidation of Trenches, Localities and Craters after assault and capture, with a note on Rapid Wiring*.

SS 112 is a particularly valuable pamphlet, as it addresses skills which were never needed by a British expeditionary force prior to the First World War, and is therefore an entirely new construct since 1914. Elements of 'common sense' feature in the document, such as factoring in natural features in the ground, but also more detail based on experience regarding the practical business of consolidating a variety of positions. On the subject of trenches, the reader is instructed to construct well-wired strong points in front, equipped with Lewis or machine guns, establish supporting points to the rear, fill in hostile points within bombing range of the new positions, and eventually connect the new strong points together. Advice is

[175] *SS 109, Training of Divisions for Offensive Action,* GHQ Pamphlet, May 1916.

given on fortifying captured villages and defending wooded areas, and wiring is described in some detail, with exercises given in the creation of a variety of wire obstacles.[176] All aspects of this document seem to have been well thought-through, with specific instructions and good, practical drill. On the subject of responsibility for consolidation, *SS 112* runs contrary to *SS 109*, stating that while it is indeed advisable that assaulting troops be relieved as soon as possible, this is not to be simply expected. Securing ground was not to be treated as a task for relieving troops, but was to be started at once by those that had captured it.

Once the Somme campaign was launched, a further GHQ pamphlet was produced, *SS 119, Preliminary Notes on the Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations*. Various aspects of the early actions are critiqued and/or highlighted as best practice, such as the means of following a barrage advancing in lifts, the value in patrolling after capturing an objective, how best to employ Royal Engineers, and the importance of 'mopping up' the trenches, by which it is meant clearing dugouts of any remaining defenders.[177] Caution is urged in the use of bombers; Point 6 states: 'it must be realised by all ranks that the rifle and bayonet is the main infantry weapon', and that attacks over open ground are better than large-scale bombing attacks, perhaps in part because bombing discipline appeared to be poor at the time. The document alleges that 'more grenades than necessary [are] thrown, thus tiring out the throwers prematurely and wasting grenades'. *SS 112* is once again highlighted as a valuable document, and its principles 'are to be followed'. Practical advice is given on positioning of support weapons in defending against counter-attacks, as well as how best to move battalion and brigade HQs forward in an advance. In summary, *SS 119* was a much more developed and practically useful document than *SS 109*. Both *SS 109* and *SS 119* were superseded by *SS 135* when it came into circulation; *SS 112* was deemed sufficiently useful not to require an update at that stage. Few of the divisions studied in this thesis had any time with *SS 135* before going back into the line in early January, although those that did seemed to move swiftly to adopt its principles. However, most divisions did make adjustments to their company and platoon structures, either after advice from outside sources, demonstrations by other divisions, or by their own initiative. This quasi-organic means of learning and sharing knowledge horizontally

[176] *SS 112, Consolidation of Trenches, Localities and Craters after assault and capture, with a note on Rapid Wiring*, May 1916.
[177] *SS 119, Preliminary Notes on the Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations,* July 1916.

across units is an aspect of the BEF's tactical development which has been explored in broad terms by Aimée Fox in her work *Learning to Fight*. [178]

A more detailed appreciation of *SS 135* is included in Chapter 4. Though *SS 119* was based on experience, it came in for criticism shortly after its publication, which was particularly evident in matters of the transmission of orders from corps level down to companies. A letter sent through to Archibald Montgomery, Fourth Army's Chief of Staff, by Major-General William Walker, GOC 2nd Division in August 1916, explicitly listed the tasks to be carried out down the various levels of command and cited *SS 119* specifically as having 'considerably underestimated' the minimum amount of time for orders to be transmitted. Other letters from divisional commanders echo this sentiment; clearly more work was required.[179]

Training

Following each of their most recent actions, the divisions which are the subject of study in this thesis spent time in training. These periods may have overlapped, but they were rarely exactly concurrent. With different experiences of action, different senior commanders, different lengths of time and different periods spent away from the lines, it is unreasonable to expect similar training periods and focuses, but the importance of certain skills was recognised by many divisions. For the sake of simplicity, the important skills, signs of progress, organisational changes or aspects of combat have been sorted into categories for examination.

- Basics: essential skills that make up most soldiers' personal armoury, such as musketry, bayonet fighting, physical strength, marching and grenade throwing. All these skills are especially important to new soldiers, of which thousands joined the BEF during the examined period.
- Structural improvements & Formations: this can include formation changes, and instruction of junior officers and NCOs to increase effectiveness within units, but also the removal of senior officers deemed to have been unsuccessful in command.

[178] A. Fox, *Learning to Fight,* pp. 53-72.
[179] Montgomery-Massingberd Papers 7.3, Liddell-Hart Centre for Military Archives; Letter from Major-General W. Walker, GOC 2nd Division to Fourth Army HQ, dated 16 August 1916.

- Offensive action: the 'bite', or ability to capture a position. This includes generic attack practice, contact patrol training with aircraft, night action, advancing under a barrage, and 'mopping up' (clearing dugouts of the enemy in captured trenches).
- Consolidation: the 'hold', or ability to resist counter-attack. Digging, wiring and setting outposts, as well as establishing communications with the local artillery to send or fire SOS signals effectively.
- Specialists: related to previous categories, but developing the roles of Lewis gunners, rifle grenadiers, scouts, snipers, bombers and runners, and considering their employment to improve unit effectiveness.

The close examination of brigade and battalion war diaries has been essential for this study, and while it is acknowledged that diary entries can vary in quality and reliability, across whole divisions, patterns do emerge. Each of these categories will be examined in turn.

Basics

While unglamorous, the basic skills are unquestionably vital and should not be trivialised, especially with the high number of reinforcement drafts received by many of those units which took part in the early stages of the Somme campaign; not least from the examined battalions of this thesis. While the numbers of reinforcements were recorded too haphazardly to perform a meaningful study on which divisions were the most seriously affected, certain units noted difficulty in assimilating so many new soldiers.

7th Division, for example, moved north to the Ploegsteert sector after their actions at Delville Wood and Ginchy, coming into the line there on 19 September. The division's operations at Delville Wood in early September had been discussed at a conference of brigade commanders, held by Watts, on 13 September. Attention was drawn to a number of matters, and proposed action to strengthen the division:

- The 'serious lack of experienced officers'.
    - Establishment of a divisional school was deemed 'advisable' in the forthcoming fortnight.
- Men without understanding of 'the object of their elementary training'.

- At least one battalion-level training exercise to take place each week, and one brigade-level exercise to be carried out each fortnight, ensuring some advanced work had been carried out before future operations.[180]

7th Division was unremarkable in terms of the numbers of reinforcement drafts it was required to take on in late 1916; 21/Mancs recorded 6 officers and 311 other ranks joining the battalion in September, while 2nd Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment (2/R Warks) received 420 men.[181] 20/Mancs received 528 men, the largest draft being 233 from the Cheshire Yeomanry on 10 September.[182] 7th Division also had one of their pre-war regular battalions, 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Regiment (2/RI) replaced with 2nd Battalion Honourable Artillery Company (2/HAC). 2/HAC arrived in France on 3 October, and a week later, had their first experience of holding the line.[183]

The division's period in a relatively quiet sector was punctuated by raids which were largely unsuccessful, although 1st Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers (1/RWF) managed a break-in on the night of 30 September to 1 October 1916, bombing several dugouts and killing around 30 Germans, but taking no prisoners and capturing no documents.[184] As well as introducing the new drafts to the trenches, some useful training was carried out in the period September – November, again, largely focused on the basics; 8th Battalion Devonshire Regiment (8/Devons) listed musketry, company drill, bayonet fighting, physical drill, route marches. They did, however, also move on to more sophisticated skills in training, such as digging and wiring, skirmishing, judging distances, bombing and Lewis Gun practice, which were carried out in September.[185] 1st Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment (1/S Staffs) included a tactical exercise in their training.[186] 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders (2/Gordons) recorded a special course in physical training and bayonet fighting attended by 16 NCOs, which was run by an instructor from Headquarters Gymnasium Aldershot over three days. In addition, 2/Gordons

[180] TNA WO 95/1631/2, 7th Division General Staff Diary, entry for 13 September 1916.
[181] TNA WO 95/1668/1, War Diary for 21/Mancs, entries for 4, 5, 12-17 and 21-26 September 1916 and TNA WO 95/1664/3, War Diary for 2/R Warks, entries for 10, 11 & 14 September 1916.
[182] TNA WO 95/1663/1, War Diary for 20/Mancs, entries for 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 & 13 September 1916.
[183] TNA WO 95/1662/1, War Diary for 2/HAC, October 1916.
[184] TNA WO 95/1661/1, HQ Diary for 22 Brigade, September 1916, 'Account of Raid carried out by 1st R.W. Fusiliers on night 30th September / 1st October 1916'.
[185] TNA WO 95/1655/2, War Diary for 8/Devons, various entries in September 1916.
[186] TNA WO 95/1670/2, War Diary for 1/S Staffs, 15 September 1916.

instructed their men in 'appreciation and use of cover' and 'use of entrenching tool' in September.[187]

32nd Division's Somme campaign was altogether more miserable than 7th Division's with significant failures on 1 July and 18 November 1916. Clearly, such methods of fighting could not be repeated, and the change of approach early in the following year shown by the division, under their new leadership, shows a marked improvement in performance and clear evidence of tactical progress. After being withdrawn from the line following the attack in November, 32nd Division had a full month of training in December. Taking 97 Brigade as representative of how the training was conducted, the focus was initially placed on training the trainers; Officers and NCOs were trained in seven skills which were deemed the most necessary, with the exception of the musketry course, for which every man was required immediately. The courses run at Brigade level were as follows:

- Map reading and use of Compass. 6-day course for junior officers and senior NCOs.
- Musketry. 2-day course for every man.
- Lewis Gun. 6-day course for NCOs.
- Sniping. 8-day course for NCOs and selected men.
- Bombing. 2-day course for Officers, NCOs and selected men, but each man to throw a live bomb under supervision of the Brigade Bombing Officer.
- Physical training and bayonet fighting. 6-day course for Officers and NCOs
- Signalling.[188]

Those not involved in brigade courses would parade and train under battalion arrangements; this would typically involve musketry, training with bombs, physical training, bayonet fighting and tactical exercises for officers. Each battalion had its own training ground and 30-yard range in the Flixecourt area, which although short, was employed specifically to establish consistency and 'grouping' of shots. A routine was established in the first week of December, and lectures were given on a variety of topics, which became more important as a few days

[187] TNA WO 95/1656/2, War Diary for 2/Gordons, entries for 12 & 14 September 1916.
[188] TNA WO 95/2399/3, 97 Brigade HQ Diary, '97th Infantry Brigade – Training', December 1916.

were lost to bad weather. On 5 December 'rapid wiring' was introduced to the training scheme, but extended-order drill was also practiced, which may have seemed hopeful rather than practical. Recreational training, including a football tournament and 'bomb throwing competitions' played a part in the month's activities, and the individual skills training sessions were repeated as the month went on. This reinforcement of skills training no doubt proved useful as replacement drafts joined their battalions, sometimes over a hundred strong; as an exceptional case and reflective of their heavy losses in November, 2/ Mancs received 528 men in the period from 23 November to 17 December 1916.[189]

Meanwhile, 8th Division went through a similar process. From the third week of November through to the end of the third week of January, the division embarked on an even lengthier programme of training, and also took on sizeable replacement drafts, often in excess of 100 strong. 2nd Battalion East Lancashire Regiment (2/E Lancs) in particular, one of the most depleted battalions at the end of October, lamented the difficulty in organising the 278 men who arrived from twenty-six different battalions on 1 November, among which there were only two full NCOs (corporals). The mood seemed to improve little when a further 132 arrived at the battalion on 11 December, '129 of which [were] marked 'untrained'.'[190] With most battalions who saw action in October registering casualty figures in excess of 200, and hundreds of new soldiers arriving, the focus of training through November and December was, similarly to the work of 32nd Division, largely on what may be termed 'the basics'. 8th Division also recorded availing themselves of those training establishments already in place from earlier in 1916. At various levels, different skills were already being coached:

- The 2/Middlsx war diary lists small numbers of specialists periodically being sent to 'Lewis Gun School' from September 1916 through to early 1917. This would typically involve two specialists (sometimes with an officer) heading for training for 5-6 days.[191]
- 'Brigade Grenade school' would typically take seven Other Ranks away for a similar period.[192]

[189] TNA WO 95/2392/2, War Diary for 2/Mancs, Drafts recorded: 23 Nov, 35 ORs; 30 Nov, 360 ORs; 4 Dec, 34 ORs; 12 Dec, 80 ORs; 15 Dec, 15 ORs; 17 Dec, 4 ORs. This came after receiving 264 new men in October.
[190] TNA WO 95/1720/1, War Diary for 2/E. Lancs., entry for 2 November 1916.
[191] TNA WO 95/1713/1, War Diary for 1/Middlsx, entries for 5-8 September 1916.
[192] Ibid.

- Divisional Schools of Instruction could take anything from single officers to whole companies away for drill and instruction.[193]

After the short spell in the line in mid-November, training under battalion arrangements was carried out for the final week in the month, while a divisional scheme was planned. 2nd Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment (2/Northants) kept detailed notes on the training carried out, and can be considered as representative during this period. Leaving aside one day's training as lost to bad weather (lectures were carried out under cover by company commanders) and church services being carried out on Sunday 26 November, the remaining days were spent alternating between bombing, platoon drill and musketry on a 30-yard range, starting each day with 30 minutes physical training. As in the case of 32nd Division, sports were played in the later afternoons.[194] Junior officers from the recent drafts were sent to the divisional school of instruction in November, and schools were set up for bayonet training and use of trench mortars.[195]

63rd Division was taken out of the line for almost two months to refit and retrain following their actions of 13-14 November. Sizeable reinforcement drafts were incorporated during this period, with certain battalions recording very high numbers of new men between mid-November and the end of December:

- Hawke Battalion: 13 officers, 318 other ranks.[196]
- Nelson: 16 officers, 316 ORs.[197]
- 1/HAC: 16 officers, 399 ORs.[198]
- Hood: 16 officers, 486 ORs.[199]

Battalions began this period with route marching, ceremonial and saluting drill, musketry, bayonet and physical training. More sophisticated elements such as visual training, judging distances, use of ground and cover, passing orders, and communicating with semaphore were

[193] TNA WO 95/1723/1, War Diary for 1/Worcesters, 9 September.
[194] TNA WO 95/1722/2, War Diary for 2/Northants, 25-30 November 1916.
[195] TNA WO 95/1713/1, War Diary for 2/Middlsx, entry for 26 November lists a number of courses.
[196] TNA WO 95/3114/2, War Diary for Hawke Battalion, 2-23 December 1916.
[197] TNA WO 95/3114/3, War Diary for Nelson Battalion, 25 November – 15 December 1916.
[198] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, 6-30 December 1916.
[199] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, 25 November – 17 December 1916.

also introduced at this stage.[200] 5th Australian Division similarly focused on the basics as reinforcements came in for its Fromelles losses, and then became more ambitious; the idea of a divisional school was suggested and then rejected in early September. A school set up by II ANZAC Corps was preferred, instructing the basics to new arrivals, and more advanced skills as the demand for junior officers and specialists such as Lewis gunners, bombers, pigeon handlers, Stokes mortar crew and signallers increased.[201] Despite holding the line, Australian 5th Division as part of II ANZAC Corps seems to have used the period of the Somme offensive as productively as could reasonably have been expected, without actually taking part in the campaign.

Australian 4th Division were given approximately two weeks for training following their Mouquet Farm actions in early September 1916, although in the case of 4 Brigade it was closer to one week. The division immediately followed the rest of I Anzac Corps to the Ypres Salient, and training on what can be termed 'the basics' (bayonet fighting, physical training, gas drill, musketry and bomb throwing) was carried out initially.[202] As training areas were allotted in the Ypres-Poperinghe area, this training was expanded into more technical activities such as rapid loading and firing, fire orders, describing and recognising targets and close order drill.[203] Divisional training orders stressed the need to practice at night as well as during the day, and gave instructions on sending candidates to GHQ and army schools of instruction. At Brigade level time was given to training through September and October when battalions were not in line, and schools were set up for elementary training of new officers and NCOs, running tactical exercises without troops.[204] Unusually, the term 'steadiness' is used in 52/AI as part of their September training, and 'Steady Drill' was one of the exercises named in the divisional instruction circular; this may have had specific reference to the gas drill which was receiving special attention during this period, although morale may have still been a concern after the

[200] TNA WO 95/3111/1, War Diary for Anson Battalion, November 1916, 'Training Programme for week ending Dec 2nd 1916'.
[201] AWM: AWM4 23/73/8, War Diary for 56/AI, entries for 8-11 September 1916.
[202] AWM: AWM4 23/31/23, War Diary for 14/AI, 7 September 1916; AWM4 23/67/15, War Diary for 50/AI, 11 September 1916.
[203] AWM: AWM4 23/67/3, War Diary for 50/AI, September 1916, 'Syllabus of Training for week ending 21st September 1916'.
[204] AWM: AWM4 1/48/6 Part 2: Australian 4th Division HQ Diary, September 1916, Appendix XIX, 'GS Circular No.44. Training', 11 September 1916.

Somme fighting.[205] Aside from a lack of progress towards Mouquet Farm, 4th Division had experienced at least one high-profile failure of morale, with a company commander being arrested on the morning of 1 September for drunkenness.[206] 50/AI saw fit to add a note to their September training syllabus on 15 September stating 'point out the numerous accidents through careless handling of arms, also the certainty of punishment for self-inflicted wounds.'[207] The time spent in the line on the Ypres Salient was spent to the south of the town, between St Eloi and Vierstraat, and was largely quiet, but punctuated by occasional raids.

In mid-November, Australian 4th Division moved back to the Somme sector, holding a section of the line near Gueudecourt for just over three weeks, and running working parties when not in the line. This was followed by a longer spell away from the trenches for training, which for most units initially focused on physical training and route marches. However, discipline, ceremonial work, refitting of clothing and equipment and reorganising was also given special attention. This went down to the most elementary tasks such as ensuring 'each man has his hair cut properly and is properly shaved' and was wearing his equipment properly.[208] This is a highly unusual war diary entry, which indicates concern over a lack of discipline and poor morale in the formation. By mid-December units had moved on to regular tactical exercises at company and battalion level, as well as a greater emphasis on musketry. The need for a reversion to the most basic forms of training indicates worry on the part of the divisional and brigade commanders, if not of a collapse of morale, then at least of heavy wear. 50/AI recorded 'easy physical training and running exercises…followed by kit inspection' on 7 December 1916, a hint that a degree of care was needed at that stage.[209] This is supported by Charles Bean, who acknowledged that although 'the Australian soldier resented 'mothering'…the only course compatible with efficiency was to take intimate care of the men whether they resented it or not'.[210] This acceptance that orders were resented adds weight to the concern over poor discipline within the formation and the fact remained that morale in

[205] AWM: AWM4 23/69/6, War Diary for 52/AI, entry for 22 September 1916.
[206] AWM: AWM4 23/66/4, War Diary for 49/AI, entry for 1 September 1916; Service record for James Barton Walker, Record of GCM held in the field, 30 September 1916, https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au.
[207] AWM: AWM4 23/67/3, War Diary for 50/AI, September 1916, 'Syllabus of Training for week ending 21st September 1916'.
[208] AWM: AWM4 23/12/10, HQ Diary for Australian 12 Brigade, December 1916, Appendix 1, '12th Australian Infantry Brigade Operation Memo No. 86; Training while in rest area', 1 December 1916.
[209] AWM: AWM4 23/67/6, War Diary for 50/AI, entry for 7 December 1916.
[210] Bean, *AIF in France 1916,* p. 956.

the Division had been low since the division's actions at Pozières. This duly affected the quality and complexity of training that could be carried out during this precious spell out of the line.

Structural Improvement & Formations

In the winter 1916-17 period, 18th Division ran a school, which among other things adopted a new series of attack formations. The detail on these formations was retained from the instructions by which the school was formed in November 1916, prior to the publication of the *SS 135*, *SS 143* and *SS 144* pamphlets on unit training.[211] This detailed the positions in which units within a brigade should form up and the order in which they should attack, as well as delineating responsibilities for moppers-up and carrying parties. Although the acceptance was made that these formations could be subject to change as situations demanded, these formations were adopted 'for normal instructional purposes'.[212] In various ways, interest was shown in French tactical methods, and although not every aspect of French training was seen as superior to British instruction, use of specialists and their integration into platoons and companies was followed to a degree. A translated French pamphlet explains their platoon structure in November 1916, and seems to have provided at least some of the basis for future British formations, with a platoon structure of half riflemen (trained with bombs), a quarter bombers, and a quarter rifle bombers, and with 4 attached light machine guns.[213] The larger document with which the French pamphlet was circulated was issued by Fourth Army, and which provides lessons learnt from the Somme, is useful and makes dozens of worthy points without ever outlining specific training methods. It is also less than authoritative on certain matters, using phrases such as 'opinions differ', and discussing a number of hypothetical situations in the assault. Although it is a document of interest, it is far from authoritative and leaves much interpretation to divisional commanders.

While there appears to have been ambiguity and openness to different lines of thought within Fourth Army, the same cannot be said of Fifth Army in the same way; General Gough's remarks

[211] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, Diagram 10, 'Disposition of one brigade in attack with two assaulting battalions in three forming-up trenches'.
[212] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, 18th Division No G.280, '18th Divisional School', dated 18 November 1916.
[213] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, Appendix B to Fourth Army GS 360, 'Notes on lessons of the operations of the Somme as regards infantry attack formations and the employment of specialists', 'Notes on French infantry formations'.

from a well-attended conference held on 27 December 1916 show a desire to set 'normal' formations in place, down to platoon and section level, stating:

> To illustrate [the organisation and formation of a brigade] I have here a brigade ready to carry out an attack. The organisation and formation of this brigade are in accordance with sound principles and have stood the test of practice, and I will be glad if you will study it, asking any questions you like of the Brigadier and other officers. I do not say that this formation is to be exactly copied, but after you have studied it, I want every division to lay down and practice some form of attack which can be varied to suit circumstances. You must remember that we have to deal with entirely untrained junior regimental officers and it is essential, therefore, that they should have in their heads some sound scheme of formation as a basis from which to start.[214]

Gough's key ally within Fifth Army in raising infantry standards was 18th Division's commander Ivor Maxse, (his influence is noted by Aimée Fox), who in correspondence with Archibald Montgomery at Fourth Army HQ wrote: 'inexperienced armies cannot be fed on 'general principles' only. They require definite methods…we should from time to time issue papers…and these papers should indicate *methods* of carrying out accepted principles'.[215] Demonstrating the proposed new formation at the conference were units of 54 Brigade from 18th Division, and although Gough explained that he did not necessarily want them 'exactly copied', this demonstration must have been seen as instructive, rather than simply a display of best practice. The formation proposed by Maxse extended to detailing the deployment of sections in the attack, with a company frontage of 140 yards, with two platoons each employing two sections in their first and second waves. According to an attached note in Maxse's papers, this company disposition was copied and ordered to be used by at least 18 Divisions in Fifth Army in 1917.[216] The benefits of having the platoon bombers groups together rather than spread across sections was explained, and highlights the more 'extended' nature

[214] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, Fifth Army G.A. 68/0/29, 'Precis of remarks made by the army commander at the conference held on 27 December 1916.
[215] Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p. 62, citing LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/4, Maxse to Montgomery, 26 November 1916. Emphasis is in original text.
[216] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 53.1, 'Disposition of one company in the attack from trench to trench', attached note on 18th Division headed paper dated 4 January 1917.

of the foreseen conflict. The change in focus to the platoon as the tactical unit necessarily followed, as did the devolution of more firepower to platoon commanders. As the fighting became more open, less contact between battalion and company commanders and their subordinates would be made, and it stood to reason that platoons would have to operate with more independence. Gough also hinted at a future training pamphlet coming from GHQ in which 'a sound organization of platoons [would be] strongly emphasised'; a nod to the forthcoming *SS 143* and *SS 144* pamphlets, of which he must have been aware. Incidentally, despite having said that precise copying of formations was not necessary, the following communiqué from Fifth Army general staff instructed divisions that 'the platoon organisation laid down by the army commander will be adopted forthwith throughout the Fifth Army, i.e. 3 sections of riflemen and one section of bombers'.[217] This was seemingly an organisational stepping stone before the requisite number of Lewis guns and trained rifle grenadiers were across all battalions. 18th Division's example was closely followed in at least one other division in this study; Australian 5th Division's General Staff diary for January 1917 contains a memo instructing brigades that 'the normal formation to be adopted by brigades in attack will be that given in diagram 10 shewing [sic] disposition of 18th Division of one brigade in attack with two assaulting battalions'.[218]

Furthermore, at 18th Division various lectures were given on subjects including aerial photography and divisional organisation. [219] The desire to increase the capability of junior officers, NCOs and underperforming men is particularly evident in Thomas Shoubridge's 54 Brigade, as both 7th Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment (7/Beds) and 12/Middlesex record some form of special attention to this task.[220] Meanwhile, Brigadier-General G D Price's 55 Brigade appears to have experimented with a new attack formation in mid-December, but no further detail is recorded.[221] 55 Brigade's conference on 15 December reinforced many of these

[217] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 23.3, Fifth Army G.A. 68/0/29, note to Fifth Army School attached to 'Precis of remarks…'.
[218] AWM: AWM4 1/50/11 Part 1, HQ Diary for Australian 5th Division, January 1917, Appx A General Staff Memorandum No. 79 'Formations in Attack', dated 13 January 1917.
[219] TNA WO 95/2035/1, HQ Diary for 53 Brigade, 8 January 1917 and TNA WO 95/2049/1, War Diary for 7/Buffs, lectures held on 2 & 3 January 1917.
[220] TNA WO 95/2043/4, War Diary for 7/Beds, 31 January 1917 and TNA WO 95/2044/1, War Diary for 12/Middlesex, 4 December 1916.
[221] TNA WO 95/2049/1, War Diary for 7/Buffs, 12 December 1916 and TNA WO 95/2050/2, War Diary for 8/E Surreys, 9 December 1916.

points, and also highlighted the need for specialists to take part in ordinary training periodically, and for further training in use of rifle grenades, white star gas grenades, smoke candles and flares.[222]

Within 63rd Division, changes in attack formation took place in early January, after all 63rd Division's brigade and battalion commanders (as well as numerous others) attended the assault demonstration by 7/Beds from 18th Division on 27 December. Full details of the demonstration at Millencourt are not recorded, but Gough's presence and influence lent considerable weight to the demonstration: 'The Army commander had arranged for this exercise & pointed out the importance of the proper organisation of [companies] in platoons & sections'.[223] The attack practices carried out by 63rd Division in January demonstrate progress in the sense that bombing sections were created within platoons. However, rather than leaving the platoon commander autonomy to control his own bombers, on encountering resistance, 'the battalion bombing officer will direct [the bombing sections] in clearing the strong point [and on arrival of a consolidating party from the support battalion] will send the bombing sections forward to their platoons'.[224] There were still too few Lewis guns issued to companies to devolve their command to platoon level, and these were retained by company commanders and deployed in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th waves in attack practices.[225] The exact placement of officers in the formations are not recorded apart from the 'Director' who took position in the centre of the first wave; one can reasonably assume from the previous instructions that this was to be the battalion bombing officer, although it may also have meant the senior battalion officer participating in the assault.

Also present at 54 Brigade's demonstration on 27 December 1916 were officers from 61st Division. At this point, the division held a section of the line south of Grandcourt which had been vacated by 18th Division. The division took a number of prisoners during this time, but acknowledged quite swiftly that this was due less to the quality of their patrolling, and more

[222] TNA WO 95/2041/4, 55 Brigade HQ Diary, Appendix Z 'Agenda for Conference 15th December 1916'.
[223] TNA WO 95/3112/1, HQ Diary for 189 Brigade, 27 December 1916.
[224] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, January 1917, 'Notes for the Brigade attack at Vercourt, 2-1-17'.
[225] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, January 1917, 'Notes for the Brigade attack at Vercourt, 2-1-17; Order of Battle'.

to poor morale among the German regiments opposite them. Proximity to 18th Division seems to have served 61st Division well, as a host of senior divisional and brigade staff were able to watch 7/Beds on 27 December. On 2 January instructions were sent out to brigades from divisional HQ, outlining new platoon and company formations, and a new training plan was drawn up and came into effect soon after. This formation specified one bombing section and one Lewis gun section per platoon.[226] The first two weeks of January were spent organising the platoon as the fighting unit within the division. [227] Additionally, an experiment was carried out at the end of January, taking one platoon from each brigade for a week of intense training, which was then demonstrated on 7 February to the divisional staff and corps commander. The skills shown were the platoon in the attack and reorganisation for counter-attack. This was then demonstrated to the infantry battalions over the following days.[228] Other skills practiced involved rapid changes in formation, use of entrenching tool and wiring, night patrols and consolidation, map reading for section commanders and movement through woods.[229]

48th Division similarly learned from the experience of others, as well as showing some reflection on the realities of modern tactical command, and a focus on platoon-level training in January 1917. 4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (4/R Berks) on 11 January recorded the following statement: 'The training programme was carried on, particular attention being paid to the training of the platoon. This is to be considered the unit for all future training, the idea being to make each platoon a separate unit, complete with its Lewis gun, bombing and rifle sections'. [230] This is supported in 4/R Berks Battalion history, highlighting that during the winter 'there was much to be done in training, for the new platoon organisation had now come into force. Its object was to make the platoon a self-contained unit of specialists, with its four sections divided into riflemen, Lewis gunners, bombers and rifle-bombers.[231] This predated the publication of the *SS 143* training pamphlet by around a month, and yet, quite accurately predicted its instructions. Furthermore, evidence of adoption of the latest training

[226] TNA WO 95/3056/2, War Diary for 2/6 R Warwicks, 21 January 1916.
[227] TNA WO 95/3033/3, 61st Division General Staff Diary, January 1917, Appx VI '61st Division Training Instructions Jany. And Feby. 1917'.
[228] TNA WO 95/3033/3, 61st Division General Staff Diary, 7 February 1917.
[229] TNA WO 95/3057/1, War Diary for 2/8 Warwicks, 23 January-13 February 1917.
[230] TNA WO 95/2762/3, War Diary for 4/R Berks, 11 January 1917.
[231] C. R. M. F. Cruttwell, *The War Service of the 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment (T.F.)* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1922) p. 100.

doctrine can be seen in records of the Division's next spell in the line as they prepared for offensive action south of the Somme, as they refer specifically to p25 of *SS 135*; this concentrates on consolidation of a captured position.[232] 48th Division is one of the few divisions which did actually record the fact that they were working from *SS 135* almost immediately after its publication.

Perhaps as important as training, however, were the significant changes made in the command of several divisions (see table 2). Only two of the ten divisions examined in this study retained their divisional commanders through the entire period of study, namely 48th and 61st Divisions. Five of the divisions changed their divisional commanders once.

	Outgoing commander	Reason for removal	Incoming commander	Previous role	Outgoing commander	Reason for removal	Incoming commander	Previous role
7th Division	Herbert Watts	Promotion	George Barrow	First Army Staff	George Barrow	Poor results	Thomas Shoubridge	BGOC 54 Bde
8th Division	Havelock Hudson	To India Admin	William Heneker	BGOC 190 Bde				
18th Division	Ivor Maxse	Promotion	Richard Phillips Lee	5th Army Staff				
32nd Division	William Rycroft	Poor performance	Reginald Barnes	BGOC 116 Bde	Reginald Barnes	Illness	Cameron Shute	GOC 63 Div
48th Division	n/a							
61st Division	n/a							
63rd Division	Archibald Paris	Wounded	Cameron Shute	BGOC 59 Bde	Cameron Shute	Different Command	Charles Lawrie	BGRA II Corps
Aus 2nd Div	James Gordon Legge	Illness	Nevill Smyth	BGOC Aus 1 Bde				
Aus 4th Div	Vaughan Cox	To India Office	William Holmes	BGOC Aus 5 Bde				
Aus 5th Div	James McCay	Illness / Command	Talbot Hobbs	CRA Aus 1 Div				

Table 2: Changes in divisional command, December 1916-April 1917

18th Division's fine performance through the Somme campaign earned Ivor Maxse a promotion to Corps command, and Richard Lee took his place, which he held for the remainder of the conflict. Australian 2nd, 4th and 5th Divisions all had their commanders changed; 2nd Division replaced James Gordon Legge with Nevill Smyth after a spell of illness, 4th Division's Vaughan Cox was dispatched to the India Office and replaced by William Holmes, BGOC Australian 5 Brigade. Charles Bean puts the change down to a desire of the Australian Government, where possible, to have Australians commanded by Australians, and was complimentary to Cox, stating that he had 'splendidly commanded' the 4th Division.[233] James McCay was also removed from command of 5th Division ostensibly on medical grounds, but seemingly with some questions unanswered on his command prowess. Charles Bean suggest that McCay was, 'after prolonged trial…held to lack, or to have lost, some quality essential for command at the front.'[234] McCay's skill as a trainer must have held some value, as he was sent

[232] TNA WO 95/2746/1, 48th Division Order No. 150, issued 21 February 1917.
[233] Bean, *AIF in France 1917,* p. 24.
[234] Bean, *The AIF in France 1917*, p. 23.

back to command the Australian depots near Salisbury, and replaced by Talbot Hobbs, who had commanded Australian 1st Division's artillery and been on the I ANZAC Corps staff. Hobbs retained command of the division through to the end of the war, and immediately set to work on its reorganisation, and the planning of training while out of the line.

In the case of 8th Division, J. H. Boraston, the divisional historian, suggested that the need for a change of command was due to the divisional leadership having been 'worn out by strain and responsibility passing the limits of human endurance, as well as the incorporation of reinforcements and the re-equipment and training of the completed units'.[235] Major-General Havelock Hudson was removed as GOC and replaced with Major-General William Heneker, and Lieutenant-Colonel E. H. L. Beddington MC was installed as GSO1. Early in the new year, the CRA and commanders of 24 and 25 Brigades were also replaced. Heneker was linked to Ivor Maxse and 18th Division, having served as commander of 54 Brigade for most of 1915, prior to being wounded in December that year, and replaced by Herbert Shoubridge. More recently, Heneker had commanded 190 Brigade in 63rd Division under Cameron Shute during November 1916 and through the late 1916 Ancre actions. With the new command came new ideas on attack formations, and at Brigade conferences in mid-January, among myriad suggestions and topics for discussion, the idea of 'Battle Patrol Platoons' (BPPs) was brought up.[236] In a similar manner to 63rd Division, the suggestion was to create platoons which would advance with picks and shovels in order to be able to consolidate localities rapidly. In the following weeks these special patrolling platoons were raised by each battalion and by the last week of the month the BPPs were ready for training and inspection by the Divisional commander. On 19 February Sir Henry Rawlinson visited the Division and observed the Battle Patrol Platoons of 2/RB and 2/R. Berks.[237] The idea for these units was not uniformly received with happiness by battalion commanders. As Stuart Mitchell has highlighted, Lt-Col James Jack of 2/W. Yorks considered the suggestion to be 'hateful subterfuge' and rejected the idea of populating the battle patrol with his strongest troops.[238]

[235] Boraston, *The Eighth Division,* pp. 96-97.
[236] TNA WO 95/1726/5, War Diary for 25 Brigade, January 1917, Appendix 9 '25th Brigade Conference 14.1.17'
[237] WO 95/1731/3, War Diary for 2/RB, entries on 21 January and 19 February.
[238] S. B. T. Mitchell, '32nd Division' p. 149.

Three divisions, meanwhile, had three different commanders through late 1916 and early 1917. 7th Division's commander, Herbert Watts, was, like Maxse, promoted; his place taken by George de Symons Barrow, who only retained his position until the end of March 1917 when he was removed after failure at Bucquoy and Croisilles, his place taken by one of Maxse's Brigadier-Generals at 18th Division, Thomas Shoubridge. The wounding of 63rd Division's Archibald Paris saw Cameron Shute take his place for a little over three months, before moving to 32nd Division for a spell as commander from the end of February, and replaced by Charles Lawrie. Though notoriously unpopular as commander of 63rd Division, as demonstrated by the famous A.P. Herbert poem, there is little sign in the battlefield performance of the division that his influence was anything other than positive.

In 32nd Division, Major-General William Rycroft was similarly removed; relations between him and General Gough had never recovered since the opening phases of the Somme campaign, and failure on 18 November was the final straw.[239] Leaving along with Rycroft were the GSO1 and commanders of 14 and 96 Brigades.[240] As the attempt to gain information from those officers involved in the Redan Ridge actions show, the incoming officers took the business of improving the Division's performance seriously, however continuity of command was not something that came to 32nd Division immediately. Major-General R.W.R. Barnes, Rycroft's replacement, spent much of the winter off sick, frequently leaving the Division in the hands of the CRA, Brigadier-General James Arbuthnot Tyler. This did not seem to set the Division back, however, and not only did the division's performance in forthcoming actions prove to be a credit to those officers present through the training period, but Barnes's reinstatement in Summer 1917 shows there was faith in his abilities.

Among the ten divisions studied in this thesis, there were eleven changes of leadership in the space of four months; six of them saw Brigadier-Generals with recent combat experience take the place of the incumbent divisional commander. One involved one of these former brigade commanders (Cameron Shute) moving on to another of the divisions in the study which was

[239] Ibid, p. 197.
[240] Simkins, *Somme to Victory*, p. 119.

in need of firm leadership (32nd Division). The trend was not simply for commanders who obviously failed in 1916 to be replaced, but even where there were question marks over performance, if there was a Brigade commander who showed the right instincts and aptitudes, they would be put forward for promotion.

Offensive Action

This section will examine the ten divisions in training for offensive operations, and the styles of fighting that they anticipated and prepared for.

Although Australian 5th Division was not involved in the main actions of the Somme offensive, their efforts to stay up to date with events and fighting techniques, as well as their participation in the advance to the Hindenburg Line, make them an interesting case to study. Battalion exercises were difficult to conduct in the period following the attack and the heavy losses at Fromelles in July; certain units stayed well below establishment strength until the winter, and were only reorganised back into four companies in September.[241] However, certain skills which had become important in the Somme, such as wood fighting and barricading trenches to aid consolidation, were practiced.[242] Additionally, lectures were given to divisional officers by Second Army's intelligence officers on subjects such as Operations on the Somme, the strategy of General Joffre and the 'Balkans Tangle'.[243]

61st Division's period from the action at Fromelles through to late October 1916 was occupied with the division continuing to hold the line in the Fromelles sector. A number of raids were carried out, none on a particularly large scale. One raid by 2/6 Warwicks on 8 October came in for fairly scathing criticism from the Army Commander, initially criticising a lieutenant leading one of the raiding parties, then shifting the focus of criticism on to the soldiers themselves and acknowledging the lieutenant's sound work.[244] This may have been a spur for

[241] AWM: AWM4 23/70/4, War Diary for 53rd Battalion Australian Infantry (53/AI), entry for 8-17 September 1916.
[242] AWM: AWM4 23/48/14, War Diary for 31/AI, September 1916, entries for 1-4 September 1916 and Appx A: 'Syllabus of Work for period ending 3rd Sept 1916'.
[243] AWM: AWM4 23/74/8, War Diary for 57/AI, entries for 10 & 12 September; AWM4 1/50/7 Part 1, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, entry for 17 September 1916.
[244] TNA WO 95/3033/3, 61st Division General Staff Diary, October 1916, File entitled 'Minor operations – Raid carried out by 2/6th Warwicks against enemy trenches at N.19.A.6.9. SE of Fauquissart on morning of 8th October'.

more intense training. There was an effort to stay *au courant* with developments on the Somme, with Major-General R. B. Stephens, GOC 5th Division lecturing to 61st Division's available officers on the Somme fighting on 17 October.[245] The October training took on a more tactical approach than had been employed in September, with demonstrations of cooperation between snipers, bombers and Lewis gunners, and practicing of artillery formations and open warfare techniques being introduced.[246]

Australian 2nd Division's difficulties in November 1916 can largely be attributed to the weather, the inadequacy of the artillery preparation (particularly on 5 November), and the strength of the defenders.[247] The conditions exacerbated the difficulties in keeping the assaulting troops supplied with bombs, ammunition, water and rations, making enemy counter-attacks almost irresistible. Over the next two months, efforts were made to enhance the Australians' abilities to hold on to gains; in mid-December, prior to Major-General Legge's replacement, all three brigades took part in practice attack schemes, with and without contact patrol aircraft. The premise of the practice attack in each case was the enemy occupying two lines of trenches (referred to as O.G.1 and O.G.2), the first on a forward slope, the second on the reverse slope.[248] Trenches were marked with ploughed furrows, and the barrage was marked by a line of horses, which stood on certain objectives, then advanced at certain prearranged times at 75 yards per minute.[249] While this all seems reasonable enough, the lack of uniformity in the division as regards attack formation for the practice, suggests a lack of consensus as to what their strongest, or most successful formation may be. For the exercise, 5 and 7 Brigades opted to put all four of their battalions in line, split into four (presumably company strength) waves, while 6 Brigade formed up with just 21st and 22nd Battalions (21 & 22/AI) as the four assault

[245] TNA WO 95/3054/2, HQ Diary for 182 Brigade, TNA WO 95/3056/3, War Diary for 2/7 Warwicks and TNA WO 95/3060/1, War Diary for 2/4 Glosters, 17 October 1916.
[246] TNA WO 95/3056/3, War Diary for 2/7 Warwicks, 10 October-28 November 1916; TNA WO 95/3057/1, War Diary for 2/8 Warwicks, 20 October-30 November 1916; TNA WO 95/3060/1, War Diary for 2/4 Glosters, 21 October-28 November 1916. TNA WO 95/3066/2, War Diary for 2/1 Bucks Bn recorded 'training hard for open warfare' on 1 November 1916.
[247] Australian War Memorial: AWM4 Subclass 23/7/15, Australian 7 Brigade HQ Diary, November 1916, 'Report on the Operations of the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade between 3rd and 7th November '16'.
[248] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/6/16, Australian 6 Brigade HQ Diary, December 1916, '6th Australian Infantry Brigade Order No. 000', issued 13 December 1916.
[249] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/7/16, Australian 7 Brigade HQ Diary, December 1916, 'Appendix 1, Training Order No. 8' issued 11 December 1916.

waves, 23/AI following in reserve, and 24/ AI held as a 'garrison battalion'.[250] The divisional commander's reaction to the conduct of the exercise does not appear to have been rapturous; the record in the divisional war diary is simply 'The practice was, on the whole, satisfactory'.[251]

Following Legge's replacement with Smyth, there is evidence of greater attention to detail in training, and some effort to explore lessons beyond Australian 2nd Division's own experience of the Somme. Brigadier-General Robert Smith, commanding 5 Brigade, attended a demonstration at the Corps School on the 'French system of Drill for the attack' on 20 January, and although the content and nature of the demonstration is not recorded, it resulted in changes of formation for the next series of practice attacks across the division, which took place on 26 January.[252] On this occasion, all three brigades put two battalions in line, and insisted not simply on the capture of trench lines, but additionally capturing enemy strong points beyond the second objective, and pushing posts forward beyond the captured lines.[253] Smith also took the trouble to have notes made on the lessons of the 26 January exercise itself, noting several points for improvement.

Firstly, while the barrage was followed well initially, the infantry fell behind it after capturing the first objective. Following the barrage lifting off an objective, men should rush the trench cheering and shouting in order to reach the parapet first, to 'give impetus to attack for hand to hand fighting', and to 'rouse men's ardour'. Secondly, scouts required more training, so as to understand their roles better and to be more flexible in formation. Thirdly, shallow columns were easier to handle when advancing towards enemy strong points, and less likely to suffer heavy loss to shellfire. Fourthly, those columns should break to lines before the assault on the strong point. Fifthly, communication between battalions required greater discipline. Setting off from one objective to the next without coordinating with neighbouring battalion will leave a unit vulnerable to enfilade fire.

[250] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/5/18, Australian 5 Brigade HQ Diary, December 1916, 'Appendix; Training Order No. 3', issued 12 December 1916; AWM4 Subclass 23/6/16, Australian 6 Brigade HQ Diary, December 1916, '6th Australian Infantry Brigade Order No. 000', issued 13 December 1916.
[251] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/17, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, 14 December 1916.
[252] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/5/19, Australian 5 Brigade HQ Diary, 20 January 1917. Smith was the only brigade commander able to attend the demonstration of 20 January, as John Gellibrand (6 Brigade) was away sick, and Evan Wisdom (7 Brigade) was on leave.
[253] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/7/17, Australian 7 Brigade HQ Diary, Appendix 9: 'Training Order No. 3'.

Sixthly, in consolidation, Lewis guns should be placed at least 50 yards ahead of newly captured positions, forming the basis of a new line. It was reasonable to expect hostile artillery batteries to know the locations of their previously-held trenches, and therefore to be able to bring them under fire swiftly. For that reason, old German lines should not be held. Digging a new line 100 yards distant was instructed, to leave the enemy uncertain of the position taken until they could acquire aerial photographs.[254] While these points were all valuable, and the practice itself more realistic and relevant than that carried out in December, Australian 2nd Division would have little time to assimilate the observations, returning to line-holding duties in late January.

Australian 4th Division had been busy since its Pozières actions, but was able to come out of the line and into Second Army's training area for three weeks in the last week of October 1916, having spent around 5 weeks line-holding in the Ypres Salient. In the training area, they were able to carry out large-scale unit exercises, which were described by 13/AI as 'amplification of exercises practiced prior to the Somme'.[255] Attack practices in four waves were carried out by day and night, with the roles of the third and fourth waves being to maintain communications between the objective lines and the start line.[256] Reinforcements also came in through September and October, with several battalions receiving over 200 men, and 13/AI, one of the heaviest involved at Mouquet Farm, taking 329, bringing their strength from 26 officers and 550 ORs on 22 September up to 33 officers and 903 ORs by 30 October.[257] Despite their losses, battalions had been able to maintain a respectable strength, even those of 13 Brigade which were last in line on the Somme in September; 49/AI were made up to 26 officers and 820 ORs with the arrival of 269 reinforcements in September and October.[258] Attack practices reached a good level of sophistication later in December and into early January, with some genuinely creative tactical schemes carried out, with and without troops. 4 Brigade, for example, ran scenarios for company commanders, such as being put on the spot with the company

[254] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/5/19, Australian 5 Brigade HQ Diary, Appendix 8: 'Notes on Attack Practice carried out by 17th and 20th Battalions on 26th January 1917'.
[255] AWM: AWM4 23/30/24, War Diary for 13/AI, entry for 28 October 1916.
[256] AWM: AWM4 23/32/19, War Diary for 15/AI, 30-31 October 1916.
[257] AWM: AWM4 23/30/23-24, War diary for 13/AI, 22 September 1916; entries for 16-30 October 1916.
[258] AWM: AWM4 23/66/4-5, War Diary for 49/AI, entries for 11, 16, and 24-30 September; entries for 16 & 21 October 1916.

realistically disorganised by action, and instructed to select immediate tactical objectives.[259] Preparation for a more open from of warfare was also carried out, with extended-order drill and rapid changes of formation at platoon, company and battalion level, simulating encountering the enemy in an open setting.[260]

Shortly afterwards in early November, the brigades of 7th Division were only able to dedicate around seven days to training while marching back to the Somme front from the Ploegsteert area. This period involved tactical exercises and a greater focus on attack practice, with 9/Devons among those recording instruction in outpost and guard duties, extended order attack drill as well as a brigade field day held on 14 November.[261] Although most units were able to carry out some training during October, Major-General Watts's desire of carrying out a battalion exercise each week and a brigade exercise every fortnight proved impossible to fulfil while holding the line in Flanders.

8th Division were afforded more time out of the line than 7th Division over winter 1916/1917. From 6 December, practice trenches and wooded areas were available for 8th Division and used for attack and defence training.[262] Practice assaults at brigade level took place, with multiple battalions working on communication and coordination in attack. The emphasis in training with one or two battalions in capturing a trench line and wiring at night was concurrent with a switch in offensive tactics by those units in the line in January and February, namely that of aggressively pushing outposts forward and patrolling at night with the intention of capturing enemy outposts. This is significant, and not simply for 8th Division, as it matches the style of fighting adopted by 32nd Division on their reintroduction to the line in January, suggesting an element of communication and shared learning. As a final note on training in December, although new attack formations for divisions were published that month, there is no evidence that the *SS 135* pamphlet, *Instructions for the Training of Divisions in Offensive Action*, was used for training by either 8th or 32nd Division.

[259] AWM: AWM4 23/4/15, HQ Diary for Australian 4 Brigade, December 1916, Appendix 10, 'Company Training'.
[260] AWM: AWM4 23/69/9, War Diary for 52/AI, 'Syllabus of Training From 27th to 30th December 1916'.
[261] TNA WO 95/1656/1, War Diary for 9/Devons, entries for 7, 8 & 14 November 1916.
[262] TNA WO 95/1714/2, War Diary for 2/W Yorks, 6 & 12 December 1916.

48th Division's units are fairly light in recording detail on their offensive training. Various units noted training in September 1916 involving artillery formations, and 1st Bucks Battalion practiced wire cutting in October. 5th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment (5/Glosters) ran a night training scheme for their scouts on 17 January, and at the end of the month had a training session in French tactics in bombing, without explaining in the diary how they differed from the British style.[263] Various tactical schemes took place at battalion and brigade level with and without troops, and 145 Brigade had use of a contact patrol aircraft on one occasion.[264] As a final point, there was some hope that a more open style of warfare would return to the battlefield in the near future and the divisional conference on 4 January was held to discuss this subject, although no training with that in mind was recorded thereafter.[265]

18th Division's winter training by comparison, was rather more technical and ambitious, and were observed at least twice by General Gough and other senior staff in training, providing further evidence of their reputation as an exemplary attacking division.[266] Expecting to be put back in the action on the Ancre as soon as the weather permitted, the division went into specific training for an assault towards South Miraumont Trench, as well as working on more general techniques. Intensive digging was practiced across the division, as well as regular musketry, bombing, bayonet fighting and in wet weather, rapid loading indoors. 'Opposed' attack practices were carried out, with one battalion acting as the enemy in brigade-level training.[267] Night operations and following a barrage were rehearsed, and advance guard schemes, intensive digging, outpost construction, and dugout checking and clearing were among the skills practiced.[268]

[263] TNA WO 95/2763/1, War Diary for 5/Glosters, entries for 17 & 31 January 1917.
[264] TNA WO 95/2761/1, HQ Diary for 145 Brigade, 24 January 1917.
[265] TNA WO 95/2757/4, HQ Diary for 144 Brigade, 4 January 1917. 145 Brigade recorded holding an 'Advance Guard Scheme' on 3 January, which may have been repeated as part of general company training, but no evidence thereof was noted.
[266] TNA WO 95/2015/3, HQ Diary for 55 Brigade, 22 December 1916.
[267] TNA WO 95/2039/3, War Diary for 8/Suffolks, 3 January 1917.
[268] TNA WO 95/2044/1, War Diary for 12/Middlesex. The diary for late November and through December lists in some detail the training exercises carried out by the battalion, including notes on the formations adopted for brigade attack schemes.

