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War in the Trenches

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BOOK REVIEW

War in the Trenches

A.M.J. Hyatt

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

This book should become a landmark in Canadian historical study of the First World War, for it breaks new ground, provokes new questions and is clearly written. The enormous number of casualties during that war are still shocking, and seemed, until recently, abundant proof of the tactical sterility of war. For many years the war was seen as a struggle between incompetent British generals and naive politicians. Gradually that picture has been redrawn into a more complicated and more believable portrait. But the Western front in the popular view has remained barren of tactical ideas and innovation, hence dramatically different from the Second World War. Rawling presents a very different account. He examines in detail the tools of war available on the Western Front, the manner in which these tools were used in the Canadian Corps as well as how they were developed and modified. More importantly, he concentrates on the way training schemes and tactics were developed to maximize the advantages of the tools and minimize casualties. The story is long, complex and inherently untidy, but it is well told and carefully developed. Not least of the book's merits is the fact that it avoids nationalistic overtones which so often accompany military history. It is a Canadian story which acknowledges appropriate debt to the British and to others.

The Canadian experience in 1915 was painful. Poorly equipped and inadequately trained, Canadian soldiers were simply not ready for the situation which confronted them when they reached France. (A situation more or less mirrored a generation later?) Quickly a process of development began, but it was slow, continuous, and often brutal. While efforts were made to have inadequate tools replaced or modified (Colt machine guns, Ross rifles), other efforts were made to develop new systems incorporating unfamiliar weapons. Although the results were no "guarantee to clear cut victories," they were nonetheless significant. Rawling argues that Canadians at the Somme "learned that they had not learned enough."(p.86) By the Battle of Vimy Ridge the Canadian Corps had developed a system of tactics "based on available technology that would allow the infantry to capture its objectives and hold them without the heavy casualties of earlier battles."(p.88) In tracing such a process, Rawling considers not only infantry, but artillery, engineers, signallers, machine gunners, the weapons and equipment they all used, and the staff officers and commanders who studies the results. By mid-1917, "Canadian tactics were a better guarantor of success than the haphazard rushes of 1915, but they did not ensure that individual units would survive intact."(p.142)

At Passchendaele, usually considered the epitome of slaughter without clear purpose, Rawling shows that the development of tactical methods for trench warfare reached a peak. Perhaps no account of this horrible battle can be completely satisfactory. Rawling's story must inevitably be limited, and it sometimes leaves the reader somewhat uncomfortable. For example, his description of the preparations for the attack on 6 November (all of which took place in six days) can be justified by reference to documents written after the attack, but it is hard to believe that all of it could have happened in the time available. ("Units tried to develop the best methods of capturing pillboxes, strong points, and machine-gun emplacements, and they relearned the techniques of fire and movement, of leadership and command. Training was capped with full-dress rehearsals." (p.160) Following the Passchendaele battle, Canadians continued to train hard and developed a system that would provide success in a modified form of open warfare. The account of "the Last 100 Days," less fulsome than some will wish, nonetheless is quite adequate to support the story which Rawling follows—the development of tactical systems and weapon techniques. He concludes that Canadian success in "the Last 100 Days" of the war was remarkable, but notes that casualties were also remarkable.

The cost of war is always too high, but the Canadian Corps' last battles on the Western Front were less costly than the disaster at Ypres or the massacre on the Somme. In the cold-blooded calculus of war, one trades territory or perhaps even the lives of one's own troops for those of the enemy; in either case the tactics of fire and movement proved themselves. (p.215)

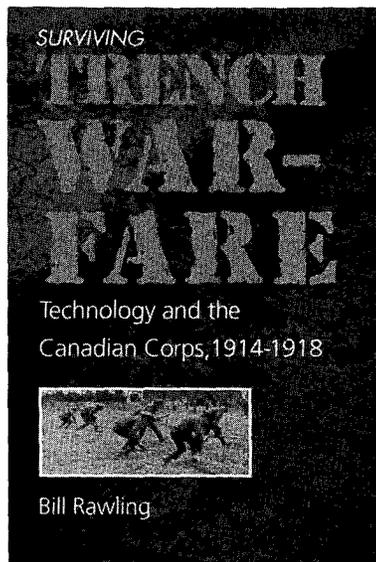
This book is important not only because it traces the untold development of weapons and tactics in the Canadian Corps, it also forces the reader to think beyond 1918. In this sense it contributes substantially to the notion that 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 were two segments

of the same conflict. Rawling misses no opportunity to reflect on problems which were as real in the second segment as they were in the first. The impact of the tank (indeed of all technology) in battle was overemphasized after 1918. In part this occurred because of the understandable desire of all who participated in the First World War to reduce casualties in a future war by using machines instead of men. But Rawling shows clearly that technology produced success only when it was combined with an effective tactical system, and when it was used in a manner which aided the infantry on the ground. Second World War planners could have profited from examining Canadian

experience with tanks. As early as the battle of Courcellette Canadians concluded, "no action of infantry should every be made subservient to that of tanks. Tanks are a useful accessory to the infantry and nothing more."(83) Later Rawling notes that Canadian experience at the Canal du Nord was a "foreshadowing of the next war, when artillery and engineers in many theatres would be hard-pressed to keep tanks, artillery and truck-borne infantry moving over rivers and rough terrain."(210) The key to the effective use of technology in both wars is provided half-way through the book: "technology requires

technicians who know how to use it [and who are] ... capable of applying available technology to solve the tactical problems of the battlefield."

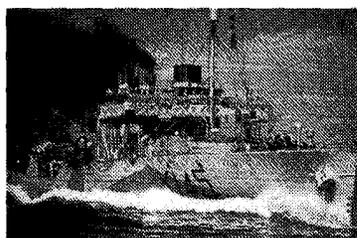
Like most outstanding works, this stimulating book can be disappointing when the author stumbles on a detail or fails to do what the reviewer would prefer him to do. Happily these details are few and far between, usually insignificant. The most distressing gaff was misidentifying an account of the Canal du Nord by a a survivor of the 13th Battalion as testimony about Amiens. My greatest disappointment was the caution which Rawling demonstrates in picking a side on the debate over the efficacy of machine guns used for indirect fire. Twice Rawling reviews the debate



and indicates the nature of the controversy. (178, 214) But in the end he goes no further than his documents allow him to go. A commendable position, but it prompts one to ask how far can documents be trusted to provide an accurate framework for a description of the undecipherable. Of course the question is unanswerable, and it must be said that the author provides all that he claims to and a reviewer should expect no more. On the other hand, the best thing about this book is that it provokes reflection on as yet unanswerable questions.

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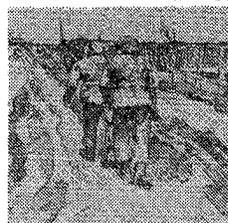
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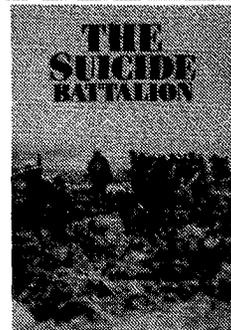


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