Consolidation

Part of 48th Division's winter training were skills which had become apparent as entirely necessary, such as rapid digging and wiring. Instructions for an attack on the Butte de Warlencourt in December (which never took place) highlight the importance placed on consolidation, stressing that 'rapid wiring of the new front is essential… Arrangements must be made to infuse vigour into the work of consolidation by pushing up fresh men and fresh officers. A senior Battalion officer is to be put in charge to superintend consolidation and the pushing up of water and rations. When consolidation is complete, the garrison of the new line is to be reduced, under the direction of the senior battalion officer, and the line held with numerous M.G.s and Lewis guns, provided that each post is completely garrisoned and supplied…'[269] Clearly there must have been some confidence in the division's ability to capture a trench line, and so the focus of training moved on to holding the trench against the likely German counter-attack, for which digging and wiring were deemed necessary.[270]

Consolidation and construction of outposts were only occasionally factored into training in 63rd Division during their November-January training period. Nelson Battalion recorded outpost training and wiring in mid-December, and 1/RMLI sent all its officers on field engineering courses in early January.[271] 7th Battalion Royal Fusiliers (7/RF) also engaged in outpost training in early January, but there is no evidence other battalions prioritised these skills.[272] 61st Division's infantry on the other hand, had worked with Royal Engineer supervision on rapid wiring as early as October, which progressed on to converting shellholes into firing positions, night digging and methods of digging trenches in November.[273] This approach broadly mirrored the training focus of the more successful divisions involved in the Somme fighting, and reflected the importance placed on defeating the expected enemy counter-attack. The notion seemingly was that taking defensive positions in the captured trenches which were known to the enemy was more dangerous than adopting new positions; even if that meant digging in themselves after the advance. It is a credit to the division that

[269] TNA WO 95/2745/5, 48th Division Order No. 139, issued 8 December 1916.
[270] Best expressed in TNA WO 95/2759/1, War Diary for 7/Worcs, 3, 11,12 & 13 January 1917.
[271] TNA WO 95/3114/3, War Diary for Nelson Battalion, 12-15 December; WO 95/3110/1, War Diary for 1/RMLI, 9 January 1917.
[272] TNA WO 95/3119/1, War Diary for 7/RF, 9 January 1917.
[273] TNA WO 95/3067/1, War Diary for 2/4 Ox & Bucks, 5 October 1916.

despite not having taken part in the Somme fighting, they still endeavoured to profit from its lessons, and prepare for their own introduction to full-scale offensive action. 8th Division had also concentrated on the basics up to November, but then was able to switch the focus of its training on to skills such as wiring, and use of bangalore torpedoes. Assaults were rehearsed by day and night, and wiring at night was practiced. Meanwhile, the Fourth Army musketry school periodically took groups ranging in size from 53 men in the case of 2/Devons, to 190 of 2/E. Lancs.[274]

Australian 4th Division's emphasis on the basics and efforts to strengthen the division in attack came at something of a cost regarding consolidation. Although attack practices up to Brigade level were carried out, the art of consolidating a position quickly with rapid digging and wiring seems not to have been included in training programmes in this period. In late October 51/AI recorded 'company wiring parties organised', but did not specify whether this was a training exercise, a form of fatigues or an assignment of roles for forthcoming actions.[275] Exercises on consolidation seem to have been limited in scope, however; there is only evidence of practicing wiring a position in one of 4 Brigade's battalions, ostensibly the most experienced of the division's infantry.[276] It is perhaps a result of the insular nature of I ANZAC Corps that some best-practice in other BEF units was missed.

Australian 5th Division's training, conversely, progressed quickly on to more complicated work such as liaison with aircraft, outpost fighting, advancing under a barrage, construction of strong points and conversion of captured trenches.[277] This progress on to consolidation, coupled with the wood fighting and barricade building work done in September, is a point of difference with the Australian divisions which had fought at Pozières and Mouquet Farm between July and September, and is more in line with British divisions' training programmes.

[274] TNA WO 95/1712/1, War Diary for 2/Devons. On 23 December, 1 officer and 52 ORs proceeded to Army musketry school, and C Company returned from the Divisional School of instruction. Additionally that day, 190 men from 2/E Lancs proceeded to the Army musketry school, while the rest of the battalion practiced wiring and destruction of wire with bangalore torpedoes (WO 95/1720/1). The Final of the Divisional Football match also took place on 23 December, with 2/Northants beating 23rd Machine Gun Company, 3-2.
[275] AWM: AWM4 23/68/8, War Diary for 51/AI, 31 October 1916.
[276] AWM: AWM4 23/32/22, War Diary for 15/AI, entries for 16 & 19 January 1917.
[277] AWM: AWM4 23/76/10, War Diary for 59/AI, November 1916, Appx P, '15th Australian Infantry Brigade; Programme of work for period ending 14/11/16'; AWM4 23/72/9, War Diary for 55/AI, entries for 16-17 November 1916.

Whether a sign of a broader outlook due to ethos differences within the division's leadership, or exposure to a more proactive learning process in Second Army, or simply a desire to improve quickly having missed the Somme fighting is unclear. I ANZAC Corps schools of instruction for specialists and junior officers and NCOs were certainly used by Australian 5th Division on their arrival, even if their training priorities at divisional level showed some differences. Morale seems not to have suffered within the division, having had sufficient time to recover strength after Fromelles. There was sufficient concern over the presentation of the men for a memo to be sent out on 7 November instructing 'the men to get thoroughly cleaned up' and 'shaving to be resumed', but that may well have been due to an imminent visit and inspection from the Commander-in-Chief 4 days later.[278] The same memo instructs 'light training' to be carried out, but presents enough tasks to be active and busy, and does not hint that extra care needed be taken with the men due to fragile morale.

Specialists

Training of specialists was a very high priority for 18th Division over the winter of 1916 – 17, and although theorising continued over such matters as how many Lewis guns were to be deployed in the opening waves of an attack, the feeling was that specialists needed to be put in the hands of platoon, or at most, company commanders, rather than battalion commanders. A memo was circulated in late December stating explicitly that 'no bombing organisation outside that of the company exists in this division, neither is such recommended.'[279] Two fully-trained teams were to be kept for each Lewis gun in case of injuries or incapacitation, although in the attack most were to be kept back for the consolidation phase, rather than used in the assault.

Training instruction orders were kept from assault practices in January 1917, particularly from a series of training sessions on a trench system with front and support lines and a strong point sited between them. The main purpose of these practices was to test the new platoon formations as outlined by the Army commander, but also to get platoon commanders used to handling their men in a different manner. Some good lessons were learned. Lewis gun teams

[278] AWM: AWM4 1/50/9 Part 3, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, November 1916 Appx G, 'Training Memorandum No. 62', 7 November 1916.
[279] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 53.1, 18th Division No G.835, 'In reply to II Corps G.206 dated 9/12/16'.

needed to make better use of cover, as did snipers and riflemen. Riflemen still had important roles while working with specialists, and were vital in covering bombing parties. More effort was needed, however, to conceal movement of riflemen up a trench towards a strong point, as bayonets were visible too often. Versatility was emphasised, with bombers having to be ready to change roles, either to riflemen or rifle grenadiers. Platoon commanders had to take responsibility for organising covering fire for assaulting troops, especially as a 'bold and determined dash across the open' was preferable to bombing up a trench; the Germans were at least as good at bomb-throwing.[280]

The conclusions of the exercises were that Lewis guns were certainly better employed in the hands of platoon commanders, even if there were occasions when one platoon did not need its gun and another platoon would have benefited from having more than one. At this time, Lewis guns seem to have been retained as troops attached to the platoon commander himself, rather than put into their own section under an NCO. Rifle grenades were also extremely useful, but did damage to the rifles which would render them useless for regular rifle ammunition after a few shots.

48th Division's programme of training over the winter of 1916-1917 was by no means unusual. This in some ways is heartening, in that despite not having been involved in major set-piece assaults while on the Somme, and having no great successes to their name, they had clearly noticed what was working and what needed to be worked on. In all units there was some focus on what can be termed the basics; physical fitness, bomb throwing, bayonet training, and musketry. Most units stressed the need for extra training for their specialists, and Lewis gunners in particular were singled out, as well as designated bombers and signallers. 4th Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (4/Ox & Bucks) list a series of lectures and demonstrations that took place in January 1917 on subjects which included Lewis guns, Stokes mortars and the use of bombs in attack.[281] Integration of the Lewis gun into the platoon was planned for January. 63rd Division, meanwhile, certainly recognised the importance of Lewis gunners; although Anson battalion records introductory Lewis Gun training at the end of November, there is little evidence of an attempt to integrate light

[280] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 53.1, 18th Division No G.300, 'Platoon Organisation' with report dated 13 January 1917.
[281] TNA WO 95/2764/1, War Diary for 4/Ox & Bucks, 16-19 January 1917.

machine guns into the platoon, and no evidence of trained cooperation between the specialists. Most units record use of the Lewis gun as a specialist skill, along with scouts and signals. Howe Battalion recognised the need for additional Lewis gunners, however, and recorded putting an extra crew per company into training in the third week of December.[282]

Overall, inconsistency can be seen in the training of specialists in late 1916, with the most advanced divisions training their men in two or three separate skills to ensure that all the various support weapons were employable, even in case of wounding. Many divisions do not record training specialists besides Lewis gunners at all during this period, however, having been too preoccupied with raising standards in more basic skills, and incorporating reinforcement drafts.

Conclusion

The ten divisions which have been the subject of this analysis made uneven progress over the late 1916 period following their final actions of the year. This development depended on each division's own experience, command, and amount of time it had to train and adapt. No division of the ten studied went backwards, however. In each case, experience brought about progress in one form or another, and among the most impressive of the divisions in a development sense are those who were dealt a sharp defeat at Fromelles, but which made keen efforts to stay abreast of the latest methods and techniques. The influence of General Hubert Gough during this time is worthy of note. In bringing officers from a number of relatively inexperienced divisions to watch a demonstration of an experimental formation from arguably his top-performing division, Gough showed what was expected. While not renowned as a great trainer, he listened to a highly-regarded subordinate in Ivor Maxse, and pressed others to use similar best-practice methods. Aimée Fox's work on horizontal learning supports the notion of commanding officers playing a role in horizontal learning across divisions, mentioning Gough specifically as having been particularly direct and prescriptive. During late 1916 and very early 1917 however, with inexperienced divisions to manage, this approach was entirely appropriate. Before the arrival of the new training pamphlets, there were commendable efforts to spread best practice assault and consolidation methods

[282] TNA WO 95/3111/2, War Diary for Howe Battalion, 19 December 1916.

between divisions, and these can be seen to have been effective. General Gough, in line with his more direct command style was keener to set 'normal formations' in place across Fifth Army than Henry Rawlinson appeared to have been with Fourth Army. Though this may have seemed over-prescriptive by the standards of *FSR 1*, at this at that stage in the conflict and in the spirit of bringing all divisions up to something resembling a uniform standard, such a level of control seems correct. Furthermore, Gough's efforts in bringing officers from less-experienced divisions to observe arguably his top-performing division demonstrating the latest in proposed formation changes, were entirely sensible.

Another method of disseminating knowledge and best practice was the movement of leadership figures who had experience of success, and using them to replace officers who did not. Commanders who had not impressed through 1916 were moved on, and replaced with more promising officers coming through, in certain cases from divisions nearby which had achieved more in the previous weeks. The key tasks for these new divisional commanders, as well as for those who remained in post, was the swift reorganisation of their units and formations, and particularly to take on replacement drafts as swiftly and seamlessly as possible, bringing them up to the required standards. In this regard, training pamphlets were of secondary importance; immediate attention was required to be given to basic elements in training, with the understanding that more sophisticated methods were on their way, and that best practice would be collected, collated and distributed in due course. Broadly, but not uniformly, there seems to have been a greater awareness that the best opportunity to inflict serious loss on the enemy was when he counter-attacked, and that the 'hold' was as important as the 'bite' when it came to offensive action. This grim pragmatism is reflected in the fact that exploitation was hardly a concern by the winter of 1916-17, as opposed to in May 1916 when, according to *SS 109*, it had been considered an integral part of attack planning. Overly-optimistic attack plans were largely a thing of the past in Fourth and Fifth armies, although an acknowledgment of this reality would necessarily reveal that the war was not close to its end.

With that in mind, maintenance of morale through a tough winter was given widespread attention, although Australian 4th Division seem to have needed more care than any other formation. On the basis of evidence in the war diaries, this unit seems to have eased their men through the late 1916 training period, rather than push them though, at least prior to

the replacement of their divisional commander. This division is exceptional in recording 'easy' training; for the remainder, the challenge of reinforcing, reorganising, reforming and retraining seems to have been well understood, and the period after their last actions of 1916 appears to have been well-used in taking those initial steps. That this process was largely undertaken before the best-known training pamphlets could be published or take effect, demonstrates the valuable experiences gained during the hard fighting of the Somme campaign in 1916. The efforts to distribute not just knowledge, but also knowledgeable individuals, across those divisions which had yet to experience success was a commendable stopgap while the new doctrine was drawn together. This chapter has shown that the initial focus of training following the late 1916 actions was in laying the foundations for success, rather than producing the finished articles immediately. The focus on the basics, assimilating drafts, practice of consolidating positions and where possible, training specialists, was a reflection of what had worked, and provided the groundwork for the success of certain divisions in very early 1917.

Chapter 3

Resuming the Offensive

Early 1917 actions on the Somme Front

It is easy to gloss over the actions of early 1917 on the Somme front. Notionally between two major British offensives, the Somme and Arras, they contain no headline days of failure or success such as 1 July 1916 or 9 April 1917. Moreover, as Gary Sheffield has noted in his introduction to Spencer Jones's recently-published edited volume on the year 1917, 'there has frequently been a disconnect between historical studies of the 'big' events caused by the war and what happened on the battlefield.'[283] Those 'big' events typically involve the resumption of unrestricted U-Boat warfare by Germany, the entry to the war of the United States, or the revolutions in Russia. Even in France, events on the front line are overshadowed by those at the Calais Conference in February, where Prime Minister David Lloyd-George nearly managed to place the BEF under the direction of French General Robert Nivelle for the forthcoming offense season. Another recently published history of the War on the Western Front makes no mention of the early 1917 actions at all. Nick Lloyd explicitly states that the Somme campaign had 'petered out in the snows of mid-November', and focuses instead on the miserable conditions of winter 1916-17 and political developments, before switching his attention to the Arras front.[284] Gary Sheffield in *Forgotten Victory* similarly moves swiftly on to Arras after his summary of the Somme campaign. Philpott summarises the actions briefly in *Attrition* by stating that 'over the winter the British army sustained pressure against a demoralised enemy on the Somme front, nibbling away at the German defences with effective localised attacks. The British army had grown in skill and confidence, while the GHQ was busy codifying the lessons of its gruelling baptism of fire into doctrine appropriate for positional warfare.'[285] With the Somme campaign nominally over, and with rich veins of historical information to mine elsewhere, the actions of British Fourth and Fifth Armies on the Somme

[283] G. Sheffield, introduction p.xx in S. Jones (ed), *The Darkest Year; The British Army on the Western Front, 1917* (Helion, 2022).
[284] Lloyd, *The Western Front*, p. 264.
[285] W. Philpott, *Attrition; Fighting the First World War* (Abacus, London, 2015) p. 258.

front in January, February and March 1917 have largely slipped through the historiographical net.

In reality, as this chapter will show, the attacks made during this period had profound consequences, as they led to the first of the voluntary German withdrawals from the battle lines of 1916, and then to the large-scale retreat to the Hindenburg Line in mid-March 1917. In January in particular, the capture of the bulk of Redan Ridge, to the north-east of Beaumont-Hamel, led to the Germans giving up sections of the line in front of the villages of Serre and Gommecourt, which had held out since 1 July 1916. These gains encouraged Fifth Army to broaden the offensive to the south side of the Ancre and push towards Miraumont, which the Germans vacated with their preliminary withdrawal in mid-February. Fourth Army were hampered during this period by the enforced extension of their line to the south, but attempts were made to threaten the German line in front of the Butte de Warlencourt and Le Transloy. As the appearance of a general withdrawal by the Germans on the Somme Front became clearer, efforts were made to upset the orderly nature of the retreat by both Fourth and Fifth Armies; Fifth army in their drive on the R1 line in front of Grévillers and Bucquoy, and Fourth Army with a divisional-level set-piece at Bouchavesnes, to the south of Moislains Wood. Fifth Army's capture of Irles on 10 March was the final act before the German 'marching day' on 16 March, leaving British and French forces to find empty trenches in front of them on the morning of 17 March.

The key actions in this period of operations can be divided into the following phases:

1. Actions on the Ancre (Fifth Army).
2. Operations towards Le Transloy and Bapaume (Fourth Army).
3. Pursuit to the German R1 Line following the initial withdrawal of late February.
4. Independent actions.

This chapter will examine the ten case-studied divisions following their actions and training periods covered in chapters one and two. It will demonstrate that in certain divisions, tactical and operational progress is detectable through the changes in approach to problems which had existed during the previous year's fighting. Extensive attention to detail is evident in certain attack plans, which shows a greater awareness of battlefield challenges: an awareness

that in all likelihood comes from experience of both success and failure. Success was not guaranteed, but even those units which struggled in this period showed elements of increased flexibility, modifying plans to suit the conditions for subsequent attacks. This chapter will demonstrate that the clearest difference between the actions of 1916 and those of early 1917 was in the preparation for action and attention to detail. This came from astute judgement of what was required to attain objectives, based on experience. Additionally, fighting styles were modified, and advances achieved without defined offensive operations taking place, in a style of fighting more associated with the year 1918. Furthermore, the attention given to defeating the counter-attack was a clear aspect of progress from the previous year. These improvements and developments were largely achieved with no or little evidence of reference to the latest training pamphlets, demonstrating the learning that had taken place in the previous weeks without doctrinal development.

Actions on the Ancre

Following 32nd Division's failed attempt to capture Munich and Frankfort Trenches on 18 November and the subsequent attempts to rescue the cut-off parties from the Border Regiment and Highland Light infantry, 7th Division were brought into the line. By 24 November, the battalions of 20 Brigade had taken over part of the line near Beaumont-Hamel from 32nd Division. 7th Division was immediately put under instruction to prepare an assault to capture Munich Trench, the German position on the high ground to the north-east of Beaumont village, which gave the enemy observation of the British rear areas and the approach to Auchonvillers.[286] Watts proposed to wait until the approach trenches could be properly constructed and boarded, which meant delaying the attack until after 3 December, which was deemed acceptable by XIII Corps command, which had recently taken over that sector from V Corps. In the meantime, 7th Division was keen to adopt an aggressive attitude and secure identifications of the enemy units opposite; therefore, rewards were issued to men who could bring in German prisoners. The divisional general staff diary recorded 'that to encourage men to capture prisoners, a reward of £5 a head is offered for each of the first 20 prisoners captured between 1st and 15th December'.[287] As a further incentive, on 2 December the division offered

[286] TNA WO 95/1631/3, 7th Division general staff diary, November 1916, Appendix XXXVII cites V Corps message G.X.8452 dated 23 November 1916, instructing 7th Division to submit proposal for attack on Munich Trench.
[287] TNA WO 95/1631/3, 7th Division general staff diary, entry for 30 November 1916.

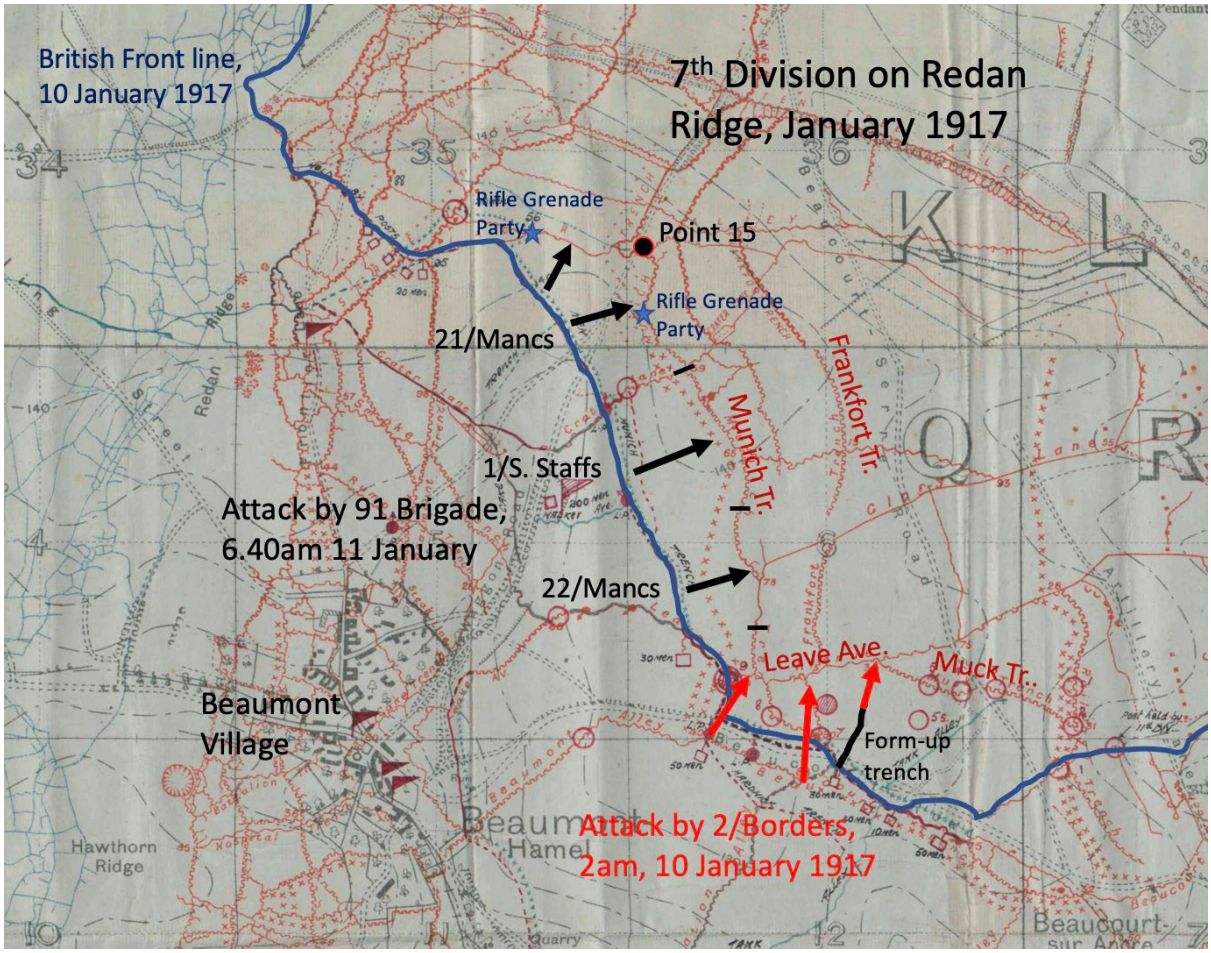
10 days leave to each man to bring in a prisoner, and when a patrol from 2/HAC brought in a prisoner on 7 December, the battalion commander personally added a further £5 to the prize fund.[288] The efforts to bring in more prisoners became bolder as December wore on, with an intelligence officer from Fifth Army command coming to the front on Christmas Day and advancing to the German lines with an officer of 1/RWF and 'endeavoured, without success, to get some Germans to surrender'.[289] Most bizarrely, on 30 December, a patrol from 2nd Battalion Border Regiment (2/Borders) encountered two Germans; the officer leading the patrol's revolver had slipped round his waist and he could not reach it, he 'therefore drew his pipe and pointed it at the enemy who put up his hands and was taken prisoner. The other man turned and fled and got away in the dark.'[290] In total, the divisional general staff diary recorded 44 prisoners taken in December, but then over 50 taken in the first two days of January, and a further 56 taken in the fighting for one of the division's outposts on 5 January.[291]

While 7th Division had not managed to advance its outposts far in the time between late November and early January, plans for the attack on Munich Trench were ordered to be set by 7 January, and then carried out at the first available opportunity.[292] The assault on Munich Trench was to be preceded by the capture of Leave Avenue and its join with Muck Trench, securing the right flank of the main action, and this took place in the early hours of 10 January (see map 4). The ground was deemed too heavy for an orthodox assault under a barrage, and so three identical attacking groups were organised from 2/Borders, each operating in two parties:

- 1st party: 2 bombing sections, 1 rifle grenade section, 1 Lewis gun and a team of 4 men, 15-20 riflemen and 2 runners ('mopping up' party included). [293]
- 2nd Party: 4 carriers for small arms ammunition (SAA), 8 carriers for bombs, 9 carriers for wire and stakes.

[288] TNA WO 95/1662/1, War Diary for 2/HAC, 7 December 1916.
[289] TNA WO 95/1631/3, 7th Division general staff diary, entry for 25 December 1916.
[290] TNA WO 95/1655/1, War Diary for 2/Borders, entry for 20-31 December 1916.
[291] C. Falls, *Official History of the Great War; Military Operations, France and Belgium 1917* Vol. I (London, IWM, 1992), p. 67.
[292] TNA WO 95/1668/2, War Diary for 21/Mancs, '91st Infantry Brigade; Instructions for forthcoming operations No.1', 27 December 1916.
[293] TNA WO 95/1655/1, War Diary for 2/Borders, entry for 10 January 1917.

- Remainder of company as support.[294]



Map 4: 7th Division attacks on Redan Ridge, 10-11 January 1917

Although some British posts had been established in the south-eastern end of Muck Trench, these were evacuated to allow a heavy barrage to be placed on the objective in the days before the attack, which was to come from the south and west. A new trench had been cut from a strong point in Beaucourt Trench to enable one of the assaulting parties to form up under cover, closer to the objective. The heavy artillery paused for an hour between 10 and 11pm on 9 January to allow the attacking parties to move into position, then fired intensely on the objective until zero (2am, 10 January), whereupon it lifted its fire to form a protective barrage.[295] The attack itself went well, with assaulting troops on their objectives by 2.20am,

[294] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, App IX, 'Report on the attack on Leave Avenue and Muck Trench, carried out by 2nd Bn. Border Regiment, on January 10th, 1917'.
[295] TNA WO 95/1654/2, 20 Brigade HQ Diary, January 1917, '20th Infantry Brigade order No 112', 8 January 1917.

although the news did not reach 20 Brigade headquarters until 3.25am. Parties of Royal Engineers were sent up to assist with the consolidation of the captured positions, and duck-board tracks were laid to the two left positions, while two Vickers machine guns were brought forward.[296] Casualties were slight in the attack; only three men slightly wounded, although the positions were heavily shelled by the enemy during the day, resulting in seven men killed, forty-five wounded and two missing. However, three officers, 128 other ranks, two machine guns and an automatic rifle were captured.[297] More importantly, the right flank for the main assault was secure.

1/S Staffs, 21/ and 22/Mancs from 91 Brigade were employed in the attack on Munich Trench, although none of the three battalions committed their entire strength to the assault. Each battalion maintained a reserve, and 2nd Battalion Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment (2/Queen's) were kept back as brigade reserve. This attack did employ a creeping barrage from the divisional artillery which, due to the nature of the ground, was possibly the slowest barrage employed in the entire war, advancing at a rate of 50 yards in 5 minutes.[298] No special programme was set for the heavy artillery prior to zero, but a steady bombardment was maintained on Munich Trench in the days and nights preceding the attack.[299] One potential problem was the re-entrant adjacent to a small salient, named Point 15, where Lager Alley met Munich Trench in 21/Mancs section. Two parties of rifle grenadiers were given the task of taking positions in the two respective trenches to the south and west of the strong point, to bring the enemy under a crossfire of grenades, should significant resistance be encountered.[300] 21/Mancs had the most challenging role of the three assaulting battalions, as they also had responsibility of the left flank, which was planned to be held along Lager Alley, facing north. For this task, they allocated 'A' Company, less two platoons, making 21/Mancs'

[296] TNA WO 95/1654/2, 20 Brigade HQ Diary, January 1917, '20th Infantry Brigade order No 112', 8 January 1917
[297] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, App IX, 'Report on the attack on Leave Avenue and Muck Trench, carried out by 2nd Bn. Border Regiment, on January 10th, 1917'
[298] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, App XI, 'Narrative of attack of Munich Trench', dated 16 January 1917 and C. Falls, *Official History of the Great War; Military Operations, France and Belgium 1917* Vol. I (London, IWM, 1992), p. 68.
[299] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, App XI, 'Narrative of attack of Munich Trench'.
[300] TNA WO 95/1668/2, War Diary for 21/Mancs, January 1917, 'Instructions for forthcoming operations – No.4.' 2 January 1917.

commitment in the assault slightly larger than the other two battalions. In support to the left flank, a protective machine gun barrage was provided by 3rd Division.[301] The attacking units formed up on tapes in front of the British line with bombing sections guarding the company flanks, men set to consolidate the position behind those assaulting, and carrying parties waiting in New Munich Trench.[302]

With zero set at 6.40am, the field artillery barrage opened at 6.37, causing around 50 casualties among 1/S Staffs, including the commander of their left company, which struggled to make headway in the boggy ground. [303] A number of men from this unit dug in short of Munich Trench, which was found by those who reached it to have been almost entirely obliterated. 22/Mancs and the right company of 1/S Staffs pressed on to the objective well enough, reaching Munich Trench before the enemy could bring machine guns into action.[304] There is some inconsistency in the narrative of 21/Mancs' action on the left, which mostly progressed unimpeded, although the official history and published divisional history suggest that Point 15 held out for over an hour.[305] The divisional report mentions only that the point was reported clear by carrier pigeon at 8.30am, and mentions no delay in the capture.[306] 21/Mancs own report, however, suggests that there was no hold-up, stating:

> The centre company ['D'] was slightly fired at from direction of Point 15 but the opposition was immediately overcome. The enemy at once surrendering on the trenches being entered about 7am…The brigade rifle grenadiers were not called on to fire rifle grenades as the attack was nowhere held up.[307]

On balance, the appearance of resistance was more likely down to a delay in communication, than any difficulties in capturing the position. Consolidation had already been planned, and the intention was to mirror the defence style of New Munich Trench, holding Munich Trench

[301] TNA WO 95/1668/2, War Diary for 21/Mancs, January 1917, 'Operation Orders No.38; 21st Battalion the Manchester Regiment'.
[302] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, 'Attack on Munich Trench by 91st Infantry Brigade Jan 11th 1917; Sketch showing position of attacking troops at zero hour.'
[303] TNA WO 95/1670/2, War Diary for 1/S Staffs, entry for 11 January 1917.
[304] TNA WO 95/1669/2, War Diary for 22/Mancs, entry for 11 January 1917.
[305] Atkinson, *The Seventh Division,* p335, Falls, *Official History, 1917 vol I*, p68.
[306] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, App XI, 'Narrative of attack of Munich Trench'.
[307] TNA WO 95/1668/2, War Diary for 21/Mancs, January 1917, 'Narrative of operations for capture of Munich Trench'.

with a series of posts at designated points.[308] This task was begun during the day and continued the following night.

The capture of Munich Trench was probably helped by a thick mist on the ground at the time of the attack, obscuring any view the defenders may have had. As had been the case the previous day, casualties in the assault were slight, but mounted as snipers and artillery fired on the units consolidating their gains. In total, 91 Brigade suffered 11 officer and 264 other rank casualties, a relatively low proportion of them being killed; 3 officers and 60 other ranks. Approximately 205 prisoners were taken. Douglas Haig's despatch in the middle of 1917 reveals his view on these actions:

> In January a number of small operations were carried out with [the object of capturing the Beaumont-Hamel Spur], resulting in a progressive improvement of our position. Before the end of the month the whole of the high ground north and east of Beaumont Hamel was in our possession, we had pushed across the Beaucourt Valley 1,000 yards north of Beaucourt Village, and had gained a footing on the southern slopes of the spur to the east.
>
> The most important of these attacks was undertaken at dawn on the morning of the 11th January against a system of hostile trenches extending for some 1,500 yards along the crest of the spur east and north-east of Beaumont Hamel. By 8.30 a.m. all our objectives had been captured, together with over 200 prisoners.[309]

The high quality of planning shown by 7th Division ahead of 10 and 11 January is evident in their adept identification of their requirements prior to the attack, as well as troops used in auxiliary roles, such as carrying parties and laying duckboard tracks. While the artillery bombardment was imperfect, it was of sufficient strength to subdue the enemy and destroy the wire, and slow enough to be followed over extremely heavy ground. The relatively low casualty figures, combined with the high number of prisoners taken in the assault and in the days prior, suggest unusually low morale among the enemy at this time. Rather than using this

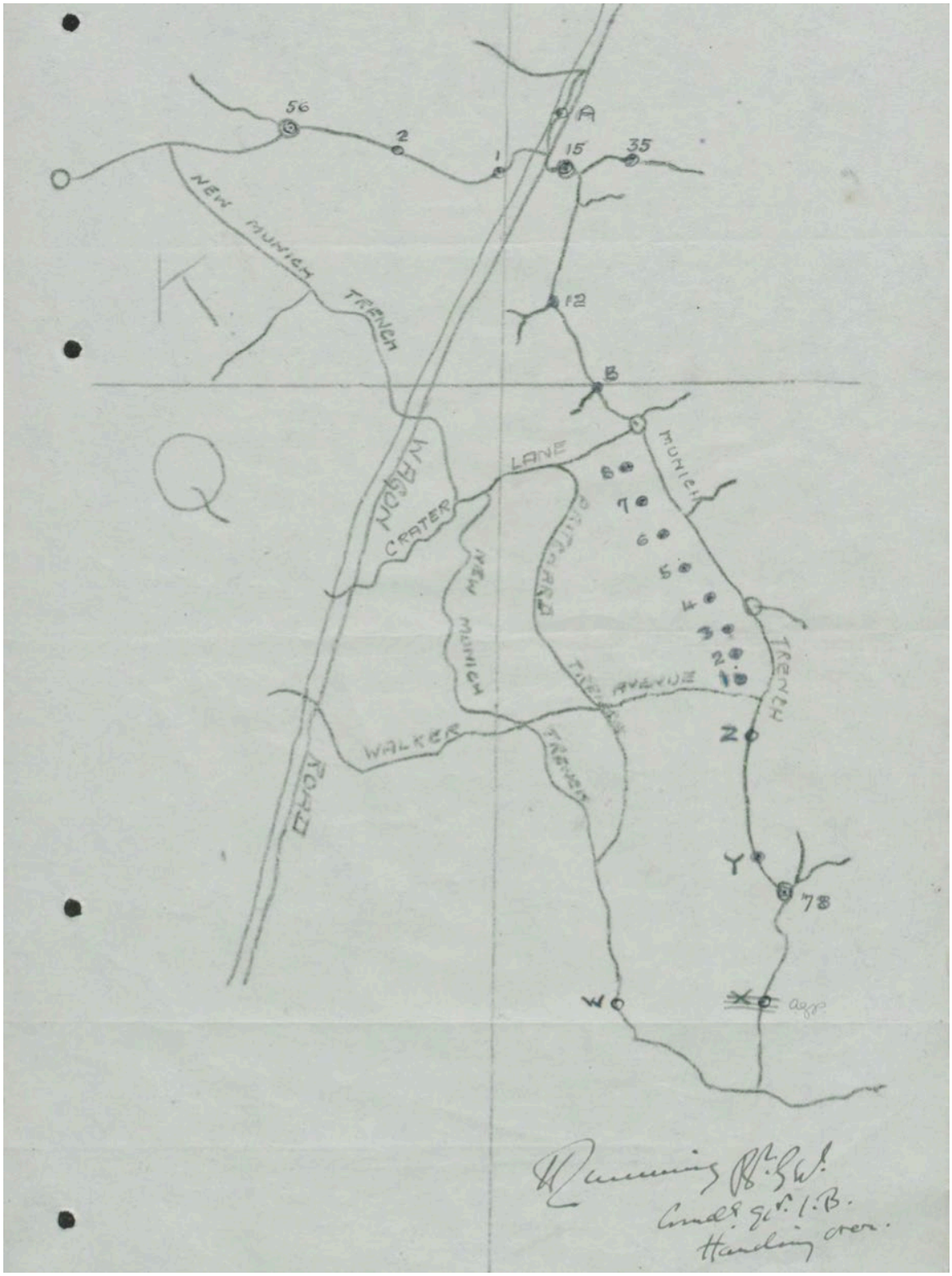
[308] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, January 1917, App 7, 'Narrative of Attack on Munich Trench'.
[309] Sir Douglas Haig's third despatch (operations on the Ancre, 1916, and pursuit of German retreat to Hindenburg Line), dated 31 May 1917. J.H. Boraston (ed), *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches (December 1915-April 1919)* (J.M. Dent, 1979) p. 66.

possibility to diminish 7th Division's achievement, however, it is important to acknowledge the role of the division's aggressive attitude in engendering this mindset. The one area in which criticism may legitimately be levelled at 7th Division is in minimising casualties during the consolidation period. 1/S Staffs deviated from the prescribed consolidation plan, electing to dig 8 new posts 30 yards to the west of Munich Trench, whereas the two Manchester Regiment battalions either side consolidated existing posts in Munich Trench and Lager Alley (see map 5).[310] Despite holding the centre portion of the line and suffering around 50 casualties from friendly artillery, 1/S Staffs endured a much lower fatality rate than the Manchesters from the known casualties (see table 3). This may be attributable to the fact that 1/S Staffs dug in a short distance away; not far enough to be missed completely, but far enough for the effects of the shellfire and sniping to be abated.

	Killed		Wounded		Missing	
	Officers	ORs	Officers	ORs	Officers	ORs
21/Mancs	2	17	2	54	0	3
1/S Staffs	0	8	5	81	1	9
22/Mancs	1	15	0	54	1	10

Table 3. Casualties among attacking battalions, 91 Brigade, 11-12 January 1917.[311]

[310] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, January 1917, App 7, 'Narrative of Attack on Munich Trench'.
[311] TNA WO 95/1669/2, War Diary for 22/Mancs, entry for 13 January 1917; TNA WO 95/1670/2, War Diary for 1/S Staffs, entry for 13 January 1917; TNA WO 95/1668/2, War Diary for 21/Mancs, January 1917, 'Narrative of Operations for capture of Munich Trench'.

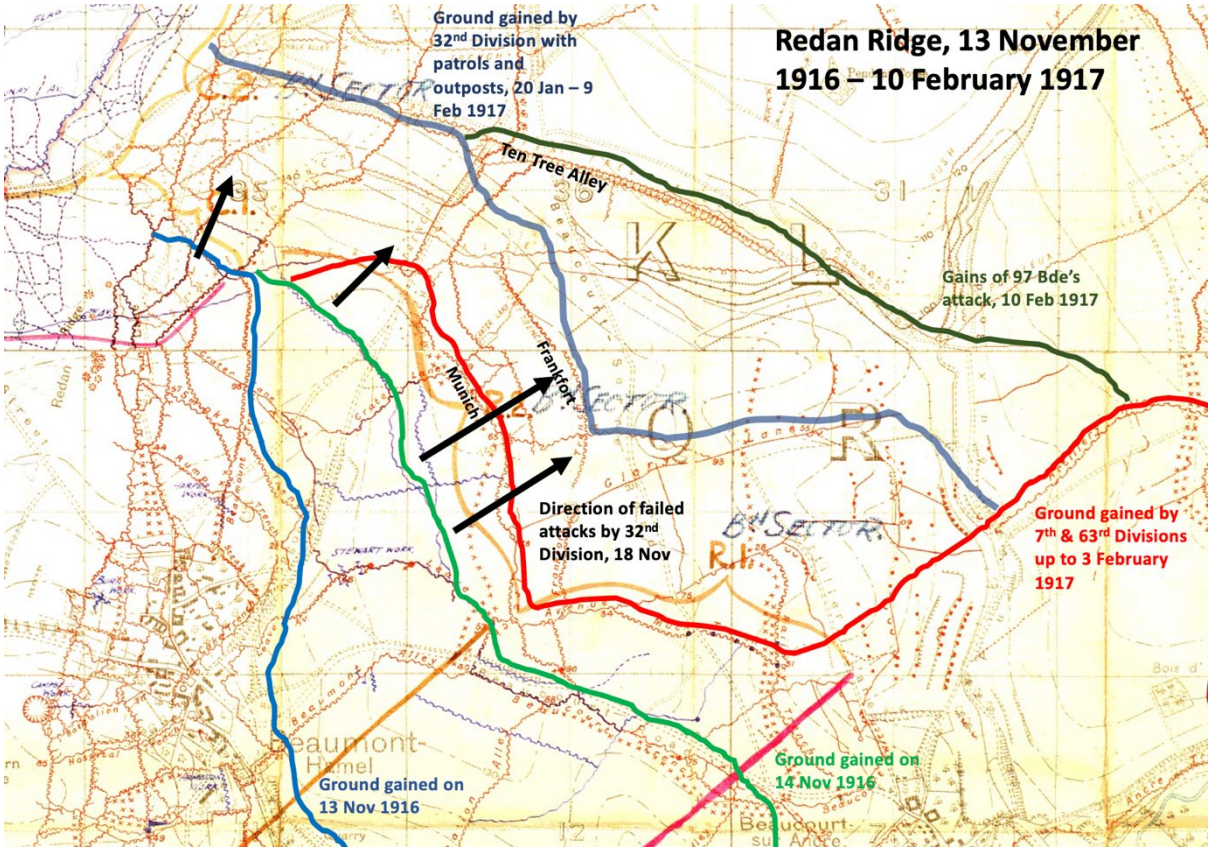


Map 5: Diagram of outposts at relief of 91 Brigade (7th Division) on night of 12-13 January 1917. The outposts dug by 1/S Staffs are set away from the trench in its central portion.[312]

[312] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, January 1917, B.M./1023, 14 January 1917.

With the observation point on the ridge secure, the next objective was to consolidate the gains further, which meant taking the main trench line in the direction of Serre to the northeast, known as Ten Tree Alley. The capture of Ten Tree Alley by 32nd Division on 10 February 1917 was not so much a matter of a successfully planned set-piece action, but as a series of small actions in the weeks prior. From the reintroduction of the division on the night of 19-20 January to the lines over which they had fought in November, an aggressive mindset was evident. Frankfort trench, although still not yet occupied by the British, was too close to the newly-captured Munich trench to be held in force by the Germans. On 20 January an old German post roughly half-way along Frankfort trench was occupied without opposition by 2/ KOYLI.[313] The following day, this point was consolidated, and another unoccupied German post was taken further south. On 22 January, orders were issued for more outposts to be put out, and these orders were duly followed; it is of interest to note that two of the four posts established on 23 January were in very close proximity to those formerly occupied by the Germans. The intention may have been to attack any Germans who may have wished to reclaim their posts, or there may have been an awareness that the erstwhile German posts would doubtless be registered on enemy maps, and therefore liable to come under shellfire. A combination of the two is likely. Over the next eight nights, posts were pushed out, with a special focus on the left flank, by the old front line and the western end of Ten Tree Alley on 27 and 28 January, with six new posts established in that time. The territorial gains during this period are shown on Map 6. Clearly the Germans had noticed the change in tactics by this time, as on 30 January they launched a small-scale attack on two British posts, and an even smaller raid on a third; these were beaten back with little loss, and were not repeated on the following evenings. Indeed, over the next two days, German work parties were observed strengthening the triangular area to the north of Ten Tree Alley and to the South of the Serre Road. The German attempted attack on 30 January seems to have given 32nd Division's staff cause for thought; on 1 February no new posts were put out, but the following day both 14 Brigade and 97 Brigade between them put out ten new posts, the Divisional diary using the term 'fighting patrols' to describe those of 14 Brigade.[314]

[313] TNA WO 95/2368/4, 32nd Division HQ Diary, 20 January 1917. 97 Brigade is recorded as having taken the post known as 'The Englishman's nest', which is in the R.2 Subsector, at that point held by 2/KOYLI, the battalion diary has no detail.
[314] TNA WO 95/2368/4, 32nd Division HQ Diary, 2 February 1917.



Map 6: 32nd Division, 13 November 1916 – 10 February 1917

As it seemed that Ten Tree Alley was still held in strength, the next few days were spent identifying enemy outposts and machine guns for the artillery, and pushing outposts yet closer, so that when the attack was finally launched on 10 February, the distance to cover was short and the assaulting troops had intimate knowledge of the ground. The attack was principally carried out by two battalions, 2nd Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (2/KOYLI) and 11/Borders, both from 97 Brigade, meaning strong reserves were held not just by the divisional commander, but also the brigade, and even battalion commanders. One company of 16th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers (16/NF) were attached from 96 Brigade to guard the left flank, one supporting company from 17/HLI were placed at the disposal of 2/KOYLI's commander, and another was close by under brigade orders. There would be plenty of men spare for carrying parties which were supplied by 16/HLI, who were otherwise not involved. Forward observation officers were stationed in two of the outposts which had been established in late January, and both standing protective barrages and a creeping barrage was

used.[315] The assault itself took place in the evening, which would delay any enemy attempt to form up for a counter-attack, which eventually came the following day. For all this additional preparation, events did not unroll perfectly; two German strong points held out for at least a day, one of which caused a gap to appear between the two main attacking battalions until the morning on the day after the attack. One was captured, the other was withdrawn on 13 February, with German counter-attacks to reinforce it having failed.

These elements are in marked contrast with the November attack. Clearly the benefits of a period of time to familiarise themselves with the ground made a difference, and the speed with which the line of Ten Tree Alley was taken shows the energy of rested and fed men. Attention to detail made a difference; the importance of getting the men's ration quantities correct, and allowing the men hot food before an attack in freezing weather were stressed in the wake of the 18 November attack. For 10 February, a point was made of stopping at Auchonvillers on the way up to the line for a canteen of hot soup, a rum ration already having been issued.[316] In broader terms, the fact that strengthening work had been observed behind the German lines, coupled with the isolated and unrepeated German attacks on 30 January, would indicate that 32nd Division's aggressive efforts to dominate the battlefield had been successful. Even without the benefits of a major offensive action, the line had steadily been advanced by means of 'peaceful penetration', removing many of the outposts in front of the main enemy trench line which had very much become features of the German defensive style by that time. This made the assault on Ten Tree Alley a far easier task than if the same attack had been attempted from Munich Trench, with the added obstacles of enemy outposts in front. This method of countering the German outpost system of defence is rarely mentioned prior to mid-1918, and usually credited to Dominion forces from Australia and New Zealand. Charles Bean described the technique as being employed by Australian and New Zealand forces 'wherever the ground gave any freedom of movement, these Dominion troops began to pester the enemy, trying to waylay his patrols and cut his posts… it was the private war of

[315] TNA WO 95/2399/4, War Diary for 97 Brigade HQ, '97th Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 110', 7 February 1917.
[316] TNA WO 95/2399/4, War diary for 97 Brigade HQ, 'Report on Operations of 97th Inf. Bde. Feby. 10th and 11th', 25 February 1917.

the infantry which, in the four months April-July [1918] gave a strongly marked character to the campaign on the Australian and New Zealand fronts.'[317]

Stuart Mitchell's study on 32nd Division rather glosses over the victory at Ten Tree Alley as a 'successful action', and in doing so misses an opportunity to discuss a notable shift in fighting methods.[318] Bean described the style of fighting as 'peaceful penetration', and although the term itself was not used by 32nd Division at this time, the tactics employed on Redan Ridge show apparently identical objectives and techniques, and are worthy of the term. Philpott suggests the term is a creation of Fourth Army's commander Henry Rawlinson, and defines it as 'small-scale harassing attacks on the enemy's lines', with particular reference to troops from I ANZAC Corps in early 1917.[319] Robert Stevenson and Aaron Pegram have expanded on this definition in his chapter on trench raiding in Jean Bou's *The AIF in Battle*, with Pegram describing the circumstances for which peaceful penetration was suitable as where 'the German front line was no longer continuous and lacked fortification, which exposed it to small fighting patrols that could use the undulations, long grass, and sunken roads to their advantage to outflank and occupy outposts using surprise and minimal force.'[320] Pegram was discussing the situation after the German Spring Offensive in 1918, and while 'long grass' may not have applied on Redan Ridge in January 1917, this research suggests that any defensive situation in which communications are stretched, and outposts may be isolated and difficult to reinforce quickly, is suitable for the employment of 'peaceful penetration' methods. Jack Sheldon, in referencing the history of German Reserve Infantry Regiment 74, suggests that these techniques were already being employed in late September 1916 by French Sixth Army. The following passage cited by Sheldon does also name the British as using these methods, but the unit in question was facing the French, and this research has yielded no supporting evidence that the BEF was using these methods prior to September 1916:

> The British and French, independent of their larger attacks, are employing the following methodology to work their way forward and improve their positions. They first probe forward with patrols. Behind come detachments of infantry equipped

[317] C.E.W. Bean, *ANZAC to Amiens* (Halstead, Sydney, 1968), p. 445.
[318] Mitchell, '32nd Division', p. 93.
[319] Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, p. 457.
[320] A. Pegram, 'Nightly Suicide Operations: Trench Raids and the Development of the AIF' in J. Bou (ed), *The AIF in Battle; How the Australian Imperial Force fought 1914-1918* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2016) p. 212.

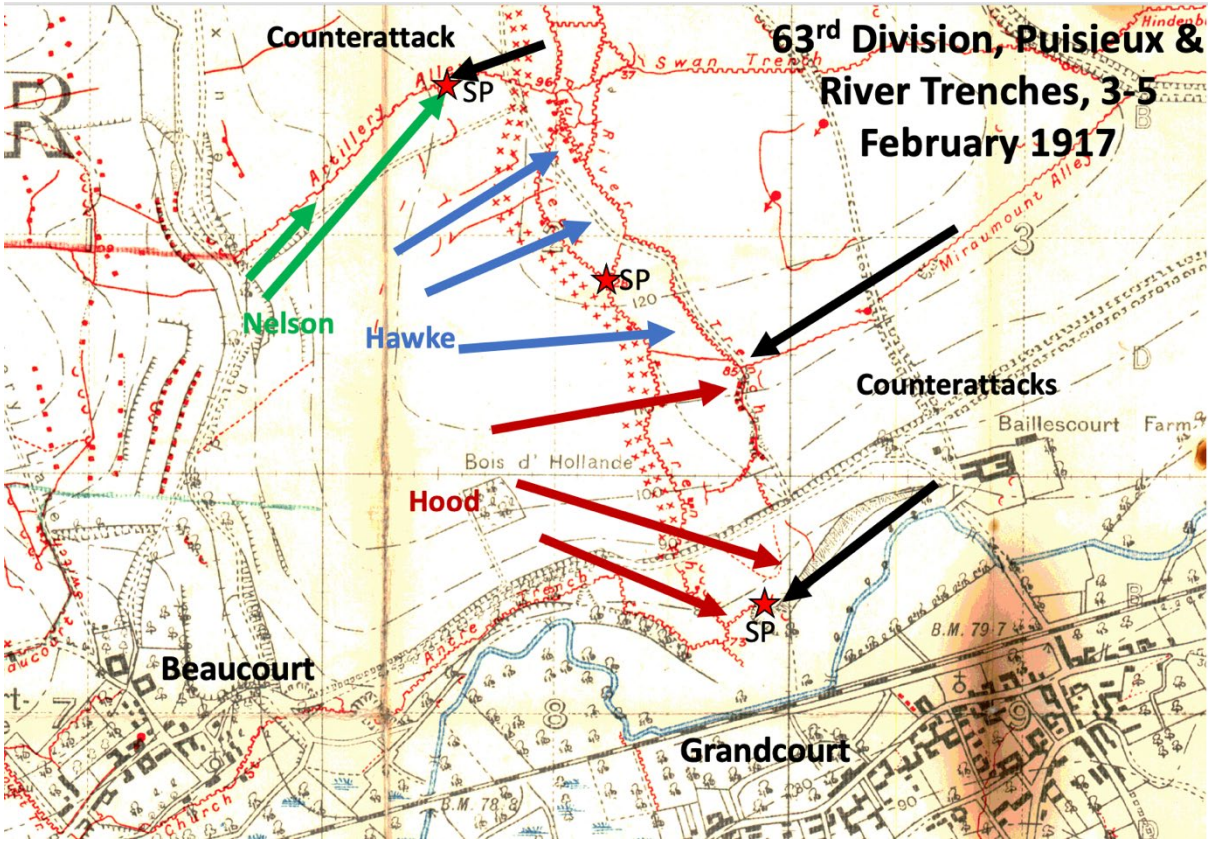
> with machine guns, ready to consolidate the small local successes achieved by the patrols. Every gap in our lines is soon discovered by this method and used to create nests [of resistance]. Later come larger detachments that drive further forward and attempt to enlarge the nests sideways. So in this way, at first unnoticed and in any case discounted, British and French nests are established. The seriousness of the situation is generally not recognised until it is too late.
>
> Experience shows us that these nests are then used by the British and French as jumping off places for further local attacks or are exploited as anchor points in order to force a route into our lines during the next major assault.[321]

Robert Stevenson examines the term 'peaceful penetration' in closer detail, describing its origins in the growth of pre-war German trade within the British empire, but also suggesting the term was known by other means, such as 'nibbling' or 'winkling'.[322] 'Winkling' certainly bears comparison with 'peaceful penetration', but seems more synonymous with 'raiding'; 53 Brigade in 18th Division planned a 'winkle' in early January 1917 that ended up taking on the form of a raid on Folly Trench by 10/Essex on 8 February.[323] The term 'peaceful penetration' did in fact appear in 8th Division's vocabulary two months later, however; having closed on the outposts of the Hindenburg Line, Brigadier-General H.W. Cobham issued a verbal order to 2nd Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment (2/Northants) on 14 April 1917 'to send out small parties to cut wire in front of German trenches and attempt by 'peaceful penetration' to site posts in suitable places so as to make the line more continuous'.[324] The BEF's ability to adopt a new, aggressive, and effective way of clearing outposts in front of main resistance lines is certainly evidence of improved tactical ability in early 1917, however this would still need to be coupled with powerful and well thought-through set-piece attacks as enemy defensive lines were encountered.

Concurrently with 32nd Division's efforts on the northern part of Redan ridge, 63rd Division was reintroduced to the Ancre valley itself in mid-January, a few days after the publication of the

[321] Sheldon, *Fighting the Somme*, p. 135, referencing Bauer, *History Reserve Infantry Regiment 74,* p. 376.
[322] R. Stevenson, 'The Battalion: The AIF Infantry Battalion and its Evolution' in Bou, *AIF in Battle*, p. 58.
[323] TNA WO 95/2035/1, 53 Brigade War Diary, section in appendices for February 1917 entitled 'Folly Trench: 8.2.17'.
[324] TNA WO 95/1717/2, 24 Brigade War Diary, 14 April 1917.

SS 135 pamphlet, allowing the division no time out of the lines with the new instructions. With German observation along the valley reduced, the opportunity was present to push towards Grandcourt and Miraumont. The immediate German defences on 63rd Division's front consisted of a double trench line, Puisieux and River Trenches, which ran to the north away from the Ancre, north of Grandcourt. Two battalions, Hood and Hawke from 189 Brigade, were assigned the task of assaulting and consolidating these lines, with Drake in support if needed, and Nelson forming a protective left flank. On this occasion, Hawke and Hood's commanders were able to keep a company in reserve, deploying three each in the assault. Their flank companies were ordered to attack in three waves, the first of two platoons and the second and third of one platoon each; the central companies were to attack in two waves, each of two platoons. Attention was given to consolidation, with the men of the second and third waves each instructed to carry a pick or shovel up to the enemy lines. On capturing the objectives, battle patrols were to advance with tools and set up outposts as close as possible to the next enemy line.[325]



Map 7: 63rd Division at Puisieux & River Trenches near Grandcourt, 3-5 February 1917

[325] TNA WO 95/3114/2, War Diary for Hawke Battalion, February 1917, 'Hawke Battalion Operation Order No.7', 31 January 1917.

The attack was launched at 11pm on 3 February, and although both assaulting battalions recorded moving on to their objectives quickly and with little opposition, a gap appeared in the centre of the line. Once again, a strong point in the centre of the battlefield put up a stubborn resistance, and with orders not to attack these positions directly, the centre and right companies of Hawke broke contact to encircle the strong point (see map 7). Hawke's right company then stayed in touch with the majority of Hood battalion, which lost direction and veered right, taking up a line facing the river, almost due south.[326] Hood's commander while Freyberg recovered, Lieutenant-Colonel Munro, moved to correct the error and managed to get the battalion on roughly the correct alignment when he was wounded, at around 1.30am on 4 February.[327] The gap between Hawke and Hood remained, however, until the morning of 5 February, despite a concerted effort to take the strong point being planned for the evening of 4 February. This was disrupted by a significant German counter-attack on Hawke's left flank, where Nelson Battalion had been unable to clear another strong point in Artillery Alley and was therefore not in touch with Hawke's left.[328] Additional counter-attacks broke into the junction of Miraumont Alley and River Trench, and captured a post close to the river on Hood's right flank, which was still in the process of being consolidated.[329]

Drake Battalion was ordered into action around 10am on 4 February, despatching 'A' Company to work with Hood to recapture the lost post, detailing a platoon to complete this task. 'B' Company were sent to close the gap between Hood and Hawke, and were instructed to work down the obliterated River trench from Hood's left, behind the central strong point, and cut it off. [330] 'A' Company were badly hit by shellfire as another enemy bombing attack coincided with their arrival in line, and the entire platoon detailed for the attack on the outpost were lost. 'B' Company were able to link up with Hawke in the late morning of 5 February, and its remaining two companies were brought into bridge the gap between Hawke's left and

[326] TNA WO 95/3114/2, War Diary for Hawke Battalion, February 1917, 'Report on Operations of 3/2/17', 6 February 1917.
[327] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, 3-4 February 1917.
[328] TNA WO 95/3114/3, War Diary for Nelson Battalion, February 1917, 'Report on Operations before Beaucourt during period February 1st to February 5th, Inclusive'.
[329] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, 3-4 February 1917.
[330] TNA WO 95/3114/1, War Diary for Drake Battalion, February 1917, 'Report on the action of the Drake Battn' in the operations of 3rd-5th Feb 1917 north of the River Ancre'.

Nelson's right. These were also caught by shellfire and ended up taking a line of shellholes, in very much a depleted state, with only three unwounded officers, two of whom were very recent arrivals. Further reinforcements from 1/HAC and 7/RF were fed in over the next 24 hours to consolidate and retake posts, and battle patrols were pushed out as ordered; these units were found to be extremely vulnerable, as the Brigade report states: 'A great number of the missing were in battle patrols or parties who were sent out to re-take posts which had been lost, and who were never heard of again.'[331] Casualties across 189 Brigade amounted to 24 officers and 647 other ranks, from which around half were killed or missing; a higher proportion than usual.

The actions at Puisieux and River Trenches were comparable to the attack on 13 November in a number of ways, and at first glance show little progress; indeed, a court of inquiry was held at Hawke Bn HQ over three days in February to try and ascertain the causes of difficulty.[332] Again, a central strong point held out for over 24 hours, officer casualties were significant, units were split and gains were consolidated with difficulty. However, different approaches were employed in a bid to solve recurring problems, and casualties were significantly lower, even if only by virtue of fewer battalions being employed, and those units not committing their entire strength to the action immediately. Efforts to bypass points of resistance have the theoretical, if not practical hallmarks of infiltration techniques, used effectively by German infantry in late 1917 and early 1918. Efforts to get machine guns forward in the consolidation phase were commendable, even if they put the gun at risk, and reinforcements were either too early or too late; arriving *during* the enemy counter-attack was simply putting additional men in danger of falling victim to artillery fire. The reinforcements either needed to be hard on the heels of the assault troops to aid the digging-in, or held back to intervene once the counter-attack had taken place.

The imperfect execution of some sound, more advanced tactical principles than those employed on 13 November, highlight a shortage of experienced junior leadership. Hood battalion, whose gains 12 weeks earlier had been the highlight of the division's performance,

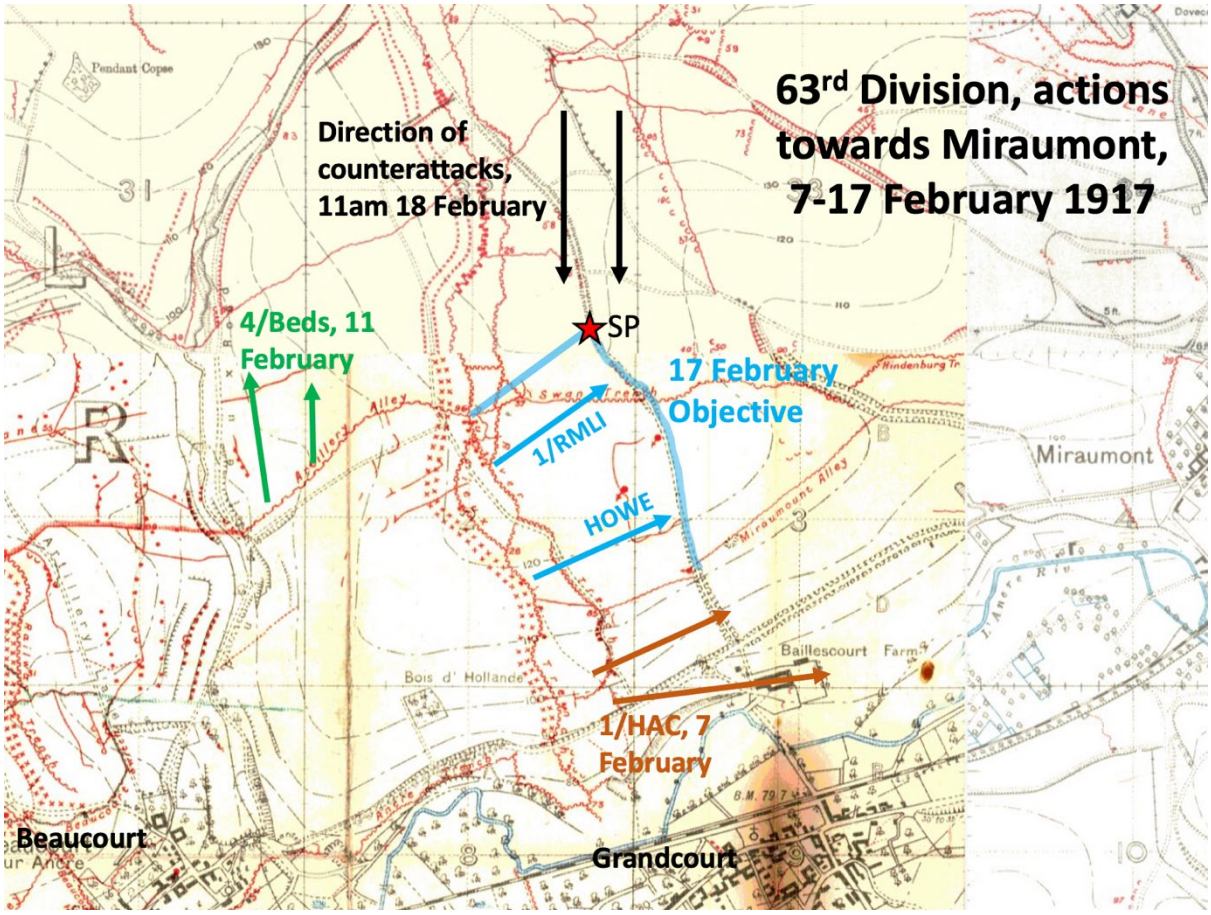
[331] TNA WO 95/3112/2, HQ Diary for 189 Brigade, February 1917, 'Report on Operations, 3rd – 5th February, 1917'.
[332] TNA WO 95/3114/3, War Diary for Nelson Battalion, 10-12 February 1917.

lost direction unacceptably and pulled Hawke apart, when Hawke's tasks were actually the more challenging. Again, there seems to have been little answer to the problem of snipers and rifle fire which was noted especially by Hood battalion; 'Germans undoubtably our superior in this part of warfare, possibly because they are in their own ground and also probably because they have a more thorough system of instruction'.[333] Training and platoon formations in 63rd Division did seem to be modernising steadily in this period, however, as rifle sections were recorded has having been formed and undergoing separate training under musketry specialists in mid-February.[334] Ultimately, there seems to have been insufficient time to incorporate replacement drafts, lessons from previous actions, and the latest training instructions.

Fifth Army's desire to maintain pressure on the Germans along the Ancre meant that 63rd Division's next actions came soon after, with an attack planned to cooperate with a broader effort made by II Corps on the south side of the river. Grandcourt was found to be evacuated on 7 February, and that evening 1/HAC assaulted and captured Baillescourt Farm under a barrage. This attack showed some technical skill in extending from close to open order on the approach to the farm complex, and 86 prisoners were taken, with a similar number of casualties suffered.[335] This was followed on 11 February as 4/Beds on the divisional left pushed their line forward to conform with the position taken by 32nd Division the previous day.[336] On 17 February, 18th and 2nd Divisions attacked to the south of the Ancre, while 63rd assaulted the sunken road to the north of Grandcourt and Baillescourt Farm (see map 8). Lessons on consolidation and vulnerability to enemy shellfire after capturing the objective had sunk in by this point; part of the divisional order read 'in order to keep the attacking troops clear of hostile artillery fire directed from the map, and at the same time to adapt new defences to the lie of the ground, care will be taken so far as possible to avoid old trenches in selecting positions for consolidation'.[337] The attack was carried out at 5.45am by 1/RMLI and Howe Battalion, with Hood and Anson in support. Both assaulting battalions record being

[333] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, notes in in diary following entry for 5 February 1917.
[334] TNA WO 95/3111/2, War Diary for Howe Battalion, entry for 12 February 1917.
[335] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, entry for 7 February 1917.
[336] TNA WO 95/3118/2, War Diary for 4/Beds, entry for 11 February 1917.
[337] TNA WO 95/3093/5, 63rd Division General Staff Diary, February 1917, Appx XXXVIII, '63rd (R.N.) Divisional Order No.95', 15 February 1917.

heavily shelled prior to and during the attack, but both reached their objectives within an hour or so, with 1/RMLI achieving the impressive haul of 102 prisoners, 2 machine guns and a 77mm field artillery piece captured.[338] A strong point on 1/RMLI's left held out until later in the morning, but was eventually taken along with its garrison of around 40. Again, a gap appeared in the line on 1/RMLI's front, but this was immediately identified and plugged by a company of Hood battalion.[339] Howe's actions were simpler, and having quickly captured their objectives they immediately set to creating a line of outposts 50-100 yards east of the sunken road.[340] The main enemy counter-attack came from a position due north of the position taken in the sunken road and came with no artillery preparation, hoping to make use of the cover of mist. The force was observed and SOS signals were fired by 1/RMLI, bringing down a highly effective protective barrage which broke the attack up, for no British losses.[341]



Map 8: 63rd Division actions near Grandcourt, towards Miraumont, mid-February 1917

[338] TNA WO 95/3110/1, War Diary for 1/RMLI, entry for 17 February 1917.
[339] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, entry for 17 February 1917.
[340] TNA WO 95/3111/2, War Diary for Howe Battalion, entry for 17 February 1917.
[341] TNA WO 95/3093/5, 63rd Division General Staff Diary, entry for 18 February 1917.

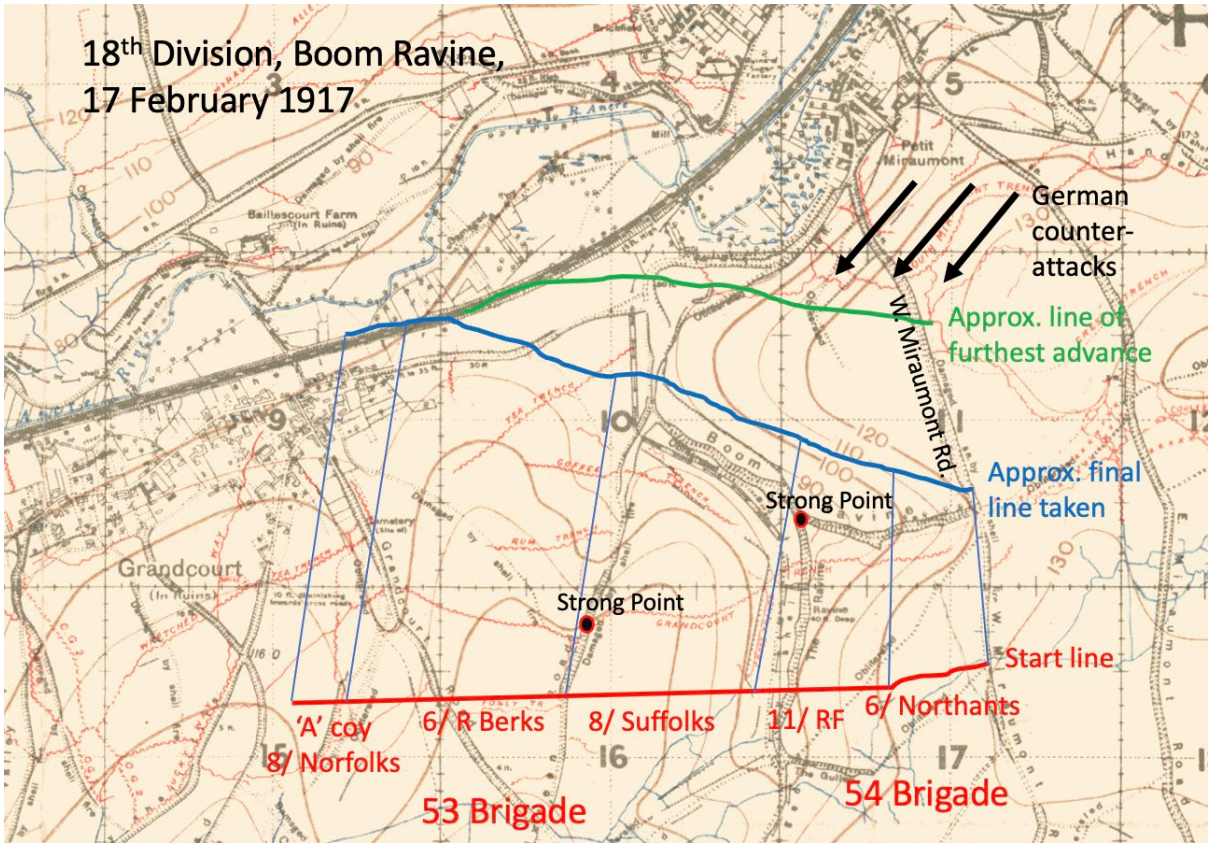
Casualties to 63rd Division in the assault itself were not negligible, with 23 officers and 526 other ranks killed, wounded and missing, principally from the two assaulting battalions, and suffered during the consolidation.[342] However, they did compare favourably to those on 3 February, and with an intelligence failure south of the Ancre tipping the Germans off to an imminent attack in the, the consequences could potentially have been worse.[343] Furthermore, the relative smoothness with which the operation was conducted hints at a measure of tactical progress. The short time between attacks may have been a contributing factor in this regard, with swift 'on-the-job' learning taking place, but in reducing the numbers participating in the attack, scaling back the objectives and putting the emphasis on consolidation inside the range of the supporting artillery, 63rd Division put themselves in a position to inflict a heavy defeat on a strong German counter-attack. This had the additional benefit of reducing the risk of losing overextended parties of men. This adoption of a small-scale proto bite-and-hold style of attack was becoming more widespread, particularly among those formations who either worked along the Ancre in early 1917 or who came in contact with those who did. This technique was related to, and complimented, the developing peaceful penetration method of advancing the line. The battle patrols were pushed out again after the action on 17 February, but did not advance to the point where they were isolated and vulnerable, and there are no records of men being lost as they had been two weeks previously. The more conservative methods, coupled with the respectable efforts to consolidate, show that although 63rd Division may not have conducted operations in as sophisticated a manner as 7th Division, the desire to reduce casualties was having a positive impact on tactics.

On the left flank of II Corps's advance, but with a central task on the south side of the Ancre, was 18th Division, by this point without its commander through the Somme campaign, with Ivor Maxse having moved on to lead the newly-formed XVIII Corps. Major-General Richard Lee replaced Maxse, and though the divisional history records a sense of loss at their former commander's departure, Lee's arrival was not seen to weaken the division at all. Lee is

[342] C. Falls, *Military Operations, 1917* Vol. I (London, IWM, 1992), p. 82.
[343] A number of 18th Division's war diaries record information taken from German prisoners on how they obtained the details on the British assault, and a more modern investigation is detailed in Trevor Pidgeon's *Boom Ravine* (Leo Cooper, 1998). It seems at least one man from 2nd Division crossed no-man's land.

described as 'display[ing] infinite knowledge, quick grip and decision…He had a great gift for map-reading, and consequently never failed in his battle dispositions to make full use of ground.'[344] Lee remained in command of the division for the remainder of the war. Although Lee's first command of the division in action would be on 17 February 1917 as part of the Operations on the Ancre, battalions had begun preparing for the assault before Maxse's departure, with 11th Battalion Royal Fusiliers (11/RF) digging practice trenches representing those at Miraumont.[345] 11/RF were earmarked a leading role in the assault and had several battalion-level sessions on the practice trenches before taking the left assaulting role in a brigade demonstration. This was the role they would take during the assault itself, although other units took different positions to those practiced; 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment (6/Northants) practiced in the '4th Battalion' supporting role, but took the position of right assaulting battalion on the day of the attack.[346] The capacity to switch roles had been a point of pride in *ad hoc* actions such as at Trônes Wood in July 1916, but as part of a set piece in this context, shows a strong confidence in unit flexibility which is not necessarily honed in formal learning, but in practical experience. Though the value of experience has never been in doubt, the fact that it enabled flexibility in this manner was of operational value, rather than simply tactical. It ensured that the division could meet its commitments to neighbouring formations without the need for significant reorganisation, ensuring schedules could be met. The value of experience, rather than doctrinal learning, was apparent in this instance.

[344] Capt. G. H. F. Nichols, *The 18th Division in the Great War* (N&M Press, 2004), p. 138.
[345] TNA WO 95/2045/1, War Diary for 11/RF, 1-27 December 1916.
[346] TNA WO 95/2044/2, War Diary for 6/Northants, 27 December 1916.



Map 9. 18th Division attack towards Miraumont & capture of Boom Ravine, 17 February 1917

The attack towards Miraumont was made with 18th Division in the centre, while 63rd (Royal Naval) Division conducted its smaller operation on the left, and 2nd Division assaulted with two brigades on the right. The main objective of this operation was to gain control of the high ground to the south of Miraumont, which would probably force the Germans to withdraw from the village.[347] 18th Division used the same two brigades which had led the attack at Thiepval in September, but with a different formation; 53 Brigade used 6/R Berks, 8/Suffolks and 'A' Company 8/Norfolks for the assault, with 'B' & 'D' Coys 8/Norfolks to support the R Berks and Suffolks if needed. 54 Brigade put 11/RF and 6/Northants into the line, with 12/Middlesex in the supporting role (see map 9). Zero hour was set at 5.45 am, meaning both the form-up and assault would be carried out in darkness. From 4.30 am, however, while the attacking units were taking their position in no-man's land, a heavy enemy bombardment was opened on the preparing troops, causing casualties and disrupting the formations. The attack went ahead on time regardless.

[347] C. Falls, *Military Operations, 1917* Vol. I (London, IWM, 1992), pp. 75-76.

53 Brigade's assault went largely as planned, despite some hard fighting and a delay at Coffee Trench. The company of 8/Norfolks on the left flank of the division suffered a slight loss of direction but corrected themselves and pressed on to their final objective on the railway embankment, which they secured. Both 6/R Berks and 8/Suffolks advanced well initially in spite of some casualties, but then had to adjust as events on the right unfolded. The early enemy bombardment had hit 54 Brigade's units somewhat harder, in particular the right assaulting company of 6/Northants, whose commanding officer was among the casualties.[348] The British barrage, though accurate, was insufficiently heavy to subdue the enemy machine gunners and marksmen, and 11/RF in their report remarked on 'the high percentage of men that were hit through the head'. 11/RF right assaulting company had also suffered during the enemy bombardment, and when the attack pressed on to Grandcourt Trench, the battalion's left assaulting company became pinned by three machine guns firing from a strong point in the ravine just behind. At this point a sound decision was made, in that one of 8/Suffolks' platoons wheeled to its right and engaged the machine guns which were holding up the Royal Fusiliers, with rapid rifle and Lewis gun fire.[349] This subdued them sufficiently for 11/RF (by this stage entirely commanded by NCOs) to capture the crews, rally their remaining strength, and press on towards South Miraumont Trench under the command of a Company Sergeant Major.[350]

6/Northants had managed to cross Grandcourt Trench and reach the ravine, but only the right company was able to move beyond in time with the advancing barrage. Only small numbers from the assaulting battalions were able to pick their way through the strong wire in front of South Miraumont Trench. As such, they were too few to hold off a strong German counter-attack made between 8 and 8.30 am from the north east. Furthermore, although the previous days had been very cold, a thaw had set in overnight softening the ground, and causing rifles and Lewis guns to become clogged as the men struggled in the mud.[351] As 6/Northants were

[348] TNA WO 95/2044/2, War Diary for 6 Northants, 'Narrative of the part played by the 6th Northamptonshire Regiment in the operations against S. Miraumont Trench Feb. 17 1917'.
[349] TNA WO 95/2039/4, War Diary for 8/Suffolks, untitled narrative of events, 15-17 February 1917, dated 25 February 1917.
[350] TNA WO 95/2045/1, War Diary for 11/RF, 'Operations against S. Miraumont Trench on February 17th 1917 and the part played by the 11th Battn. Royal Fusiliers'.
[351] Falls, *1917*, p. 80.

most exposed to this threat, the battalion adjutant (by this time, in command of the brigade right) pulled his right flank back and endeavoured to hold a defensive line on the West Miraumont Road, facing east.[352] This exposed the battalion's left to enfilade fire from the north, which they endured for around an hour before withdrawing to a line just north of Boom Ravine, facing north. The battalions to the left of 6/Northants took corresponding positions to the north of Boom Ravine, linking up to the left flank of 53 Brigade.

Further information came to light in the hours following the action. As previously mentioned, the German defenders of Miraumont had been well alerted to the British plans to attack that morning, either by prisoners taken overnight, or a number of deserters. The punishing German bombardment in the period before zero, as well as the fresh troops in position to counter-attack effectively, leave us in little doubt that the intelligence coup for the defenders was significant. Though short of the final objective, the view into Miraumont from two angles was clear for Fifth Army, and within a week, the German defenders of Miraumont pulled back to their next defensive line, the first move in the series which would see the retreat to the Hindenburg line within a month.

General Gough's disappointment at the failure to capture the high ground was such that an enquiry was ordered, but in reality, 18th Division's performance was an extremely creditable one. In spite of the enemy knowing almost exactly when and where the attack was to take place, they advanced the line almost a kilometre, captured a tricky obstacle in already trying conditions, and turned an awkward salient into an untenable one for the Germans. Furthermore, there were signs that the quality of command among junior officers and NCOs was improving further on the previous year. What stands out in the reports is command responsibility dropping down to subalterns and NCOs with no perceptible breakdown in performance. The ability 6/Northants and 8/Suffolks showed to wheel round under fire, maintain unit cohesion and either attack an enemy position to support a neighbouring friendly unit, or to withdraw from a dangerous position in good order, is commendable. The fact that both sets of manoeuvres were ordered by ranks below captain, reflects well not just on the

[352] TNA WO 95/2041/4, 54 Brigade HQ Diary, Appendix D, 'Account of Operations against Boom Ravine and South Miraumont Trench on February 17th 1917, as far as they concern the 54th Infantry Brigade.'

officers in question, but also the men under their command, and their training and discipline. *SS 135* does covers flank protection in this manner in point 5 of the section on 'action of reserves', which states:

> The Company commander requires a reserve for three purposes:
>
> 1. To assist his own company to get forward by working quickly round the flanks of any point which may be holding up his leading lines.
> 2. To protect his flanks in the event of the companies on his right and left being hung up. This protection must be obtained by pushing in his reserve on the exposed flank and acting vigorously on the offensive. Thus he will not only protect himself, but also make it easier for the unit which is temporarily hung up to get forward.
> 3. If his attack succeeds in reaching its objective, he still requires a body of troops, well in hand, to exploit his success and gain ground to the front…

Operations towards Le Transloy and Bapaume

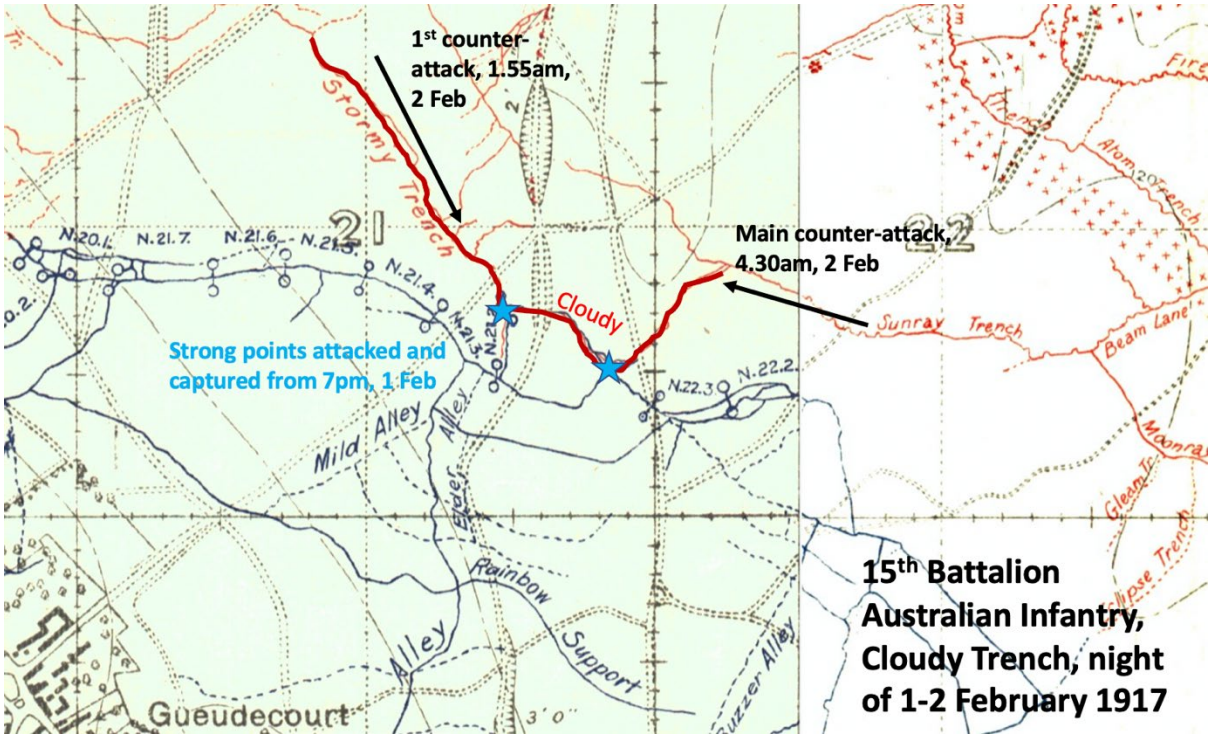
Fourth Army's offensive actions during this period were more modest than Fifth Army's; not only were they hampered by having to take over approximately 13 miles of line from the French on their right, they did not benefit from improved observation of the enemy positions opposite them as Fifth Army had done late in the previous year. 29th Division enjoyed a small success on 27 January to the south of Le Transloy, 'the Kaiser's Birthday raid' bringing in almost 400 prisoners, encouraging I ANZAC Corps on their immediate left to launch enterprises of their own.[353] First into action was Australian 4th Division, with the newly-appointed Major-General William Holmes in command.

Holmes had no time in training with his division, as at the end of the first week of January, Australian 4th Division moved back into the same sector they had held previously, near Gueudecourt. The string of actions they conducted in early February were part of a scheme laid down by General Birdwood to advance the line in I Anzac Corps's sector, involving the

[353] S. Gillon, *The Story of the 29th Division; A record of Gallant Deeds* (Naval & Military Press, reprint of 1925 edition).

planned capture of the Butte de Warlencourt.[354] Australian 4th Division's tasks were to capture the German salient formed by Cloudy Trench, north-east of Gueudecourt, and push up Stormy Trench once Cloudy was secure (see map 10). The first attempt on Cloudy Trench was made by 15/AI at 7pm on 1 February, with two bombing parties attacking under an 18-pounder artillery barrage. The smaller of the two parties, 70 men and 3 officers from 'C' Company, attacked towards a strong point at the southern tip of the salient, but were held by uncut wire.[355] Meanwhile, a larger force of 150 men and 3 officers from 'A' Company attacked another strong point where Cloudy and Stormy trenches met. A break-in was forced, and in expanding their gains this party managed to bomb up to the other objective. By 2am on 2 February both positions were taken, along with around 50 German prisoners.[356] Around this time the first German efforts to retake the position moved against the left flank supported by intermittent shelling. This was held for around two and a half hours, until a second, stronger counter-attack came up Sunray Trench on the right. SOS signals were fired and the Australian artillery responded promptly, but with insufficient weight to halt the German assault, and the enemy shelling had caused enough casualties for a withdrawal to be necessary. Casualties in the attack numbered 20 killed and approximately 150 wounded.[357]

[354] Bean, *AIF in France 1917,* p. 26.
[355] AWM: AWM4 23/32/23, War Diary for 15/AI, entry for 1 February 1917.
[356] AWM: AWM4 23/4/17, HQ Diary for Australian 4 Brigade, Appendix III, 'Daily intelligence report. From 6am 1-2-17 to 6am 2-2-17', 2 February 1917.
[357] AWM: AWM4 23/4/17, HQ Diary for Australian 4 Brigade, Appendix III, 'Daily intelligence report. From 6am 1-2-17 to 6am 2-2-17', 2 February 1917.

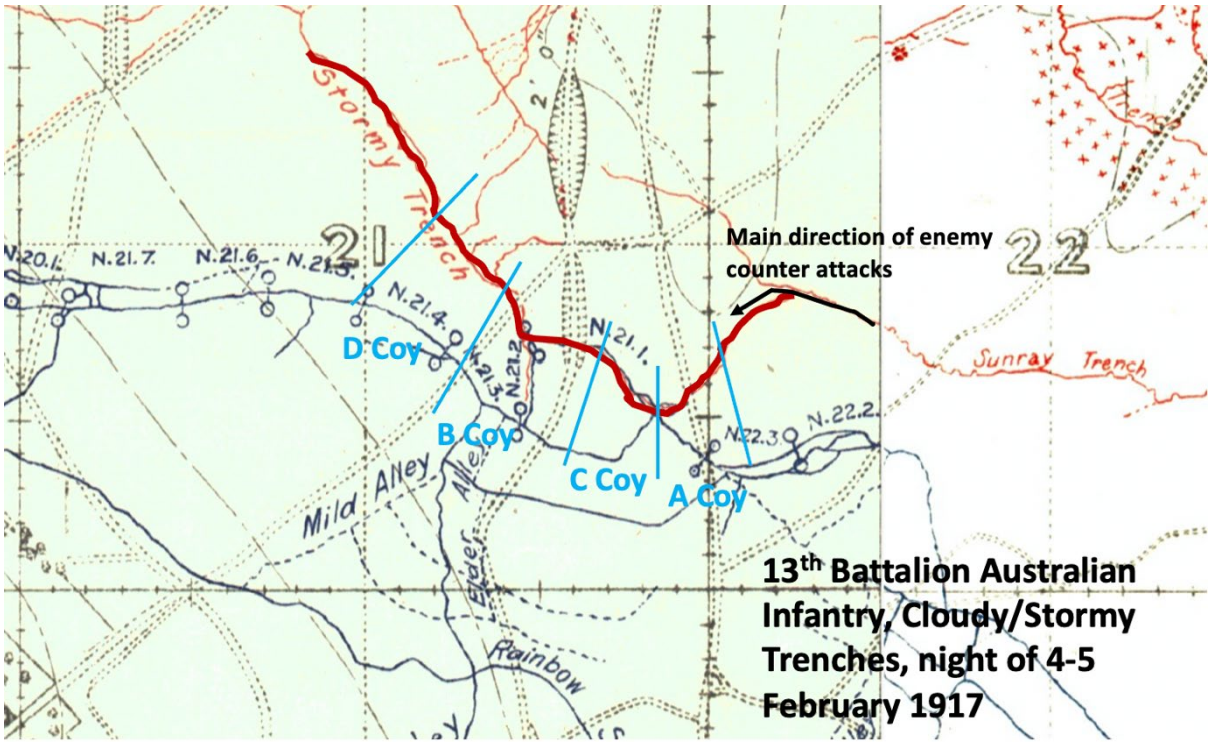


Map 10: 15th Battalion Australian Infantry at Cloudy Trench, 1-2 February 1917

Following the attack, Major-General Holmes conducted an interview with Lieutenant-Colonel McSharry of 15/AI, present at which were also Charles Brand (BGOC 4 Brigade) and his Brigade Major, Charles Rosenthal (Divisional CRA), and the commanding officer of 13/AI, Lieutenant-Colonel Durrant. Debriefing in front of a peer in this manner is significant, and shows an entirely professional desire for progress, rather than sparing the feelings of a commander who had failed to hold his objective. From this interview, Holmes made several conclusions:

- Artillery and Infantry both satisfactory in initial attack.
- Organisation to resist counter-attack not satisfactory. Lewis guns had to be maintained forward. If they were withdrawn due to intense artillery fire, they must be pushed out the moment it slackens.
- Officer commanding the attack did not take steps to reinforce the front line, and Lewis and machine guns were incorrectly used. No adequate defence was put up and the commander's second SOS signal was too late.
- Once the SOS signal was made, the artillery was slow to respond. However, the artillery can not fire indefinitely, and the infantry are 'inclined to expect too much from the artillery, without making adequate preparations to defend themselves'.

The attack was repeated by 13/AI and a company of 14/AI over the evening of 4-5 February, with zero at 10pm, and an artillery barrage opening 2 minutes earlier. Though Durrant only received his order formally on 3 February, he had been involved in the debrief following the first assault and Brigadier-General Brand had verbally given him the order to prepare his attack on 2 February; plans had to be made swiftly, but not in panicked haste. The formation employed was a more orthodox assault plan, with four companies in line, advancing in two waves; a single assault wave, followed by Lewis gunners (3 per company) and carriers (see map 11).[358] Provision was made for an overwhelming supply of Mills bombs; approximately 20,000 hand and 1,000 rifle grenades were stored either in the front line trenches or at battalion headquarters, ready to be taken forward.[359]



Map 11: 13th Battalion Australian Infantry at Cloudy Trench, 4-5 February 1917

At zero, the assaulting wave advanced on to the objectives quickly, with some short-lived resistance on the right flank. With good knowledge of the trench layout, mopping-up was

[358] AWM: AWM4 23/30/28, War Diary for 13/AI, February 1917, 'Thirteenth Australian Infantry Battalion Order No.12', 4 February 1917.
[359] AWM: AWM4 23/30/28, War Diary for 13/AI, February 1917, 'Report on Operations carried out by 13th Battalion AIF, Stormy Trench, N.E. of Gueudecourt, Night of 4th/5th February 1917.

carried out easily enough, although the eastern portion of Cloudy Trench was subject to enfilade artillery fire from the direction of Le Transloy, and further progress towards Sunray Trench was impossible.[360] Shortly after midnight on 5 February, 13/AI were able to take a sound bearing on the German 5.9-inch battery which was firing on this line, and the information was passed on to the heavy artillery, which 'proved to have the desired effect'.[361] 'A' Company on the right flank, which had been under this artillery fire, had to fight off five separate bombing attacks, and was ably assisted in keeping its men supplied with bombs by the supporting company of 14/AI. As SOS signals were fired, the supporting artillery fired promptly, accurately and heavily and as dawn came the enemy fire slackened. 13/AI held their positions during the day and reliefs took place over the night of 5-6 February.

The key lessons taken from 15/AI's attack were on the importance of consolidation, supply, and communication, especially between the infantry and the artillery. Extra attention was given to all three, and the results showed in 13/AI's assault, not only in the success of the operation, but also in gaining further useful skills, particularly with hand and rifle grenades. Extra attention to detail included tying sandbags over the men's boots to avoid making noise while forming up, and then removing them just before the assault to avoid snagging on the barbed wire.[362] Communication with signal flares worked well enough before wires could be run over between the companies involved in the assault and battalion headquarters, and despite the risk of them breaking, they appear to have worked well. Consolidation and digging in was difficult with the ground having frozen solid, making the supply of bombs all the more crucial; here it seems that what may have been considered 'excessive' was enough, and what may have been considered 'enough' for the previous attack actually was insufficient. When it came to close contact and fighting, the troops fared well, and 'A' Company's commander, Captain H.W. Murray, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his and his company's parts in the success of the operation. Combat itself had never been the problem for Australian 4th Division,

[360] AWM: AWM4 1/48/11 Part 1, Australian 4th Division HQ Diary, February 1917 Part 1, Appx XX 'Report on Operations carried out by the 4th Australian Infantry Brigade, on enemy's trenches in Square N.21.b and d, between 1st and 8th February 1917', 8 February 1917.
[361] AWM: AWM4 23/30/28, War Diary for 13/AI, February 1917, 'Report on Operations carried out by 13th Battalion AIF, Stormy Trench, N.E. of Gueudecourt, Night of 4th/5th February 1917.
[362] AWM: AWM4 1/48/11 Part 1, Australian 4th Division HQ Diary, February 1917 Part 1, Appx XX 'Report on Operations carried out by the 4th Australian Infantry Brigade, on enemy's trenches in Square N.21.b and d, between 1st and 8th February 1917', 8 February 1917.

however; organisation, consolidation and holding a position were the causes for concern. By early February, it seemed these aspects of fighting were receiving the proper amount of attention.

Two smaller actions were carried out the following week which extended 4th Division's gains. On the nights of 11-12 and 14-15 February, bombing attacks from 46/AI and 51/AI respectively extended the division's gains up Cloudy Trench towards Sunray Trench by 200 yards, enabling an old communication trench between Cloudy and the Australian front line to be opened for use.[363] Rifle grenades were used in support to good effect, firing over the enemy party at their trench block, cutting them off from reinforcements.[364] This technique was used again and enhanced with Stokes mortars on the nights of 20-21 and 22-23 February, as 45/AI and 48/AI took turns on the offensive. These attacks succeeded in gaining another 350 yards of trench line and capturing 61 prisoners for remarkably little loss; only 11 men wounded, none fatally.[365] In February 1917, Australian 4th Division appear to have discovered a recipe for success in bombing attacks. If the winner is to be the side who can maintain the supply of bombs to the combat area, then it was essential to maintain one's own supply while cutting off the enemy's. While the German egg grenade was smaller than the Mills bomb, and therefore able to be thrown greater distances, the enemy had the advantage; this was changed with prolific use of rifle grenades and bold employment of Stokes mortars. As long as artillery remained available to carry out counter-battery work, or fire on the enemy approaches when an SOS signal was launched, the infantry seemed to have realistic aims of what was achievable, and to have the skills to carry their tasks out. On being withdrawn from the line at the end of February, the firepower of the divisional infantry increased further, with additional Lewis guns brought into bring the total to 16 per battalion, or one per platoon without the need to pool resources.[366]

[363] AWM: AWM4 1/48/11 Australian 4th Division HQ Diary, February 1917 Part 2, Appx XXIII, '4th Australian Division – Intelligence Summary No. 100. From 6 AM 11th February 1917 to 6 AM 12th February 1917'.
[364] AWM: AWM4 23/63/13, War Diary for 46/AI, February 1917, Appx 4, 'Report on Minor Operation 11/12 February 1917, from N.21 d8 ¾ 5 ½ '.
[365] AWM: AWM4 23/12/12, HQ Diary for Australian 12 Brigade, February 1917, 'Report on Operations in the Right Brigade (GUEUDECOURT) Sector 4th Aust.Div. Front 8th – 25th February 1917'.
[366] AWM: AWM4 1/48/12 Australian 4th Division HQ Diary, entry for 8 March 1917.

Australian 5th Division found their concurrent period in line somewhat frustrating. A proposed attack alongside Australian 4th Division's on 4 February landed on abandoned trenches, with the enemy having vacated part of the line after 29th Division's success on the right flank on 27 January. The most significant operation carried out by Australian 5th Division in this period was a raid by 57/AI on the night of 14-15 February on Sunray trench, which was carried out by two parties, each approximately 60-strong.[367] 8 casualties were sustained, and it was thought that around 30 of the enemy were killed or wounded, mostly prisoners who attempted to escape while being brought across no-man's land.[368] The raid is noteworthy for the extent of the planning involved – clearly defined roles were given within the raiding parties, as shown in Table 4. Though this may seem excessively prescriptive, for a relatively inexperienced division still acclimatising to the Somme front, it was not inappropriate to leave as little as possible to chance. The value of experience is therefore emphasised further, with direct prescription used as a substitute for initiative.

COMPOSITION OF PARTIES.

	Right.	Left.
Parapet Parties.	1 N.C.O.& 4 men.	1 N.C.O.& 4 men.
Blockers	1 N.C.O.& 4 men.	1 N.C.O.& 4 men.
Intelligence	1 N.C.O.& 1 man.	1 N.C.O.& 1 man.
Machine Gunner	1 man.	
Engineers	1 man.	1 man.
Stretcher bearers	2 men.	2 men.
Prisoners escort	4 men.	4 men.
Telephonist	1 man.	
Linesman	1 man.	
Runners for O.C. Assault.	3 men.	
Dugout parties	1 N.C.O.& 10 men.	1 N.C.O.& 10 men.
Runners for O.C. Parties	1 man	1 man.
Grenadiers	2 N.C.O's & 16 men	2 N.C.O's & 16 men.
Bayonet men	8 men	8 men.

Table 4: Composition of raiding parties, 57/AI, Sunray Trench 14-15 February 1917.[369]

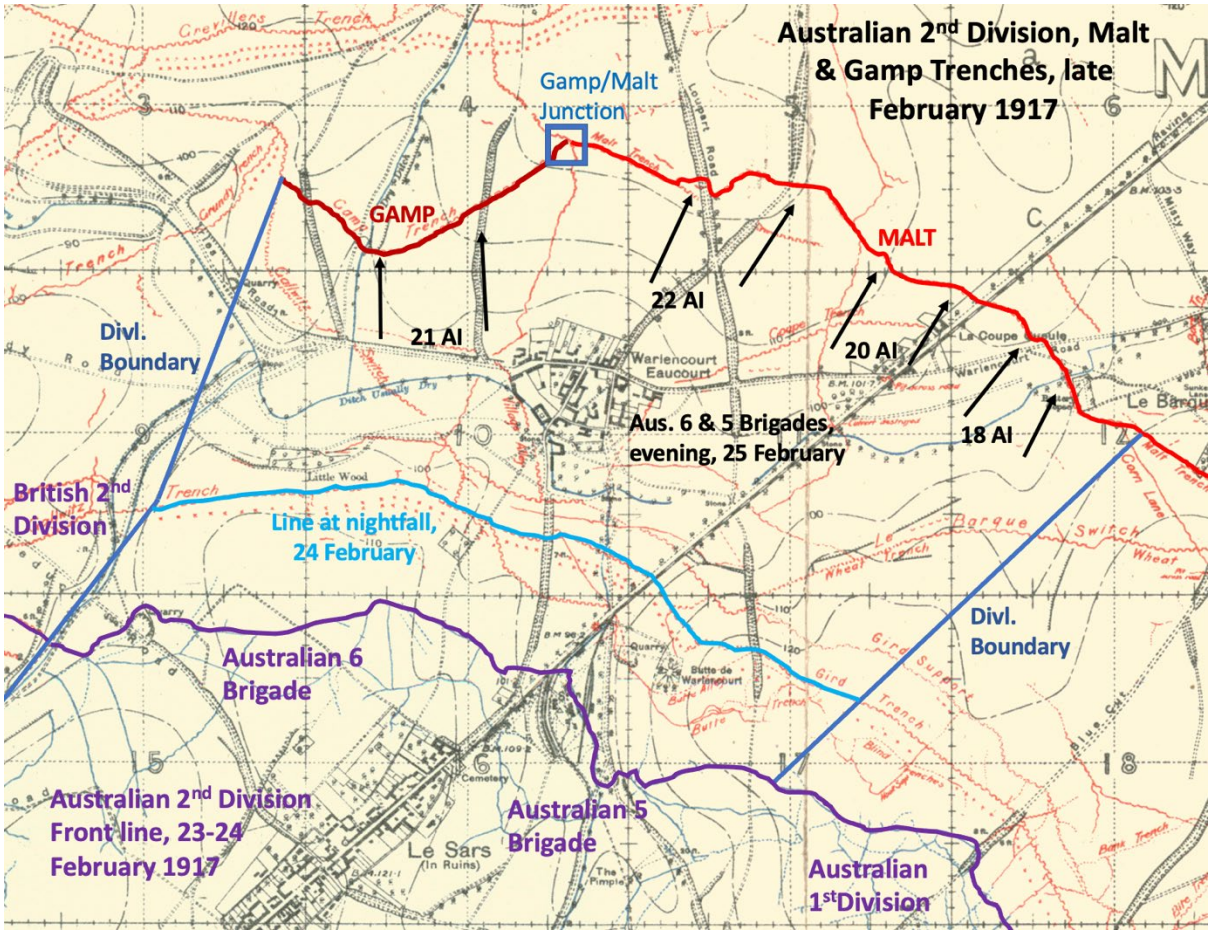
[367] AWM: AWM4 23/74/13, War Diary for 57/AI, February 1917, Appx 33, '57th Battalion Operation Order No.17', 12 February 1917.
[368] AWM: AWM4 23/74/13, War Diary for 57/AI, February 1917, Appx 33a, '57th Battalion AIF; Report on Raid carried out on night 14/15th February 1917'.
[369] AWM: AWM4 23/74/13, War Diary for 57/AI, February 1917, Appx 33, '57th Battalion Operation Order No.17', 12 February 1917.

Lewis gun parties were deployed to engage any hostile machine guns or flanking counter-attacks, while the divisional field artillery fired a protective barrage on the approaches to the raided trench line. The objective itself was bombarded by Stokes mortars for 90 seconds at zero, targeting known strong points. The raiders reached the parapet before the defenders, and at one of the dugouts the German occupiers refused to surrender; this dugout's entrances were blown with Stokes bombs being thrown in. In his report, Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart questioned the value of a Stokes bombardment which serves to identify the raided area, but acknowledged their cooperation and complimented the barrage.[370]

Pursuit to the German R1 Line

Two days after 29th Division's successful raid on 27 January, Australian 2nd Division moved back into the forward area, on the Albert-Bapaume road near Martinpuich, attempting little more ambitious than line-holding in bleak conditions over the next four weeks. On 24 February, Australian 5 and 6 Brigades were in line when the first German withdrawal was detected; this initial withdrawal taking the resistance line back behind the Butte de Warlencourt, to a trench known as Malt Trench in front of Le Barque, running across the Roman road along the forward slope, South of Loupart Wood. This joined Gamp Trench due North of Warlencourt (see map 12).

[370] AWM: AWM4 23/74/13, War Diary for 57/AI, February 1917, Appx 33a, '57th Battalion AIF; Report on Raid carried out on night 14/15th February 1917'.



Map 12: Australian 2nd Division at Malt & Gamp Trenches, late February 1917

This movement was clearly not anticipated by I ANZAC Corps, and came at an inopportune time for Australian 2nd Division, with Major-General Smyth on leave. This created a chain of temporary promotions, with Brigadier-General Gellibrand (Aus 6 Brigade) commanding the division, Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes (21/AI) filling in as brigade commander, and Major Crowther stepping up to battalion command.[371] On the evening of 24 February, the enemy front and immediate support lines were occupied, and the Butte de Warlencourt was captured.

By dawn on 25 February, outposts had been set around Warlencourt-Eaucourt, but the condition of the ground slowed the flow of information to the temporary divisional commander (especially so from his own brigade), which according to Charles Bean, was

[371] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/6/18, Australian 6 Brigade Diary, February 1917.

'almost intolerable'.[372] No serious resistance had been encountered in the occupation of Gird and Gallwitz Trenches, and on the morning of 25 February it was unclear where the next line of enemy strength would be. Patrols continued to be pushed out through the morning and early afternoon. At 2.30pm Gellibrand ordered 5 and 6 Brigades to occupy Malt and Gamp Trenches by 5.30pm 'unless proved to be strongly held by the enemy', as from there operations could be mounted against Grevillers Trench.[373] No coordination took place between the two brigades, and 5 Brigade moved to assault at 5pm. Their entire frontage was visible from Malt Trench on the high ground to the left, and with 6 Brigade's attack delayed first by a later start time, then by 21/AI arriving late into position, 5 Brigade was halted by rifle and machine gun fire.[374] 20/AI on 5 Brigade's left were halted first, while 18/AI persevered for a time attempting to move between shellholes, their left company taking heavy casualties. 6 Brigade commenced their advance at 5.30pm, and no information from the attacking troops was received for almost two hours; at 7.16pm the message arrived from 22/AI stating that 'occupation of objective held up by M.G. fire and heavy wire'. 21/AI on the divisional left flank did not manage to get a message back until after 10pm, but they had managed to break into Gamp Trench at its most southerly point, where it bends.[375] Further progress was impossible due to machine guns firing from the junction of Gamp and Malt Trenches, but 21/AI did manage to establish a post in Gamp where the break-in had occurred. The division sustained 174 casualties for this small gain.[376]

Overnight efforts to bomb into Malt Trench and bring Stokes Mortars to bear against the enemy were unsuccessful. On the morning of 26 February artillery fire could be directed on to the 15-foot thick barbed wire belts in front of the objectives. Confusion was common in the effort to take Malt Trench. An officer from 14th Heavy Artillery Group had climbed the Butte de Warlencourt in the afternoon of 25 February and observed enemy artillery fire dropping on Malt Trench north of the Bapaume road, and had incorrectly declared it was unoccupied.[377]

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[372] C.E.W. Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France 1917* (Halstead, Sydney, 1941) p. 72.
[373] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/19 PART 3, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, Appendix XXXV, Message 51.
[374] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/5/21, Australian 5 Brigade HQ Diary, 'Report on Operations; 24th/25th February to 2nd March '17', 14 March 1917.
[375] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/6/18, Australian 6 Brigade Diary, February 1917, 'Summary of Events; 24/27th February 1917.
[376] C. Falls, *Official History of the Great War; Military Operations, France and Belgium 1917* Vol. I (London, IWM, 1992), p. 98.
[377] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/19 PART 1, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, 25 February 1917, 6.30pm.

During 26 February 5 Brigade made some headway into Malt Trench, south of the Bapaume Road, but 6 Brigade added further to the confusion when a patrol from 24/AI came in at 8.45pm and reported back that they had been through Malt Trench and the junction with Gamp Trench, and moved 200 yards down the trench, undisturbed by the enemy.[378] 6 Brigade was due to be relieved that evening by 7 Brigade, and this relief was under way by the time the message came from divisional HQ to put a post at the junction of Malt and Gamp Trenches immediately; as such, three parties from 28/AI were dispatched to carry out the order. As the relief was completed, a second patrol from 24/AI came in, claiming they had been fired on from machine guns at the Malt/Gamp junction. Unaware of this new information, divisional HQ sent an inquiry to 6 Brigade HQ, asking why Malt Trench had not been occupied immediately on discovery it had been vacated. Puzzlement at divisional HQ appears to have given way to consternation, as reports arrived from 7 Brigade in the early morning stating their party which had attempted to enter Malt Trench and occupy it, had been held up by M.G. and rifle fire, and that Malt Trench was held by the enemy in strength. At 9.40am on 27 February, Colonel Bridges, the divisional GSO1 sent a message to 6 Brigade demanding a copy of the instructions given to the patrol which had entered Malt Trench the previous night. On the threat of a 'full enquiry into the matter', Lieutenant-Colonel Forbes revealed that the patrol probably had not entered Malt Trench at all.[379] Adding further weight to the myriad sources of disinformation working against Gellibrand was a report from a contact patrol aircraft, received on the morning of 27 February stating that the lower part of Malt Trench was unoccupied; simultaneously reports arrived from 5 Brigade detailing the fighting currently going on in that spot.[380]

27 and 28 February were dominated by intense grenade combat, particularly on the right, where 5 Brigade endeavoured to force a way up Malt Trench from the South-East. 7 Brigade were more patient in their approach, having established that the wire was too thick for attacks without artillery preparation. Malt Trench was duly kept under bombardment during 28

[378] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/6/18, Australian 6 Brigade Diary, February 1917, 'Summary of Events; 24/27th February 1917.
[379] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/19 PART 1, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, 27 February 1917, 9.40am & Bean, *AIF in France 1917*, pp.96-97. Bean states that Malt Trench certainly WAS entered, but between two outposts.
[380] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/19 PART 1, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, 27 February 1917, 11.50am. The pilot had flown over between 8 and 9 am.

February, with the approval of General Gough who visited divisional HQ around 11am.[381] The artillery and trench mortar fire kept up the wire cutting until 7pm on 1 March, when scouts went out and deemed the wire passable, and the attack from 7 Brigade went ahead at 3am on 2 March. Even then, a sharp bombing contest developed as German reinforcements came down from the direction of Loupart Wood, but the link between 5 and 7 Brigades was eventually made, and by the afternoon the gains were consolidated. Throughout the period of fighting at Malt and Gamp Trenches, Australian 2nd Division had fought adeptly, but without much innovation. Its approach relied on the methods that they had used throughout 1916, and clearly elements of their performance, particularly communication, were unsatisfactory.

Nevertheless, lessons were slowly being learned. In the wake of the capture of Malt Trench, 7 Brigade's staff put together a document of 'lessons learned', which centred around the value of preparation and the dangers of getting caught in a bombing contest. The first point, 'that attacks hastily launched and without proper preparation against an entrenched enemy, frequently fail, and are costly', seems obvious to say, and the fact this needed to be explicitly stated can, if taken in isolation, suggest a glacial speed of progress from the Pozières actions the previous summer. However, the reflections that in bombing attacks, 'it is invariably the side which can throw in the last reinforcement of bombers, that seems to win', and 'that a prepared frontal attack is less costly, more successful, and more quickly accomplished than bombing attacks' indicate a growing scepticism on the part of senior officers of the reliance on the bomb, and at least an awareness of what other divisions had been discovering since September.[382] Certainly the established trench fighting techniques required thought and modification as a degree of movement became a feature of the actions of early 1917. One continual problem however, would be the relative lack of time away from the trenches for training and assimilating the lessons learned from their actions. Australian 2nd Division's only significant period away from the trenches had been in early December 1916, and while a divisional school was set up and attack practices carried out, there is no significant evidence of innovation in this period. While these observations are worthy, they are no further

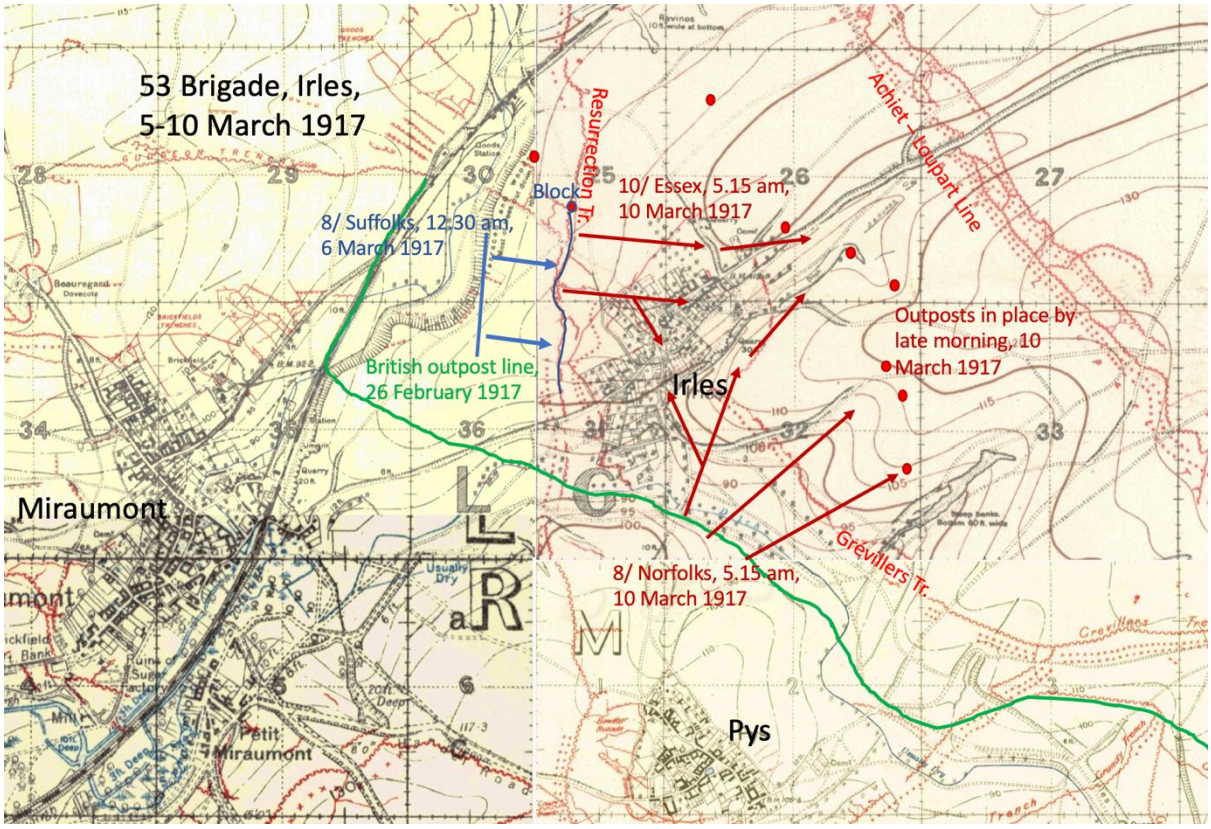
[381] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/19 PART 1, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, 28 February 1917, 11.15am.
[382] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/7/19, Australian 7 Brigade Diary, March 1917, Appendix A: 'Report on Offensive Operations carried out by 7th Australian Brigade from 27 February 1917, to March 2nd 1917, inclusive.' 7 March 1917.

advanced than those made by 18th Division after their attack at the Schwaben Redoubt after the capture of Thiepval in September 1916, noting the fruitlessness of bombing attacks versus an attack over the ground. Indeed, this message had found its way into *SS 135*, in section 5 on 'the assault', point 6 is extremely brief: 'All movement must be over the top of the ground'.

18th Division were also in line at the time of the initial German withdrawal, and stayed in the line for that immediate, short pursuit and remained on an aggressive footing. Though they had closed to the outskirts of the village of Irles by the morning of 26 February, patrols had determined that the village was held in force and some preparation was needed before the advance could continue.[383] The capture of Irles is described in the divisional history as a 'very pretty little victory', and once again involved 53 Brigade and cooperation with 2nd Division attacking Grévillers Trench to the right. Major-General Lee decided early in March that the best chance for a successful operation against Irles was with an attack from the west, making the capture of Resurrection Trench necessary.[384]

Therefore, 18th Division's capture of Irles came in two stages; firstly 8/Suffolks capturing Resurrection Trench to the north on 6 March, and then the main assault by 10/Essex and 8/Norfolks on 10 March (see map 13).

[383] TNA WO 95/2016/1, 18th Division General Staff Diary, 26 February 1917.
[384] TNA WO 95/2035/2, 53 Brigade HQ Diary, 18th Division order No.G.826, dated 2 March 1917.



Map 13: 53 Brigade's capture of Resurrection Trench and Irles, 5-10 March 1917

The Resurrection Trench operation was swiftly carried out by two companies of 8/Suffolks at 12.30 am on 6 March, and demonstrated impressive flexibility in the engaged battalions, which in turn shows experience and aptitude. Four platoons from 'A' and 'C' companies assaulted with no preliminary bombardment beyond wire cutting. With only one trench as the objective, there were no dedicated 'mopping-up' parties assigned, so the following waves were for support and strengthening the position to deal with counter-attacks. Such an attack came at approximately 1.30 am, by which time five Lewis guns and a Vickers machine gun had been brought into the line, which stopped the German effort to retake the trench.[385] A bombing party pushed northwards up Resurrection Trench and established a block which in due course was counter-attacked and driven back slightly, but ultimately held and was re-established. By 2.15 am two Stokes mortars and 100 rounds were in position to help break up further counter-attacks and at 8 am a contact patrol aircraft was answered with flares, establishing the position was fully taken. While a straightforward enough action, the fact that it was carried out smoothly at night is worthy of praise, and the attack formation contains

[385] TNA WO 95/2039/3, War Diary for 8/Suffolks, untitled report on the capture of Resurrection Trench.

some detail which shows progress. Pre-empting the *SS143* platoon formations, but without predicting them perfectly, platoons had divided into rifle and bombing sections, two of the latter being employed on the right flank of the attack. Lewis guns were still apparently under company instructions and five followed in the second wave with a reinforcing platoon for each attacking company. This formation appears to have been very effective. Lieutenant-Colonel Hill of 8/Suffolks, in his report of the action, was predictably full of praise for his men. He also recommended amongst other things that 'all bombs issued should be rifle grenades. It is quite easy to throw the bomb even with the stick in it'.[386] This recommendation does not appear to have been acted upon. One final point to note is that this report, unusually, details .303 ammunition expenditure by the attacking companies, and shows that 3,080 rounds were fired by rifles, and 2,150 rounds fired by Lewis guns. This would appear to show the troops were certainly not relying on Lewis guns for fire support, and were making good use of their personal weapons, an indication of skill and confidence in their own musketry.[387]

With Resurrection Trench secure, Irles could be attacked from both the south and west. Close cooperation was demanded from the artillery, and for this attack 18th and 2nd Divisions would benefit from having the support of heavy artillery from II Corps and V Corps.[388] The two angles of attack presented a challenge for the divisional artillery, as they were unable to site the guns directly behind the 10/Essex who were to attack from the newly captured Resurrection Trench. An oblique barrage would have to be fired, which required a different approach from the infantry. Typically the advancing infantry would be quite safe from shrapnel exploding directly above them as it would continue on ahead for a distance; on this occasion, 10/Essex were warned to stay at least 75 yards away from the barrage as the shrapnel would be flying across them.[389] In addition, a howitzer barrage was to remain on the southern part of the village for 90 minutes while the attack went on around it. When the attack proceeded, 10/Essex attacked from the west with two companies, each reinforced by one platoon from a third. The remaining two platoons remained in a supporting and carrying role, with the fourth

[386] TNA WO 95/2039/3, War Diary for 8/Suffolks, untitled report on the capture of Resurrection Trench.
[387] Ibid.
[388] Falls, *1917*, p. 105.
[389] TNA WO 95/2038/4, War Diary for 10/Essex, 10 March 1917. Falls, *1917*, p. 106 states that 53 Brigade issued diagrams illustrating the lateral spread of the bursting shrapnel.

company in reserve.[390] 8/Norfolks, attacking from the south, assaulted with three companies in line, each with objectives in the south of Irles, and in the ground between the village and the next German defensive system (the Achiet – Loupart line).[391]

At zero (5.15 am) on 10 March 8/Norfolks' right company moved swiftly on to its objectives, captured around 30 prisoners and two machine guns, and immediately set to establishing outposts to the south-east of the village. Very little of Grévillers trench was identifiable after the heavy artillery bombardment, and the centre company missed it completely and in doing so lost direction briefly. The left company, however, came up against thick barbed wire and enemy soldiers in the open who opened rifle fire; this party of Germans surrendered when the centre company corrected its position and came up on their rear.[392] Meanwhile, 10/Essex had moved into the northern part of Irles and although there was a brief hold-up at the orchards and a few casualties suffered, they set about clearing the village, including the southern part when the howitzer bombardment lifted.[393] There was no hostile barrage to speak of, probably due to a combination of strong counter-battery fire and the fact that 10/Essex captured the German forward observation officer in the village.[394] Contact was made between the two battalions at around 6.45 am, and the work of consolidation and establishing the planned outposts went ahead. Results of the action show 154 prisoners, 10 machine guns and a trench mortar captured, with 68 men of 53 Brigade killed, wounded and missing.

Junior officers seem to have to impressed, as Lieutenant-Colonel Frizzell of 10/Essex stated in his report that:

> The 10th was a day of good leadership, and much initiative was shown by all officers and many NCOs. Irles was not taken without opposition and there was a considerable amount of hand-to-hand fighting in the orchards N. of the village – in these, rapidity of decision and action in all cases brought about the desired effect.

[390] TNA WO 95/2038/4, War Diary for 10/Essex, 10 March 1917.
[391] TNA WO 95/2040/1, War Diary for 8/Norfolks Appendix 2, '8th (Service) Battalion the Norfolk Regiment. Narrative of Operations against Grevillers Trench – Irles Village 10th March 1917'.
[392] Ibid.
[393] TNA WO 95/2035/2, 53 Brigade HQ Diary, ER 8/44, '10th Bn. Essex Rgt. Narrative of the Battle of Irles'.
[394] TNA WO 95/2038/4, War Diary for 10/Essex, 10 March 1917.

> Rifles were constantly used at close range and there was a considerable amount of bombing.[395]

8/Norfolks' report also comments on the use of the rifle, highlighting a single good shot of 'one man who ran away being dropped at 50 yards range by a sniper!'[396] While this was probably an impressive shot, this should certainly have been within the abilities of a sniper armed with a Lee Enfield rifle, and the surprise is possibly an indicator of previously low expectations, rather than exceptional performance. There were numerous complimentary reports on the quality of the barrage, including from the captured German artillery observation officer, who purportedly described it as 'excellent and wonderful'.[397] The officers commanding 8/Norfolks' assaulting companies declared it to be 'the best barrage they have ever followed, not excepting that of July 1st 1916', and the artillery was apparently 'one of the first topics of conversation amongst wounded, prisoners, escorts and runners.'[398]

In the attacks at Irles in March, we see considerable evidence of progress in artillery technique and accuracy, even in the space of a few weeks. The improvised bombardment worked superbly well, and in this set-piece action of limited scope, the artillery gave the infantry every chance to succeed. The infantry themselves displayed growing experience, as shown by the attacking company of 8/Norfolks which lost direction in the dark, as they corrected themselves swiftly and rejoined the action to good effect. The company which was held at the wire endeavoured to work round the obstacle and held the enemy in a firefight while their neighbouring unit (albeit without prior planning) attacked them from the rear. Consolidation against counter-attack was uppermost in each unit's planning, and while Irles was still being cleared, new outposts outside the village were being sited, with help from the Royal Engineers. When viewed alongside the Boom Ravine attack, 18th Division's reputation as an extremely strong attacking division on the Somme can be carried into the new year. Despite serious adversity and heavy officer casualties on 17 February, the division advanced the line,

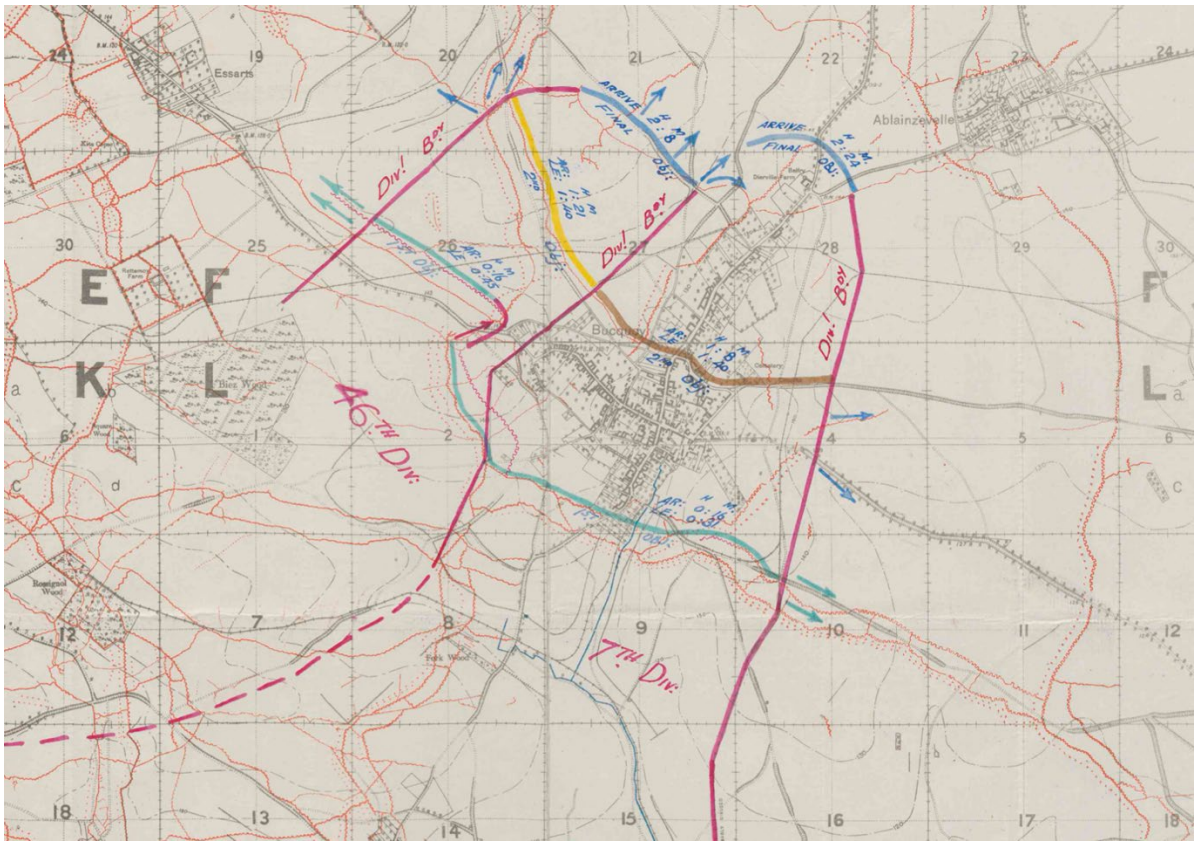
[395] TNA WO 95/2035/2, 53 Brigade HQ Diary, ER 8/44, '10th Bn. Essex Rgt. Narrative of the Battle of Irles'.
[396] TNA WO 95/2040/1, War Diary for 8/ Norfolks Appendix 2, '8th (Service) Battalion the Norfolk Regiment. Narrative of Operations against Grevillers Trench – Irles Village 10th March 1917'.
[397] TNA WO 95/2035/2, 53 Brigade HQ Diary, 'Note, Miraumont-Irles-Grevillers Road – Remarks passed by prisoners'.
[398] TNA WO 95/2040/1, War Diary for 8/Norfolks Appendix 2, '8th (Service) Battalion the Norfolk Regiment. Narrative of Operations against Grevillers Trench – Irles Village 10th March 1917, Appendix C – Notes on our own Barrage during operations against Irles and Grevillers Trench on the 10th March 1917'.

and held their shape well; a testament to their training, leadership and standard of soldiering. In early March, they again showed fine command, but also creativity, tactical aptitude and ability to adapt. They excelled at night fighting, actions in the open and in villages, all in very trying weather conditions and with the supply difficulties those conditions bring. When the full German withdrawal to the Hindenburg line began within a week of the capture of Irles, 18th Division, led by 6/Northants, carried on the pursuit up to Croisilles and carried out reconnaissance, which determined the village was held in strength. The advance guard withdrew to safety, and that was the Division's last action before being withdrawn.

7th Division's return to the line following their break after the Redan Ridge actions came just before the preliminary German withdrawal in the last week of February 1917. Patrols from 21/Mancs reported Serre to be vacated on the morning of 24 February, and 91 Brigade began the process of advancing to regain touch with the enemy.[399] Very slight resistance was encountered moving through Serre, which had held out and inflicted significant loss on the attacking British forces on 1 July and in the November operations. Puisieux, however, was held in greater strength than Serre, and 1/RWF and 2/Borders each suffered between 40 and 50 casualties in clearing the village on 27 February, in addition to the 66 casualties sustained by 1/RWF in closing up to Puisieux.[400] There was a slowing of the advance for a few days while 62nd and 31st Divisions on either flank caught up, and then 7th Division was brought out of the line altogether at the end of the first week of March. The division's new objective was to prepare for an attack on the R.1 line at Bucquoy, whilst also assisting in the repair of roads in the newly occupied zone. Replica trenches of those in front of Bucquoy were cut for the attacking battalions to practice on, and the detailed plan of attack was drawn up and sent to V Corps command on 12 March.[401] 20 and 22 Brigades were to attack with two battalions in line each, a further one in close support and one in reserve (see map 14). Some evidence of learning from the January actions is visible, in an awareness that most of their casualties had been suffered during consolidation. The left battalion of the right brigade was due to move through the town, with the support battalion moving through them and on to the final

[399] Atkinson, *The Seventh Division*, p. 346.
[400] TNA WO 95/1665/1, War Diary for 1/RWF, entries for 25-27 February 1917; WO 95/1655/1, War Diary for 2/Borders, entry for 27 February 1917.
[401] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, entries for 4, 7 & 12 March 1917.

objective; once this move was under way, the assaulting battalion was to remove as many men as possible, back to Puisieux, to keep them safer.[402] While no time was set firmly for zero when 91 Brigade took over the divisional front on 12 March, the brigade orders suggested 'the attack will probably take place at dawn on March 15th'.[403] The plan for the attack on Bucquoy seems to have been soundly thought-out. It took into account the different terrains to traverse, acknowledging that moving through the built-up area of the town would necessarily be slower than passing through the fields around, and had realistic objectives.[404]



Map 14: Planned assault by 7th Division on R.1 line and Bucquoy.[405]

However, on 13 March, word was passed on that the enemy had evacuated part of the R.1 line between Achiet le Petit and Bapaume, and Australian 2nd Division was pushing forward through Grévillers. Lieutenant-General Fanshawe (commanding V Corps) expected further withdrawals immediately, and ordered 7th Division to attack that evening, if Bucquoy was not

[402] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App XVIII, 'Plan for 7th Division Attack'.
[403] TNA WO 95/1669/3, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, March 1917, App IV, '91st Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 65', 12 March 1917.
[404] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App XVIII, 'Plan for 7th Division Attack'.
[405] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App XXa, map attached to location reports, 12 March 1917.

already occupied by patrols by then.[406] As there would be no time to relieve 91 Brigade, Major-General Barrow, the new divisional commander, ordered patrols to go and ascertain whether Bucquoy was held, and if so, to prepare 'to attack under cover of barrage' that evening.[407] 2/Queen's from 91 Brigade were ordered by the brigade commander, Brigadier-General Cumming, to put patrols out, and reported back at 3.10pm that the right patrol was held by heavy machine gun fire.[408] Unusually for post-action reports, 91 Brigade's narrative of events includes typed versions of the orders received from divisional HQ on 13 March. There does appear to be an effort to disassociate 91 Brigade command with events that followed. Cumming ordered a modified adoption of the plan which had been circulated on 12 March, with 2/Queen's taking the place of 20 Brigade on the left, and 22/Mancs taking the place of 22 Brigade on the right.[409] At 4.30pm, Barrow sent a note to V Corps command indicating that he did not consider the wire sufficiently cut to justify the attack, but only secured a postponement of an hour and a quarter, moving zero from 11.45pm that evening to 1am, 14 March.[410] The heavy artillery programme remained unchanged, however, firing between 10pm and 10.30pm. When the attack went ahead, only one small entry was made into the enemy lines, on the extreme right of the line, where elements of 22/Mancs broke through the wire and created a block in the enemy trench. They held until approximately 6.30am, when they ran out of both British and German hand grenades, whereupon those who were not captured, were driven back.[411] Elsewhere, the attacks failed due to the strength of the wire, and strong enemy machine gun and artillery fire. The official history was particularly damning; 'it is seldom that, in comparing two attacks such as those against Irles [by 18th Division on 10 March] and Bucquoy – each against a ruined village and a section of earth-works…one finds it so easy to realise why one succeeded and the other failed.'[412]

[406] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 108.
[407] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App XXIII, 'Priority Operations' handwritten note dated 13 March 1917.
[408] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, March 1917, Appendix 3B, 'Narrative of Attack on BUCQUOY carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on night 13/14th March, 1917'.
[409] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, March 1917, Appendix 3B, 'Narrative of Attack on BUCQUOY carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on night 13/14th March, 1917'.
[410] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, Apps XXVI and XXVII, copies of notes sent to V Corps command, and to the divisional infantry brigades, CRA, CRE and the neighbouring divisions (46th and 62nd Divisions).
[411] H. R. Cumming, *A Brigadier in France* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1922) p. 48.
[412] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 109.

Cumming pulled few punches in his report. In his view, the primary cause for failure was the condition of the wire, adding: 'no one who has seen the position by day, with its triple belt of wire scarcely damaged, can be surprised that it was able to withstand an impromptu attack in pitch darkness and pouring rain by men to whom the ground was entirely new.'[413] He also stressed the pressure placed on the battalion commanders, who received their orders at 6.10pm, listing their tasks to complete ahead of zero:

- Summoning company commanders to battalion headquarters.
- Issuing battalion orders.
- Company commanders' conferences with platoon commanders.
- Laying out tape line.
- Relief of right sector.
- Issuing of stores, food and water and organising carrying parties

Additional criticism was directed at the plan for the heavy artillery barrage, which ended an hour and a half before the assault. It was therefore useless in a suppressing capacity, and served only to alert the enemy, who could 'bring more machine guns into play'. Cumming closed his report by stating that a personal message was received from V Corps command at 11.30pm, giving him leave to change the plan, withdraw the assault and push strong patrols instead. The point was firmly made that this was too late, and Cumming was sure the attacking battalions would do their best. 2/Queen's and 22/Mancs suffered 119 and 143 casualties respectively, with almost half of 22/Mancs losses missing. [414]

Independent Action

Following the movement further north, the Fourth Army divisions which had moved into the old French positions were also expected to maintain pressure on the enemy, even if full-scale offensive action was not possible with General Rawlinson's line so stretched.

8th Division, newly under the command of Major-General William Heneker, were not earmarked for a major offensive role immediately, but they moved into the line near St Pierre

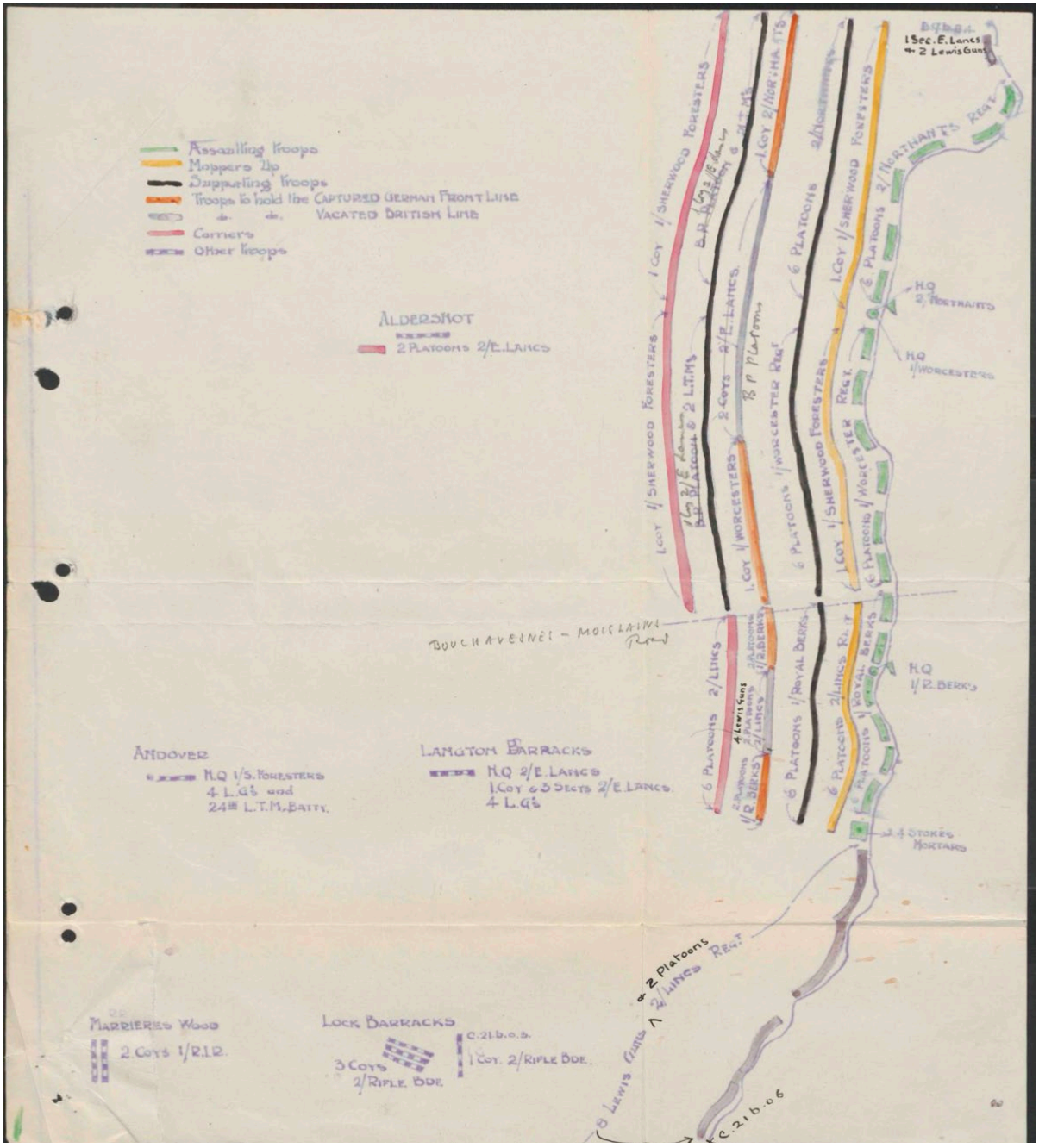
[413] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, March 1917, Appendix 3B, 'Narrative of Attack on BUCQUOY carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on night 13/14th March, 1917'.
[414] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, March 1917, Appendix 3B, 'Narrative of Attack on BUCQUOY carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on night 13/14th March, 1917'.

Vaast wood, part of XV Corps area. An attack to the east of Bouchavesnes was suggested for the end of February, and actually took place on 4 March (see map 11).[415] The preparation, with the benefit of some weeks to be made, was extensive, thoughtful and detailed; spitlocked practice trenches were created near Chipilly, and then altered when they were found to be incorrectly cut.[416] A week in mid-February was set for training on those practice trenches, as battalions and brigades, and two days were used for divisional rehearsals, including staging a rehearsal with no officers or sergeant-majors participating.[417] The plan itself was to have only three battalions involved in the assault (on a slightly shorter frontage than the attack launched on 23 October 1916), but increase the depth of the attacking waves, keep reserves close at hand and more clearly formalise the arrangements for flank protection, carrying and 'mopping-up' parties.[418]

The winter of 1916-17 was famously long and harsh, and, in late February the temperature had dropped, making the ground firmer and easier to cross. However, it was also impossible to cut saps or jump-off trenches stealthily to narrow no-man's land, forcing the attacking troops to form up in no man's land at night. Wire cutting was carried out by XV Corps heavy artillery in the days previous and patrols identified at least one very large gap near the right flank of the attack.[419] In addition, a machine gun barrage was to be fired at intervals in the hours leading up to the attack, and during the assault itself, and for the preparatory bombardment, known strong points were targeted, but the trenches more generally were not; the acceptance was that pulverised trenches are more difficult to hold.[420] The divisional artillery had fire plans drawn up covering approach trenches to the assaulted area in case of SOS signals, which would be made with flares and yellow and black flags.[421] Plans were carried out by the divisional engineers to remove the British wire immediately after dark on 3 March, and the assembly of assaulting troops, moppers-up, support, flank guards and carrying parties

[415] TNA WO 95/1676/2, 8th Division HQ Diary, 'Attack on German Trenches in C.16.c, C.16.a and C.10.c, NE of Bouchavesnes, carried out by 8th Division on 4th March, 1917'.
[416] TNA WO 95/1726/5, 25 Brigade War Diary, 14 February 1917.
[417] TNA WO 95/1729/1, War Diary for 2/R. Berks, March 1917, Appendix 1: 'Report on operations 4-5 March carried out by the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment'.
[418] TNA WO 95/1717/2, '24th Infantry Brigade Operational Order No. 131'.
[419] TNA WO 95/1726/6, '25th Brigade Intelligence Summary for 24 hours ending 6am 2nd March, 1917'.
[420] TNA WO 95/1676/1, 8th Division HQ Diary.
[421] TNA WO 95/1717/2, 'Account of Operations 4th to 6th March'.

was complete by 4.35 am, 40 minutes before zero.[422] The plan for 8th Division's deployment was drawn out to leave no room for misinterpretation (see map 15).



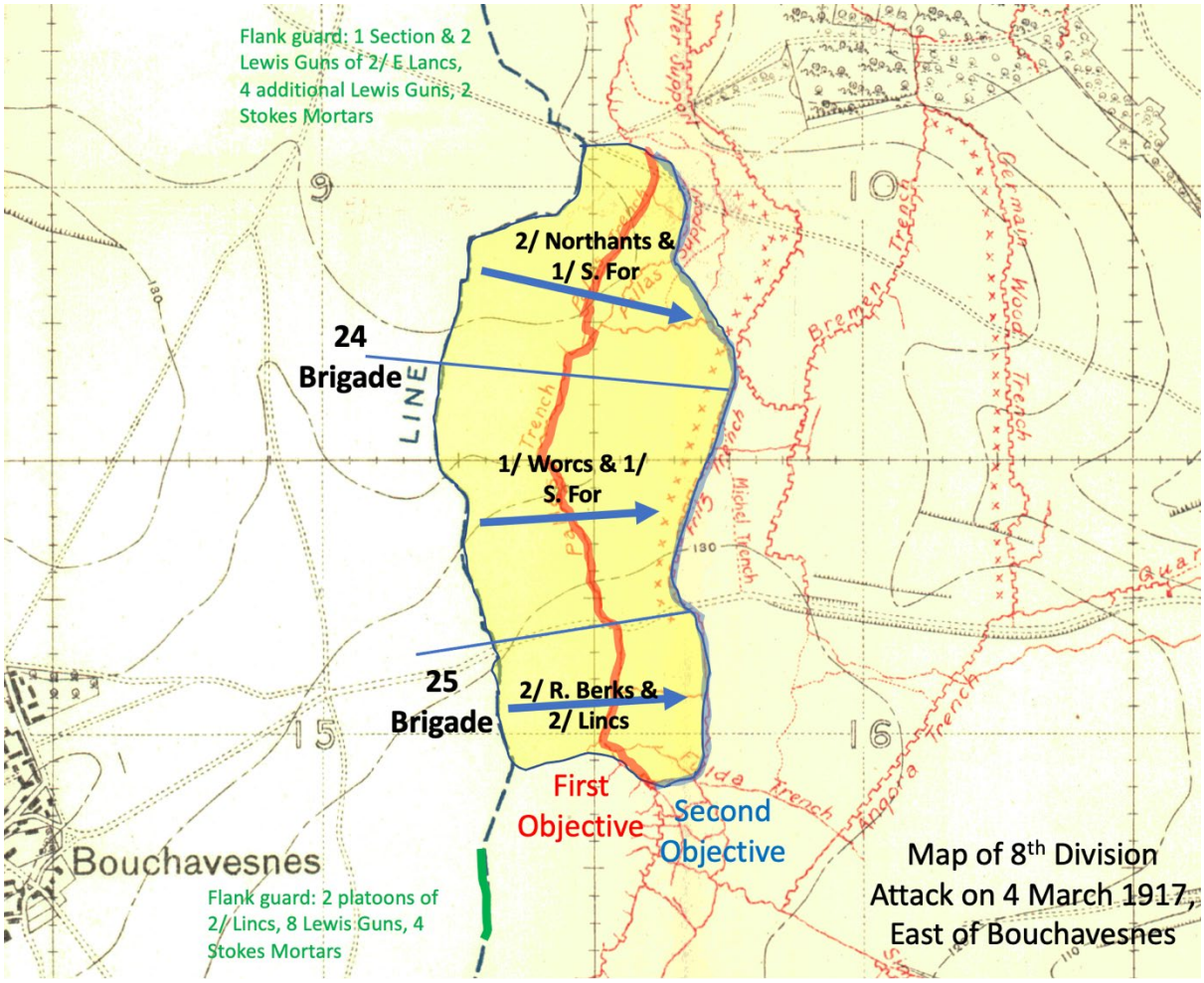
Map 15 (hand-drawn): Sketch of 8th Division deployments for attack on 4 March 1917[423]

Further attention to detail is shown by the fact that strict noise and light discipline was demanded of the men forming up, however the divisional staff were not insensible to the fact

[422] TNA WO 95/1676/1, 8th Division HQ Diary. The Assaulting troops of 24 Brigade had signalled their readiness earlier than those of 25 Brigade, at 3.20am. (WO 95/1717/2, 'Account of Operations 4th to 6th March'.
[423] TNA WO 95/1676/1, 8th Division HQ Diary, March 1917.

that in the freezing conditions, at night and exposed, coughing may give away the position of the assaulting troops. To try and mitigate this problem, an effort was made to secure cough lozenges for the men, and when they did not arrive, a supply of chewing gum was used instead, with 'extraordinary effective [sic]' results.[424] When the attack was launched, the leading wave pressed immediately on to the second objective, leaving clearance of the first objective to the moppers-up close behind, who were largely successful (see map 16). At one point in the centre of the battlefield at 6.45am, a pocket of the enemy were still holding out, however this was dealt with by the Battle Patrol Platoon of 2/Northants, which arrived in one of the supporting waves.[425] The official historian also draws attention to the work of the carrying parties of 1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters (1/S For) for delivering supplies of bombs as the attacking units ran low, and to the divisional pioneer battalion for cutting two communication trenches by the early afternoon.[426]

[424] TNA WO 95/1676/2, 8th Division HQ Diary, '8th Division No. G.12/14' 2 March 1917 and 'Report on Operations by the 24th Infantry Brigade, 4th March 1917', 9 March 1917.
[425] TNA WO 95/1717/2, 24 Brigade War Diary, 'Account of Operations 4th to 6th March'.
[426] Falls, *Official History*, pp121-122.



Map 16: 8th Division, 4 March 1917. Gains shown highlighted in Yellow.

Part of Fritz trench exchanged hands twice more as German counter-attacks came and were defeated, all objectives were captured along with 217 enemy soldiers, four trench mortars and seven machine guns.[427] Ultimately the action was entirely successful and in terms of preparation, shows a marked increase in attention to detail over the attack in October. This was no mean feat, as although the division had had time to settle the reinforcements that had arrived through the winter, experienced officers were in short supply, shown by the role of brigade major in 25 Brigade being held by a lieutenant, who performed very creditably.[428] Broadly speaking, the success of the operation fitted with what historians such as Jim Smithson have noted regarding the performance of First and Third Armies on 9 April at Vimy and Arras, that by early 1917, units of the BEF were very capable of planning and executing a

[427] TNA WO 95/1676/2, 8th Division HQ Diary, 'Report on Operations Carried out by the 25th Infantry Brigade on March 4th, 1917', 10 March 1917.
[428] Ibid.

successful set-piece action, provided they were given time, manpower and resources, and that the commanders and staff were up to the task.[429] 8th Division's new personnel seem to have proved that much, and divisions elsewhere had shown a greater competency in more fluid actions, all of which bode well for forthcoming campaigns. Their next challenge, however, would involve an altogether different style of warfare, as within two weeks of the Bouchavesnes attack, the German Army commenced Operation ALBERICH, withdrew from their positions in front of Fourth Army, and retired to the Hindenburg Line. 23 and 25 Brigades were holding the line in the Rancourt sector in mid-March, and had been made alert to the likelihood of a withdrawal along with the rest of Fourth Army in February, which was confirmed in early March.[430] Having found a counter to the outpost system, and shown the ability to break into an established defensive system with a set-piece, the BEF was tested with open warfare for the first time since trench warfare had been adopted in 1914.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the actions of early 1917 on the Somme front are, as Cyril Falls stated in the Official History, very much worthy of further study from a tactical point of view. The period following the cessation of offensive operations on the Somme is typically associated with stagnation and grinding to a halt in foul weather. What Prior and Wilson termed a 'much overrated' victory at Beaumont Hamel in November 1916 really ended with the last genuine failure in the area, before a period of qualified success in early 1917 led to the main German withdrawal.[431] From 7th Division's capture of Munich Trench where 32nd Division had failed a few weeks earlier, through 18th Division's ability to gain ground in the face of adversity and puncture the enemy's defensive lines, to 8th Division's execution of a thoroughly-planned set-piece, the performance of Gough's and Rawlinson's forces was impressive, if imperfect. What is especially important to mention is that the successes during this period were largely achieved without significant reference to new doctrine and training methods. Even the 'peaceful penetration' method of advancing the line, principally remarked upon by the German army some months earlier on the French front and typically associated

[429] J. Smithson, *A Taste of Success; The First Battle of the Scarpe* (Helion, Solihull, 2017) p. 257.
[430] TNA WO 95/1676/1, 8th Division HQ Diary, '8th Division Order No. 159', 27 February 1917 and WO 95/1717/2, 24th Brigade War Diary, '24th Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 135', 2 March 1917.
[431] R. Prior & T. Wilson, *The Somme* (Yale University Press, 2005) p. 305.

with 1918 actions on the British front, seems to have been adopted fairly organically in the British sector as circumstances made them suitable.

This chapter has also shown the extent to which preparation for offensive operations became more detailed in early 1917, and attention to detail became more apparent. Artillery cooperation was for the most part well-considered and coordinated. With the Somme campaign notionally having concluded, the pressure of being involved in a major offensive which forced an unsuitably fast operational tempo was no longer a factor. Preparation, such as that made at Munich Trench by 7th Division, or at Bouchavesnes by 8th Division for example, could be more methodical than that which was afforded the Australian units at Pozières and Mouquet Farm in August and September the previous year, for example. The successes identified may then, be down to stronger, more accurate artillery employing more sophisticated methods in combination with the simple fact of more time allowed for thorough planning. However, the advantages of additional time for preparation should not overshadow the fact that these preparations *were* made successfully. Furthermore, the uneven success and levels of sophistication in infantry methods must also be considered. Following a barrage did not guarantee success, and the use of initiative at platoon command level can be seen to be valuable. The ability to solve problems on the ground, such as the junior officer from 8/Suffolks who changed the direction of his platoon's assault in order to neutralise a threat to a neighbouring unit shows sound judgement, solid command and an impressive capacity for improvisation.

These noticeable improvements in performance, coupled with the adoption of techniques such as peaceful penetration, speak to the value of experience gained over the previous months, rather than changes in training or doctrinal modifications. Paddy Griffith stated the new training manuals of 1917 'gave the junior tactician plenty of appropriate guidelines', whilst also acknowledging that certain experienced officers were aware of 'all-arm cooperation within the platoon long before it surfaced in any training course or in *SS 143*.'[432] Though short on detail, Griffith is essentially correct, and experience had raised certain formations to the requisite tactical level for their forthcoming actions. This chapter has shown that experienced divisions demonstrated the skills which would be prized as firepower

[432] Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 79.

devolved down yet further to the platoon and even to the section as the war became more mobile in the forthcoming 12 months. Australian 2nd and 4th Divisions by comparison, toiled in challenging conditions, and possibly leaned to a more modest and simplified training period following their Somme actions. Australian 4th Division's first attempt at taking Cloudy Trench by bombing exclusively was, by the standards of 1917, backward and inadvisable. The importance of training should not be diminished by emphasising the importance of experience, more that both were essential in order to develop from lessons learned. The fact that Australian 4th Division changed tack within a couple of days is creditable, and left little doubt that when correctly employed, Holmes's new command could certainly fight. This chapter has shown that there was an upward trend in the performance of the BEF's divisions in the very early months of 1917. This was born out of experience and lessons learned on the ground, and greater time spent by energetic and adept commanders in preparation for action, rather than doctrinal change.

Chapter 4

Defining the Shape of the Offensive

Doctrine, Training and Progress before the Resumption of Open Warfare in 1917

While there is widespread consensus that the various training pamphlets issued by GHQ in late 1916 and early 1917 were indeed important, and laid the groundwork for a more effective infantry later in the conflict, detail is short on how well the lessons were integrated into training, and how readily the new methods were adopted. This chapter will provide some of that detail, and in doing so will clarify the uneven nature of training, and how certain skills, such as the use of Lewis guns, were prioritised over other weapons such as rifle grenades. Similarly, attack practice was carried out by all divisions, whereas consolidation and wiring were given less time. Above all, experience seems to have dominated training focus, with few divisions wanting to make the same mistake twice. Additionally, although *SS 135* was a sound training document, it covered an enormous variety of necessary skills. For divisions still integrating new weapons, training specialists and taking on reinforcement drafts, some aspects could not be covered in the time allowed and decisions had to be made.

Not all the divisions examined in this study remained on the Somme front after the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, and a brief situational summary is appropriate:

- 7th Division: After their actions on Redan ridge in January, the division had a spell of training in late January – early February, before moving back into line just before the first German withdrawal in late February. Brigades in 7th Division alternated between line-holding and work parties in the weeks leading up to the main withdrawal on 16 March. The Divisional commander through the 1916 Somme campaign, Herbert Watts, was promoted in February 1917, and replaced by Major-General George D. S. Barrow from First Army General Staff.
- 8th Division: Under newly-promoted Major-General William Heneker, 8th Division spent most of the winter from mid-November 1916 through to the end of January in training, before moving to a section of line near the village of Bouchavesnes. The division carried out a successful advance to the east of Bouchavesnes on 8 March 1917, and

were holding their position in front of Moislains in the days before the main German withdrawal.

- 18th (Eastern) Division: Ivor Maxse left 18th Division after their actions in mid-November, south of the Ancre, whereupon the division spent the next six weeks in training, returning to the line in mid-January. Under Major-General Richard Lee's command, the division took part in the February actions towards Miraumont. 18th Division were then set to work parties before coming back into line near Loupart Wood, just before the main withdrawal.
- 32nd Division: After the attack on Munich Trench of 18 November 1916 and the failed attempts to rescue the men trapped in Frankfort Trench, the division was withdrawn for training through the next 8 weeks, under the intermittent command of Major-General Reginald Barnes and the divisional CRA, Brigadier-General J. A. Tyler. 32nd Division relieved 7th Division at Redan Ridge in mid-January 1917 and captured Ten Tree Alley on 10 February. Thereafter they were transferred to Fourth Army, where they took over a sector south of the river Somme from French forces, on the far southern end of the BEF's line. Major-General Cameron Shute took over command in late February, with Barnes away sick.
- 48th (South Midland) Division retained Major-General Robert Fanshawe as its commanding officer, and spent the second half of December and all of January in training, before taking over a section of the line in the first week of February, just south of the river Somme, where it bends in front of Péronne. 48th Division were involved in raiding prior to the main withdrawal, including being the victim of a substantial raid by German forces on 4 February, very soon after moving into line. A major retaliatory action was planned, but not carried out.
- 61st (2nd South Midland) Division: 61st Division, under Major-General Colin Mackenzie, relieved 18th Division in line near the Ancre at the end of November 1916, having been transferred to the Somme sector in the 1916 campaign's closing stages. Most of January and the first week of February 1917 were spent in training, before taking over a new section of line near Vermandovillers, south of the Somme.
- 63rd (Royal Naval) Division: After the division's actions of 13-14 November 1916 under Major-General Cameron Shute, the division spent approximately 8 weeks away from

the trenches reorganising and retraining. This period ran until mid-January 1917, after which the next month was spent in line, with offensive operations carried out on 3-4 and 17 February. On its subsequent withdrawal, the division was set on to work parties before its transfer to First Army in mid-March, with Major-General Charles Lawrie newly appointed as commanding officer.

- Australian 2nd Division: Major-General Nevill Smyth took over the division in late December 1916, after the division's two-week spell of training which followed their period in line in November. Australian 2nd Division spent a further week of training in late January 1917 before moving into line at the end of the month, where they remained during both the German withdrawals.
- Australian 4th Division: Four weeks of training from late February through to late March 1917 followed Australian 4th Division's actions at Cloudy and Stormy Trenches in the early part of February. Major-General William Holmes had taken over in January, and had therefore missed any opportunity to train with the division before the operations in February, which were imperfect but showed promise.
- Australian 5th Division: The division moved to the Somme front in October 1916 but did not play a part in any major operations. Scarcely any time out of the line was afforded to Australian 5th Division in the new year of 1917. After Major-General Talbot Hobbs took over in mid-December, the division had three weeks out of the line in training, before alternating between line-holding and providing work parties.

Most divisions had at least some time out of the line before the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line was carried out, although Australian 2nd and 5th Divisions with just a week each in January had discernibly less than the majority, and both had new commanders.

Tactical Doctrine and Training Pamphlets

There were key differences between the early 1917 training period and that which had immediately followed the late 1916 actions. After the necessity of taking on reinforcement drafts, and therefore providing the time to train heavily in the basics, standards in those skills had risen sufficiently to allow for examination of the latest doctrinal information published by GHQ. As has already been suggested, most units had some time out of the lines in early 1917 to at least examine *SS 135* prior to the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line in March. On its

distribution in December 1916, *SS 135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* and its appendices superseded *SS 109*, *Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (May 1916) and *SS 119*, *Preliminary notes on the Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations* (July 1916). As a 72-page document, *SS 135* was a much larger piece of work than the 8-page *SS 119* or 3-page *SS 109,* and gave detail on matters such as issue of orders, setting objectives, infantry/artillery cooperation, use of reserves, consolidation, and the employment of various specialists. The appendices cover preparatory measures to be taken ahead of an attack from trenches, and instructions for contact patrol work by aeroplanes. Feedback from divisional commanders such as Major-Generals William Walker (2nd Division), Ivor Maxse (18th Division) and Thomas Bridges (19th Division) after the publication of *SS 119* had highlighted that certain points of the July document required refining, and there was a need for a more comprehensive series of instructions ahead of offensive actions, so as to prevent essential pieces of preparation falling through the cracks. *SS 135*'s essential purpose was to bring uniformity to methodical preparation for attacks on prepared positions. However, it also provided the training framework for the infantry to solve problems that could appear through an overreliance on artillery. If there was one lesson for the infantry to learn from the opening day of the Somme campaign, it was this.

SS 143, The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action built on a growing sentiment through 1916 that the near impossibility of establishing clear battlefield communication required increased firepower to be put in the hands of leaders lower down the chain of command. The lowest level of command delegated to an officer was the platoon, and it was seen fit to organise the platoon as self-contained unit with fire support from Lewis light machine guns, and rifle grenades, augmenting the rifle and hand grenades previously in the hands of platoon commanders. These changes were made possible in no small part by the increased availability of Lewis guns; through winter of 1916-17 it was possible to allow 16 per battalion. The minimum strength of a platoon was set at 28 (exclusive of its headquarters), any fewer and the platoon would 'cease to be workable', and reinforcement would be required. The notionally ideal strength was 41 men in total, with four sections of 9 men, each led by an NCO, and a small HQ section made up of the platoon commander and 4 other ranks. The sections were arranged as follows:

- A bombing section, including 2 throwers and 2 bayonet men.

- A Lewis gun section, with gunners No.1 and No.2, the remainder carrying ammunition.
- A rifle section, with picked 'shots', scouts, and bayonet fighters.
- A rifle grenade section, with 4 bomb firers.

As demonstrated by his circulated remarks and organisation of brigade-level demonstrations in attack formations described in chapter 2, General Gough was a firm proponent of the adoption of a uniform structure, and appears to have given two Fifth Army divisions more attention than others in terms of refining the standard platoon formation, namely 7th and 18th Divisions. 7th Division reorganised in late January 1917 into a structure very similar to that described in *SS 143*, and were observed by Gough and Lieutenant-General Fanshawe, V Corps commander on 29 and 30 January. On 8 February a further demonstration of an attack on a strong point was carried out by soldiers from 20 Brigade, with Gough and a collection of other officers present. Despite a serious accident involving the premature detonation of a rifle grenade, this formation for an assault on a strong point was carried forward into general circulation.[433] The process carried out by Gough, in identifying two relatively successful divisions from which to draw lessons on effective tactics and then disseminating lessons based on their experience demonstrates the flexibility of the BEF's informality, and the value of personal connections. This particularly supports the work of historians such as Foley and Fox, who have outlined the process in their respective works, but which possibly lacked detail from the infantry in what was a crucial moment in the BEF's development.

There was some degree of discussion over precisely the best form for the platoon; in January 1917 18th Division ran similar demonstrations but with the rifle grenades split across two rifle sections, in addition to the bombing and Lewis gun sections. There were found to be advantages and disadvantages to this approach; the platoon benefitted from having rifle grenades spread across the sections as they could not be easily outranged by enemy bomb throwers, they could engage enemy machine guns more easily, and rifle grenades could easily be used as hand grenades. On the other hand, rifles were found to be damaged by the grenade cartridges, and even if barrels did not burst, after firing three grenades the Lee Enfields were

[433] TNA WO 95/1655/1 War Diary for 2/Borders, entry for 25 January and 8 February 1917.

found to be 'useless for firing [standard ammunition]'.[434] Maxse himself came to the conclusion that sections themselves 'should all be armed with rifle, bayonet, bomb and rifle grenade', but acknowledged that corporals may not be sufficiently trained for such tactical flexibility. Lewis guns were, in Maxse's opinion, to be held at company level and deployed in support of platoons as necessary.[435]

Although Maxse's proposed formation may have allowed greater flexibility than that eventually chosen as the standard formation, is seems that simplicity was allowed to take precedence, and the 4-section system was enshrined in the new instructive pamphlets. *SS 144* then explicitly informed unit commanders of the formation to adopt in the attack; namely one where the platoon formed a wave of two lines, with the bombers and riflemen in the first line, and the rifle grenadiers and Lewis gunners in the second line. The company then formed a second wave with another platoon behind the first, in a supporting role. 'Moppers-up' should follow the first wave, and may be taken from a different company, or even a different battalion. The option was given to commanders in the case of there being two or more objective lines, whether or not to send the first wave direct on to the furthest objective, or to stop on the first objective and have the second wave pass through; on balance it advises the former option to be preferable. This was the method of attack employed by 8th Division at Bouchavesnes on 4 March 1917.

Training

In this training period, many divisions continued to put training of the basic skills into the hands of divisional training schools, as they had done in the wake of their 1916 actions, and with reinforcement drafts to bring up to standard. One exception was 61st Division; not having fought in any significant action since Fromelles in July 1917, there was no large contingent of new drafts to assimilate, and so they seem to have coped without divisional schools. In line with *SS 135*, most units put focus on specialist training, and training in operations involving cooperation between different specialists became more commonplace. Some of the best records of training programmes and restructuring during this period were kept in 4th

[434] Maxse Papers 53.1, IWM, 'Platoon Organisation; 18th Division No.G300' dated 13 January 1917.
[435] Maxse Papers 53.1, IWM, Letter to Major-General Richard Butler, dated 29 January 1917.

Australian Division, which had struggled with morale and discipline problems in the previous year, and apparently continued to do so. In 14/AI in particular, through late February and into March, a sound structure was followed in line with *SS 135*, in the hope of 'reviving the efficiency of the battalion both individually and collectively', a statement which appears to tacitly admit a drop in morale and effectiveness.[436] Training was to be divided into periods based on unit size, with the first period covering platoon, section and specialist training; the second period on company training; the third period battalion training, and brigade training covered in the fourth period.

The most detail is given on that first period, where organisation and skills training are given priorities, as well as improving the appearance and fitness of the men. The following periods cover organisation of units of company size and higher, and then engaging them in attack practice. *Training of Divisions for Offensive Operations* was explicitly cited in 14/AI's memo on training from 24 February 1917, along with various priorities for reorganisation and training: Firstly, reorganisation in accordance with *SS 135* pamphlet; secondly, completing equipment; thirdly, 'regaining the disciplinary and physical standard by means of physical training games, close supervision of men by officers and NCOs, improvement of physical appearance, and ceremonial and drill'; fourthly, regaining technical efficiency in basic elements such as musketry, bayonet fighting, bombing, Lewis gun work and rifle grenade work. Training of officers and NCOs both in fighting and administration duties was also listed, along with training company and battalion specialists such as runners and observers. 'Training of platoon for attack' came relatively low down the list, showing that deficiencies in basic elements still remained in late February in Australian 4th Division. [437] Even with this detailed structure and planning for Australian 4th Division, however, training did not proceed perfectly; on 2 March 1917, the General Staff diary for the division records: 'Brigades are utilising this week for company and section training, but unfortunately some battalions do not seem to realise the importance of this training & much time is being wasted.'[438] Australian 4th Division is an outlier within this study, as the only division to remain heavily focused on basic soldierly elements,

[436] AWM: AWM4 23/31/29, War Diary for 14/AI, Appx 1 'Training' dated 24 February 1917, located in War Diary for March 1917.
[437] AWM: AWM4 23/31/29, War Diary for 14/AI, Appx 1 'Training' dated 24 February 1917, located in War Diary for March 1917.
[438] AWM: AWM4 1/48/12, General Staff diary for Australian 4th Division, diary entry for 2 March 1917.

rather than progressing on to more sophisticated fighting methods during the early spring period.

Basic Skills

Musketry was still given significant attention from all divisions during this period, as the growing tendency towards outpost fighting in the earliest actions of 1917 further demonstrated a reduced focus on trench-to-trench attacks, and increased the need to be able to engage a target over a distance of potentially some hundreds of yards. Skills with the rifle were, therefore, prioritised. 8th Division sent officers to the musketry schools at Pont Remy and Camiers for courses of instruction in January and February 1917, and divisions set about constructing ranges themselves.[439] Despite not having a dedicated school for the purpose, 61st Division did work on skills such as rapid loading and fire discipline while conducting musketry training in January 1917.[440] 1,000 men from the other Fromelles unit, Australian 5th Division, were sent to Fourth Army's musketry school at Pont Remy, as well as battalions conducting their own musketry training.[441] Despite concerns over the division's morale and discipline, Australian 4th Division was more creative than most in this respect, with units practicing firing the rifle from the hip in the advance as an effort to subdue enemy fire in the attack. This idea stemmed from a visit made by some divisional officers to a French training camp on 6 February, in which the French method of attack, including firing automatic rifles from the hip, was being practiced. 15th Battalion Australian Infantry's representative recorded in the unit war diary on 6 February 1917:

> I was much impressed with their keenness and very smart turnout. I do not consider that the firing of the automatic rifle from the hip during the advance is an advantage, over rough ground it is very doubtful whether any shots would be effective, also the waste of ammunition is considerable and would be of more value driving off counter-attacks. The rifle grenade barrage is a splendid idea.[442]

[439] TNA WO 95/1712/2 War Diary for 2/Devons, 15 February 1917.
[440] TNA WO 95/3057/1 War Diary for 2/8 R. Warwicks, entries for 25 & 30 January 1917.
[441] AWM: AWM4 1/50/11 Part 1, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, entry for 5 January 1917; AWM4 23/49/18, War Diary for 32/AI, entries for 8-10 January 1917.
[442] AWM: AWM4 23/65/13, War Diary for 48/AI, entry for 6 February 1917.

When it came to trialling similar methods themselves, the assessment from 14th AI's experiment was that actual hits on the targets were few, but that 'the moral effect of extended formations, firing from the hip while on the move, must be very great indeed'. The results may have been impressive, but they were not convincing, as 14/AI's commander concluded his report with 'I am not in favour of the system'.[443] Battalions in 7th Division also experimented with firing on the move, with 2/Gordons recording: 'C Company gave a demonstration on the range of the use of the rifle in the assault by the 1st wave, with a view to keeping down enemy snipers… demonstration was on the whole a success'.[444]

Most units record engaging in bayonet training at some point during this training period, but bomb-throwing was more commonly left to brigade or divisional schools, rather than training at battalion level. 18th Division concentrated on training the new recruits in bomb-throwing, and 8/E Surreys recorded putting two men per platoon per day through instruction with a specialist officer in mid-March 1917.[445] Australian 4th Division trained with German stick grenades ahead of their actions against the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt, which seems a sensible way of taking the pressure off carrying parties by making use of German weapons.[446] It was not until the end of the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line that any Fourth Army units record doing similar, but 8th Division did conduct a demonstration with German egg bombs in mid-April.[447] Australian 2nd Division, also in the days preceding the attack at Bullecourt, took the time to run a cooperative session between bombers and Lewis gunners at the divisional bomb school.[448] Additionally, 8th Division and Australian 2nd Division both took the trouble to take the partially-trained men out of their units for further instruction during this period.

As a further point, getting the right people into positions of authority at lower command levels, such as company, platoon and even section, was also taken seriously. Several battalions recorded prospective officer candidates being taken away and put through army-level schools. In Australian 5th Division the drive to find junior officers continued, and officers were urged to

[443] AWM: AWM4 23/31/29, War Diary for 14/AI March 1917, Appx 9 dated 10 March 1917.
[444] TNA WO 95/1656/2 War Diary for 2/Gordons, entry for 13 February 1917.
[445] TNA WO 95/2050/3, War Diary for 8/E Surreys, entry for 16 March 1917.
[446] AWM: AWM4 23/64/11, War Diary for 47/AI, entry for 8 April 1917.
[447] TNA WO 95/1727/1, HQ Diary for 25 Brigade, entry for 13 April 1917.
[448] AWM: AWM4 23/5/20, HQ Diary for Australian 5 Brigade, entry for 21 February.

look beyond serving NCOs, as it was appreciated that 'different qualities are required in non-commissioned officers and officers, and the selections will therefore be sounder if made from privates who have the requisite standard of educational qualifications and are of the right stamp for officers, but have hitherto escaped notice in the selection of non-commissioned officers'.[449] 63rd Division's command structure was subject to change during the winter period, as Major-General Shute moved on to command of 32nd Division, and Charles Lawrie, formerly II Corps's artillery commander, took over the Royal Naval Division. Subject to particular scrutiny were 189 Brigade, who were visited by the divisional and corps commanders on 5, 6 and 9 March, and then on 10 March the brigade diary records '4 RSMs and 16 CSMs arrived from England to take the place of the existing warrant officers in battalions'.[450] Though there is no explanation in the unit war diaries or published divisional history of the need for such a wholesale change, the situation must have been unsatisfactory. Hood Battalion's war diary makes the point that these were Army warrant officers as opposed to Navy or Royal Marines, suggesting some resistance on the part of the removed Royal Naval warrant officers to army command.[451]

On their withdrawal from the line in late February, 63rd Division's involvement in offensive operations on the Somme front ended. The division was initially required to furnish work parties, before they could start the process of retraining after their early 1917 actions in late March, when the focus was put on elementary skills. A divisional conference on training was held on 27 March, and training itself started the following day.[452] Elementary skills again formed the basis of the early days of this spell, although outpost schemes seem now to have been considered as a basic skill.[453] Specialists, in particular Lewis gunners, were trained in greater numbers, including when the rest of the men were on working parties.[454] A reorganisation of companies was carried out, although precisely how they were set up thereafter was not recorded, and tactical exercises were carried out from the end of March,

[449] AWM: AWM4 1/50/11 Part 1, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, January 1917, 'Training memorandum No.75, 16 January 1917.
[450] TNA WO 95/3112/2 HQ Diary for 189 Brigade, entries for 5-10 March 1917.
[451] TNA WO 95/3115/1, War Diary for Hood Battalion, entry for 10 March 1917.
[452] TNA WO 95/3093/6, 63rd Division General Staff Diary, entries for 27-28 March 1917.
[453] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, entry for 31 March 1917.
[454] TNA WO 95/3119/1, War Diary for 7/RF, entries for 7, 9, 10 & 13 March 1917.

with 'many useful lessons learned'.[455] Lectures were provided on subjects such as sniping, outpost warfare and wood fighting, and rifle grenades were incorporated into training, as well as elements such as musketry, bombing, bayonet fighting and physical training.[456] The variety of fighting styles and formations practiced included close and extended order, attacks in waves, outpost fighting and a defensive scheme on a canal line.[457] In summary, the training done in this period, although not explicitly stated to have been carried out in line with the latest training pamphlets, does seem to have shown awareness of the latest styles in fighting, and the need to pay attention to defeating the counter-attack. The greater emphasis on musketry seems to fit with the German sniper threat and style of defending shell holes and strong points rather than entire trench lines. The incorporation of rifle grenades into training was another necessary adaptation after the Ancre actions. Plenty of tactical schemes and exercises were carried out over the fortnight of training, despite a lack of space on the cultivated land, and preparations were made to join the Arras campaign shortly after its opening on 9 April.[458]

Structural Improvements and formations

Unit war diaries uniformly accepted the need for greater employment of specialists across companies, and training instructions stressed the need for a greater emphasis on platoon and section training. Prior to the publication of *SS 143* and its explicit guidance on platoon structure, there was still some creative leeway for divisional commanders; 7th Division, for example, may have been laying the framework for the uniform platoon structure, but were still toying with their own. The division stayed in line for just over a week after its capture of Munich Trench, during which time plans were made for further training work and organisational change. In mid-January, the intention was to ensure that 'each platoon has one section composed entirely of both bombers and rifle grenadiers. It is suggested that two rifle grenadiers per bombing section is, and will be sufficient'. [459] Distribution of Lewis guns was moved down to platoon level, as the same order states 'as soon as sixteen Lewis guns are

[455] TNA WO 95/3116/3, HQ Diary for 190 Brigade, entry for 31 March 1917.
[456] TNA WO 95/3118/1, War Diary for 1/HAC, entries for period 31 March – 11 April 1917.
[457] TNA WO 95/3119/1, War Diary for 7/RF, entry for 2 April 1917.
[458] TNA WO 95/3116/3, HQ Diary for 190 Brigade, entry for 30 March 1917.
[459] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, January 1917, App II, memo 'with reference to 7th Division G.52 dated 31st December', 14 January 1917.

issued to battalions one will be distributed to each platoon. Meanwhile the twelve at present with battalions will be distributed to twelve platoons.' No definitive formation for platoons was set at this time, however, this was left to brigade commanders to decide. Training programmes were drawn up, and these provided a good mix of essential skills and more technical elements, such as advanced and flank guards.[460] By late January, 7th Division had adopted formations very close to that which would be published in *SS 143*.

For 32nd Division and Australian 2nd Division, extensive reorganisation was to prove impossible before April, as both were involved in line-holding and action in February and March, as well as taking part in the pursuit after the main German withdrawal on 16 March 1917. 61st Division was quick to take on new advice; in January 1917 its battalions reorganised and began section and platoon training. A 5-week training programme was adopted in the latter part of the month, much in the same style as Australian 4th Division, which saw the division broken down and reorganised into its smaller component units, then steadily brought together over the weeks that followed (see table 5).

[460] TNA WO 95/1632/1, 7th Division general staff diary, February 1917, '7th Division Weekly Programme of Training', 5 February 1917.

61st DIVISION.

TRAINING INSTRUCTIONS.

Jany. & Feby. 1917

Arrangements. 1. 20th to 22nd Jan. Rest, cleaning up, Arms and Kit inspection; cleaning billets.

	TRAINING	REMARKS
23rd to 27th Jan) 1st week.) 29th Jan. to 3rd) Feb., 2nd week)	Platoon Training	4 hours work a day. Remainder to be devoted to games.
5th to 10th Feb.) 3rd week.) 12th to 17th Feb) 4th Week.)	Company(& some Battalion) Training.	4 hours work a day; games in afternoon; 6 hours work a day.
19th to 24th Feb 5th Week	Battalion (and some Brigade) Training.	6 hours work a day.
Special Fixtures		
2nd Feb.	Div.Exercise without troops (open battle)	Will not affect battn programmes.
1st or 2nd week.	Demonstration of Coy.organization in each Bde.	See para. 3.
3rd & 4th weeks.	2 Bde.Exercises without troops.	On scheme of Div. Exercise.
3rd week.	Demonstration of Trench Attack.	See para. 7.
14th Feb.	Div.Route March.	
4th week.	M.G.Covs. to LE GROTOY for Range practice.	
5th week.	Div.Exercise.	

Table 5: January/February training schedule, 61st Division.[461]

Of interest in the training programme is how the daily workload lengthened from 4 to 6 hours per day in the 4th week of the programme; this may be either in expectation of better weather allowing more time outside, a desire to increase the intensity of the training to increase stamina and resilience of the men, as a *reflection* of the growth in stamina and resilience, or

[461] TNA WO 95/3033/3, General Staff Diary for 61st Division, January 1917, Appendix VI.

a combination of any of these factors. Physical training is not listed on the programme, but 'games' can cover several aspects of training and morale maintenance.

During their spell out of the line in April, 18th Division's staff looked to innovate away from the confines of *SS 143*, with an effort to devolve Lewis guns down to platoon level command in a different manner. On 5 April, 55 Brigade recorded discussion between commanding officers on '18th Division having decided to make the Lewis gun section a 5th section in each platoon'. This was then revised four days later, as the diary states 'definite decision made by 18th Div, to adhere at once to platoon organisation laid down in GHQ letter OB.1910 of 7/2/17'.[462] For such a successful division to shelve their own plans and adopt the universally-available doctrine, was quite the validation and show of faith in the *SS 143* formations and methods. Ivor Maxse's influence on unit structure continued after he left 18th Division in December 1916, and a useful document on training in this period was kept in his personal papers, which covers companies planning for open warfare in March 1917. Various useful points are made, on organisation, advancing, deployment, the assault and consolidation. Regarding organisation, a key point is that 'platoons and sections were to be <u>permanent</u> units under their own commanders', with understudies for commanders.[463] This was to be done 'in spite of the Adjutant or the Quarter-master Sergeant', which would indicate a structural reluctance on the part of these battalion level personnel to delegate and devolve responsibility down. This echoes Gough's instructions in late December, on the importance of the platoon as a more autonomous tactical unit. As such, platoon commanders were required to take a greater hand in training their men than they had done previously, and this was stated explicitly in this document: 'Platoon commanders must be <u>compelled</u> to train their platoons, however badly they do it at first. They learn best by teaching and making their own mistakes, not by lectures from superiors'.[464] March discipline was also emphasised, and came with a new circular document stressing its importance. It can be seen that there was little doubt in the efficacy of the normal formations, and the speed with which those units which had time to do so, adopted the new doctrinal methods, shows how sound they were believed to be. The methods therein had, through success in experimentation, proved themselves to be

[462] TNA WO 95/2047/1, HQ Diary for 55 Brigade, 5 & 9 April 1917.
[463] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 35.1, 'Notes on training infantry companies in open warfare'.
[464] Ibid.

successful, and Hubert Gough in particular was a firm influence in pushing the tactical reforms through. Though known as an aggressive 'thruster' when commanding men in action, Gough can be seen as an important player in the increased effectiveness of the British infantry at a crucial time in its development.

Offensive Action

Along with reorganisation and formation changes, preparation for offensive action dominated the early 1917 training period, often with the assumption that a more open form of fighting was close at hand. One exception was 7th Division, already one of the more experienced BEF divisions, which carried out relatively orthodox attack practices with contact patrol aircraft, and battalions practiced various tasks in darkness, such as forming up for an assault and consolidating a position.[465] Specific training was also carried out in preparation for the attack on Bucquoy. Prior to the failed operation at Bucquoy, however, a note from the divisional General Staff was circulated, instructing brigade commanders to work on solutions to two problems which they anticipated as the conflict opened up, namely improving communications between fighting troops, and dealing with small parties of the enemy with machine guns, left behind to delay any advance. This memo stressed that the ideal situation was that every man in a battalion would be trained and proficient in this task, but in reality, it was more practicable for each company to assign a platoon of selected men to this role. This platoon would require tactical training in all weapons available to the infantry, including rifle grenades, Lewis guns and smoke bombs, and should be able to fire with good effect as they advance, under cover of snipers. The memo left the choice to brigade commanders as to whether or not these platoons should have Stokes mortars attached; their usefulness in neutralising machine guns would doubtless be countered by their lack of mobility.[466] Unfortunately, it seemed there was insufficient time to set up the specialist platoons prior to the rushed attack by 91 Brigade at Bucquoy in the early hours of 14 March 1917, but they did feature in the operations of 28 March at Croisilles.

[465] TNA WO 95/1670/1, War Diary for 2/Queen's, entries for 31 January and 7 February 1917; TNA WO 95/1663/1, War Diary for 20/Mancs, entries for 3, 7 and 13 February 1917.
[466] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App X, '7th Division No. G.557'.

Battalions from 61st Division practiced 'rapid shaking out to artillery formation from column' while on route marches, as well as night patrolling in early February 1917.[467] 2/1 Bucks Battalion recorded 'training hard for active warfare' on 2 February, without ever providing exact detail on what that meant , but with the context of other diaries probably refers to quick formation changes and open fighting.[468] 61st Division also engaged in tactical schemes for their officers and section commanders in the first week of February, which included training in map reading.[469] 'Mobile warfare' was the subject of training for Australian 2nd Division with the little time that units had when not holding the line in mid-March 1917. With explosions and fires seen behind the German lines, it became clearer that tremendous damage was being done to the villages behind the lines in preparation for their main withdrawal, and the expectation of a more open form of warfare grew in response.[470] Australian 2nd Division was one of only two divisions in this study, along with 61st Division, which recorded training for wood fighting in this period; possibly due to Loupart Wood's prominent position in the German defence in front of I ANZAC Corps.[471] Australian 2nd Division's war diaries are unusual among the divisions of this study, in that hardly any mention is made of any element of the early 1917 pamphlets. This is potentially due to the division's commitments in line-holding and then following both stages of German withdrawal, leaving little time to process new doctrine. The key points from the training documents remained absent in the division's training and organisation until early April 1917, when brigade and battalion diaries record 'special attention was given to platoon organisation and training at formations for rapid movement' and a renewed focus on specialist training.[472]

Australian 4th and 5th Divisions provide particularly good detail on their preparations for the resumption of the offensive in Spring. Having fought no major actions in almost 6 months, Major-General Hobbs set to work on Australian 5th Division's reorganisation and the planning of training, immediately on being given time out of the line. A divisional memo issued on Christmas day in line with Corps instructions highlights that specialists (bombers, rifle

[467] TNA WO 95/3056/2, War Diary for 2/6 R Warwicks, entry for 13 February 1917.
[468] TNA WO 95/3066/2, War Diary for 2/1 Bucks Battalion, entry for 1 February 1917.
[469] TNA WO 95/3057/1, War Diary for 2/8 R Warwicks, entry for 8 February 1917.
[470] AWM: AWM4 23/44/19, War Diary for 27/AI, entries for 14-17 March 1917.
[471] AWM: AWM4 23/5/21, HQ Diary for Australian 5 Brigade, entry for 3 March 1917.
[472] AWM: AWM4 23/45/25, War Diary for 28/AI, entry covering 1-14 April 1917.

grenadiers and Lewis gunners) would be devolved down to platoon command, and not held in a separate platoon by either company or battalion commanders.[473] This was followed early in January with memos which instructed brigade staff to find suitable sites in their training areas for rifle grenade ranges, and direction on how to arrange brigades in attack.[474] The training itself, though only lasting two weeks, was focused on valuable skills; companies were instructed in advancing under fire, use of ground, rapid loading, extended order movement, fire discipline, assault & pursuit, and theory and practice of rifle grenade use.[475] Where battalions recorded less detail on their training, they acknowledged that 'more advanced exercises in company drill [were] carried out'.[476] A number of battalions managed to run exercises with contact patrol aircraft, although these were not all carried out faultlessly; for 15 Brigade's exercise the plane flew too far away, making the exchange of signals impossible.[477] During this period, most of Australian 5th Division's battalions record that even when they were expected to provide significant work parties, they kept their specialists in training, especially light machine gunners. This would be increasingly important as this weapon was increasingly coming under the command of platoon commanders; by February battalions in the division were each in possession of 14 Lewis guns, almost one per platoon.[478]

New organisation did not necessarily translate into perfect performance, however, as 14/AI from Australian 5th Division noted following the short pursuit in late February:

> Our experience in throwing [strong fighting patrols] out, during the last two or three days, has shown that the tactical knowledge displayed by some of the patrol leaders was not of a very high order. Again, some patrols lost their direction badly in the dark. Steps must be taken at once to think out, in Brigades, how these fighting patrols should advance and work, and brigadiers will please instruct Battalion and Company commanders in how this should be done, so that patrols can be put forward with confidence, from whatever troops happen to be handy at the time when an enemy

[473] AWM: AWM4 1/50/10 Part 1, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, December 1916, 'General Staff memorandum No. 74'.
[474] AWM: AWM4 1/50/11 Part 1, Australian 5th Division General Staff Diary, January 1917, 'General Staff memorandum No.78', 3 January 1917 and 'General Staff Memorandum No.79; Formations in attack', 13 January 1917, which in turn references Fourth Army GS 360.
[475] AWM: AWM4 23/71/12, War Diary for 54/AI, entries for 2-9 January 1917.
[476] AWM: AWM4 23/72/11, War Diary for 55/AI, entry for 9 January 1917.
[477] AWM: AWM4 23/74/12, War Diary for 57/AI, entry for 10 January 1917.
[478] AWM: AWM4 23/73/13, War Diary for 56/AI, entry for 21 February 1917.

retirement takes place. The organisation of these strong fighting patrols will include Lewis gunners and rifle grenadiers and the administrative arrangements of battalions must be such that ammunition and rifle grenades are always available to fit out any special patrols that are wanted at short notice.[479]

Work continued in Australian 5th Division after the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line began, as the need for open warfare aptitude was demonstrated at Beaumetz. Open warfare exercises were carried out by companies of 56/AI while the advanced guard was in action and other units were endeavouring to supply work parties. [480]

Australian 4th Division carried out attack practices with battalions in different roles, including following a barrage, advanced guard and open warfare drills. Its officers had, in a similar manner to Australian 5th Division, noticed deficiencies in its men on the move to a more open style of patrolling and advancing, and put together a training memo at the end of February, stating:

Movement must be the keynote of all training and will consist largely of practice in:

A. Rapid advance against enemy trenches in open order.

B. Re-assembly and reorganisation after an attack

C. Charges with fixed bayonets against a line of trenches, edge of a wood etc

D. Rapid deployment from close order into extended lines.

E. Closing from extended order into small columns on the move.

F. Machine and Lewis guns should take part in all exercises that are carried out. Covering an advance or retirement and occupying tactical points.

G. Bombers and rifle grenade parties will also take part in these exercises whenever the exercise permits of them being used.[481]

[479] AWM: AWM4 23/14/12, HQ Diary for Australian 14 Brigade March 1917, '5th Australian Division; General Staff Memorandum No. 91' dated 2 March 1917.
[480] AWM: AWM4 23/73/14, War Diary for 56/AI, entry for 21 March 1917.
[481] AWM: AWM4 23/12/13, HQ Diary for 12 Australian Brigade, February 1917 Appx 27 'Operation Memo 91; Training' dated 27 February 1917.

Fourth Army's divisions, meanwhile, had longer than Fifth Army's to prepare for open warfare as the River Somme was bridged, and 48th Division's battalions were able to spend some days practicing advance guard formations and cross-country movement.[482]

Prior to the German withdrawal, there had been few command changes in 48th division during the winter period; Major-General Robert Fanshawe remained as GOC, and only one Brigade and one battalion had their commanders replaced. There had been several changes in the divisional staff since August, with a new GSO1 and another Brigadier-General, but during the training period the command structure was stable.[483]

48th Division's return to a front-line holding role after their winter training came at the beginning of February 1917, as they took over a section of the line from the French on Fourth Army's extreme right, just south of the river Somme. Though their biggest problems initially appeared to be caused by the weather and the conditions in the trenches, a German raid on 4 February achieved surprising success, and came as a shock to the division.[484] The 6/ Warwicks were hit hard, suffering over 100 casualties; 6/Glosters, who were also in line, did not report their losses in the action, stressing instead the effective manner of their resistance.[485] In response, small scale raids were carried out through February while a larger scale assault was planned for the hamlet of La Maisonette, for which the initial order was issued on 21 February. As previously mentioned, the orders for this attack drew specific attention to the pages focused on consolidation of a captured position in the *SS 135* pamphlet, issued in December 1916. The points raised included:

- Double-blocking of communication trenches leading into the captured line, with bombers and, when possible, a stokes mortar posted there.
- Placing outposts a good distance in front of the main captured line.
- Rapid 'turning around' of the trench, into a fire trench facing the enemy.
- Opening entrances and clearing existing dugouts.
- Communications trenches to the new outpost line, and to the rear.
- Narrow, deep slit trenches, away from the main line as protection against shell fire.

[482] TNA WO 95/2762/3, War Diary for 1/4 R Berks, entries for 17 & 19 March 1917
[483] Mitchinson, *48th Division*, p. 132.
[484] Ibid, p. 136.
[485] TNA WO 95/2755/2, War Diary for 6/Warwicks, 4 February 1917 and TNA WO 95/2758/2, War Diary for 6/Glosters, '1/6th Bn Gloucestershire Regiment; Supplement to War Diary February 1917'.

- Creation of dumps for ammunition, grenades, flares, tools and rations.
- Reorganisation in depth, with support and counter-attack units.[486]

These points were doubtless emphasised with the recent German raid in mind. However, the day after the order was issued, 144 Brigade staff wrote up a pessimistic 'appreciation of probable chances of a successful offensive'. This stressed difficulties with the weather and conditions, necessity of artillery registration and need for the strain induced on the infantry by working parties to reduce. Perhaps more worryingly was an awareness that the Prussian Guards Division had been in the line opposite, and unless there were signs they had been relieved and inferior troops had come in, greater strength at platoon level was needed.[487] In the event, a scaled-down raid by units of 145 Brigade took place on the night of 7-8 March, with a good degree of success.[488] The larger enterprise against La Maisonette was scheduled for the evening of 16 March, by which time the initial German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line was under way. This news was confirmed when a deserter crossed the lines on 15 March and informed the Division that the withdrawal eastward was taking place, and that 20 men per company were being left to defend the current lines.[489] The advance on the night of 16-17 March therefore took place with next to no opposition, and by the evening of 17 March elements of 8/Warwicks had crossed the River Somme.

Consolidation

On the whole during this period, it is surprising that not all units recorded training specifically in consolidation. It is possible that the necessity to train for open warfare took precedence over digging in, despite 7th, 18th and 32nd Divisions having demonstrated the value of swift and strong consolidation, and Ivor Maxse having argued compellingly for its value. Maxse's was not the only voice on the matter; there were other noteworthy observations made on consolidation during the Somme campaign which were reflected in *SS 135*. Reginald Kentish, commanding officer of 76 Brigade in 3rd Division, had remarked that 'fresh troops will consolidate without the aid of RE or Pioneer companies whereas tired troops will not

[486] Stationary Series pamphlet *SS 135*, issued December 1916, p. 25.
[487] TNA WO 95/2757/4, 144 Brigade HQ Diary, 'F.57. Appreciation of probable chances of a successful offensive + action taken to deal with the existing situation', dated 22/2/17.
[488] TNA WO 95/2746/1, 48th Division General Staff diary, 8 March 1917.
[489] TNA WO 95/2746/1, 48th Division General Staff diary, 15 March 1917.

consolidate even with the aid of the latter'. 19th Division's commander, Thomas Bridges noted that 'certain battalions which had been trained on ground where digging was allowed and been allowed an hour for the consolidation of the objective after every attack, in actual warfare immediately began to dig on reaching their objective.'[490] To the credit of GHQ and the authors of *SS 135*, the value of consolidation was clearly explained:

> Provided the Artillery preparation has been thorough and complete, and the infantry have been trained to advance close behind the barrage, the assault will seldom fail; but there remains the task of holding on to what they have gained and of beating off possible counter-attacks. This can only be done when the position has been well consolidated.[491]

Part of Australian 4th Division's month out of the line for training between late February and the last week of March 1917 saw the division reorganise its platoons and prepare for open warfare, although they also trained in wiring, particularly after the failure of 15/AI at Cloudy Trench to resist the enemy counter-attack on 1-2 February. Although the division had been quick to adopt the principles of *SS 135*, when it came to reorganising companies and platoons in mid-March 1917 after the publication of *SS 143*, Australian 4th Division took a different approach, demonstrating that although strides were being made to bring infantry formations up to a common standard, strict uniformity was still elusive. The company structure adopted by Australian 4th Division was as follows:

- Three platoons arranged with two sections of bayonet men, including a proportion of rifle grenadiers, reserve bombers and scouts; a bombing section; a Lewis gun team with reserve gunners.
- A fourth platoon including a company headquarters section; a section of bayonet men trained in wiring; a bombing section; a Lewis gun team with reserve gunners.[492]

While the need for training men in wiring is acknowledged by this company structure, which points to a better understanding of the best means to inflict loss on the enemy, one section

[490] Montgomery-Massingberd Papers 7.3, Letter from Brigadier-General R J Kentish, dated 3 August 1916 & 'Some further notes on the recent operations by the Divisional Commander' from Major-General T Bridges, dated 9 September.
[491] *SS 135*, p. 24.
[492] AWM: AWM4 23/68/13 War Diary for 51/AI, March 1917, 'Company Circular Memo No.5; Reorganization', dated 28 February 1917.

per company can only be seen as a token gesture. Although on training exercises men were 'told off for consolidation' and carried picks and shovels, 51/AI's war diary recorded that consolidation work tended to involve holding the captured line as lightly as possible to save casualties, while immediately working on communication trenches back to the original front line.[493]

Maxse continued to advocate strongly for an emphasis on consolidation in training, even after leaving 18th Division. In his notes and correspondence with divisional commanders, both within his XVIII Corps and elsewhere, several factors were identified:

- Concealment from enemy artillery is the main factor.
- Observation posts should not dictate the main position, which should be on a reverse slope.
- Use banks and folds in ground.
- Intensive digging must be practiced.
- Advanced posts with Lewis guns and snipers to be built in, as well as a 'sealed pattern strong point'.

Further points were made on consolidation of villages and woods, along much the same principles; the most important of which was avoidance of enemy artillery fire. [494]

Aside from the divisions covered by this study, Maxse's influence reached across the BEF after his promotion. Correspondence was carried on between Maxse and certain divisional commanders during February and March 1917, most notably Perceval (49th Division) and De Lisle (29th Division). The 29th Division memos found in Maxse's papers are interesting and have clearly been influenced by 18th Division's methods, particularly in terms of consolidation and rapid digging. However, De Lisle did not simply adopt the methods of rapid digging carried out by 18th Division, but carried out experiments of his own to find the most efficient ways of cutting a new trench quickly.[495] Through this work they discovered that while Maxse's rapid digging is sound practice immediately after an advance and while there may be a shortage of

[493] AWM: AWM4 23/68/13 War Diary for 51/AI, March 1917, 'Battalion order No.10', 8 March 1917; AWM4 23/65/14, War Diary for 48/AI, March 1917, '48th Battalion Operation Order No 64'.
[494] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 35.1, 'Notes on training infantry companies in open warfare'.
[495] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 53.1, 29th Division No. G.S. 26, dated 28 March 1917.

tools, if picks and shovels are in sufficient supply, other techniques are more productive. A lack of uniformity across the BEF in this regard is demonstrated, but not a detrimental one. 29th Division also offers notes on the training of rifle grenade sections within a platoon, showing their adoption in this division at least; this is noteworthy, with 29th Division having been involved in action alongside I ANZAC Corps in January and February 1917.[496]

The construction and consolidation of outposts was a skill that had proven its value on Redan Ridge in early 1917, and was to form an important element of a more mobile style of warfare. 8th Division already had its battle patrol platoons carrying tools set before its action on 4 March, but these were not universally adopted, while 32nd Division had already demonstrated proficiency in outpost construction and defence in the manner by which they closed on Ten Tree Alley in early February. 18th Division were also ahead of the curve regarding rapid digging and wiring, and had the chance after the capture of Irles to put the more advanced elements of combining outpost construction and wiring with advanced guard and patrol work into practice, before their withdrawal from the line in mid-March.[497] For several other divisions, the business of putting outposts together had often been left to Royal Engineer parties, despite concerns over putting engineers in unnecessary danger, and an awareness that infantry working under RE supervision can accomplish much.[498] 48th Division trained in the creation of cruciform posts in line with instructions in *SS 135* in March, and 61st Division trained in use of the entrenching tool, rapid wiring and wiring at night, and the creation of 'Z-shaped posts'.[499] Australian 5th Division only record practice in consolidation and wiring in late April, after their actions in the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, and it is noteworthy that they were subject to a successful German counter-attack in that period.

[496] IWM, Maxse Papers, File 53.1, 29th Division NO. G.S.43/1, 'Notes to assist Platoon Commanders in the instruction of Rifle Bombers', dated 29 March 1917.
[497] TNA WO 95/2043/1 War Diary for 7/Bedfords, entry for 18 March 1917.
[498] Montgomery-Massingberd Papers 7.3, Liddell-Hart Centre for Military Archives, notes from X Corps: 'Questions relating to an initial attack after lengthy preparation', dated 16 August 1916.
[499] TNA WO 95/2764/1 War Diary for 1/4 Ox & Bucks, entry for 30 March 1917; WO 95/3057/1, War Diary for 2/8 R Warwicks, entry for 1 February 1917; WO 95/3060/3, War Diary for 2/7 Worcs, entry for 1 March 1917; Capt. G. K. Rose MC, *The Story of the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1920) p.48.

Specialists

All divisions examined in this study made mention of specialist roles within the infantry battalions during this training period, even if simply describing them as 'specialists'. In most cases, this meant Lewis gunners, specialist bombers, signallers and snipers/scouts, although 1st Battalion Royal Marines (1/RMLI) were also careful to include the regimental band in their list.[500] Lewis gunners were the most obviously sought-after specialist troops in this training period, as the availability of the weapon improved dramatically; production of Lewis guns increased from 3,650 in 1915, to 21,615 in 1916, 45,528 in 1917, and 62,303 in 1918.[501] With the value of the light machine gun not in doubt after the Somme campaign and the early 1917 actions, divisions worked to increase the number of men trained in their use; again, Maxse articulated some useful points on their deployment which others may have missed, one crucial point being the NCOs who actually handle the weapons, potentially not being the best tactical handlers. More likely, a private with 'an aptitude for 'stripping' and putting together the mechanism of the gun' would be promoted, with the result that the Lewis guns were not handled to advantage in battle.'[502]

The need for additional Lewis gunners is highlighted by the amount of specialist training being carried out; in Australian 4th Division, 15/AI recorded 'as many Lewis gunners as possible being trained' at the end of February.[503] Lewis gunners were instructed by company rather than platoon at this stage, likely more down to the fact that the requisite 16 guns per battalion had not yet arrived, rather than specific agreement with Maxse that the Lewis gun was better employed as a company weapon, instead of a platoon weapon.[504] 46/AI's weekly training programme for Lewis gunners involved two and a half days spent stripping & cleaning the gun, half a day practicing drum filling, a day dealing with potential stoppages, and two days on the range, including half a day each firing in motion (in spite of any misgivings over its value) and on revolver practice.[505] Australian 2nd Division, in a similar manner to that practiced in the

[500] TNA WO 95/3110/1, War Diary for 1/RMLI, entry for 1 March 1917.
[501] *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914*-1920 (War Office, 1922) p. 479.
[502] Montgomery-Massingberd Papers 7.3, Liddell-Hart Centre for Military Archives; Letter from Major-General Ivor Maxse, dated 31 July 1916.
[503] AWM: AWM4 23/32/23 War Diary for 15/AI, entry for 28 February 1917.
[504] AWM: AWM4 23/31/28 War Diary for 14/AI February 1917, Appendixes 13 & 14.
[505] AWM: AWM4 23/63/14, War Diary for 46/AI, March 1917 Appx 2 'Syllabus of Training for Lewis Gunners; 46th Battalion' dated 2-8 March 1917.

French infantry and observed by Australian officers, endeavoured to fire Lewis guns while on the advance, what they called 'hosing', which was recorded as having been practiced by Australian 5 Brigade in early April 1917, and said to be 'very effective'.[506] 144 Brigade in 48th Division recorded in their war diary on 10 March 1917 engaging in trials with firing on the move, which were not deemed to be successful; even with the rifle, shots tended to go high and require a very firm grip on the weapon; with the Lewis gun, 'shooting [was] wild, progression slow, and vulnerability great.'[507] Clearly opinion was divided, and few were entirely convinced.

It was common across divisions to have specialists in training when the rest of the battalion was supplying work parties. Australian 4th Division's training programmes for February 1917 split daily tasks down into headings: intelligence section, snipers, Lewis gun sections, signallers, grenadiers, wiring, and the remainder engaged in tasks such as musketry or gas drill. Tasks for the intelligence section included map reading, compass work and field sketching, as well as acquiring information and reporting it. Included with the intelligence section were snipers, training with their telescopic sights. Bombers trained with both hand grenades and rifle grenades. *SS 135* was cited as the source from which platoon commanders were instructed to give lectures ahead of attack practices. Attention was also given to improving communications, as lectures on signals and use of pigeons were given, and a divisional signals exercise without troops took place on 19 March. These signallers did not always conduct themselves with the desired level of care; during an exercise without troops in mid-March, it was noted that 'visual signallers recklessly exposed themselves as usual.'[508]

With regard to other specialist weapons, Australian 4th Division appears to have been further advanced than the British divisions examined in this study in the use of rifle grenades, their value having been clearly demonstrated during the second attack on Cloudy Trench on the night of 4-5 February 1917. Rifle grenade training as a specific skill was listed in very few British war diaries prior to April 1917, with the exception of 29th Division mentioned earlier, which is

[506] AWM: AWM4 23/5/22 HQ Diary for Australian 5 Brigade, entry for 9 April 1917.
[507] TNA WO 95/2757/5, HQ Diary for 144 Brigade, entry for 10 March 1917.
[508] AWM: AWM4 23/62/13, War Diary for 45/AI, March 1917, entries for 6 & 9 March; AWM4 1/48/12, 4th Australian Division HQ Diary, March 1917, Appx 7.

not strictly one of the units covered by this study but took part in actions alongside the Australians near Le Transloy around the same time. By comparison, in 48th Division's diaries, one battalion records 'every man fired a rifle grenade under instruction of battalion bombing officer' back in September 1916 and then no follow-up, which scarcely counts as exhaustive or specialist training.[509] Through the early 1917 actions, British divisions had generally placed greater reliance on protective artillery bombardments, made use of Stokes mortars, and focused on facilitating the supply of hand grenades rather than employing rifle grenades to hold back enemy counter-attacks and prevent German resupply. Australian 4th Division's February training programme states 'special attention to be paid to rifle grenades instruction', the only formation to give priority to a weapon which was proving increasingly valuable.[510] By April, most British divisions were following suit, with 18th, 61st, and 63rd Divisions all listing specific rifle grenade training in the middle of the month, and Australian 5th Division which had joined I ANZAC Corps late, had one rifle grenade section per company in training by the same time.[511]

Conclusion

It is perhaps of no surprise that the training of early 1917 focused less on the basic elements of soldiering, and more on preparation for action, which was expected to be more open in nature than the previous year. Experience mattered for the BEF divisions in training in this period; those that had successful experiences of employing support weapons such as rifle grenades in recent operations, recognised their capabilities, and importance as a potential substitute for an artillery or mortar bombardment if the enemy positions were too close, or if no heavier support were available. In this respect, Australian 4th Division were ahead of the field. The division went to extreme, almost excessive lengths, in the employment of rifle grenades during their early February actions, then saw those methods as a recipe for success in the future, and gave them a corresponding amount of time in training. For most other divisions in this study, the prospect of open warfare loomed large after the first German

[509] TNA WO 95/2756/2, War Diary for 1/8 R Warwicks, entry for 9 September 1916.
[510] AWM: AWM4 23/31/28, War Diary for 14/AI, February 1917 Appx 14 'Syllabus of training for week ending 25/2/1917' dated 18 February 1917.
[511] AWM: AWM4 23/46/21, War Diary for 29/AI, entry for 13 April 1917.

withdrawal of late February 1917 and the destruction of villages to the east was seen and heard. Swift changes of formation and shaking out between open or extended order, and firing lines or close order, were extensively practiced when time permitted. With the extension of Fourth Army's line, work party demands, extremely poor weather, and many units actually remaining in action in early 1917, there was less time for training during this period than is often realised. While Gary Sheffield has stated that 'the winter of 1916-17 allowed a period of more considered reflection', this research has shown that this time for reflection was not always available to the infantry.[512] That said, many units did profit from this period of *relative* quiet. The key infantry weapons were seen as the rifle and Lewis gun, and with the latter becoming increasingly prevalent, manpower demands to service the weapons increased. Maxse's point regarding responsibility for firing Lewis guns being given to the men who were best at stripping them down, rather than deploying them, is difficult to verify. Certainly, the efforts across battalions in increasing the number of men trained in the deployment of support weapons were necessary, in order to make the new platoon structures viable, and to allow commanders a certain flexibility. It stands to reason that proficiency in Lewis gun use should have increased as a result of the increased number of men in training, but proof thereof could only come out in action. While it was clear in the immediate wake of the Somme offensive that Lewis guns were especially valuable in covering attacks and defeating counter-attacks, rifle grenades were still a subject for discussion and had yet to prove their value to all units at this time.

This chapter has shown that within battalion and brigade war diaries, there is a demonstrable shift from basic skills to unit work with platoons at the core of attack practices. Notes on training in this period are more extensive, particularly in Australian 4th Division, which appeared to be behind the other divisions in this study in terms of tactical prowess and morale. Additionally, training pamphlets were more detailed in instruction, and more realistic in their expectations than even a few months earlier. Though many of the principles of the latest training documents still had their origins in the pre-war *Field Service Regulations* documents, feedback from experienced, articulate and successful officers had been incorporated to provide materials and advice which was, as far as possible, up-to-date and of

[512] Sheffield, 'Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras' in Hayes, Iarocci & Bechtold, *Vimy Ridge*, p. 23.

practical value. Clearly specialists were becoming increasingly important, and much advice was available on their instruction. The increase in number of specialists, coupled with improved battlefield performance in the first three months of 1917, shows value in the prevalence of schools through the various command levels between battalion and army, as well as the early focus on basic skills. Trust was also, out of necessity, growing in junior commanders as their experience grew. This made the devolution of support weapons such as Lewis guns and rifle grenades not just preferable, but practically possible. *SS 135* was valued by divisions, and its principles were largely adopted without question, although there is a certain level of flexibility within its instructions which could still cause the document to be seen as 'advice' rather than doctrine. The fact that 7th and 18th Divisions, both highly experienced and within the context of the BEF in 1916, successful divisions, were still experimenting and adapting formations after the publication of *SS 143* and *SS 144*, suggests that the required uniformity of the two later documents were not always appreciated. This research shows that there was still a great deal of work to do in terms of bringing standards to uniform levels, and that skills such as consolidation still did not receive sufficient training in all divisions. However, the trend was for more detailed and specialised training at all levels, and the greater emphasis on open warfare and extended order training showed a sound awareness of the German shift in defensive style to an increased reliance on depth. This prioritisation in training was both logical and beneficial, and was made possible by the groundwork in skills laid earlier in the winter.

Chapter 5

Open Order Action

The Pursuit to the Hindenburg Line

This chapter will discuss the transition to a more open style of fighting after the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line on 16 March 1917, and the actions of those divisions involved in the pursuit against the German rear guards and outpost villages. To a greater extent than the previous chapters, this period is relatively clearly defined, from 17 March 1917, to the point when Fourth Army was able to bring the Hindenburg Line under fire from its artillery in support of Third Army's operations further north at the opening of the Arras campaign on 9 April. This chapter will argue that the BEF's divisions generally adapted well to the new conditions, although errors were made on occasions. Divisions which had struggled in 1916, by this time under new command and having trained well over the winter, achieved some landmark victories, and demonstrated significant tactical development. Other units which had less space in which to operate on the pursuit, or that met more dogged resistance, also managed to advance in a manner which had not always proved possible in 1916.

The BEF's transition to open fighting in Spring 1917 has rarely been subject to significant analysis in Great War literature. Cyril Falls's volume of the official history which covers the pursuit, is restricted by the need to explore the Arras campaign of April and May 1917 and the operations on Messines Ridge in June 1917 in depth, leaving little room to explore Fourth and Fifth Armies' advances earlier in the year in full detail. Falls devotes a total of 43 pages to the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line and the actions against the German outposts, including the crossing of the Somme, and the short advance on Third Army's front, further north. David Stevenson's *1917; War, Peace and Revolution* condenses the pursuit down to a couple of sentences, and the Arras offensive to half a paragraph, with global events such as revolution in Russia, the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare by the German navy, the American entry to the war covered in genuine depth, and the Nivelle offensive dominating action on the battlefield.[513] In other anglophone literature of the Western Front, the Arras

[513] D. Stevenson, *1917; War, Peace & Revolution* (Oxford, 2017) p. 128.

campaign receives greater attention as the British contribution to Nivelle's offensive, in addition to Field Marshal Haig's planning for his much-desired Flanders campaign later in the year.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, few recent works on the Arras offensive have expanded measurably on the official history, although a recent PhD Thesis by Christopher Newton has provided a good study of Third Army in the battles of the Scarpe. Newton has carried out a broad-themed examination of the Arras offensive, addressing elements such as planning, cooperation between artillery, infantry and the flying services, as well as studying arms of exploitation. In Newton's chapter on infantry tactics, he acknowledges the need for infantry to be able to solve their own problems on the battlefield and not simply be reliant on an artillery barrage to remove all opposition. Newton speaks in positive terms about the adoption of new platoon formations and their effectiveness, leaning heavily on, amongst others, the papers of Major-General John Shea and the records of 30th Division under his command.[514]

Where the pursuit has been mentioned elsewhere in the literature, historians have been somewhat disparaging towards Haig's armies; in *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, Paddy Griffith states that:

> Open warfare did in fact become a reality on four separate occasions – the retreat from Mons in 1914, the advance to the Hindenburg Line in March 1917, the spring retreats of 1918, and then in the advances of the Hundred Days. In all four cases the BEF was essentially unprepared for the sudden shock to its system, and it would only be on the last occasion that it rose to the challenge at all convincingly. If viewed from this perspective, therefore, the high command might be criticised for placing too little emphasis on the mobile battle, rather than too much.[515]

Indeed, in certain divisions, the primary evidence supports Griffith's assertion; within Australian 5th Division, it was recorded that:

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[514] C. Newton, 'An Anatomy of British Adaptation on the Western Front: British Third Army and the Battles of the Scarpe, April-June 1917' (KCL, 2019) pp. 211 – 214.
[515] P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994), p. 160.

> The first day's advance proved how inexperienced our officers were in open warfare. Loss of direction was common and towards evening all companies had converged on our point – this took over an hour to rectify… The experiment of leaving the administrative portion of Brigade HQ behind when we advanced was a failure and matters did not run smoothly until it was brought up.[516]

In examining a wider spectrum of divisions, however, this chapter will demonstrate variety in performance among the case-studied divisions, with other units performing creditably under the new conditions. This chapter will examine the actions of several of the most active divisions in the advance following the German withdrawal and add depth to the historiography of the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, as well as continuing the examination of tactical progress in the studied divisions. It will demonstrate that the divisions which performed well, combined the latest experimental or doctrinal tactics with their own initiative, and linked well with other branches of service such as artillery, cavalry and armoured cars. A good example is the evolution of the outpost-style tactics employed on Redan Ridge in January-February 1917 into a workable open warfare style of advancing through an enemy outpost zone without the support of an artillery bombardment. As discussed in chapter 3, this style of fighting has come to be termed 'peaceful penetration', and has traditionally been thought of as an approach largely employed by Australian forces in 1918. However, this research demonstrates that not only was the style of fighting used by British troops in 1917, but the term 'peaceful penetration' itself was also in parlance within at least British 8th Division on the pursuit.

This chapter will also demonstrate that through improved training and increased infantry firepower, even less experienced formations could engage in prolonged firefights, suppress or hit the defenders, and enable attached or neighbouring units to outflank enemy positions. While not claiming that the BEF divisions involved in the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line were the finished article in terms of open warfare methods, this chapter shows that their methods were not as haphazard as has been claimed. Moreover, in having a 'practice run' at open

[516] AWM: AWM4 23/15/13 Part 1, HQ Diary for Australian 15 Brigade, entry for 31 March 1917.

warfare, Fourth and Fifth Armies were able to work through skills which would serve them well in the latter part of 1918, on the road to victory.

Fifth Army:

Without the delay of crossing the Somme, and having a much shorter distance to cover to reach the Hindenburg Line outposts, Fifth Army's British and Australian divisions advanced to contact almost immediately, having already experienced the initial withdrawal of late February. Communications were as troublesome as at any point during the conflict, and the pursuing forces were vulnerable to counter-attack as they essentially carried out reconnaissance in force. However, there did appear to be a chance open to Fifth Army to inflict some loss on the withdrawing enemy, and therefore an energetic pursuit was carried out.

The most northerly division of this study during the pursuit, and therefore with the shortest distance to advance before reaching the Hindenburg Line outposts, was 7th Division. 7th Division had undoubtedly performed strongly on Redan Ridge in January 1917, though the subsequently-installed Major-General George de Symons Barrow's command had started shakily at Bucquoy in the early hours of 14 March, after 91 Brigade were held at the R1 line. The failure of 91 Brigade's attack meant 20 and 22 Brigades' planned assault was still an option for Barrow, and this was duly ordered later on 14 March, to take place four days later on 18 March.[517] However, the attack was pre-empted by the main German withdrawal, and Bucquoy was occupied without resistance on 17 March. By 20 March, allied advanced guards had pursued the enemy to the outpost villages in front of the Hindenburg Line, which in 7th Division's sector comprised Croisilles, and Écoust-Longatte. 54 Brigade (18th Division) attempted a reconnaissance-in-force at Croisilles on 20 March, but found it strongly held, and were promptly withdrawn, with 7th Division taking over the line.[518] Major-General Barrow wrote up an appreciation of the situation, stating that Écoust and Croisilles were both occupied, wired and held with machine guns. He also assessed the relative value of each village, deciding that:

[517] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App XXIX, '7th Division. No. G.725'
[518] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 145.

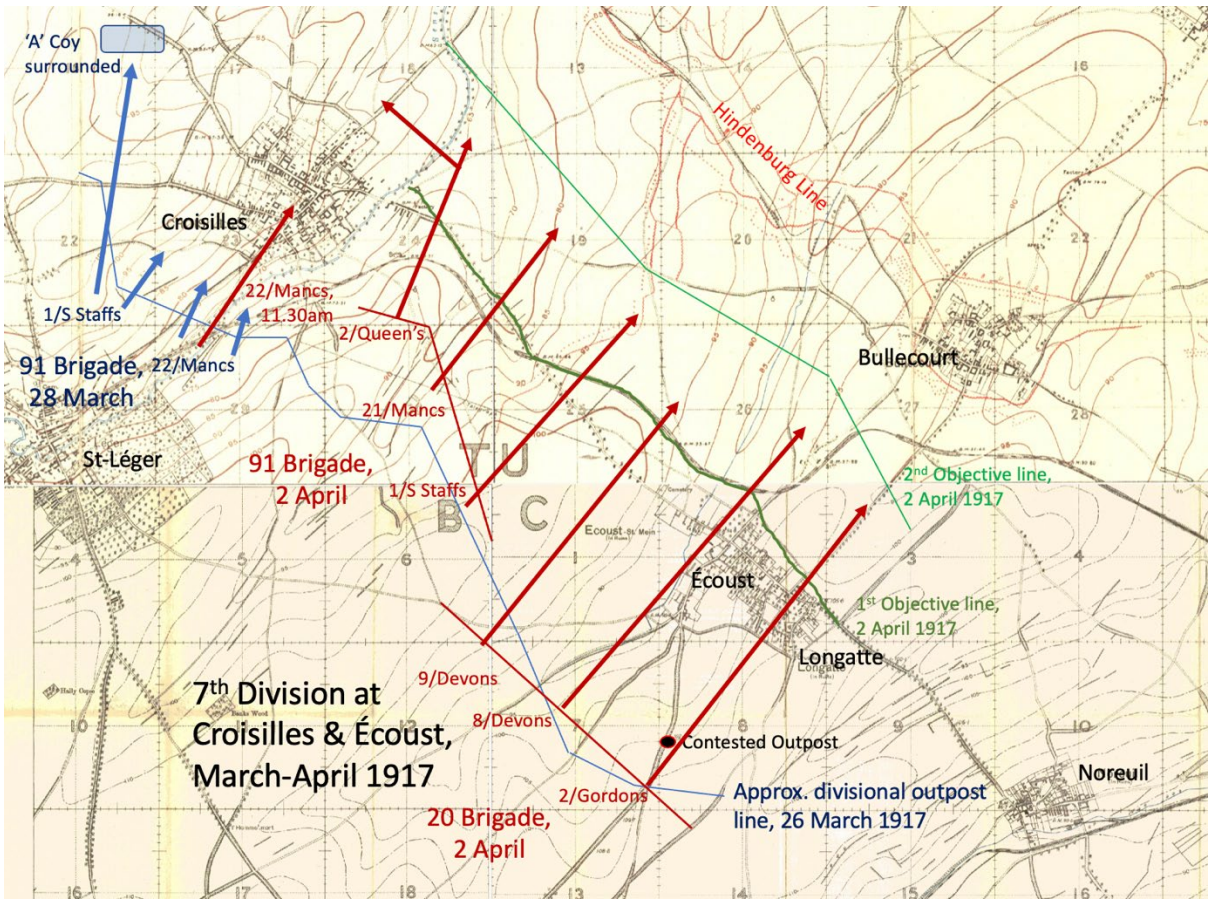
> Croisilles is situated in a hollow, and although a difficult place to attack, is not in itself a tactical feature of any importance. On the other hand Écoust…dominates the ground between Noreuil and Croisilles. Its possession gives access to the valley which turns Croisilles from the east. Its capture by us would probably be followed by the evacuation of Noreuil and Croisilles by the Germans, and in any case would greatly facilitate a subsequent attack on Croisilles if this should still be necessary.[519]

Attack plans were duly drawn up, and those dated 24 March 1917 ordered an attack on Écoust-Longatte on 26 March by 20 Brigade, cooperating with a simultaneous attack by I ANZAC Corps on their right.[520] Croisilles was not to be attacked directly, but was to be bombarded with artillery and gas to simulate an attack. Once Écoust was secure, strong patrols were to assess whether the capture of Croisilles was practicable.

Within a day of the orders being distributed, the attack was in doubt. Barrow reported to V Corps command that the wire in front of Longatte was insufficiently cut, and that his divisional artillery was not up to the task. He requested a 24 hour delay to enable corps heavy artillery to get into position; this was accepted, and a 'Chinese' creeping barrage was to be fired in support of the Australian attack on 26 March.[521] In the meantime, unsuccessful efforts were made to advance the outpost line towards Écoust-Longatte; enemy machine gun fire prevented any progress, and the existing outposts were subject to harassing artillery fire.[522] On 26 March, General Gough took a closer interest in the situation, and ordered a company to be moved to within 500 yards of Longatte.[523] This order was then altered in the evening, instructing 20 Brigade to advance two companies to the aforementioned position, under a barrage. Meanwhile, new orders were drawn up and issued for 91 Brigade to attack Croisilles at dawn on 28 March, and postponing the attack on Écoust-Longatte until 30 March.[524] 1/S

[519] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App LXXXV, Note to V Corps from Major-Genaral Barrow, 21 March 1917.
[520] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App LXLI, '7th Division Order No.139'.
[521] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App LXLIV (Note from Major-General Barrow to V Corps command, 25 March 1917) and App LXLVI (7th Division order No. 140). The 'Chinese' barrage was a feint to simulate an attack and draw enemy artillery fire away from the assaulting Australians.
[522] TNA WO 95/1655/2, War Diary for 8/Devons, entry for 26 March 1917.
[523] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, entry for 26 March, 3.40pm.
[524] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App CI, '7th Division Order No. 141', issued after 7.45pm, 26 March 1917; TNA WO 95/1669/3, War Diary for 22/Mancs, March 1917, App IX, '91st Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 69', 26 March 1917.

Staffs, augmented by one company 2/Queen's, and 22/Mancs were assigned the task of making the assault on Croisilles, with the remainder of 2/Queen's in support. The two assaulting battalions were instructed to attack with two companies, each company preceded by a 'fighting patrol of strength not less than one platoon' advancing ahead of the main force.[525] Only two platoons of each battalion were to enter Croisilles, the remainder of the force was to move around the outskirts of the village; the intention being to keep casualties from shellfire to a minimum.[526]



Map 17: 7th Division at Croisilles and Écoust-Longatte, late March to early April 1917

Zero was at 5.45am on 28 March (see map 17). Both battalions were met by intense machine gun fire, and 22/Mancs on the right only managed to break through the wire at one point, with one officer and 12 men cutting a passage through and holding out in an enemy trench

[525] TNA WO 95/1669/3, War Diary for 22/Mancs, March 1917, App IX, '91st Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 69', 26 March 1917.
[526] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, April 1917, Appendix 1, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 28th March 1917' 10 April 1917.

for 36 hours, until they were relieved. The majority of the battalion dug in in front of the wire, and with no progress seeming likely, Brigadier-General Cumming ordered 22/Mancs reserve company to attempt a flanking manoeuvre through the valley to the south-east of Croisilles.

This movement was observed by the enemy, came under artillery fire and made no progress. 1/S Staffs' assaulting companies advanced a considerable distance, but became separated and ultimately failed to breach the village's defences, coming under heavy frontal and enfilade machine gun fire. An effort was made to dig in, but their left company was isolated, counter-attacked, enveloped and lost.[527] Brigadier-General Cumming's report on the Croisilles action was more sanguine than that on the effort at Bucquoy, stating that if the 28 March assault were considered as a reconnaissance-in-force, it 'established the fact that the enemy was not yet prepared to throw open the approaches to the Hindenburg Line', and therein contributed to future success. The casualty figures for 91 Brigade seem relatively low for a two-battalion attack which was checked; 1/S Staffs suffered 19 killed, 58 wounded and 58 missing, while 22/Mancs lost 29 killed, 64 wounded and none missing.[528] The divisional history, however, highlights that both battalions were well below establishment, and describes the casualties as 'heavy'.[529]

In spite of the lack of success on 28 March, there are some interesting points to note. Firstly, the use of a platoon to move ahead of the main assault was a new development, and very likely came as a result of the memo from 7th Division General Staff prior to the Bucquoy action, which instructed a specialist advanced guard platoon to be picked. Cumming's employment of a platoon ahead of each assaulting company, in something akin to a skirmishing role, was a logical development of this idea and instruction.[530] Secondly, with regard to the overall plan, Barrow's assessment of the difficulty in attacking Croisilles versus the rewards for its capture was, seemingly, correct. Without the benefit of heavy artillery support to break up the wire in front of Écoust-Longatte, but with pressure from corps and army command to cooperate with

[527] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, April 1917, Appendix 1, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 28th March 1917' 10 April 1917.
[528] TNA WO 95/1667/1, HQ Diary for 91 Brigade, April 1917, Appendix 1, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 28th March 1917' 10 April 1917.
[529] Atkinson, *The Seventh Division*, p360.
[530] TNA WO 95/1632/2, 7th Division general staff diary, March 1917, App X, '7th Division No. G.557'.

the attacks of neighbouring units, it seems that 7th Division carried out the absolute bare minimum to conform to orders. The fact that Cumming was able to describe his brigade assault in terms of a 'reconnaissance-in-force' suggests this was not a wholehearted push by Barrow to break into the outpost villages. It is if not likely, then certainly possible, that Barrow was endeavouring to minimise casualties in what he saw as a largely pointless endeavour, and save his strength for more meaningful actions later.

Unfortunately, 28 March was Barrow's last day commanding 7th Division in action, as he was removed as GOC immediately afterwards. There is no precise detail recorded on the manner of his departure, but as 1/S Staffs were visited by Field Marshal Haig on 29 March, it is likely that the Commander-in-Chief was personally involved.[531] Barrow was replaced by Thomas Shoubridge, the highly-rated commander of 54 Brigade in 18th Division, which had made the initial reconnaissance-in-force at Croisilles on 20 March. Plans were made for an assault on Croisilles and Écoust-Longatte to take place on 2 April at 5.15am. This had elements in common with Barrow's original scheme, with Croisilles not to be attacked directly, but the high ground to the south east secured first. 91 Brigade had this task, and attacked with three battalions in line; 2/Queens, 21/Mancs and 1/S Staffs. 22/Mancs were in brigade reserve, ready to either assist with the main attack, or clear the village.[532] 20 Brigade were delegated to attack Écoust-Longatte, also with three battalions in line; 9/Devons, 8/Devons and 2/Gordons. Their task appeared to be complicated by the fact an outpost on the proposed assembly line had been lost to the enemy on the night of 31 March – 1 April. Two platoons of 2/Gordons were assigned to capture the point as the rest of the attack went in.[533] The artillery barrage was constructed so as to concentrate fire on the flanks, rather than the centre of the attack, and Croisilles was to be subjected to heavy bombardment until the first objective was taken. The barrage was set to advance at 100 yards every 3 minutes to a line 200 yards beyond the first objective, where it would stand for 30 minutes, before advancing towards and beyond the final objective.[534] No skirmishing platoons were employed.

[531] TNA WO 95/1670/2, War Diary for 1/S Staffs, entry for 29 March 1917.
[532] TNA WO 95/1632/3, 7th Division general staff diary, April 1917, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917'.
[533] TNA WO 95/1654/3, HQ Diary for 20 Brigade, April 1917, 'Report on Operations carried out by 20th Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917.'
[534] TNA WO 95/1632/3, 7th Division general staff diary, April 1917, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917'.

At zero, 1/S Staffs moved through the first objective relatively quickly, and deployed Lewis gun and rifle fire on those enemy who had broken cover and were retreating to the Hindenburg Line.[535] 21/Mancs were initially forced to withdraw 50 yards at zero with the artillery barrage dropping short, but advanced when it lifted. In spite of enfilade and frontal machine gun fire from the railway embankment, they were able to drive on to the first objective; the support company playing a valuable role in carrying the embankment and moving to the final objective.[536] 2/Queen's were worse hit by the inaccuracy of the artillery, with all of 'B' Company's officers becoming casualties, and on the advance came under the same heavy fire from the railway embankment. Lewis guns were deployed and under their covering fire, the railway line was carried.[537] 2/Queens were quite seriously disorganised by the time the first objective was secure, but still managed to consolidate and bring up machine guns and Stokes mortars, call for a bombardment on an unsubdued enemy strong point, and push parties round the north east side of Croisilles in a bid to close off the enemy escape route.[538] With all objectives secured and 2/Queen's position stabilised, 20 Brigade's commander, Brigadier-General Edward Thorpe, issued orders for 22/Mancs to move against the village with two companies.[539] Major-General Shoubridge insisted on a barrage on the southern defences of the village prior to this attack, which may have made a significant difference as the attack quickly became disorganised on entering Croisilles, and all 22/Mancs reserves were used in its eventual clearance.[540]

20 Brigade's advance was no easier, although the supporting artillery was much more accurate. The strong point on 2/Gordons' front was vacated by the time leading waves reached it, and although the highlanders strayed a little to their right and temporarily lost touch with 8/Devons on their left, the battalion war diary reports that the attack was 'pressed

[535] TNA WO 95/1670/2, War Diary for 1/S Staffs, April 1917, 'Narrative of Operations against Croisilles on 2nd April 1917.'
[536] TNA WO 95/1688/2, War Diary for 21/Mancs, April 1917, 'Narrative of Operations by 21st Battalion Manchester Regiment 1st-2nd April 1917'.
[537] TNA WO 95/1670/1, War Diary for 2/Queen's, entry for 2 April 1917.
[538] TNA WO 95/1632/3, 7th Division general staff diary, April 1917, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917'.
[539] TNA WO 95/1632/3, 7th Division general staff diary, April 1917, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917'.
[540] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 166.

home' and all objectives secured.[541] 9/Devons attacked to the left of the village, moving through their first objective and securing the railway line, but came under heavy fire in pushing forward to the final objective. They duly retired to the railway and consolidated.[542] 8/Devons only found one gap in the wire on their front, but under cover of Lewis gun fire, managed to rush men from their right company through to secure it, capturing a machine gun in doing so. This company used hand and rifle grenades effectively against defenders firing from windows and strong positions, helping the left company break into the village after suffering some casualties.[543] According to the battalion war diary, all units ended up digging in short of the second objective line as heavy shellfire forced them backwards, but Écoust-Longatte was secure, with an outpost line established between the village and the Hindenburg Line.

One of the more striking aspects of the post-action reports across the various brigade and battalion war diaries is the variety of weapons used. Both in open action and in clearing the villages, the seven battalions in action made good use of rifle, Lewis gun, rifle grenades, hand grenades and Stokes mortars, and were not afraid to withdraw from a bad position, either to take a better one, or simply to allow for a re-bombardment. 2/Queen's' performance in this regard is particularly noteworthy, and a great deal of responsibility must have fallen on the NCOs and junior officers as casualties among the battalion leadership mounted. 8/Devons are also worthy of mention for the way in which they created a base of fire with Lewis guns, to enable the forcing of a bottleneck; then spreading out quickly to move through Écoust village. The attack was not without incident and setback, and in every case, correct decisions were made by the man on the spot. 91 Brigade suffered 230 casualties for the capture of Croisilles, while 20 Brigade's capture of Écoust-Longatte cost 331 killed, wounded and missing.[544] 152 prisoners were put through the cages, and approximately 200 enemy dead were left behind.[545]

[541] TNA WO 95/1656/2, War Diary for 2/Gordons, entry for 2 April 1917.
[542] TNA WO 95/1656/1, War Diary for 9/Devons, entry for 2 April 1917.
[543] TNA WO 95/1655/2, War Diary for 8/Devons, April 1917, '8th Battalion the Devonshire Regiment; Report on Operations at Ecoust on. 2nd April 17'.
[544] TNA WO 95/1632/3, 7th Division general staff diary, April 1917, 'Narrative of attack on Croisilles carried out by 91st Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917'; TNA WO 95/1654/3, HQ Diary for 20 Brigade, April 1917, 'Report on Operations carried out by 20th Infantry Brigade on 2nd April 1917.'
[545] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 166.

7th Division is an interesting case study in this period, as they appear to have been considered an exemplary formation in early 1917. Visits from Corps and Army commanders observing the division at training were followed by elements of their newly adopted formations being replicated in the widely-distributed BEF training documents, such as *SS 143*. It is perhaps due to high expectations that so little patience was shown to Major-General Barrow after the division experienced setbacks at Bucquoy and Croisilles, despite the attacks bearing little resemblance to the plans made by the divisional commander. The one significant innovation that Barrow appears to have added, which may have been unique at the time, was the use of skirmishing platoons; however, they enjoyed no success, and were not re-used in the same way by the division under Shoubridge's command. Another training focus from February was in the use of the rifle while advancing, or firing while moving; no mention of these terms was made in the reports in the unit war diaries which covered the attacks on 28 March and 2 April, and the techniques of firing on the move do not seem to have been continued after Barrow's departure. Shoubridge's one discernible intervention once battle had started on 2 April was to order the bombardment on Croisilles prior to 22/Mancs assault on the village. Although there was hard fighting to clear the village, 22/Mancs passed the wire and entered the village with hardly a shot fired. It is hard to imagine that would be the case without the prior artillery fire, and for this reason Shoubridge's instincts and experience proved valuable. Without doubt, he enjoyed the benefits of greater heavy artillery support and a longer period wire cutting than Barrow had, but still made all the right decisions, and all his battalions made progress. Barrow's dismissal may have been unfair, but Shoubridge's promotion was not unwarranted or underserved.

Following the actions at Croisilles and Écoust, 7th Division were withdrawn from the line and Shoubridge was able to make more of a personal impression; in particular by making sure heavy losses were inflicted on the enemy when they launched their seemingly inevitable counter-attacks. For this reason a document was circulated from 26 April, which stresses 'the hope of all British troops in the past has been that the Boche WILL counter-attack, as thereby more Boches are KILLED, and it is only by killing Boches that the War can be brought to a rapid

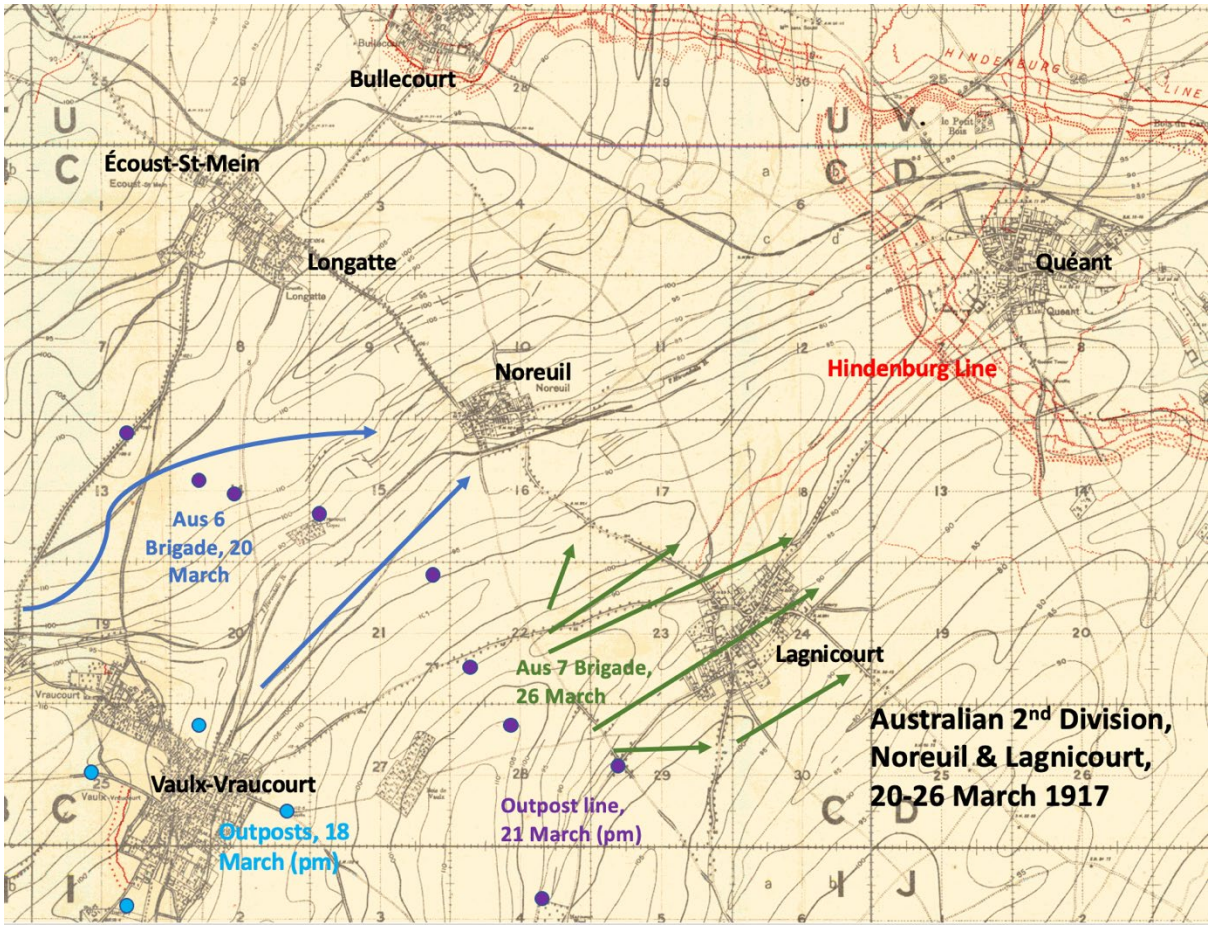
and satisfactory conclusion'.[546] This multi-point appreciation is a good insight into Shoubridge's attitude as an aggressive commander, and his fierce antipathy towards the enemy, which he was keen to impart on the men under his command. Emphasis was firmly placed on skills such as consolidation and musketry as significant skills to master for future actions.

On the right flank of 7th Division during this period were Australian 2nd Division, the northernmost of I ANZAC Corps's divisions in line. The German lines in front of Australian 2nd Division were found vacated a few days earlier than across much of the front, on 12 March. This German withdrawal to their second defensive system, preceding the main withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, saved the front line defenders from having to resist an offensive, which the Germans rightly suspected, was to be mounted around 13 March. No strong attempt was made by the Australians to force the R.II line before the German defenders marched eastwards, which was noticed in the early morning of 17 March.

The division's narrative of events is well-described in Charles Bean's *The Australian Imperial Force in France 1917* and does not require full reiteration here, but a few of the salient points are worth clarifying. Rather than commit the entire division to the pursuit of the enemy, and bearing in mind supply difficulties over broken ground and damaged roads, an advanced guard force was formed on 18 March.[547] This consisted of Australian 6 Brigade, 12th Battery Australian Field Artillery, one squadron of 13th Australian Light Horse and two sections of engineers. The force was under the command of Brigadier-General Gellibrand, reunited with his brigade after the return of Major-General Smyth.[548] Pressing on firmly, they reached the village of Vaulx-Vraucourt the same day, ahead of which lay Écoust, Longatte, Noreuil and Lagnicourt, with the Hindenburg Line behind. Gellibrand's effort to break into this line of villages came after a confusing exchange of messages on 19 March, with Gellibrand first being told to expect relief the following day, then being informed that Fifth Army's commander, General Gough, had personally visited and stated that he expected the division to get into

[546] TNA WO 95/1632/3, 7th Division general staff diary, April 1917, App 47, 'Counter-Attacks'.
[547] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/6/19, Australian 6 Brigade HQ Diary, 18 March 1917.
[548] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/20 PART 3, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, Appendix XXIII, 'Second Australian Division Order No.102', 17 March 1917.

Noreuil and Lagnicourt by then. Gellibrand clearly felt that the act of sending this message to him directly, ahead of his relief, was a specific directive to make an attempt to break into the line of villages (see map 18). [549]



Map 18: Australian 2nd Division at Noreuil & Lagnicourt, 20-26 March 1917

The result was a forced, hasty failure, as two battalions of the advanced guard advanced along the spurs either side of the Hirondelle valley in an attempt to rush Noreuil at dawn on 20 March. Bean, and indeed Falls, both describe Gellibrand's move as ingenious, and certainly such boldness would be both requisite and encouraged in the open warfare of the following year, but the simple fact was that these troops were too tired and unfamiliar with the style of combat. Having been unable to form up quickly enough, 21/AI on the northern spur were exposed by the daylight and caught by artillery and machine gun fire from Noreuil and Longatte. 23/AI on the southern approach were unable to gather their full force in time and

[549] Bean, *AIF in France 1917,* p. 179.

were not strong enough to penetrate the village.[550] Aside from the relatively heavy casualties suffered in launching the attack (13 officers and 318 ORs), a cause for concern once again was the communication between the advanced guard and divisional HQ. Smyth's headquarters was never truly in the loop as to what Gellibrand's intentions, or instructions to his battalions had been until hours after the attack, as the advance guard was withdrawing. Even the withdrawal exposed a lack of clarity, and was questioned by divisional HQ in a message sent at 10.15 that morning: 'Your T1 and T2 not clear. Did you carry out reconnaissances and then attack? What information did reconnaissance give you? Why are you going back from Vraucourt to Bapaume? Beugnatre indicated on orders as your Headquarters'.[551] The question over reconnaissance was a valid one, and exposed a willingness to take risks which, even in more open warfare, appears reckless. While Gellibrand's drive had been of benefit during the pursuit stage and an impressive pace was set, a more patient approach was required when dealing with defended villages, and Brigadier-General Wisdom's 7 Brigade was brought up for that purpose.

Australian 7 Brigade attacked on 26 March, having used the days immediately prior for reconnaissance, formulating the plan to attack Lagnicourt rather than Noreuil, and allowing additional supporting units to arrive. By the time of their assault on Lagnicourt, there would be two full brigades of field artillery, two batteries of 60-pounders and a battery of 6" howitzers in support, as well as Australian 7th Machine Gun Company. In the initial planning, an attack by British 7th Division on Écoust and Longatte was to have taken place simultaneously, but thick wire in front of those positions required artillery preparation, for which Lieutenant-General Birdwood was unwilling to wait; in the event, only Lagnicourt was attacked.[552] Flank protection was not forgotten, and each of the two attacking battalions (26 & 27/AI) provided a company for that role, as well as coordinating with Australian 5th Division on the right flank. However, on forming up, there were problems; 'B' Company, 26/AI, failed to make the start line on time, and a late change in 5th Division's plan had meant the planned right flank cover was not present on the start line either. Rather than delay the attack, two

[550] Ibid, pp. 176-186.
[551] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/20 PART 1, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, 20 March 1917.
[552] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/7/19, Australian 7 Brigade HQ Diary, Appendix C, 'Report on offensive operations carried out by the Advanced Guard, 2nd Australian Division, against the village of Lagnicourt – 26th March 1917'.

platoons of 26/AI's 'D' company (assigned the 'mopping-up' role) went into the assault line instead, and 'A' Company on the right flank extended its line and went in one wave rather than two. With the ad hoc modifications made, the attack went ahead successfully, and 'B' Company even managed to catch up, help clear the village and establish posts on the far side. Strong counter-attacks were repulsed, and Australian 2nd Division became the first BEF unit to break into the Hindenburg Line's outpost villages.

In the wake of their success, 7 Brigade once more put together notes on 'lessons learned' within their reports, and despite there being no evidence they had studied the recently-published *SS 143* pamphlet on platoon training, 7 Brigade's officers seemed to be drawing similar conclusions. Among the points highlighted in the after-action report in the brigade war diary were:

- The value of the training of platoon and section commanders in the independent handling of their units – most of the fighting, particularly during the enemy counter-attack being done by these small units.
- The necessity to hold suitable bodies in reserve for counter-attack.
- The advisability of always providing for the protection of one's own flanks, irrespective of what units are operating there in conjunction…the impression that troops were protecting our right certainly delayed the launching of [the enemy counter] attack.
- The value of Lewis guns used from the hip in attack. These were successfully used in dealing with hostile machine gun positions and strong points.[553]
- There was an excellent example of the cooperation of Lewis gun, rifle grenades, and bayonet, in the attack of a machine gun position.
- It is suggested that rifle grenades have a place in the echelon.[554]

In discussing the failure of 20 March, Bean states:

> …to Birdwood and Smyth the unexpected news of this engagement and of the casualties suffered – which were eventually found to be more than twice as severe

[553] The notes detail the improvised slings used for carrying the Lewis guns in this role, and make recommendations for wooden handles and metal fastenings to the radiators.
[554] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 23/7/19, Australian 7 Brigade HQ Diary, Appendix C, 'Report on offensive operations carried out by the Advanced Guard, 2nd Australian Division, against the village of Lagnicourt – 26th March 1917'.

> as Gellibrand at first believed…came as a shock, especially as 50 men were missing… Gellibrand never regained with Birdwood the high opinion and confidence which his vigour in previous stages of the pursuit had won… The true blame appears to lie mainly with Gellibrand, who, reading into the order an imaginary implication, undertook a hazardous operation with insufficient time for its performance, but partly with the staff of the 2nd Division, which, knowing Gellibrand's inclination, had forwarded Gough's order in a manner that left an opening for misinterpretation as to the manner of its performance.[555]

Smyth's inquiry into the extent of Gellibrand's reconnaissance was certainly valid, but the case for Gellibrand's defence is strong, especially given that his instructions came from Gough. Having been entrusted with the advanced guard, briefed to keep the pressure on the enemy and with no definite knowledge of where the next strong line of resistance would be, it is unlikely that anything other than a strong check would have been sufficient to indicate to Gellibrand where the enemy was holding. A conference of Fifth Army Corps Commanders was held on 20 March, at which it was stated 'it is evident that we cannot 'rush' the defence any further than we have now done.'[556] Australian 2nd Division's advanced guard had indicated to the entire army where the new resistance line was, and although the casualties sustained by 21/ & 23/AI were probably excessive and certainly regrettable, the need for a more patient approach was clearly demonstrated. The fact that this could be done with only two battalions committed, almost certainly saved lives. Clearly there was offensive prowess in the division by this stage, even if uniformity in progress eluded them.

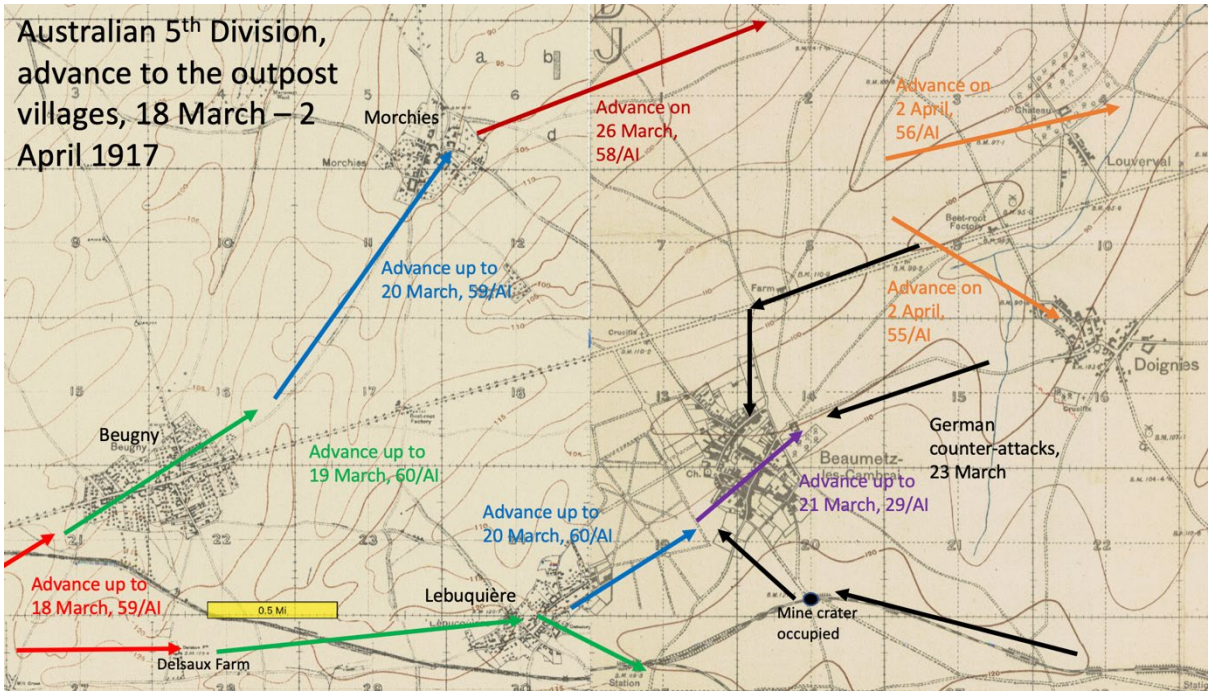
Australian 2nd Division was promptly relieved by Australian 4th Division following the capture of Lagnicourt. A divisional conference was held on 31 March, at which, lessons from the previous weeks' actions formed the basis of discussion. Various aspects of training were to be given special attention, among them were night work and training with German machine guns, trench mortars and hand grenades, as well as British rifle grenades and Lewis guns. Rocket and visual signals including Very pistols, were also to receive attention, and reorganised

[555] Bean, *AIF in France 1917,* p. 186.
[556] TNA WO 95/519/3, Fifth Army General Staff Diary, Appendix 11, 'Proceedings of Conference at Fifth Army Headquarters, 20-3-17', 21 March 1917.

platoons to better incorporate the various weapons were already in the process of being formed.[557] As a final post-script to Australian 2nd Division's action on the approach to the Hindenburg Line, on their return to the line three weeks later, 5 Brigade was urgently called into action after a German raid had retaken Lagnicourt early on 15 April. In a swift, decisive blow, which showed undeniable increase in tactical strength from the Somme campaign, and a growing aptitude for a more mobile style of fighting, 5 Brigade assisted in the recapture of the village and in inflicting over 2,300 casualties on the enemy.[558]

I ANZAC Corps's southern advanced guard was provided by Australian 5th Division. By 16 March 1917, the German withdrawal was well expected, following the first enemy withdrawal to their R.1 line in late February and second withdrawal away from the Grévillers line on 13 March. Prisoners taken had stated that the march back to the Hindenburg Line was imminent and when patrols found the line vacated on the morning of 17 March, the division were able to put the first allied troops into Bapaume the same day. On 18 March, Australian 15 Brigade was called up to form one of the corps' advanced guard forces, with Brigadier-General Elliot's force advancing up the Bapaume-Cambrai road. 59/AI took the lead for the infantry, advancing behind a cavalry screen provided by a squadron of 13th Australian Light Horse. Before reaching Beugny, 59/AI pressed through Fremicourt and came under fire from a rearguard force approximately 20 strong.[559] This small force was sufficient to hold the cavalry, and slow the infantry enough to prevent them from clearing Beugny which lay behind the R.3 line wire. Delsaux farm to the south, however, was rushed at approximately 6pm and an officer, two men and valuable documents regarding the retreat were captured (see map 19).[560]

[557] AWM: AWM4 Subclass 1/44/20 PART 4, Australian 2nd Division HQ Diary, Appendix 49, 'Proceedings of a Conference held at D.H.Q. on 31st March 1917'. One point mentioned at the conference which was not crucial to aptitude in offensive actions, but of interest, was point 18: 'Prisoners of War – Men are to be warned that they are not allowed to take the private possessions of a prisoner, such as money, small trinkets etc. By so doing, prisoners have become sulky and have not given information as freely as they otherwise might have done.'
[558] Bean, *AIF in France 1917*, p. 399.
[559] Bean, *The AIF in France 1917*, p. 158.
[560] AWM: AWM4 23/76/14, War Diary for 59/AI, entry for 19 March 1917.



Map 19: Australian 5th Division advanced guard movements, 18 March – 2 April 1917

On the morning of 19 March, 60/AI took over the vanguard role and pushed quickly through Beugny and on to Lebuquière and Velu, just to the south of the railway line, and the following day put patrols into Morchies. By this stage 5th Australian Division's advanced guard was approximately two miles ahead of the forces on either flank; Australian 2nd Division had reached the outpost villages and could go no further without proper preparation. British 20th Division on Fourth Army's left flank was advancing more methodically, in line with General Rawlinson and Field Marshal Haig's instructions to guard against possible counter-attacks. Brigadier General Elliot had no such instructions, however, and although the rearguard in Beaumetz had held 60/AI with machine gun fire on 20 March, when 29/AI took over the vanguard duties on the morning of 21 March, they found the town unoccupied and moved through. 22 March was used for consolidation and to allow the forces on the flanks to close up. The German counter-attacks that Haig had warned against duly came on 23 and 24 March. The attack on 23 March was the more threatening of the two, and succeeded in driving in 29/AI's outposts and forcing a way into Beaumetz. It was made just before dawn at 4.30am, and preceded by a short artillery bombardment, although the main problem was that a party of the enemy approximately 300 strong had found a gap in the outposts on the southern flank

of the village.[561] The sudden arrival of a German force at the rear of Beaumetz caused confusion, but the reserve company of 30/AI to the north of the Bapaume-Cambrai road reacted swiftly and launched an attack against this column.[562] Meanwhile, 29/AI rallied in the northern part of the village and with the help of the company from 30/AI restored the situation.

The following day the attack was repeated from the north and south, with the enemy occupying a mine crater on the railway crossing to the south of Beaumetz; although approximately 36 casualties were suffered in the course of the action, no additional ground was lost, and the field artillery's defensive shrapnel barrage was effective enough.[563] Between the German attacks an odd episode took place which was not recorded in the war diaries, but Charles Bean found a place for in the Australian Official History. Brigadier-General Elliot purportedly gave an order for a retaliatory attack, having taken the attacks on Beaumetz personally. This, seemingly, was only stopped when the Brigade Major threatened to intervene and inform divisional HQ if the Brigade commander was unwilling to do so. When Hobbs received word of Elliott's intentions, he came to the advanced guard HQ personally to cancel the plans.[564] An advance on the divisional left flank in support of Australian 2nd Division at Lagnicourt on 26 March was Elliott's last action in command of the advanced guard. Although the pace set on the advance was rapid and admirable, elements of their performance were imperfect, most notably allowing a company of German stormtroopers to pass unnoticed through the outpost line on the morning of 23 March.

As part of a broader plan of attacks, Australian 5th Division planned to attack the villages of Louverval and Doignies on 2 April. Brigadier-General Clarence Hobkirk's 14 Brigade was brought into line to carry out the assault with two battalions; 55/AI and 56/AI attacked Doignies and Louverval respectively, both from the north of the Bapaume-Cambrai road where it was hoped, particularly in the case of Doignies, that they could pass behind the main

[561] AWM: AWM4 23/25/13 Part 1, War Diary for Australian 15 Brigade, March 1917, Appx 153, '15th Australian Infantry Brigade; Summary of Operations 23rd to 30th March 1917'.
[562] AWM: AWM4 23/25/13 Part 1, War Diary for Australian 15 Brigade, March 1917, Appx 187, 'Beaumetz-lez-Cambrai; Details of its capture by the 15th Infantry Brigade AIF and subsequent hostile attempts to retake it'.
[563] AWM: AWM4 23/25/13 Part 1, War Diary for Australian 15 Brigade, March 1917, Appx 153, '15th Australian Infantry Brigade; Summary of Operations 23rd to 30th March 1917'.
[564] Bean, *The AIF in France 1917*, pp. 169-170.

defences.[565] No preliminary bombardment was fired, and surprise was largely achieved despite 'D' company of 55/AI disturbing a dog in the vicinity of the Beetroot factory on the main road, alerting the enemy and attracting some fire. Said company promptly attacked and captured the positions from which the fire had come, and the attacks were duly pressed on.[566] Scouts had been sent out the previous evening and set posts to mark the advance for the main force, providing a safeguard against loss of direction in the early stages of the operation with zero notionally at 4.30am.[567] The attack actually began at 5am but with no timetabled barrage, no problems were caused; battalion Commanding Officers were given leave to call for bombardments if they were needed, and one battery of field artillery was dedicated to firing on any detected enemy battery. SOS signals were used when enemy counter-attacks threatened to develop, and effective fire was accurately brought down.[568] 56/AI's position at Louverval was more awkward, holding a wood which was very easily seen and brought under fire.[569] Although a sensible precaution would have been to evacuate the area, the wood was also a route into the attack's left flank, which meant that it had to be held regardless. Lieutenant-Colonel Scott's approach was to pull back from the edge of the wood, dig in two strong points on the left flank, request reinforcements from 53/AI in support and counter-battery fire. This was adequate to hold the counter-attacks, of which seven came in the course of the day.[570] Doignies itself was captured quickly, easily and with very slight loss, which was largely put down to surprise having been achieved, although 55/AI suffered quite heavily from subsequent shelling. Only twelve prisoners were captured, while 14 Brigade suffered 484 casualties, approximately 220 in 56/AI and 180 in 55/AI.

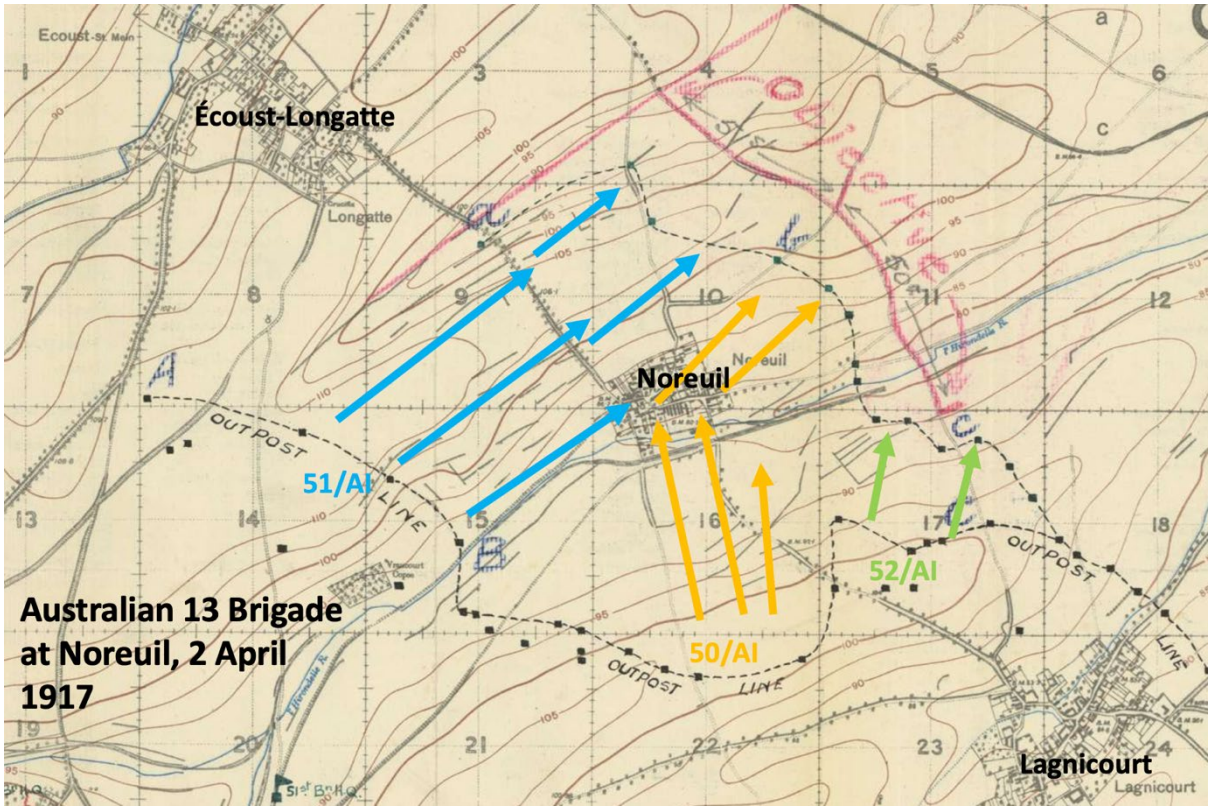
Australian 5th Division was relieved over 3-4 April, initially to take on road working responsibility, but by the end of the month were taken out for a period of training. New platoon formations in line with the *SS 143* training documents were adopted in the last week of April.[571] The quick adoption of new tactical doctrine fits with what had already been seen

[565] Bean, *The AIF in France 1917*, p. 224.
[566] AWM: AWM4 23/72/14, War Diary for 55/AI, entry for 2 April 1917.
[567] AWM: AWM4 23/14/13, War Diary for Australian 14 Brigade, April 1917, Appx A2, 8 April 1917; correspondence between 14 Brigade and divisional HQ.
[568] AWM: AWM4 23/72/14, War Diary for 55/AI, entry for 2 April 1917.
[569] AWM: AWM4 23/73/15, War Diary for 56/AI, entry for 2 April 1917.
[570] AWM: AWM4 23/14/13, War Diary for Australian 14 Brigade, April 1917, Appx A2, 8 April 1917; correspondence between 14 Brigade and divisional HQ.
[571] AWM: AWM4 23/71/15, War Diary for 54/AI, entry for 23-29 April 1917.

in the division through from September 1916; that they were proactive and quick to adopt examples of best practice, even more so than other, more experienced Australian formations, such as 4th Division. Their attention to training in skills such as consolidation and outpost warfare did not guarantee faultless performance, however; the break-in to the south of Beaumetz on 23 April was very avoidable indeed, and mention was made of a need for extra attention in the event of mist. The check of the German attack the following day suggests that a lesson had been learned, and it is worth noting that despite the division's lack of combat experience, each time they were called upon to fight, they did so creditably. The attack of 30/AI's reserve company across into another battalion's sector was precisely the correct course of action. 56/AI's approach of holding an important position by digging in strong points and thinning out the forward line in the face of strong artillery fire showed a grim shrewdness. Achieving surprise with an unorthodox attack angle and no preliminary bombardment on 2 April was similarly shrewd, particularly from a divisional commander in his first major actions commanding large infantry formations.

Though Australian 2nd and 5th Divisions carried out the initial pursuit, with the advance guards checked at the outpost villages, Australian 4th Division was called upon to take up the advance in late March, with the village of Noreuil as its objective. In cooperation with the attack by British 7th Division at Écoust-Longatte on the left, Australian 4th Division attacked Noreuil at 5.15am on 2 April. As previously stated, the village had held out against a strong reconnaissance from Australian 2nd Division on 20 March, but Lagnicourt had been captured by the time the 4th Division came into the line, allowing different angles of approach and observation. Three battalions from 13 Brigade were detailed for the assault; 51/AI on the left, attacking the west of the village and capturing the Noreuil-Longatte road, 50/AI in the centre, attacking the village from the south, and 52/AI on the right, protecting the right flank of the advance (see map 20).[572] In theory the most technical part of the advance was to be made by 50/AI, who would direct their 'A' Company to maintain touch with 52/AI on their right flank, while 'C' & 'D' Companies moved through the village, linked with 51/AI, pivoted right and advance to the north-east outskirts of the village.[573]

[572] AWM: AWM4 1/48/13, 4th Australian Division HQ Diary, April 1917 Part 1, Appx V, 'Report of Attack 13th Australian Infantry Brigade on village of Noreuil and high ground to north and north-east'.
[573] AWM: AWM4 23/67/10, War Diary for 50/AI, April 1917, 'Operation Order No.18', dated 31 March 1917.



Map 20: Australian 13 Brigade, Noreuil, 2 April 1917

The artillery fire plan involved a barrage which fired in front of the village, crept forward for 10 mins at a rate of 100 yards every 2 mins, then moved on to planned targets in and behind the village, before moving on to and beyond the objective line.[574] Similarly to 50/AI, 51/AI attacked with three companies in line, while 52/AI attacked with two, keeping a substantial reserve.[575] 50/AI's after-action report states that at zero, progress was made by all units, although enemy machine guns on the left flank and in the village inflicted casualties on 51/AI and 50/AI, having not been sufficiently subdued by the barrage which was described as 'not thick enough'.[576] 51/AI was not stopped and pressed on to the road where they captured a Maxim gun and immediately used it against its former owners, but became concerned with events on their left; elements of 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders (2/Gordons) from British 7th Division had lost their bearing, drifted into the Australian sector and had not advanced on

[574] AWM: AWM4 23/68/14, War Diary for 51/AI, April 1917, Appx II, 'Report on Operations of 2nd April 1917'.
[575] AWM4: AWM 23/69/13, War Diary for 52/AI, entry for 2 April 1917.
[576] AWM: AWM4 23/67/10, War Diary for 50/AI, April 1917, 'Report on attack on Noreuil and Ground to North East'.

their objective line.[577] A strong point was put into cover the left flank, and progress continued, until the barrage was caught. The decision was made to dig in short of the final objective, as it was on lower and more dangerous ground and a forward report centre was installed by the Noreuil-Longatte road, giving battalion HQ a telephone link to the new front line.[578]

'C' & 'D' Companies of 50/AI fired rifles from the hip as they advanced on the village from the south, and employed rifle and hand grenades as well as Stokes mortars against enemy machine guns in the village, enveloping and capturing two.[579] A brief hold-up at some uncut wire was overcome, and 30-40 prisoners were taken as the battalion left flank moved through the village and proceeded to carry out the pivot manoeuvre, which it did successfully, allowing the new advance to continue.[580] At this time, two reports were received: firstly, that the village was not fully 'mopped-up', so two platoons of the reserve company were dispatched, who duly arrived found the village all quiet; secondly, it was apparent there was a gap between 50/AI and 52/AI on the right, which resulted in a portion of 50/AI's right company being enveloped and captured.[581] This gap was not closed up until the night of 2-3 April, but was covered effectively by Vickers guns and the remaining platoon from 50/AI reserve company until then.[582] According to 51/AI's after-action report, communications between the assaulting companies and their respective battalion HQs on the whole were very good, with 50/AI also managing to get a phone line to the village, and effective communication with flares and pigeon resulting in two counter-attacks being broken up by shellfire before they could threaten the new gains.[583]

Casualties in the operation were imperfectly reported, with the divisional report placing estimated casualties at 11 officers and 340 other ranks. However, this only covers the losses

[577] AWM4: AWM 23/69/13, War Diary for 52/AI, entry for 2 April 1917, War Diary for 51/AI, April 1917, Appx II, 'Report on Operations of 2nd April 1917'.
[578] AWM: AWM4 23/13/15, HQ Diary for Australian 13 Brigade, Appx II, 'Report of Attack 13th Australian Infantry Brigade on village of Noreuil and high ground to north and north-east'.
[579] Bean, *AIF in France 1917,* p. 213.
[580] AWM: AWM4 23/67/10, War Diary for 50/AI, April 1917, 'Report on attack on Noreuil and Ground to North East'.
[581] AWM: AWM4 1/48/13, 4th Australian Division HQ Diary, April 1917 Part 1, Appx V, 'Report of Attack 13th Australian Infantry Brigade on village of Noreuil and high ground to north and north-east'.
[582] AWM4: AWM 23/69/13, War Diary for 52/AI, entry for 2 April 1917.
[583] AWM: AWM4 23/68/14, War Diary for 51/AI, April 1917, Appx II, 'Report on Operations of 2nd April 1917'.

of 50/AI, and Charles Bean puts 13 Brigade's losses at over 600, with around 100 Australians captured, and this is supported by strength returns and casualty reports from the three attacking battalions, with the vast majority suffered by 50/AI and 51/AI.[584] Bean also reports on the German losses in the attack, which appear to have been in the region of 275, mostly from 119th R.I.R., less than half those of the attacking force. Critical analysis of the action is conspicuous by its absence in reports moving up the chain of command. 50/AI and 51/AI were largely candid with the difficulties they had faced in terms of enemy machine gun fire and a shortage of tools for consolidation, leading to casualties from enemy artillery as the men were unable to dig in effectively. However, the messages from brigade and division up to corps level focused on the positives, omitting detail on challenges and casualties. The report from Australian 4th Division in the I ANZAC Corps general staff diary reported a Victoria Cross, awarded to J.C. Jensen from 50/AI for his role in the clearance of the village, and reports from brigade to corps level repeat the line 'the barrage for the attack was carefully made out and thoroughly executed', despite the battalions having reported on its lack of weight.[585] The gap appearing between 50/AI and 52/AI was put down to the 'peculiar formation of the ground and the strength of the enemy on [50/AI's] right', and it was stressed that although 'repeated attempts by the enemy were made to get through this gap', they were held by Vickers gun fire and a platoon from the reserve company.[586] This explanation for the appearance of the gap is plausible and is detailed in the battalion diary, and although its appearance does not necessarily reflect well on the company commanders involved, the fact that reserves and machine guns were adeptly deployed is to their credit.

Ultimately, the heavy casualties coupled with an apparent lack of a genuine debrief does seem to be a hangover from the Pozières fighting. A 'good news' message passed up the chain of command which stressed fighting prowess, glossed over deficiencies, misreported casualties and ignored a significant loss of men as prisoners. The capture of Noreuil itself, although not

[584] Bean, *AIF in France 1917,* p. 219; AWM: AWM4 23/67/10, War Diary for 50/AI, April 1917, 'Report on attack on Noreuil and Ground to North East'; AWM 23/69/13, War Diary for 52/AI, entry for 2 April 1917; AWM 23/68/13, War Diary for 51/AI, March 1917 '51st Battalion Daily Strength Return 31/3/17'; AWM 23/68/14, War Diary for 51/AI, April 1917 '51st Battalion Daily Strength Return 15/4/17'.
[585] AWM: AWM4 1/29/15 Part 2, General Staff, 1st ANZAC Corps, April 1917, Appx C 'Report received from 4th Australian Division on the attack by the 13th Australian Infantry Brigade on the village of Noreuil and the high ground to the north and north-east, on 2nd April, 1917'.
[586] AWM: AWM4 1/48/13 Part 1, 4th Australian Division HQ Diary, April 1917, Appx V, 'Report of Attack 13th Australian Infantry Brigade on village of Noreuil and high ground to north and north-east'.

a perfectly conducted action, was a solid achievement, and it is difficult to see why a more objective approach to the reporting was not employed. It is doubtful that the positive reporting and glossing over of casualties and surrenders was a factor in Australian 4th Division's selection for the attack on the Hindenburg Line which eventually took place on 11 April, and from which there were very few positives to take. The operations at Bullecourt are well-studied and not within the scope of this thesis, but it is apparent that challenges to the infantry in the assault on Noreuil were highly amplified at the Hindenburg Line, and the extraordinarily high number of Australian surrenders on 11 April points to earlier failings having gone unaddressed.

Fourth Army:

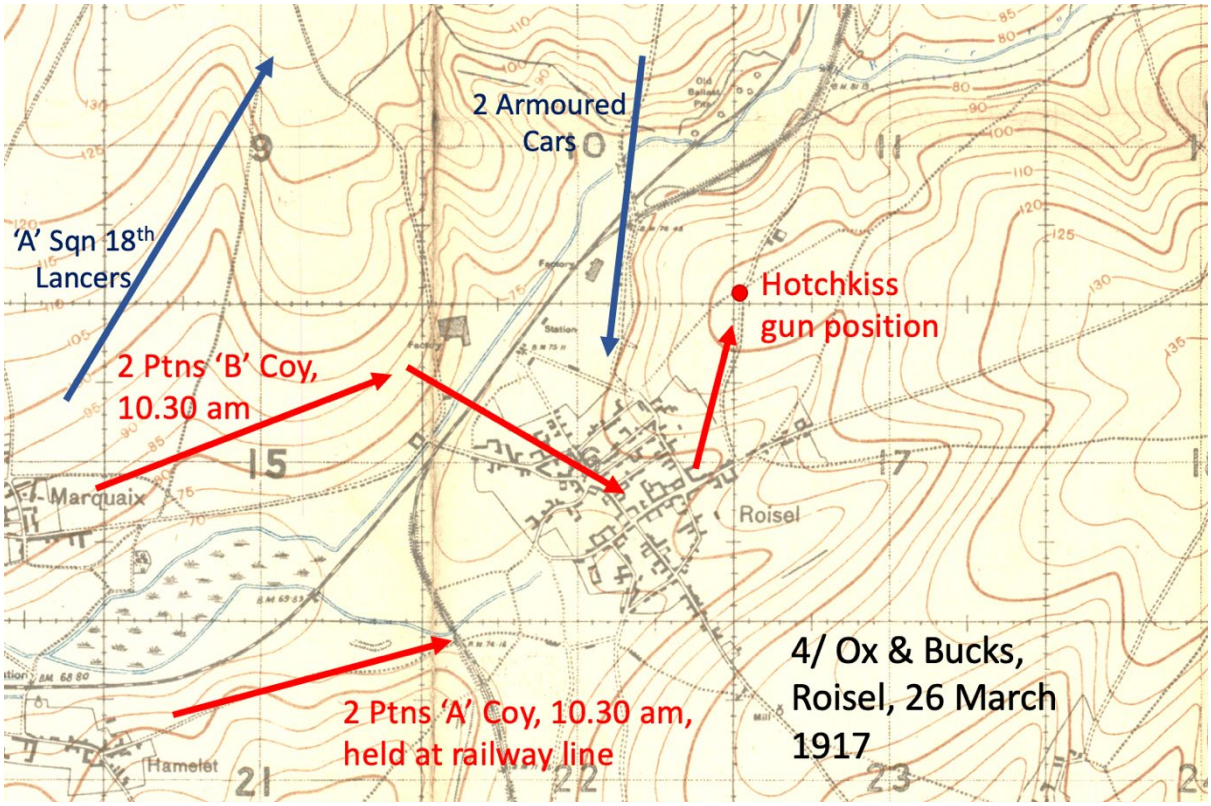
To the south of I ANZAC Corps, Fourth Army faced a different set of challenges; the ground that General Rawlinson's army had taken over in the winter extended to the south of the Amiens – St Quentin road, and at Péronne the bend in the River Somme meant the river ran south-north behind the German lines. With the German lines running broadly north-south in front of Fourth and Fifth Armies prior to the enemy withdrawal, but with the Hindenburg Line running northwest-southeast, Fourth Army had a greater distance to advance in order regain contact with the enemy. In Fifth Army, Australian 2nd Division on their advance to Noreuil, for example, had to advance approximately 8 miles from their position in front of Grévillers. In the northern part of Fourth Army's front, 8th Division, in moving from just east of Bouchavesnes to Gonnelieu, advanced nearly 12 miles; on the southern flank, 32nd Division had to move forward approximately 26 miles from their positions near Fouquescourt to those they reached near St Quentin, having first waited for the Somme to be bridged. Fourth Army therefore had more space in which to manoeuvre, but that came at the risk of more opportunities to fall victim to booby traps, and more villages and wooded areas which could potentially hide counter-attack forces. Additionally, Fourth Army's supply lines would be stretched further, potentially leaving advanced guard forces short of supplies and ammunition, especially for artillery.

It is therefore little surprise that Fourth Army's advance to the Hindenburg Line was cagier than Fifth Army's, with practical problems and the risk of counter-attack in the minds of the

senior officers. The relative personalities of the two army commanders mattered little, though Fifth Army's commander General Gough is more renowned for his aggression; practical matters meant that Rawlinson's Fourth Army would need to bridge the river Somme, then establish the requisite logistical strength and communications on the other side before the offensive could be resumed.[587] Field Marshal Haig approved Rawlinson's plans for the pursuit, namely not committing any substantial force further east of the Canal du Nord and the Somme until the proper communications were organised.[588] It was therefore not before the very end of March or early April before contact was made with the enemy to any meaningful degree.

As 48th Division was so close to the Somme, the initial challenge was enabling its crossing in strength, and much is made in the Official History of the bridging efforts.[589] This was simplified by the fact the Germans had broken contact altogether and there was no opposition. However, Major-General Fanshawe's responsibilities suddenly grew, as III Corps commander Lieutenant-General William Pulteney went on leave on 17 March, and Fanshawe took over.[590] Once the Somme had been crossed, a pursuit force was put together on 21 March consisting of an infantry battalion (4/Ox & Bucks), the corps cavalry and cyclists, two batteries of field artillery and two sections of engineers, all under the command of 48th Division's CRA, Brigadier-General H. D. O. Ward.[591] Ward's force, alongside additional mounted troops and armoured cars, endeavoured to keep up with the enemy withdrawal, failing to do so until 26 March when two companies of 4/Ox & Bucks attacked Roisel.

[587] Gough is frequently referred to as a 'thruster'; that is, an aggressive commander whose desire for offensive action came at the expense of time for planning, and at the cost of excessive casualties. See R. Neillands, *The Great War Generals on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Robinson, 1999) p267, and G. Sheffield and D.Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-18* (Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2004) p. 87.
[588] Falls, Official History 1917, p. 128.
[589] Falls, *1917*, pp. 131-133.
[590] A. Leask, *Putty, from Tel-el-Kebir to Cambrai; The life and letters of Lieutenant General Sir William Pulteney 1861-1941* (Helion, Solihull, 2015) pp. 544-546.
[591] Falls, *1917*, p. 135.



Map 21: 4/Ox & Bucks capture of Roisel, 26 March 1917

Though only a small action, there were promising signs of skill in open warfare and cooperation with other units at Roisel (see map 21). A 30-minute bombardment from the field artillery opened at 10 am, while 'A' Squadron of 18th Lancers secured the high ground to the north west.[592] Two platoons each of 'A' and 'B' Companies, 4/Ox & Bucks, advanced at 10.30 either side of the Cologne stream. On the southern side, 'A' Company's platoons were held at the railway line by machine gun fire from the village. Rather than retire, they held position on the railway embankment while 'B' Company worked around on the high ground to the north. These platoons reached the outskirts of the village before similarly being stopped by machine gun fire until the arrival of two armoured cars from the north, whose Hotchkiss guns were able to suppress the enemy well enough for 'B' Company to enter the village at around 1pm.[593] They not only cleared the village, removing 'A' Company's obstacle, but also borrowed a dismounted Hotchkiss gun from one of the armoured cars and used it to good effect against the Germans who had managed to retreat.[594] In line with their instructions, they then set

[592] TNA WO 95/1164/4, War Diary for 18th Lancers, 26 March 1917.
[593] TNA WO 95/2764/1, War Diary for 4/Ox & Bucks, 'Active Operations of 1/4th Oxf + Bucks Lt Inf, March 1917'.
[594] TNA WO 95/2764/1, War Diary for 4/Ox & Bucks, 26 March 1917.

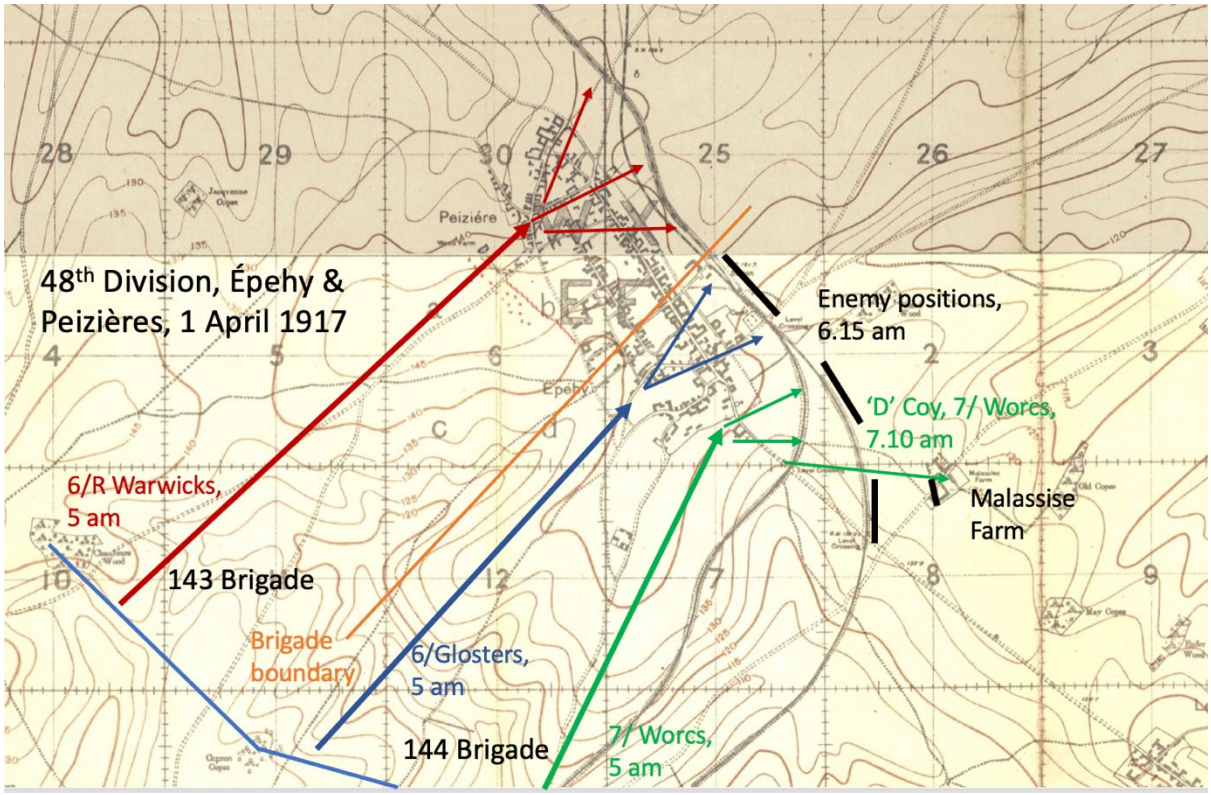
outposts on the eastern side of the village, and brought up reinforcements to relieve the assaulting troops and the cavalry outposts. The capture of Roisel cost 4/Ox & Bucks 4 men dead and 14 wounded and was a smartly carried-out operation, in spite of the delays to the infantry.

As it seemed that German resistance was stiffening, the rest of the division caught up and the mobile formations were disbanded, but for the next obstacle, the plan was very similar. St Emilie was attacked by two companies of 4/Glosters on 30 March, one attacking frontally from the west, another working round to the north. After a day's registration by the artillery, a 2-minute bombardment at 4 pm was the signal for the infantry to advance.[595] The company attacking frontally was immediately halted, and although the company attacking from the north was able to break in, the casualties were much heavier, at 5 officers and 75 other ranks.[596] Moreover, the garrison of St Emilie (between 100 and 200 strong) was able to withdraw, and a tendency to bunch together under fire was revealed in the company assaulting frontally.[597] The Official History describes the action as a 'sharp fight', and Mitchinson's divisional history lays the blame for the heavy losses on the artillery for the inadequate barrage. Changes would be required for the next action.[598]

The escape of a company's worth of the enemy from St Emilie, coupled with the increased size of the challenge at Épehy and Peizière, meant greater resources would be employed on 1 April, two days later. Between Saulcourt, where 6/R Warwicks (143 Brigade), 6/Glosters and 7/Worcesters (144 Brigade) would form up and the villages which made up the objectives, there was approximately 4,000 yards of largely exposed ground. Attempting such an advance in daylight would likely have been disastrous, and surprise was seen as a prerequisite to a successful attack. Therefore, there was no preliminary artillery fire besides a dummy bombardment at 5pm on 31 March, under cover of which patrols moved up to the jump-off positions ready for a night assault.[599] In the event of being held up by machine gun or rifle fire, the attacking battalions carried Very pistols for an SOS signal which would bring down a

[595] TNA WO 95/2757/5, HQ Diary 144 Brigade, '144th Infantry Brigade Order No. 161', dated 30 March 1917
[596] TNA WO 95/2757/5, HQ Diary 144 Brigade, 30 March 1917.
[597] TNA WO 95/2757/5, HQ Diary 144 Brigade, 'Operations of 144th Infantry Brigade from 29/317 to 5/4/17.
[598] Falls, *1917*, p155 and Mitchinson, *48th Division*, p. 145.
[599] Mitchinson, *48th Division*, p. 146.

5-minute barrage on the part of the village their brigade was attacking (see map 22). The only planned barrage was to drop on the final objective for 20 minutes at 6.30 am, on a line from Malassise Farm along the railway line on the eastern side of town.



Map 22: 48th Division at Épehy and Peizières, 1 April 1917

All three battalions were away on time in darkness, moving in artillery formation until approximately 150 yards away from the village, when the first units were seen by the enemy and some rifle fire was opened. 6/Glosters extended formation straight away and were swiftly through the weak and broken wire, entering the village at 5.50 am, capturing a machine gun and two captured and converted Lewis guns.[600] 7/Worcesters were slightly ahead of the Glosters, and managed to close to within 50 yards of the village before the enemy took any action, firing a single white flare. The southern part of the village was carried immediately and some of the enemy were seen retiring towards Malassise Farm and lining the second, easternmost railway embankment.[601] 6/R Warwicks suffered a few casualties in clearing the

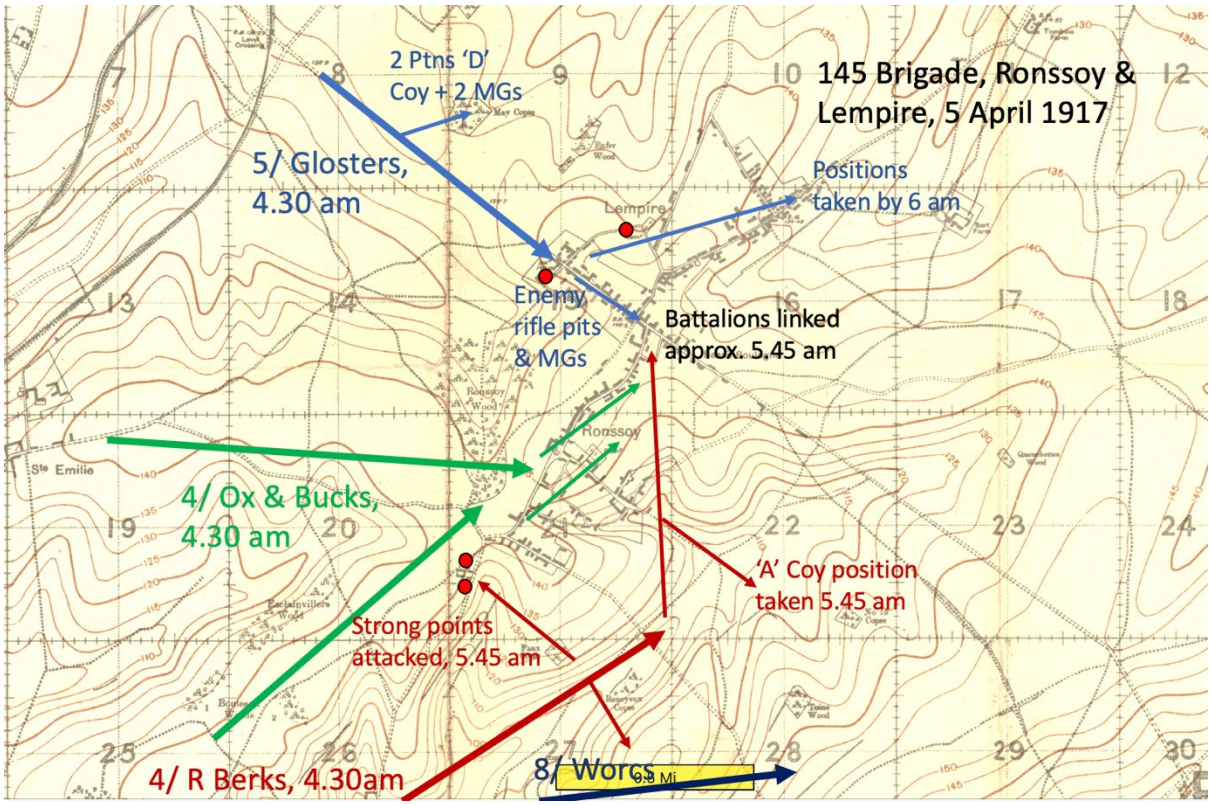
[600] TNA WO 95/2758/2, War Diary for 6/Glosters, '1/6th Bn. Gloucestershire Regiment. Report on attack Epehy, 1st April 1917' dated 29 April 1917.
[601] TNA WO 95/2759/1, War Diary for 7/Worcesters, 'Operations against Epehy 30-31 March, 1.2.3 April 1917'.

village of Peizières, but did so quickly and captured a machine gun, a light field gun and 16 of the enemy, including the gun crew.[602] The infantry had to withdraw from the objective of the railway line just before 6.30 am and the timetabled artillery bombardment, which dropped accurately and on time. The positions were then reoccupied, and two strong patrols from 'D' Company 7/ Worcesters were sent to occupy Malassise Farm, which they did.[603] Consolidation of the position was carried out, avoiding occupying the village itself, which was duly shelled quite heavily by German artillery. Total casualties for the operation amounted to 3 officers and 21 other ranks killed, 1 officer and 74 other ranks wounded. Across three battalions and to capture two villages and a good quantity of men and materiel, this was far from excessive. Fanshawe's surprise attack had worked, the SOS bombardments had not been required and the barrage fired on the railway line at 6.30 am was effective enough. Use of greater numbers in the attack had reduced the burden on individual battalions, and the speed with which the attack was carried out demonstrates an increased ability in open warfare. Another creditable component of the attack is the relatively high operational tempo, attacking two villages within 36 hours of the capture of St Emilie. This may be the reason a field gun was caught in Peizières, and why surprise was so successfully achieved; the enemy simply did not expect an assault quite so soon. In any case, creativity with the artillery, speed, skill and boldness had paid off.

Within a few days, heavier artillery was moving forward with the aim of being able to fire on the Hindenburg Line by 8 April. 48th Division would therefore have additional support as they moved east, and the villages of Ronssoy and Lempire became the latest objectives.[604] The plan for the attack on 5 April would share elements of that on 1 April; three battalions (all from 145 Brigade) would attack at dawn with no preliminary or supporting bombardment, unless called for by the assaulting troops. Each attacking battalion had its own signal for calling down a 5-minute barrage on its respective front.[605] There were certain modifications made, however; as the ground to the west and north west had been secured, 145 Brigade were able to attack different parts of the two villages from different directions (see map 23). Additional detail was incorporated into the operational order, which had taken place in the attack on Roisel anyway,

[602] TNA WO 95/2754/4, HQ Diary for 143 Brigade, 1 April 1917.
[603] TNA WO 95/2759/1, War Diary for 7/ Worcesters, 'Operations against Epehy 30-31 March, 1.2.3 April 1917'
[604] Mitchinson, *48th Division*, p146.
[605] TNA WO 95/2762/3, War Diary for 4/ R Berks, April 1917 Appendix A.1 '1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment, Operation Order', dated 4 April 1917.

but this time was explicitly stated: 'If any unit is stopped by wire, the leading troops will establish a fire fight to cover those in rear finding a way round.'[606] Flank protection was also to be established by the attacking battalions themselves, rather than expected from other units. 8/Worcesters (144 Brigade) were delegated to maintain the right flank, and 5/Glosters the left, while 4/ R Berks attacked Ronssoy from the Cologne valley to the south, and 4/ Ox & Bucks moved across the two spurs to the west of Ronssoy. 5/Glosters other role besides flank protection, was to move down the Épehy – Lempire road and attack the latter village from the north west. A day's reconnaissance time was built into the order from Brigade to the battalions, and zero was set for 4.30 am.



Map 23: 145 Brigade at Ronssoy & Lempire, 5 April 1917.

Almost immediately after setting off on time, 4/R Berks came under enfilade fire from a position on their right, between themselves and 8/Worcesters. They dispatched a platoon to outflank it; this was swiftly carried out and the party of Germans surrendered to the Worcesters who had come up on their rear.[607] The advance on Ronssoy and Lempire was

[606] TNA WO 95/2761/2, HQ Diary for 145 Brigade, '145th Infantry Brigade Order No. 192', dated 3 April 1917.
[607] TNA WO 95/2762/3, War Diary for 4/R Berks, April 1917 Appendix A.1 '1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment, Operation Order', dated 4 April 1917. The document also contains the battalion report on the action.

carried out in thick mist, and the attacking units were able to close in artillery formation to within a similar distance to those attacking Épehy and Peizières before being detected. The defenders of Ronssoy may have been expecting an attack however, as a German artillery bombardment was fired at 5am; this happily passed over the assaulting troops and likely caused no casualties at all.[608] 5/Glosters, attacking from the north, had no trouble from the woods on the left of their advance, and were into the village at approx. 5.40 am, having attacked and captured two enemy machine guns and nine men, and killed several more.[609] They pushed outposts to the eastern edge of Lempire and linked up successfully with the other battalions, who by 6 am had all reached the join of the two villages.[610]

4/Ox & Bucks' advance into Ronssoy had been just as swift, with 'A' & 'B' Companies assaulting along the spurs and two platoons each of 'C' and 'D' Companies on the right and left flanks respectively, maintaining touch with the other battalions. Lewis guns were used effectively in the assault to suppress enemy machine guns, two of which were captured as the attacking companies broke through.[611] 4/R Berks left Company ('D') broke into the southern end of Ronssay quickly and attacked two strong points on the south west approach to the village, capturing another two machine guns. 'A' company in the centre had an easier route into Ronssoy, and both made the link with 5/Glosters and began the process of consolidation.[612] 'B' Company on the right, however, was held at strong wire with heavy machine gun fire coming from a slag tip beyond it. Lewis guns were brought up to suppress the enemy fire and a bombardment called for, while wire-cutters were used to make a gap.[613] Once the bombardment lifted at 6.05 am, they were able to continue their advance, regained contact with the company on their left and took a defensive position on the right flank.

[608] TNA WO 95/2761/2, HQ Diary for 145 Brigade, 5 April 1917.
[609] TNA WO 95/2763/1, War Diary for 5/Glosters, 5 April 1917.
[610] TNA WO 95/2761/2, HQ Diary for 145 Brigade, 5 April 1917.
[611] TNA WO 95/2764/1, War Diary for 4/Ox & Bucks, 5 April 1917.
[612] C. R. M. F. Cruttwell, *The War Service of the 1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment (T.F.)* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1922) pp. 107-111.
[613] TNA WO 95/2762/3, War Diary for 4/R Berks, April 1917 Appendix A.1 '1/4th Royal Berkshire Regiment, Operation Order', dated 4 April 1917.

145 Brigade suffered just under 150 casualties during the attack, 30 of which were inflicted by British artillery fire dropping short on 4/R Berks in the early stages of the action. German losses from the action are uncertain, but 45 prisoners were brought back, and all units record killing dozens of the enemy, making it likely that the German casualties were higher than those of the attackers.[614] Though enemy resistance was stiffening as 48th Division approached the Hindenburg Line, the two attacks on 1 and 5 April show a very capable transition to a more open style of warfare. 48th Division's infantry certainly appear to have adapted more smoothly than that of the German Army, who Cyril Falls describes as having defended in a manner which was 'soldierly and workmanlike, but nothing more; there was nothing brilliant in its methods, and the machine guns were more often posted in the western outskirts of the villages, where they were expected to be, than under some slight cover in the open, where they would have been most difficult to locate.'[615]

While this assessment seems accurate, it should not be used to cast shade on the achievements of 48th Division in early April, who learned quickly and successfully expanded their assaults, and twice achieved surprise. They became adept at changing formation under fire as the situation demanded, and in opportunistically catching enemy units between their formations, showed the right instincts with regard to 'marching to the sound of the guns'. Without having fought in the later stages of the Somme campaign, or in the actions along the Ancre, Fanshawe's men had, in the space of two weeks, emerged from exhausting trench warfare into an open setting, and carried out a creditable pursuit of the enemy in spite of the immediate task of having to bridge the Somme. This is testament to their apparent ability to learn from others and from disseminated doctrine, as well as creativity on the part of the divisional staff. KW Mitchinson's assessment of 48th Division's early 1917 training suggests that *SS 143* and *SS 144* were probably being studied and applied by this time, which does appear to be likely.[616] Although not mentioning the *SS 143* training methods specifically, a note in the 144 Brigade report on their early April actions does suggest they had been brought in by this stage; 8/Worcesters noted that 'in this operation as in the previous one, the new organisation

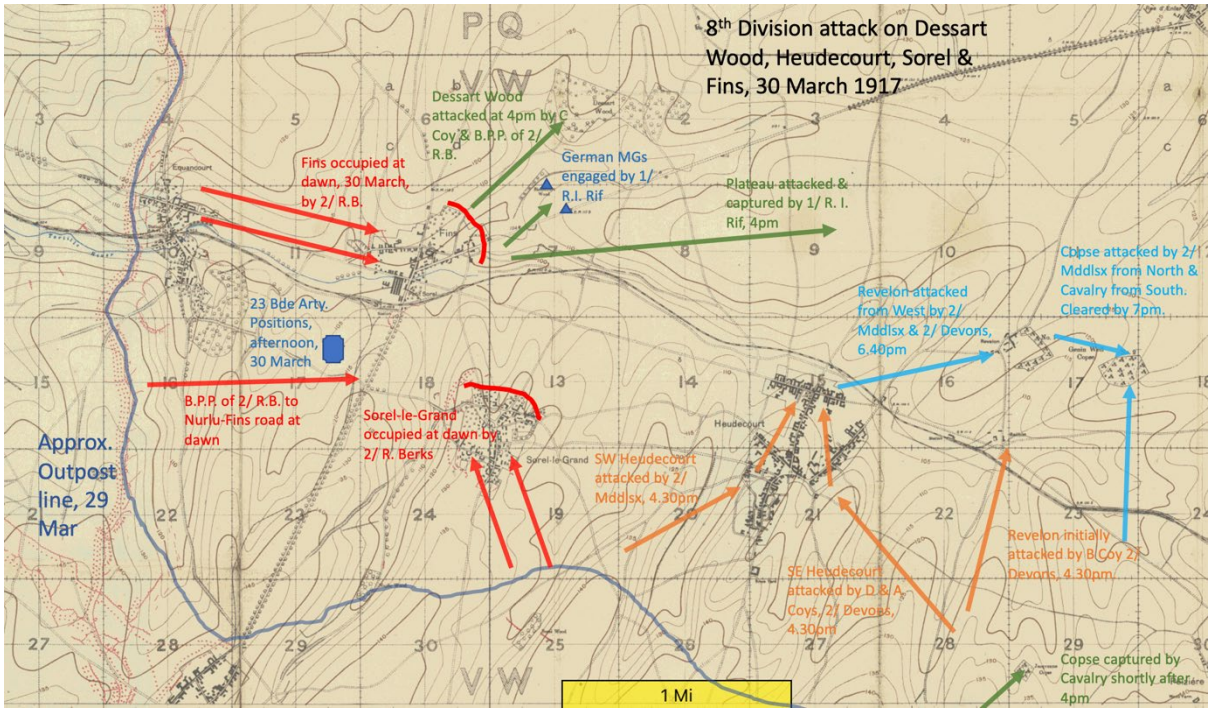
[614] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 159.
[615] Ibid, p. 161.
[616] Mitchinson, *48th Division*, p. 136.

of the platoon for the attack was found to work very well'.[617] With their capture of Lempire, only one piece of high ground and some isolated farms stood between 8th Division and the Hindenburg Line; the division proceeded with difficulty to capture said ground, in spite of the conditions worsening in the middle of April and coming under the heavier German guns of the Hindenburg Line defences. Mitchinson's assessment of the Division's actions during this period stress the difficulty of adopting their new formations while conducting operations, as well as crediting the division for the successes experienced. He highlights the actions at Épehy, described by the participants as variously 'the best fight they have had in France' and 'simply glorious'. However, Mitchinson also acknowledges the reality of the challenge of closing on the Hindenburg Line with a quote from 4/ R Berks' history, that the work of the battalion was 'not wholly satisfactory'.[618] In spite of the tactical progress made, there was still much to learn and improve. In his conclusion, Mitchinson's fair assessment states 'the attack on Ste Emilie…was a rushed and ill-prepared affair which produced predictable results. The assault on Épehy and the three villages to its south were, in contrast, well-planned with effective coordination between infantry and artillery in less than favourable conditions.'[619] It is difficult to argue against Mitchinson's view that 48th Division's performance was patchy.

Further south, 8th Division had a similar amount of time out of touch with the German army after their withdrawal. Following the advance east from the ground they had taken near Bouchavesnes on 4 March, 8th Division's first encounter with the enemy in real strength on the advance towards the Hindenburg Line was in the area of Heudecourt, on 30 March. An action was carried out which cleared the large village of Heudecourt, the smaller villages of Fins and Sorel-le-Grand, the hamlet of Revelon, Dessart Wood, three copses, and a dominating area of high ground, and advanced the XV Corps line some 6,000 yards, killing or clearing approximately 800 of the enemy for 68 casualties.[620] The villages are all overlooked by the horseshoe of high ground to the North and East, meaning that holding them would be impossible without the capture of the high ground as well; a fact not lost on those planning

[617] TNA WO 95/2757/5, HQ Diary for 144 Brigade, Appendix G, 'Operations of 144th Infantry Brigade from 29/3/17 to 5/4/17'.
[618] Mitchinson, *48th Division*, pp. 147-152.
[619] Ibid, p. 259.
[620] TNA WO 95/432/2, Fourth Army HQ Diary 'XV Corps No. 57 G.X 3/4/17, Report on Operations Carried out by the 23rd Inf. Bde and 25th Inf. Bde., 8th Division, on 30th March 1917'. Total casualties for the operation numbered 12 killed and 56 wounded.

the attack. However, as the Official History states, if the villages could be captured quickly, it would make the assault on the high ground easier.[621] Map 24 shows the different phases of the attack indicated by red, green, orange and blue arrows.



Map 24: 8th Division, 30 March 1917. Entire area of map cleared of the enemy during the day's action.

Sorel and Fins were attacked and captured by patrols of 2/RB and 2/R Berks at daybreak on 30 March, having closely picketed the villages during the night. For the attack on Heudecourt and the high ground around it, 23 and 25 Brigades were each allotted four sections of 18 pounder guns under direct control of their respective brigadier-generals, the remainder of the divisional artillery and an attached field artillery brigade being under the command of the CRA. A creeping barrage was not to be followed as such, but direct liaison between the assaulting troops and the field artillery would be attempted using Very pistols; signals being fired when a lift was required. Only the corps heavy artillery would fire to a timetable, moving from Heudecourt and Dessart Wood at the time of the assault, over the hamlet of Revelon, and then in a protective role on to the ground further north and east.[622]

[621] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 154.
[622] TNA WO 95/1676/2, 8th Division HQ Diary, '8th Division Order No.172', 29 March 1917.

With the hamlet of Revelon and the high ground beyond seemingly the more difficult challenge, the decision was made by 25 Brigade's commander, Brigadier-General Coffin, to delay the attack until the attack on Dessart Wood had the enemy's full attention. 'B' Coy and the Battle Patrol Platoon of 2/RB attacked from Fins at 4pm as planned, and were momentarily held by two machine guns firing from the East, which were immediately attacked with Lewis Guns. No. 5 Platoon, 'B' Coy, 1/R I Rif under 2nd Lieutenant Brown assaulted the guns and captured one of them, the crew of the second gun escaping.[623] The 2/RB attack then pressed on to Dessart Wood and cleared it quickly. Very lights were fired at stages through the wood, and once it had been sufficiently cleared, 'B' & 'C' Coys 1/R I Rif were ordered forward to the plateau North of Revelon.

By 4.30pm Brigadier-General Coffin deemed the situation in the North sufficiently advanced for the assault on Heudecourt to take place. Elements of 2/Mddlsx and 2/Devons fired Very lights to signal the Brigade artillery to move on to the northern part of the village, and as they progressed northwards, additional lights were fired to signal the lift on to Revelon. Once the village was clear, 2/Mddlsx and 2/Devons moved eastwards immediately, using skirmishers and Lewis Gunners to cover the advance towards Revelon and the copses, while a cavalry squadron attacked the second copse from the South. All objectives were secured by 7pm and the division dug into consolidate its gains.[624]

Major-General Heneker, in his report on the operation, stated 'three weeks ago I really do not think that we could have, with success, carried out such an open warfare attack', and made a point of praising the infantry for 'adapting themselves to circumstances'.[625] He also highlighted the value in pressing scouts and patrols forward, regardless of the time of day. As had been demonstrated in February on Redan Ridge, an aggressive policy of patrolling, maintaining outposts and seizing vantage points had proved effective, and the German army had yet to develop a counter to this change in British tactics. Furthermore, the Germans had shown their own tactical shortcomings, both in holding villages, then in bombarding villages

[623] TNA WO 95/1739/4, War Diary for 1/R I Rif, 30 March 1917.
[624] TNA WO 95/432/2, Fourth Army HQ Diary 'XV Corps No. 57 G.X 3/4/17, Report on Operations Carried out by the 23rd Inf. Bde and 25th Inf. Bde., 8th Division, on 30th March 1917'.
[625] Ibid.

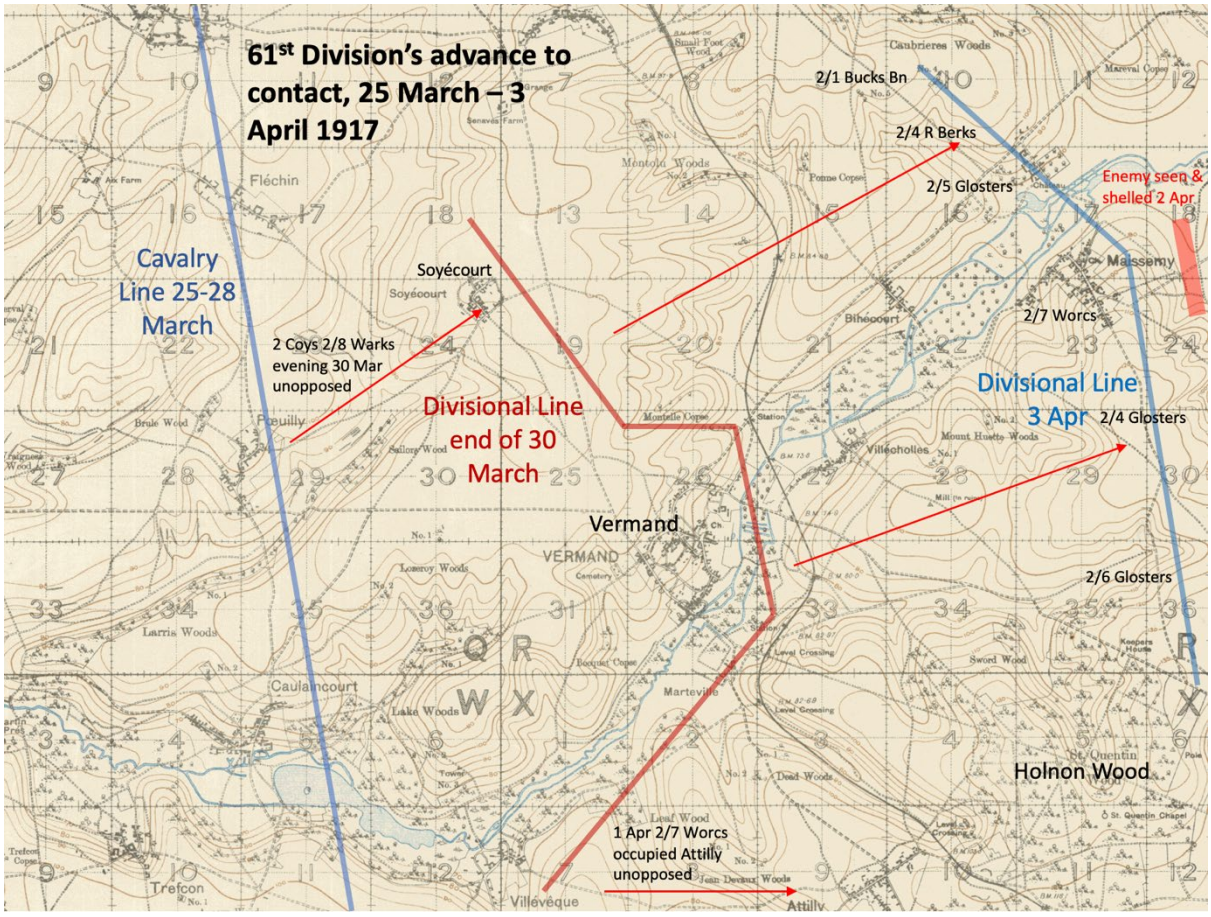
that had been captured. As Heneker states, 'The enemy's retirement is, I consider, badly carried out, because he holds towns. As a result of this, we can concentrate our efforts on to something we can see. During the attack he barraged the villages but with no result, for we were not in them.'[626] Heneker's recommendation in his report was that villages should be avoided, although he did not mention wooded areas.

The tactical flexibility afforded by devolving command of artillery units to brigade commanders, and allowing attacking troops to determine the barrage lifts themselves showed further tactical innovation. Creeping barrages had been widely used and had undoubtedly shown their usefulness, however 8th Division's ability to construct a bespoke, but variable bombardment to suit the ground and their needs, was clearly the correct course of action in this case. Making use of Very lights to aid communication was deemed to be successful enough, even to the point of making the attached contact patrol aircraft redundant. Attention to detail extended to making sure the flanks were properly-guarded, by 20th Division on the left, and the corps cavalry on the right.[627] As the official historian recorded, this was a well-conducted operation, and indicated a level of creativity and flexibility well above that previously shown by the 8th Division in action. Further actions in April on the advance to the Hindenburg Line were more cautiously planned and conducted. The weather worsened as April continued, and snowstorms hampered communications. The constant patrolling and pushing forward of outposts continued however, in the 'peaceful penetration' style, which was recorded as such in 24 Brigade's diary on 14 April.[628]

On the southernmost part of the BEF's line, the 61st and 32nd Divisions were closest to the French sector. 61st Division took over a section of the line from the French army in mid-February. With the exception of a significant enemy raid on 28 February, the period up to 17 March was characterised by difficulty in maintaining the trenches in poor weather. Once the enemy withdrawal took place, 61st Division was largely employed on road repair tasks. Touch with the enemy was not properly regained until the end of the month, and no serious

[626] TNA WO 95/432/2, Fourth Army HQ Diary 'XV Corps No. 57 G.X 3/4/17, Report on Operations Carried out by the 23rd Inf. Bde and 25th Inf. Bde., 8th Division, on 30th March 1917'.
[627] Ibid.
[628] TNA WO 95/1717/2, 24 Brigade War Diary, 14 April 1917.

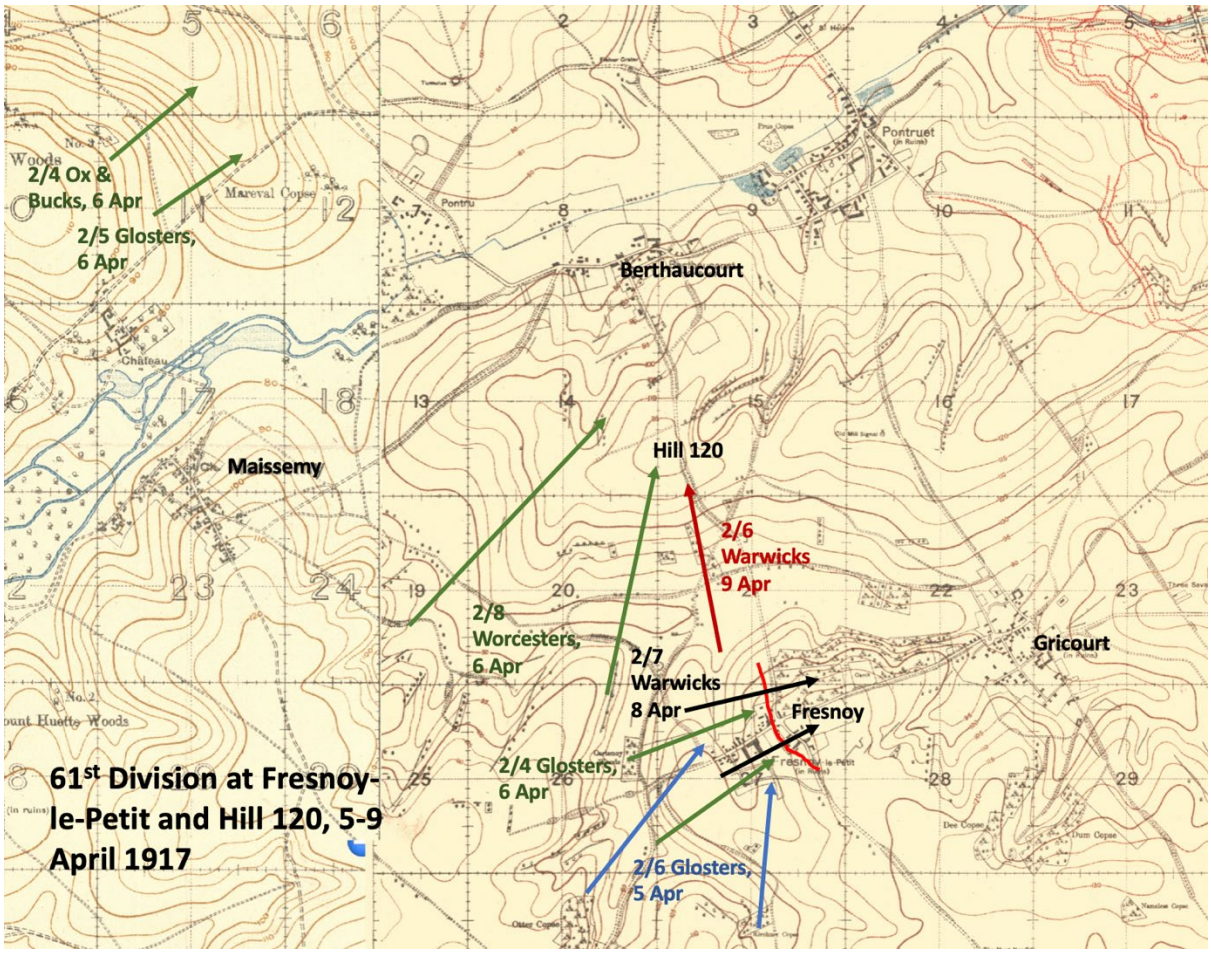
aggressive moves were made until 2 April, when the division cooperated with 32nd Division's envelopment of Holnon wood on their right flank. Even this was relatively straightforward, with little resistance encountered by 61st Division as they advanced either side of the river Omignon. At one point a force of the enemy approximately one battalion in strength was sighted, and put under artillery fire (see map 25). Field Marshal Haig and General Rawlinson with their respective staffs visited the following day and were generous with their praise for 61st Division's efforts; possibly overly generous considering the level of difficulty experienced thus far.



Map 25: 61st Division's advance to contact, late March – Early April 1917

Attacks against the entrenched enemy in the outpost village of Fresnoy-le-Petit by 183 Brigade came over the nights of 5-6 and 6-7 April, neither of which were entirely successful (see map 26). There appears to have been confusion late on 5 April, as an assault was due to commence at 10pm, but patrols came in half an hour earlier and reported the village to have been vacated. The artillery bombardment was cancelled and 2 companies from 2/6th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment (2/6 Glosters) were sent forward to occupy Fresnoy, only to find

intact barbed wire in the village itself; they came under machine gun fire as they approached the wire, and withdrew to their previous outpost positions to the west of the village. The following night an advance was carried out by 2/4 Glosters, under a barrage starting at 9pm, which failed to damage the wire sufficiently to allow progress. This time the assaulting troops dug in close to the wire in the village. At midnight, attacks were carried out on Hill 120 to the north of Fresnoy by 2/8th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment (2/8 Worcesters), and on the ridge between Maissemy and Verguier by 2/5 Glosters and 2/4 Ox & Bucks from 184 Brigade. 2/8 Worcesters' right company pushed up to the enemy lines, but the left company were checked by frontal and enfilade fire.[629] 184 Brigade's assault was abandoned due to thick uncut wire, with only one small breach being made by 2/5 Glosters.[630]



Map 26: 61st Division's attacks on Fresnoy-le-Petit and Hill 120, 5-9 April 1917

[629] TNA WO 95/3058/4, HQ Diary for 183 Brigade, 6 April 1917.
[630] TNA WO 95/3066/1, War Diary for 2/5 Glosters, 7 April 1917.

Fresnoy-le-Petit was eventually cleared on 8 April by 2/7 R Warwicks, with an attack starting at 7.40pm, after a 40-minute preliminary bombardment. Two platoons of 'C' Company attacked the northern part of the village, 2 platoons of 'B' Company assaulted the south, a platoon of 'D' Company supported each, and 'A' Company waited in reserve. Although the northern company was initially held by MG fire, they maintained their position and 'endeavoured to establish a superiority of fire, but only succeeded in silencing the rifle fire'.[631] 'D' Company's supporting platoon was absorbed into the attack and no progress was made until two platoons from 'A' Company arrived. A new effort was made to push beyond the Fresnoy-Bethaucourt road, and it was discovered that the defenders had withdrawn from their position and beyond sniping and one bombing attack, consolidation was carried out unopposed. 'B' Company's advance was similarly held for almost an hour before 'A' Company's reinforcing platoons arrived. This force was sent to work round the right flank and had no immediate success, but after a further couple of hours firing, the enemy fire weakened sufficiently to allow progress. At dawn on 9 April, 2/6 R Warwicks assaulted Hill 120 after a 15-minute bombardment; no enemy soldiers were encountered, and burning candles in the dugouts indicated a very recent withdrawal.[632] The village of Berthaucourt was also found to be empty on 9 April, and was duly occupied. No more serious actions were fought by the division before their relief on 12 April.

Although having a successful action under the belt would have been a relief to Mackenzie, 2/7 Warwicks' successful actions over the night of 8/9 April were not without error. 'C' Company had two Lewis gun teams knocked out, and when two Stokes mortars were sent into the village to help dislodge the enemy from their strong points, the officer commanding the mortars was captured and the mortars did not come into action.[633] This would indicate support weapons being pushed too far forwards, suggesting inexperience on the part of platoon and section commanders. Furthermore, Lieutenant-Colonel Clyne's report on the action states that 'the artillery bombardment owing to the proximity of our original line to the enemy line, was not as effective as it might have been'. Although the previous battalion to attack had done the

[631] TNA WO 95/3056/3, War Diary for 2/7 Warwicks, 'Report on the attack on Fresnoy-le-Petit by 2/7th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment on the night of 8/9th April 1917', 10 April 1917.
[632] TNA WO 95/3056/2, War Diary for 2/6 Warwicks, 9 April 1917.
[633] TNA WO 95/3056/3, War Diary for 2/7 Warwicks, 'Report on the attack on Fresnoy-le-Petit by 2/7th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment on the night of 8/9th April 1917', 10 April 1917.

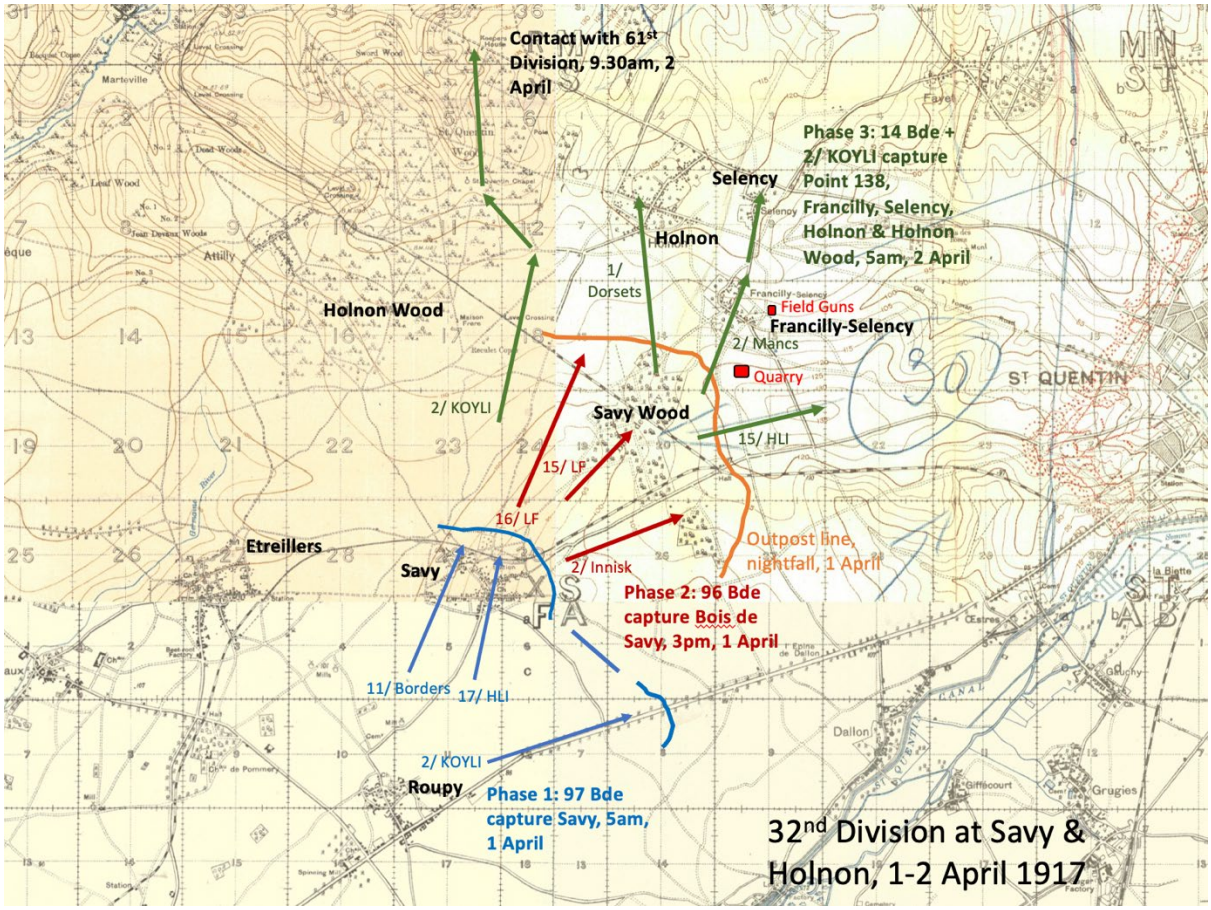
correct thing in digging in as close to the enemy wire as possible, this left little margin of error for the artillery, but there was no apparent thought to temporarily vacate the most advanced posts to allow for a heavier bombardment on the enemy wire.

These errors can easily be attributed to inexperience, and there were also positives to be taken. The willingness of the men to close with the enemy seems not to be in doubt; repeated attempts to find or force ways through uncut wire appear to have been made, and although this resulted in some loss, the casualties were not so high as to put units entirely *hors-de-combat*. In a related point, the command of reserves seems to have been well handled, as the units fed into action on 8 April either helped overwhelm, or work a way round the enemy. Whether the slackening of fire in front of 'B' Company 2/7 Warwicks was due to the enemy withdrawing, running short of ammunition or suffering casualties is unclear, but the judicious use of reserves and the solid work of the carrying parties in maintaining the supply of ammunition enabled the firefight to continue to a successful conclusion. Similarly in front of 'C' Company, the arrival of two fresh platoons from 'A' Company was sufficient to tip the balance, gain fire superiority, and enable a route into the northern part of the village. Relatively small numbers of men had been committed, and although mistakes were made, the outcome was a success. Considering the lack of experience in the division, the performance was a creditable one.

Following the Fresnoy actions, 61st Division spent a week out of the lines in mid-April, before relieving 32nd Division on the southern end of the BEF's line. This week was spent refining their platoon structure in line with the *SS 143* training pamphlet, and putting focus on to training section leaders and specialists. The attention given to platoon structure meant reorganising companies to ensure minimum platoon strength of 28 men; in the case of 2/4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (2/4 R Berks) this meant dropping the number of platoons from 4 to 3 in most companies, and down to 2 in 'B' Company.[634] 2/1 Bucks Bn recorded a 'very satisfactory improvement was noted throughout the entire battalion' during the period 14-18 April.[635] The relief of 32nd Division commenced on 19 April, and no major offensive action was launched.

[634] TNA WO 95/3065/2, War Diary for 2/4 R Berks, 13 April 1917.
[635] TNA WO 95/3066/2, War Diary for 2/1 Bucks Battalion, 14-18 April 1917.

32nd Division had the furthest advance to contact of any of the divisions in this study, and were also hindered by the need to bridge and cross the River Somme. However, just two days after 8th Division's attack at Heudecourt, 32nd Division launched their first major action of the advance to the Hindenburg Line, in the area of Savy and Holnon. Lieutenant-General Woolcombe, commanding XIV Corps, had identified Holnon Wood as a threat to the Corps advance, and instructed 61st and 32nd Divisions to surround it, rather than assault it frontally.[636] Doing so would involve the capture of the villages of Holnon, Selency, Francilly-Selency, and Savy, the nearby Bois de Savy, and the high ground to the east known as Point 138, which would afford a view over the Hindenburg Line at St. Quentin. 32nd Division at this stage was on the far-right of the British line, with 61st Division advancing on their left, and the French army on their right; Holnon Wood was directly to the North. 32nd Division would move round the wood to the South and move northwards in three phases, shown on map 27.



Map 27: 32nd Division's actions, 1-2 April 1917.

[636] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p156.

The first objective was the village of Savy, allocated to 97 Brigade, who attacked at dawn on 1 April with 11/Borders and 17/HLI (Highland Light Infantry) in line, and 2/KOYLI (King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry) protecting the right flank. One company of each assaulting battalion was to be used as 'moppers-up' in the village, while the other three captured and consolidated on the railway line running along the northern edge of the village.[637] The second phase involved the capture of the wooded area and high ground to the North-East, the Bois de Savy and Point 138, which was attempted by 2nd Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (2/Innisk) and 15th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers (15/LF) of 96 Brigade at 3pm on the same day. The wood was entered unopposed, but was 'elaborately prepared as an obstacle by fallen trees and brushwood'.[638] As the two battalions pushed through the wood, they discovered the northern part had been felled almost completely, offering very little cover, and enemy machine guns sited at the railway Halt to the immediate east opened fire, causing casualties. Messages were successfully sent back for a bombardment on the Halt, which duly took place in the evening and the position was captured by 9.15pm. The high ground remained in German hands until the morning of 2 April, when two companies of 15/HLI attacked and captured Point 138. The third phase, allotted to 14 Brigade, was the capture of Holnon village, Francilly-Selency and Selency, which cut off Holnon Wood. Meanwhile, 2/KOYLI was to envelope the wood to the North, but on seeing an enemy observation balloon in the East, took the decision to enter the wood and press through under cover. This they did without opposition, and on reaching the northern side made contact with 61st Division.[639] Patrols were then sent through to clear the wood.

The right flank of 14 Brigade's attack was a greater challenge; on clearing the Bois de Savy, 2/Mancs came under machine gun fire from a quarry to the South of Francilly-Selency, inflicting around fifty casualties.[640] 2nd Lieutenant Taylor, with a temporary command of two platoons of 'A' Company, immediately changed direction, carried out a flanking manoeuvre and cleared the quarry, capturing six machine guns. Taylor then moved North to a large crater

[637] TNA WO 95/2399/4, 97th Brigade HQ Diary, March 1917, '97th Infantry Brigade Operation Order No. 126', 30 March 1917.
[638] TNA WO 95/2395/4, 96th Brigade HQ Diary, 1 April 1917.
[639] TNA WO 95/2402/1, War Diary for 2/KOYLI, 2 April 1917.
[640] Falls, *Official History 1917*, p. 157.

and continued to protect the Manchesters' right.[641] As 'C' Company moved up to Francilly-Selency, they 'saw the flash of guns immediately in front'.[642] Another swiftly carried-out flanking manoeuvre saw 2/Mancs capture an entire battery of six 77mm artillery pieces which the enemy had been unable to withdraw in time, due to the heavy ground.[643] As 1/Dorsets pressed on to Holnon village (which they captured in spite of heavy machine gun fire), 2/Mancs left moppers-up and a guard for the guns in Francilly-Selency, and 'C' and 'D' Companies pressed on to Selency, coming under shellfire on the way. Selency was quickly cleared and posts were established on the northern and eastern sides of the villages. On 2 April, 2/Mancs captured 2 villages, cleared a defended quarry capturing six machine guns, captured a gun battery, and helped maintain the right flank of a successful assault by two divisions on a large wooded area and surrounding villages. Considering their losses in November, the number of fresh drafts taken on over winter and the second change in fighting style in three months, this performance was certainly creditable. In view of the very slight casualty figures for the battalion of two officers and ten other ranks killed, six officers and fifty-two other ranks wounded, 2/Mancs' achievements can be described as remarkable.

It is appropriate to pay credit to the divisional leadership, as clearly, they had absorbed the lessons of the previous year, while also adding an important degree of tactical flexibility. Crucially, the fact that reserves were always maintained in attack provided much of that flexibility. Furthermore, better trained officers with a more aggressive mindset could be trusted to change plans appropriately. While not as elaborate a plan as 8th Division's attack on Heudecourt, especially in terms of communication, 32nd Division had further enhanced their reputation from their actions early in the year, shown they could adapt to changes in their environment, and find ways to succeed.

[641] TNA WO 95/2392/2, War Diary for 2/Mancs, April 1917, 'Capture of a German 77mm Battery, Francilly-Selency. April 2nd 1917', written by Colonel Luxmoore, OC 2/ Mancs.
[642] TNA WO 95/2392/2, War Diary for 2/Mancs, April 1917, handwritten report on action of 2 April.
[643] TNA WO 95/2392/2, War Diary for 2/Mancs, 2 April 1917 diary entry.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated many aspects of the learning process in the BEF's divisions, but it has also highlighted how inconsistency across the BEF led to mixed results and occasionally patchy performances. Divisions had, broadly speaking, become more adept either in multi-divisional actions and independent operations, and there is more evidence of lower-level decision making showing positive results. What was becoming clearer was that while many divisions had found answers to the challenges they had faced up to that point, there was no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to the fighting on the Western Front. Any weakness in technique, such as in consolidation or use of support weapons, could be exposed and result in failure in action. The overall trend was undoubtedly positive, as the official historian Cyril Falls's stated in his fairly brief, but astutely compiled narrative and assessment of the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line. Summarising the open warfare phase, Falls stated:

> 'it will have been noticed from the short accounts of these actions that the British methods were not stereotyped or lacking in imagination. Attacks had been launched at [different times], [artillery methods varied], and there had been good use of ground and cleverly conceived turning movements, as at Holnon Wood. The overnight picketing of Heudicourt [sic], Sorel and Fins had been a very happy stroke.'

Falls went on to state that on balance, casualties were too high, and to explicitly highlight the value of experience in such actions.[644] For the divisions and their leaders, however, this period was not simply about an advance, it was invaluable experience in and of itself. With control of more firepower being devolved down to platoon and section level, this taste of open warfare vindicated methods which had been proposed and developed by certain units during the previous few months. Furthermore, they also gave several units which were adopting the new techniques a chance to employ them away from a major offensive and heavy supporting artillery fire.

This chapter has demonstrated that certain skills and principles that had been developed through the winter months came into evidence during the pursuit. 7th Division's variety of support weapons used in the attack at Écoust demonstrates the raised skill levels among specialists in a relatively short space of time, as well as their coherent integration into an

[644] Falls, *Official History 1917*, pp. 160-161.

effective attacking force. Even Australian 4th Division which went on to suffer heavy losses in their attack at the Hindenburg Line near Bullecourt employed techniques such as firing from the hip in the advance. However, they may have benefited from more work on consolidation of gains, and more objective analysis on their own performance. 8th Division adapted a semi-open outpost style of warfare with their battle patrol platoons and close picketing of enemy positions, establishing the earliest-seen reference to peaceful penetration as a method of advancing the line. As has been established earlier in this thesis, the employment of outposts, consolidation and patrols as a method to advance was in use even before the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, and by Spring 1917 several divisions were proficient in its use.

This chapter has highlighted evidence from war diaries of creativity and adaptability in the new circumstances of the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line. War diaries state that battalions from 48th Division cooperated well with armoured car crews during their actions at Roisel, after having pressed out advanced guards in support of cavalry patrols.[645] 8th Division's engagement at Fins and Dessart Wood showed tactical flexibility at company and platoon level which was at least on par with that shown by 18th Division near Miraumont in February, and artillery control and communication which demonstrated a real aptitude for open fighting. Arguably the real highlight for the BEF's pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, however, came on its right flank near St Quentin. 32nd Division advanced so quickly, skilfully and audaciously that they enveloped Holnon Wood and captured the German field artillery battery at Francilly-Selency. This chapter shows that where the BEF had space to manoeuvre, they did so effectively, and at least at Francilly-Selency, surprised the enemy with how quickly they took to the war of movement.

This chapter has also shown that where there was less space, achievements could be more limited, and Fifth Army's pursuit to the Hindenburg Line provided fewer obvious reasons for optimism. Particularly in the case of Australian 2nd Division, their lack of time for training, coupled with the haste with which they were pressed into the pursuit and a lack of reconnaissance, brought about a significant check at Noreuil. Even 7th Division, one of the

[645] TNA WO 95/2764/1, War diary for 1/4 Ox & Bucks, entry for 26 March and report 'Active Operations of 1/4 Oxf + Bucks Lt Infy March 1917'.

BEF's highest-performing divisions, struggled with the swift transition and lack of room to manoeuvre.

With that said, there is enough in the feedback from these actions to show that the latest tactical methods were considered, largely adopted or about to be adopted, and generally helpful. Australian 2nd Division's 'lessons learned' report from their advanced guard actions highlighted success with Lewis guns, rifle grenades and rifle and bayonet in cooperation. In addition to maintaining a strong reserve and protecting one's flanks, these were all valid and important points to assimilate, and showed more specialised skill with support weapons. Certainly, the improvement in performance of specialists gave these divisions opportunities to inflict damage on their enemy that they may previously have lacked, or the ability to hold positions from which they may have been ejected the previous year. The increasingly widespread focus on consolidation, shown in actions such as Australian 5th Division's at Louverval on 2 April 1917, served to provoke the German army into further shifts in defensive methods in the face of mounting losses. In truth, the operations against the outpost villages north of the Bapaume-Cambrai road took on the aspect of those on the Somme front in late 1916, requiring more methodical preparation, and with greater risk of enemy counter-attack. Another positive element of these actions was when German counter-attacks, such as that at Lagnicourt and Beaumetz, were punished by local commanders reacting quickly and under their own initiative. Though these counter-attacks broke into the outpost line on both occasions highlighting deficiency in consolidation, their eventual heavy losses and defeat are surely good examples of improved tactical skill and fighting ability. It could even be argued that in employing depth in defence and inflicting heavy loss on the counter-attacking Germans, this style of defending was unintentionally more effective than checking the enemy immediately.

In summary, this chapter demonstrates the BEF's performance on the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line showed visible tactical progress from the previous year among the infantry. With greater integration of support weapons, increased focus on specialisation and consolidation in training, certain command changes and the raising of soldierly skills, the infantry on the pursuit generally acquitted itself well. Those divisions which had employed the latest training doctrine appeared to benefit from it in terms of increased firepower, and

therefore increased resilience in the firefights which broke out in certain outpost villages. Though the actions on the pursuit were often far from perfectly conducted, they showed the value of the work to learn the lessons of the Somme campaign, and how readily the infantry of the BEF could adopt new methods, if they were given adequate time to train. This chapter shows the most significant tactical improvements came to those divisions which had time in training with new divisional commanders and staff, but also had engaged in actions prior to the German withdrawal in March, such as 8th and 32nd Divisions. Doctrinal pamphlets such as *SS 135* were gainfully employed by 48th Division, which had not seen as much action as others either in late 1916 or early 1917, and their performance was creditable but patchy. It is a fundamental point of this thesis that experience, analysis and training were of greater value than the latest pamphlets, as useful as they may have been. Regarding the devolution of control of support weapons to the platoon and section level, such moves were only practicable due to the lift in standards among the infantry. Again, this was partly down to training, and partly to experience, as is the more prevalent use of initiative in action. Operations during the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line were valuable experience to those units that took part in them, and this chapter shows the importance of the understanding of the latest fighting methods gained during then Somme campaign. Furthermore, the actions discussed in this chapter also demonstrate the value of the early 1917 actions, and how principles developed in January and February 1917 evolved to good effect in more open warfare.

Conclusion

Douglas Haig's final despatch of the war, dated 21 March 1919, served as the Commander-in-Chief's summary of the conflict, in which he discussed the duration of the war, his offensive mindset, and myriad other aspects of the fighting and the peace. Haig, while acknowledging the apparent indecisive nature of the great battles of 1916 and 1917, describes them as having been necessary in wearing down the strength of German armies.[646] The period covered by this thesis theoretically examines the months between two of these battles, the Somme and Arras, and assesses the actions in what was clearly not a quiet interlude. Between September 1916 and April 1917 there was more movement than at any point since 1914, there were significant changes in fighting styles, and at times, there was intense fighting in some of the worst conditions seen during the war. Though the wearing down of the German forces was doubtless important, the raising of skill levels in Haig's own armies was also a significant factor in the BEF's role in eventual victory. This thesis has shown that the training periods following the 1916 Somme campaign were crucial in allowing BEF divisions first to take on reinforcement drafts, then to restructure, train specialists in their new roles and assimilate new ideas and techniques. Though notionally not part of a major offensive, the events on the Somme front in early 1917 were highly consequential, and have for some time, merited study in depth.

There have been four essential strands to this thesis, firstly, to examine the manner in which the BEF made progress, and the impact of experience relative to that of doctrine in the BEF infantry's tactical development. The process of tactical reform in the BEF was well under way by the time the Somme offensive began. An awareness of the importance of skills such as consolidation was present at GHQ, as evidenced by the publication of *SS 112*, *Consolidation of Trenches, Localities and Craters after assault and capture, with a note on Rapid Wiring*, and *SS 109*, *Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*. These documents were not inappropriate for the time of their publishing, and *SS 112* continued to have value as the campaign wore on. Indeed, this research has shown that as German defensive methods shifted during the Somme campaign and beyond, consolidation became increasingly important in later actions as a

[646] J. H. Boraston (ed), *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches (December 1915-April 1919)* (Dent, London, 1979), p. 320.

means of holding ground and inflicting loss on the enemy. As British and French artillery concentrations increased through 1916, so German defensive methods shifted away from holding a forward trench line in strength, to a defensive scheme which employed outposts or shell-holes and strong points, with fewer clear targets on which the artillery could concentrate. This increased the demands on the infantry to solve their own problems on the battlefield, particularly if they fell behind the protective power of a creeping artillery barrage. While many studies of tactical progress to date are limited in detail by attempting to cover the BEF in its entirety for the whole war, this study is challenging for the opposite reason. By subjecting ten BEF divisions in late 1916 and early 1917 to detailed analysis, while still providing a significant quantity of data, a relatively small proportion of the BEF's infantry has been examined. These ten divisions were selected for the actions in which they took part in early 1917, either as part of the advance guard in the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, or as a division which took part in the actions leading to the German withdrawal, or in a few cases both. It might be said, therefore, that much additional research remains in order to accurately build a picture of the tactical progress across Haig's armies.

However, in studying these particular formations in depth, it has been possible to determine how the experiences of certain divisions shaped their own approaches to tactical development. It has thereby been possible to demonstrate the influence of certain divisions in the creation of the BEF's tactical doctrine, rather than simply looking at the impact of doctrine on divisions. This doctrine, or best-practice based on experience, could then be effectively disseminated to less-experienced divisions by means of pamphlets, but also by demonstrations, lectures, and the movement of experienced officers to inexperienced formations. The findings of this research have clearly demonstrated a point that has been suggested by several scholars over the last two decades; that tactical progress in infantry divisions was uneven and patchy, but certainly present and positive.

Secondly, it has also been possible to make an assessment of what tactical progress was actually made, specifically in terms of fighting effectiveness. Increased numbers of light machine guns and rifle grenades were available, however these additional weapons put strain on infantry units which already had to cope with large drafts of inexperienced reinforcements. The infantry was presented with the combined challenges of bringing fresh drafts up to the

requisite standards, while training specialists in the effective use of support weapons, and endeavouring to establish the methods which had been successful and find innovative new solutions to tactical problems. This research has shown that the ten divisions involved in this study all showed an awareness of these challenges, and with or without the direction of GHQ's new doctrine, they approached the problems professionally and logically. These tasks would require both experience and training; for those units who had little experience, the opportunity to learn from other formations was crucial, and demanded updates to the centrally produced training documents. These updated documents have been frequently used as evidence by scholars such as Paddy Griffith and Gary Sheffield to show tactical progress, but this research has shown that prior to the publication of pamphlets such as *SS 143* and *SS 144*, the offensive methods described therein were already in use with certain BEF divisions. As this thesis has explained, innovative formations and methods had been discussed, demonstrated, and deployed against the enemy before they were formally disseminated.[647] This is unsurprising. It would be highly unusual for a large organisation to publish instructions or directions for universal adoption, without them having been tried and tested in action first. This research has shown that was indeed the case, and identified two of the key formations in that process, 7th and 18th Divisions, both of which had experienced success through the Somme campaign. The Battle of the Somme was, therefore, crucial in establishing the methods to be adopted, but their further trial, along with progress in proto-bite-and-hold tactics, 'peaceful penetration', and outpost warfare, show the actions of early 1917 are worthy of examination and appreciation. This research has clarified the lack of uniformity between BEF divisions in terms of their tactical progress and performance, but has also highlighted the valuable efforts to bring less experienced, or less successful divisions up to the same tactical standards.

Thirdly, and linked to the second theme, this thesis has helped to redefine certain established terms and fighting techniques so as to better understand the methods employed during the conflict. Techniques such as 'bite and hold' and 'peaceful penetration' can be clearly detected in the actions of early 1917, earlier than perhaps they have been credited with being employed in the literature of the conflict.

[647] Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p77, Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, p. 151.

Fourthly, this thesis has shed light on a period of the western front's history on which scholarship has largely lain dormant for nearly 80 years. As has been acknowledged, this research has been far from exhaustive in its study of BEF divisions, but using a meaningfully large sample of divisions, particularly from a relatively under-studied period of the conflict, has established that when it came to the switch to open warfare after the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the BEF divisions employed on the pursuit were far from flummoxed. As early as September 1916 they had anticipated the war becoming more fluid in 1917, prepared for it accordingly, and acquitted themselves at least as well as their German counterparts. It is hoped that this research serves as yet another component in the body of work which has built over the last three decades in dispelling the myths of how poorly led and trained the British army were during the Great War. As experience was gained, technology and weapons systems integrated, and skill levels rose, the BEF became a force which could more than pull its weight in the advance to victory in 1918. Indeed, by early 1917, it was already contributing to allied advances and capable of meeting, surprising, and inflicting defeats on its enemy, even on ground of its choosing. Arguably the clearest contribution to the literature made by this thesis comes on this fourth topic. The pursuit to the Hindenburg Line and shifting fighting styles in early 1917 has been mentioned in more general works on the war, such as the Official History or studies of the Battle of Arras, and authors such as K W Mitchinson, Derek Plews and Nigel Dorrington have examined certain formations on the pursuit. This broader study, examining and comparing a number of divisions in the same time period, demonstrates how circumstances and experience contributed to the uneven learning processes across the BEF's infantry.

Combat in 1916

Most of the divisions examined in this study had little cause for celebration after their 1916 actions. There was no one single skill that was lacking in each division, but there were common themes; 32nd Division, 63rd Division and Australian 4th Division in particular all suffered with high casualties in their initial assaults or on the approach to the start lines, which made holding on to any gains difficult; the inability to hold on to ground gained was arguably the most consequential problem for the BEF after the earliest stages of the Somme campaign.

Even those divisions which had enjoyed success at the 'bite' element of an attack sometimes struggled with the 'hold'; 7th Division at Delville Wood and Ginchy, and 48th Division near Ovillers being two such examples. That said, by the end of the 1916 action on the Somme front, the divisions of British Fourth and Fifth Armies had found ways to advance their line, and capture valuable positions from an enemy which in some cases, had held out for many months. This had been demonstrated in actions such as those at Thiepval in late September and on the Ancre in November 1916. Though artillery firepower gave the initial impetus to British advances, firstly through pulverisation of the enemy lines, and secondly by forcing the German defenders to reduce their strength in the front line, this added to the infantry's challenge. Rather than fight for a trench line, it became necessary to engage the enemy in a more open setting, requiring a different skill set to that hitherto prioritised. This research has shown that musketry, and use of support weapons such as Lewis light machine guns and rifle grenades became more important, and assault formations had to change. Unfortunately, until divisions had some experience of success, it was impossible to know what formations to adopt, much less what best-practice advice to share among divisions.

Having been probably the top-performing BEF division during the Somme campaign, and having fought through many of the major actions from the opening day through to the last offensive actions, 18th Division's experience was vital, and important to share. Moreover, in Ivor Maxse, the Division had a keen analytical mind and an exemplary trainer of men as its commanding officer, who kept extensive records and corresponded prolifically with other officers. 18th Division's success at Thiepval on 26 September in particular was significant in determining the formation for future attacks made by the division, and the roles to which attacking troops would be assigned. Though 18th Division still had work to do in ensuring that all those involved in the assault also engaged in consolidation after the attack in September 1916, Maxse's formation seems to have been one of the driving forces in improving tactical aptitude. Examples of methods which had worked for 18th Division were being shared even before the attack at Thiepval, showing endorsement from higher command. Indeed, most of what we see in the later training pamphlets in terms of priorities in planning offensive action is visible in II Corps notes, such as trench clearers, moppers-up, consolidators, carrying parties, communication trench diggers, signallers, covering troops and those tasked with exploitation. Though the bombing attacks made by 55 Brigade against the Schwaben redoubt in late

September 1916 were disappointing, they did serve to emphasise that even the top performing divisions could be made to toil if they resorted to simple attacks up trenches with hand grenades. Supporting attacks over the ground were also needed. Tactical progress was certainly made by 18th Division during the Somme campaign, the after-action reports, particularly those compiled after the Thiepval actions, were thorough, and efforts were clearly made to share their lessons learnt.

63rd Division, on the other hand, may have carried out one of the longest advances in an assault since the advent of trench warfare in 1914 with their attack of 13-14 November 1916 on the Ancre, but their methods were less complex and more costly than 18th Division's. However, lessons were still learnt. Their divisional commander during these operations, Cameron Shute, had only been in post since the previous month, and could have had little hand in the division's training prior to 13 November. There were quite significant failures on the battlefield in the mid-November attack, such as the inability to capture or suppress a strong point in the middle of their divisional sector for at least 24 hours. Casualties were reminiscent of 1 July in that area, indeed, much in the assault plan seems similar to the attack plans of the divisions that took part in the opening attacks of the campaign. However, the new divisional commander made several useful observations on the Ancre actions of 13-14 November. For example, Shute highlighted the need for quick consolidation of a captured position regardless of the fatigue of the men, keeping back reserves and planning carrying parties for resupply, and effective deployment of support weapons such as Stokes mortars. The tactical notes made by Shute also contain the suggestion of 'Battle Patrols' which would go forward with tools. This short-lived idea was adopted in 8th Division by William Heneker when he assumed command a short time afterwards. Heneker at this time was commanding 190 Brigade in 63rd Division. There was much room for improvement in 63rd Division's preparation for action and performance when in action, but some astute observations had been made and there was a good grounding for progress.

Throughout the Somme campaign, certain errors or practical problems were commonly encountered. These included attacking with tired troops, failure to reconnoitre the ground to be assaulted, advancing to jump-off points through shallow and observed trenches, or simply launching an infantry assault on too distant an objective. Though most divisions had some

sufficiently lengthy spells out of the lines to engage in worthwhile training, where a division had no examples of success to build on, there was much less evidence of tactical progress. Divisions such as 8th and 32nd, for example, each failed twice to achieve noteworthy gains during the Somme campaign. With little evidence of tactical progress visible in either, both had their divisional commanders replaced in the winter of 1916-17. Some experiences were, therefore, more valuable than others. Successful assaults made after the German defenders had added more depth to their defensive positions were particularly important formative actions for the BEF's infantry. These highlighted the changing responsibilities for the infantry, as well as instilling confidence in the increasingly standard creeping barrage, which went on to form the basis of offensive operations for the forthcoming year. The ability to follow a creeping barrage became essential after late 1916, but attacks could potentially still suffer heavy casualties or fail altogether unless isolated strong points could be defeated, as in the experience of 63rd Division on 13 November 1916.

This research has shown that BEF divisions had a growing awareness in late 1916 that once an attack had been successful, both the real test, and the real opportunity followed. Successful consolidation of a captured locality was crucial, not simply in terms of maintaining control of ground gained, but in taking advantage of the German defensive doctrine and inflicting loss on the enemy. This element was rarely carried out with clear success during the Somme campaign, and required significant work both in the training of the infantry, and in the organisation of the assault to ensure sufficient carrying parties for tools and wire. This thesis has demonstrated that 18th Division were significantly ahead of the other BEF divisions in this respect, establishing the importance of consolidation in September 1916, as the German defensive scheme shifted. Though there was insufficient time to disseminate and share the lessons of 18th Division's successes across the BEF before the campaign closed for the worst of the winter, lessons to be shared were certainly identified and written up, which was as much as could reasonably be expected of the fighting divisions at the time. This would prove to be of particular value to those divisions that had not taken part in the Somme campaign, or had not enjoyed the experience of success on which to build. Though 18th Division has notably been the subject of study by, among others, Peter Simkins with regard to the learning process, the comparison with other divisions in this thesis sets the division in the context of Fifth Army's tactical progress. This study adds a layer of detail to the historiography regarding

the awareness of what needed to change in order for the infantry to increase their effectiveness, especially concerning consolidation. Additionally, it explains the roles of both 18th and 7th divisions in the early stages of dissemination of these lessons to other formations.

Winter Reinforcement and Training

One of the expectations of this thesis was to clarify the link between improved tactical performance and the training pamphlets which were issued by the BEF's General Headquarters over the winter of 1916-17. This began with *SS 135,* and moved on to *SS 143* and *SS 144*, and included certain others which proved to be particularly relevant in this period. What this research has discovered is that significant progress was made without the influence of the training pamphlets. Indeed, the pamphlets themselves were reflective of progress that had already been made and displayed in action, not vice versa. This is a relationship which has been little appreciated in the existing literature to date. The progress made was based on experience which had been gained over the previous months, and was driven by after-action reports and recommendations based on lessons learned in operations since July 1916. Certain changes were made on the home front which affected battlefield performance, such as industrial growth supplying ever more artillery and infantry support weapons. However, integrating these additional weapons, training specialists in their deployment, and instilling cooperation between arms was very much a task for the men at the front. In addition, the task was complicated by the need to incorporate what were in some cases enormous reinforcement drafts of partially-trained men.

This was a challenging process, as was clear at the time, and there was a drive to ensure that the officers who would be responsible for training the infantry and specialists for the forthcoming year were the best-equipped to rise to the task. To this end, tolerance for divisional commanders who were perceived to have failed during 1916 expired. Five of the ten divisions examined in this study had their commanding officers replaced on grounds of poor performance or unsuitability for continued command. At the other end of the spectrum, the two divisions which appear to have been at the head of tactical progress in late 1916, 7th and 18th Divisions, both had their commanders promoted to corps command. This was a reflection of their results on the battlefield, and their potential to instruct other divisional

commanders to achieve similar progress. Additionally, most of the officers installed as new divisional commanders had been brigade commanders during late 1916 and were more intimately aware of the latest demands on the men they were to direct in combat. This movement of personnel, such as that of William Heneker from brigade command in 18th and 63rd Divisions to divisional command with 8th Division, was one method of diffusing tactical best practice. This proved to be effective, in conjunction with demonstrations and observations between units and use of training pamphlets. Though the historiography correctly draws attention to the importance of these pamphlets, they were one aspect of sharing learning in concert with more practical means, and they should be viewed as much a reflection of progress, rather than a cause.

Adding to the challenges faced by BEF divisions in late 1916 were contemporaneous shifts in German defensive techniques. These shifts placed greater demands on the BEF's infantry skill in techniques such as musketry. The ability to hit an isolated target at distance became a higher priority than bayonet fighting. To that end schools were set up at Army and Corps level to instruct in crucial elements such as musketry. Despite the increased demands for specialists as the number of Lewis guns per battalion increased, the rifle was never set aside as the primary infantry weapon, and there was a firm emphasis on improving standards in its use. Range construction was always a priority for units coming out of the line. All divisions within this study necessarily gave at least some attention to the basics, and the initial focus was necessarily on training the trainers, and ensuring that company and platoon officers and NCOs were well-versed in the principles they were teaching.

As experience grew among infantry battalions, and the need to improve the ability to resist counter-attacks became more apparent, consolidation became an increasingly important aspect of training in late 1916 and early 1917. Although not usually considered one of the 'basic' elements, consolidation was proving to be an essential aspect of any action, and therefore it became more common to see the skill noted in war diaries as having been considered and practiced through the latter part of 1916. Coupled with ever-increasing firepower in the hands of the infantry, and greater proficiency on the part of supporting artillery to answer SOS signals, the ability to dig in swiftly had been identified in late 1916 as the best means of resisting counter-attacks, and therefore of inflicting loss on the enemy.

Consolidation was rightly given increased priority as a basic element of training between September 1916 and April 1917.

The early winter of 1916-17 was, therefore, intended not simply as a period of restoration of divisions to full fighting strength, but also as a period in which to set the foundations in place for increased strength and tactical sophistication. The BEF's higher command removed inadequate divisional commanders, and worked towards defining more precisely the lessons learned over the preceding months for broader dissemination. It is important to note, however, than not all divisions employed their time after action in 1916 as profitably as they may have done. Australian 4th Division were noteworthy in Charles Bean's assessment, for 'mothering' their men. This research has shown that although maintenance of morale was a concern common to all divisions, most carried this out with sports competitions, such as football, cross-country running, boxing and rugby. With both sides of the conflict engaged in a pressured learning process, this particular period was essential in laying foundations for future development. Missed opportunities in training, such as the less-intense training carried out by Australian 4th Division in November 1916, had knock-on effects in future actions.

Combat in early 1917

Though often overlooked, the actions on the Somme front in early 1917, prior to the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, are crucial in understanding the final results of the 1916 Somme campaign, and how the BEF made progress as a result of five hard months of fighting there. Broadly speaking, the corrections were carried out of certain errors which had become evident through the 1916 campaign, most noticeably that of allowing sufficient time for reconnaissance of the ground and preparation of the men and the jumping-off area for the assault. A discernible benefit of notionally not being part of a major offensive was the absence of a forced and excessively ambitious operational tempo. Without the time pressure from higher command to conform to schedules and deadlines, planning could be more detailed and potentially more creative. Both at Munich Trench in January, and at Bouchavesnes in March 1917, thorough preparation was carried out and the actions successful. Flanks were guarded well, and the supply of ammunition, hand grenades and consolidation materials was well organised. This research has shown that these improvements happened largely organically, without extensive doctrinal reform. Improved performance itself is an important barometer

of advancement, and of particular note during this period is how certain divisions demonstrated progress not just in set piece operations, but also in ad hoc actions, general trench warfare, or improvisation within a set piece.

As this thesis has demonstrated, progress was not uniform, and it is noticeable that those divisions which were newest to the Somme sector, and to the Western Front generally, were the ones which struggled. 63rd Division's high casualty rates continued in their actions of early February 1917. In their assault of 3 February, the attack formation failed to maintain cohesion and the battle patrols overextended and were lost. Australian 4th Division, also struggled in their first offensive operation of the new year. Their bombing attack at Cloudy Trench on the night of 1-2 February was unsuccessful, with failure to properly consolidate the captured trench being chief among the problems. Even in this period, however, progress is discernible as experience grew. 63rd Division's battalions stayed within the planned barrage areas for their action on 17 February and fewer men were lost in a successful advance. Australian 4th Division analysed their own failure adeptly and attacked in greater strength on the night of 4-5 February, with greater attention paid to supply of ammunition and bombs for resisting counter-attack. As experience grew, so did capability; even though these divisions were behind the leading tactical proponents, they still made progress.

On a subject related to the increased experience across the BEF, changes in leadership that had been carried out in the early winter largely proved to be positive. In addition to the benefits of sharing knowledge of tactics which had proven successful, divisions were now more commonly commanded by either officers who had been close to the action in the previous year, or those who had enjoyed success in the previous year, or both. William Heneker is one good example, but Cameron Shute also had a positive impact on both 63rd and 32nd Divisions during the period of this study. The lessons learned by 63rd Division in early 1917 and 32nd Division's performance on the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line must in some measure be attributable to training carried out under Shute's command. Additionally, Herbert Shoubridge, commander of 53 Brigade at Thiepval, also progressed to command of 7th Division during the period of study. On assuming command, Shoubridge quickly organised the attack and capture of Écoust and Croisilles, after the division's earlier failure. This thesis has shown that in divisions which had little experience of success in 1916, the introduction of a new

divisional commander, who had such experience, proved to be an effective alternative. This research has demonstrated that tactics such as the 'peaceful penetration' fighting style was seemingly adopted earlier than has been hitherto identified in the BEF. Peaceful penetration had hitherto been more evident in the French army, and was employed by those BEF divisions which sought to close the gap between their own lines and the enemy before launching an assault, or make the German lines more difficult to hold. This had the benefit of encouraging the German defenders into launching costly attacks on well-constructed strong points, such as that made on 30 January 1917 in front of 10 Tree Alley. This style of fighting dovetailed well with the greater emphasis on consolidation, which was detectable in certain divisions in the preceding three months, and becoming steadily more widespread. Combining these elements in offensive operations with an awareness of the state of the ground, and the limitations of advancing without the ability to break up a counter-attack with artillery fire, led to the employment of an early version of bite-and-hold tactics, on a smaller scale than that employed later in 1917 in Flanders. These attacks were carried out at battalion level, and supported with combinations of artillery, trench mortars, Lewis and Vickers guns and rifle grenades. Practicality and supply to the infantry was of paramount importance, as ground was to be held by firepower rather than with the bayonet. It is worth stressing again, that these changes were largely made before the arrival of the new training pamphlets, or before the influence of the pamphlets could be felt. Lessons learned in offensive operations, from after action analysis and reporting, and from the redeployment of officers who had experienced success, were the drivers of progress months before new doctrine was officially disseminated. However, before the new training pamphlets were issued, and before divisions had time to train in their methods, uniformity of formations, tactics and performance was an unrealistic expectation.

Spring Training 2017

With elementary training largely having been carried out in the early weeks of the winter, and with new recommendations on training available at least in the form of December 1916's *SS 135*, *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action,* most divisions increased the sophistication of their training through the early spring, prior to the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line. Though skills training in elements such as musketry still received attention, the most significant differences between the training in late 1916 and early 1917 were the shift in focus

to platoons as the tactical unit in which to focus training, the expectation of a more open style of fighting, and the increased emphasis on specialisation. Throughout January and February 1917, *SS 135* filtered through to BEF divisions, and providing that units had a spell out of the lines to train, reorganisation along the lines of *SS 135* was almost uniformly carried out. Additionally, even before the publication of *SS 143, The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* and *SS 144, The Normal Formation for the Attack*, tactical methods which had proved successful were defined, and demonstrated to those units which were relatively new to the Somme front by experienced units such as 18th Division's battalions. Essentially, in the space of approximately four months between December 1916 and March 1917, the lessons of the Somme campaign were distilled, a series of effective offensive methods were identified, and by sharing pamphlets and organising demonstrations, the leadership of the BEF quite swiftly set about changing infantry formations across its divisions. Though this process has been highlighted by researchers and historians before, this thesis has gone further to outline the uneven nature of the process across the BEF, and has shown that while the SS pamphlets certainly had value to inexperienced formations and units, they were much more an indicator of operational and tactical development than a driver. As Ivor Maxse stated, the infantry and their officers did indeed learn best by teaching and making their own mistakes, not by lectures from superiors.

Preparation for a more open style of warfare was one of the clearest shifts in the focus of training in early 1917. With outpost zones having taken the place of strongly-held front-line trenches, there was less incentive to commit large numbers of men to the initial assault. The ability to change formations rapidly, maintain an extended order formation, and deploy support weapons effectively when moving into an assault was not without its challenges. Overcoming fixed attitudes derived during several months of trench warfare was just one. Lack of experience and aptitude was also cited in one of Australian 5th Division's brigade diaries. Time in training during the early spring of 1917 was the key factor in how much tactical progress divisions made. Fourth Army's divisions in the south had less time out of the line, with the extension of Fourth Army's front to the south. However, they did have more time than Fifth Army's divisions before resuming contact with the enemy after the main withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, having the river Somme to bridge. This time was used in training for open order action and cross-country movement.

The importance of consolidation became as clear in the early 1917 actions as it had done during the Somme campaign itself. The new training pamphlets built on those before in stressing its value. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the early spring training period, therefore, is that there were still divisions, particularly the Australian divisions, which did not give significant time in training to skills such as digging and wiring. 48th and 61st Divisions both recorded training in digging out and wiring outposts in different forms, while 7th, 18th and 32nd Divisions had all demonstrated proficiency on the battlefield in outpost creation and consolidation through January and February 1917. One promising idea which ended up as an evolutionary dead-end was the Battle Patrol Platoon, employed in 8th Division under William Heneker. Having a specialist unit to take tools forward on capturing an objective was an acceptable halfway house until more units had more experience in consolidation, but ultimately, digging in was a skill that all units needed to learn, with or without Royal Engineer direction. Added to the need for training and the value of experience in consolidation, was an awareness that fresh troops could consolidate a position without the need for engineer support, but tired troops would not. This was no stunning revelation, but it does correspond with a much more detailed preparation ahead of operations, and a clear improvement in the level of care taken for men going into action. These aspects are evident in the actions on Redan Ridge in January and February 1917, relative to those in the same area from 14-23 November 1916. Despite consolidation demonstrably being an essential component of offensive operations by early 1917, Australian 2nd, 4th and 5th Divisions still prioritised training for the bite, over the hold.

Transition to Open Warfare

Though notionally the context for a well-known 2019 Sam Mendes movie, the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line by Fourth and Fifth armies in Spring 1917 is little more than a footnote in most general histories of the Great War. It is, however, a valuable period to examine in establishing tactical progress among the infantry. There were no major set-pieces where artillery dominated and could be credited with securing victory. The pursuit is an opportunity to study BEF units on the offensive against German rear guards away from established trench systems, and in conditions unseen since 1914, and an important milestone on the road to victory in 1918. The actions were often disparate and isolated, and conditions were quite

different between Fifth Army and Fourth Army, the respective northern and southern components of the BEF's pursuit. Fifth Army's shorter pursuit was more congested, hastily conducted, and resulted in action against the enemy rear guard units much sooner than Fourth Army, who by comparison had much more space and time with which to work. Across both armies, inconsistency and patchiness in performance were evident. However there were some significant victories achieved by divisions which had toiled in the previous year, showing increased tactical aptitude and a capacity for learning which would stand these divisions in good stead.

Not all divisions enjoyed significant space to manoeuvre on the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, nor sufficient time to prepare for open action. Fifth Army's divisions met the enemy rearguard forces and Hindenburg Line outpost villages quickly, and faced forceful counter-attacks. In closing the historiographical gap on the pursuit to the Hindenburg Line, this thesis has shown that the speed with which Australian 2nd and 5th Divisions advanced, up to the points when both were checked, was impressive. This is especially true considering the shortage of time in training both divisions had experienced during the winter. One legitimate criticism of Australian 2nd Division identified by this research is that of the communication between the advanced guard commander, Brigadier-General John Gellibrand, and his divisional commander, Major-General Nevill Smyth, which was doubtless not helped by the interjection by the Army commander, Hubert Gough. A lack of clarity from advanced guard HQ in the aftermath of the Noreuil action on 20 March 1917 led to some consternation at divisional HQ, which given that a court of inquiry had been ordered in the division just weeks earlier over the poor communication around the Malt-Gamp trench, would leave an observer expecting better.

Similarly, Australian 5th Division, as not just the southern flank of the Corps advance, but also Fifth Army's southern flank, had an important role in staying linked to Fourth Army and protecting the advancing units to the north. With Fourth Army necessarily ordered to advance with less haste, caution against counter-attacks would very much be necessary by Brigadier-General Elliot's advance guard. In the event, when the German counter-attack came on 23 March, its initial success was an indictment of Australian 5th Division's lack of training in outpost warfare and consolidation. The quick recapture of the ground was a fine consolation,

and the successful action on 18 March 1917 at Louverval and Doignies to advance beyond Beaumetz was a doggedly professional action which proved Australian 5th Division had moved on significantly from Fromelles the previous July. Australian 4th Division also struggled after advancing at Noreuil on 2 April 1917. Especially concerning was the number of Australian soldiers going into captivity when a German counter-attack exploited a gap in their line. As over 100 men were isolated and captured, questions should have been asked about their deployment, consolidation, command, morale or all four. This research has found that the report which went back from brigade HQ omitted details on the surrenders and casualties, and put the appearance of the gap down to the layout of the ground, rather than any possibility of human error. The attack itself was somewhat costly in achieving its objectives, but for the future, the lack of inquiry and objectivity in the report which went up from brigade to divisional HQ, and then passed faithfully on to Corps command, should have been of real concern. This thesis shows that poor consolidation and shaky outpost lines, were seemingly features of Australian battlefield performance in early 1917, as well as aggression and adept reactions to threats. Given the Australians' relatively recent arrival on the Western Front, the heavy casualties in 1916 and the shortage of time in training through the winter and spring compared to the British divisions in the area, the weaknesses in certain skills was understandable. This research shows that consolidation was one aspect in which they appeared to be less adept than other BEF units, but progress in other areas was nonetheless rapid.

This research has also shown, however, that in Fourth Army in particular where there was greater space to manoeuvre, there were compelling actions in which units were flexible and reacted positively to challenges. One such example was that carried out by 8th Division to clear Sorel, Fins, Heudecourt and Revelon on 30 March 1917. This operation combined previously successful tactics with innovative methods of communication, and showed a solid understanding of the requirements of this more open style of fighting. The operations' lifting barrages which were controlled and extended by Very light signals fired by the infantry are a fine example of devolved command being trusted to work on its own initiative, and having the requisite skill levels to do so. Prior to the action though, the benefit of advancing outposts to as near as possible to the objective, in a similar manner to 32nd Division's assault on Ten Tree Alley on 10 February 1917, can also be seen. In terms of preparation for future open actions,

valuable notes were made based on 8th Division's experiences, regarding German defensive weaknesses in open warfare, and in particular their tendency to bombard the villages which had just been attacked and captured. This reaffirmed the lessons that had been learned elsewhere on consolidation off the objective, be it a village or a trench line, and was valuable for future open operations in 1918.

Another example of progress by a division which had struggled during the Somme campaign in 1916, discussed in chapter 5 of this thesis, was the operation by 32nd Division on 1-2 April 1917 to envelop Holnon Wood and clear the surrounding villages. In all, four villages and two significant wooded areas were cleared, along with the capture of an enemy gun battery, all for very slight losses. While not as elaborate as 8th Division's scheme at Sorel and Heudecourt, the distance to cover and terrain to negotiate complicated matters, and 32nd Division's advance could not have taken place without significant delegation of initiative to commanders on the spot. The necessary skill levels must, therefore, have been in place among junior commanders and the men themselves, for that faith to be shown. This research has shown an increased use of initiative employed by commanders at all levels, but particularly at company and platoon level, as a result of officers becoming more experienced. The speed with which the advance was carried out must have surprised the enemy for a battery of 77mm guns to be caught in place at Francilly-Selency, and was probably important in keeping casualties low; no defensive artillery bombardments of any effect were fired until after the battery was captured. With the furthest distance of any BEF division to advance in order to regain contact with the enemy, 32nd Division showed urgency in keeping pace with the units to the north, and maintained contact with the French to the south as well. That a division which had toiled unsuccessfully in its 1916 actions was trusted with such a challenging role in early 1917 speaks to the higher command's faith in the division following its actions in January and February; that it carried out such challenging tasks so convincingly is a reflection of the changes of command, tactical reforms, and rising skill levels in the BEF in the wake of the Somme campaign.

Summary

Historians attempting to study tactical progress in the Great War, and particularly in the wake of the Somme campaign, have tended to focus on the major campaigns, such as the opening of the Somme campaign and the 3rd Battle of Ypres. Considering the four main themes of this study, it has shown that in terms of improving performance, the time between the campaigns was crucial. The first theme examined the relationship between doctrine and experience, and it is visible that when the pressure of taking part in a major offensive did not exist, lessons could be learnt, codified and solutions to problems developed and applied. The second research theme of thesis has shown that in this respect, employing techniques such as early peaceful penetration and small-scale bite and hold, the BEF's divisions were able to take advantage of emerging German defensive counter-attack doctrine, and inflict sufficient losses to make the old Somme battlefield untenable for Hindenburg and Ludendorff's men. In doing so, they showed that in this particular tactical race, they had nudged ahead. The third and fourth research elements, namely a reassessment and clarification of certain existing terms such as 'peaceful penetration', and an in-depth examination of offensive operations in early 1917, have helped to provide a greater understanding of the BEF's tactical advancement in the wake of the Somme campaign. Rather than contest a number of the established positions on the BEF's tactical progress, particularly with regard to the strengthening and development of artillery weight and techniques, this thesis demonstrates that the infantry made valuable technical advances of their own. This adds weight to the increasingly established view that the Somme campaign, aside from being a gruelling ordeal for the BEF, was also a vital learning ground for its troops, with demonstrable progress made.

Certain individuals such as Maxse and Gough were leading figures in this process. However, broadly speaking, this research has shown that the system of after-action reporting in battalions, producing pamphlets and memos, then inviting comment from increasingly experienced officers, brought about a doctrine within the BEF which was based on success. Furthermore, its principles were rooted in the pre-war Field Service Regulations. It was uniform enough to be a valuable framework for training, and flexible enough to be modified according to the task. This doctrine were clearly not produced in a vacuum, and it is evident that the new doctrine reflected tactical progress and learning which had already been achieved, rather than **enabling** progress to be made. That said, the pamphlets were based on

experience, and crucially, successful experience, and with numerous divisions finding victories elusive, the ability to share experience in this manner undoubtedly saved lives and, more importantly, enabled success. The pamphlets were an excellent adjunct to demonstrations and discussions which were already being carried out, and were seen as such. Though the end of the war was still distant in early 1917, the actions on the Somme front at this time which have received so little scholarly attention, actually revealed great progress. Cyril Falls's statement is certainly true: 'from the tactical point of view [these actions] are worthy of more detailed study than it is possible to devote to them here, study which would bring out the increase in skill in warfare of this type gained by the British Armies in the past six months'.[648] This research has demonstrated that progress was significant if not uniform, and experience rather than doctrine was the driver. The BEF took to open warfare more readily than has been acknowledged in the past, and gained experience in the actions of early 1917 on the Somme front which would prove valuable in the last hundred days of the conflict.

[648] Falls, *Official History 1917,* p. 73.

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    - HQs: AWM4 Subclass 23/1-3
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- Headquarters, Divisional Artillery: AWM4 Subclass 13/11
- Headquarters, Divisional Engineers: AWM4 Subclass 14/8
- 5, 6 & 7 Australian Brigades:
    - HQs: AWM4 Subclass 23/5-7
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4th Australian Division

- General Staff: AWM4 Subclass 1/48
- Administrative Staff: AWM4 Subclass 1/49
- Headquarters, Divisional Artillery: AWM4 Subclass 13/13
- Headquarters, Divisional Engineers: AWM4 Subclass 14/10
- 4, 12 & 13 Australian Brigades:
    - HQs: AWM4 Subclass 23/4, 12 & 13
    - Infantry: AWM4 Subclass 23/30-33 & 62-69

5th Australian Division

- General Staff: AWM4 Subclass 1/50
- Administrative Staff: AWM4 Subclass 1/51
- Headquarters, Divisional Artillery: AWM4 Subclass 13/14
- Headquarters, Divisional Engineers: AWM4 Subclass 14/11
- 8, 14 & 15 Australian Brigades:
    - HQs: AWM4 Subclass 23/8, 14 & 15
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