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Technology and the Great War

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BOOK REVIEWS

Technology and the Great War

A.M.J. Hyatt

Tim Travers. *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917-1918*. London: Routledge, 1992. 232 pages. \$89.00.

Every study of the British Expeditionary Force of 1914-18 must deal with the conditions under which that war was fought, the commanders who sent soldiers to fight in those conditions, and the enormous casualties which the conditions and the attacks produced. The risk of being mesmerized by the horror of the war is substantial. Tim Travers, however, has been able to look at the casualties and the British High Command without sacrificing clear analysis. His book, *How the War Was Won*, is exceedingly stimulating in the process. Indeed, after reading this book, it is impossible to avoid speculating on the continuing debate over weapons, strategy and tactics which marked the interwar years and even later.

Arguments about mechanical and mobile warfare dominated military thinking throughout the Second World War and the two dominant weapons in this regard were the airplane and the tank. By 1944 military planners had assumed that future campaigns would follow the pattern of fighting in North Africa where armour

predominated. Consequently in 1944 there occurred a reinforcement crisis in Northwest Europe where a very different pattern prevailed. There are still air power advocates who believe that wars can be won without ground forces, and still some who seem unaware that armour without infantry leads to a most precarious existence. But we should not forget that the development of aerial warfare and the "blitzkrieg" were the most important military concepts which developed after 1918. Travers, of course, ends his work with the armistice in 1918, but the issues that fill his book are very much alive in following decades.

In terms of tactical evolution, it is not too much to claim that this book is the most thoughtful study yet produced of the British Expeditionary Force during the last years of the war. Travers concentrates on three themes. First, he examines the extent to which final victory can be attributed to the British Expeditionary Force's command structure and senior leadership. Although he is critical of Haig and the High Command, his investigation avoids the simplistic condemnations which still mar many studies of the British Commander-in-Chief.

The second theme which runs throughout the book is an Finally, a third theme which runs throughout the book is the notion that the war was really over by the time the 1918 German spring offensive ended. Travers argues that "by not losing and by staying in existence, rather like the RAF in the Battle of Britain, the BEF and French Army essentially took the

initiative away from the German Army." (p.110) But even as he concludes this argument, he reminds us that "if one reads history forward and not backwards, it was still far from obvious in July [1918] how this war was to be won, or who was to win it." Moreover, the war did not begin to wind down in August 1918 if one considers the casualties.

For the British Expeditionary Force the losses of the "Last Hundred Days" were greater than the casualties at Passchendaele. The high casualties resulted from many factors, but one of them in Travers' view was that the tactical methods developed in this stage of the war did not lead to a successful combination of all arms, including tanks and airplanes. Rather there appeared to develop a system which relied more on traditional methods with artillery predominating. Travers acknowledges that there was effort put into developing an all-arms tactical system, but it did not mature.

It is, of course, possible to argue with a thesis that one finds thought-provoking and fascinating. Consider for example "the story of the tanks after the initial surprise on 8 August." (p.127) Travers correctly objects to John Terraine's exaggerated claim that by the fourth day of the offensive "the number of tanks had dropped to six." One can agree with this correction and still be troubled by the explanation offered for the large number of tanks being knocked out — "the obvious reason for this was the failure of the planning staff, whether at corps, army, or GHQ level, to protect the tanks from anti-tank guns through the use of smoke, artillery, aircraft, or better

infantry-tank tactics." All of these good things should have occurred, but the obvious reason for the large number of tank casualties still can be attributed to the slow speed and fragility of the tanks themselves. What the tank corps most needed in 1918 was better and more reliable tanks. The possibilities existed in 1918 for great success with better technical equipment. But lacking the equipment it is not surprising to find that commanders turned increasingly to more traditional forms of warfare.

Having argued with a tiny segment of Travers' thesis, it must be said that this book is an outstanding success for three reasons. First, it is a model of brevity and clarity. Given the subject, and the necessity of reviewing eighteen months of the most concentrated fighting in the war, I was astonished that Travers could make his case so effectively in 180 pages. On almost every page, moreover, one finds a sentence of great pungency. "Yet it was easier to retreat, even in panic and chaos, than it was to attack decisively, so the fact that the German spring offensives did not achieve their goals was critical." (p.107) Secondly, when I tried to disagree with what Travers wrote, when I tracked his research in the notes and checked a quotation, I found his research impeccable. Never did he fail to acknowledge a complication, a detail or a factor which might have weakened his case and in the end this strengthened his argument. Indeed by the end of the book the overwhelming impression is one of thorough research and careful scholarship. Finally, this book more than most, is not only a fine piece of historical analysis, it is a springboard for thought about following events.

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Canadian Infantry: Besting the Best

Gil Drolet

Terry Copp. *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade 1939-1945*. Stoney Creek, Ontario: Fortress Publications, 1992. 208 pages. \$34.95.

For this study of soldiers at war, it would have been difficult to pick a more representative Canadian group than the Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, part of what insiders were to call the "Hard-Luck Div," the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. Because of his extensive work on the *Maple Leaf Route* series (with Robert Vogel) and his pioneering analysis (with Bill McAndrew) of the devastating effects of combat stress (*Battle Exhaustion*), Copp is on familiar terrain in trying, quite successfully as it turns out, to restore respectability to narrative history as an acceptable and legitimate method of reexamining certain contentious aspects of the struggles of the Canadian army in North-West Europe from mid-1944 to late spring 1945. With respect to leadership, motivation and performance, Copp, impervious to controversy, makes effective use of source materials (though limited in breadth) to fly in the face of convention and advance theories and uncover truths that may not be well received in certain circles which for too long have been content to allow the sleeping dogs of myth to lie undisturbed. (The word "lie" may be construed in either of its two principal senses.)

Copp is part of what is rapidly becoming a tradition in competent history circles. He does not set out deliberately to sculpt clay feet onto idols made so in the blind heat of patriotic fervour but using sound research he and others (too numerous to mention) have reduced these epic figures to human

proportions rightly ascribing to them more faults than qualities when such is the case and measuring the effects of these shortcomings in the bloodied columns of casualties.

Like Britain in 1914-18, Canada had its rich crop of mediocrities in the later war. Some were put into positions of power through the "old boys" network which often proved to be incestuously nefarious and only rarely and fortuitously beneficial. Fortunately, for every Foulkes there was a Matthews but frequently not until too high a price had been paid. Contrary to the tendentious contentions of TV personalities who dabble in hysteria, Canada is blessed with some historians who seldom flinch from criticizing when it is warranted.

However, this does not preclude their being queried when they proffer weakly supported beliefs. Copp, for instance, has long believed in the mass patriotic fervour animating the first volunteers in 1939. In *The Brigade*, he questions the belief that the men of St. Henri (*Bonheur d'occasion*; *The Tin Flute*) all enlist for jobs after years on unemployment. Roy bluntly states that many of her people had found "*le salut dans la guerre*." Admittedly, her Emmanuel Letourneau is an idealist concerned for the fate of Poland, and Azarius, crestfallen at the fall of France, wants a piece of Hitler's mustache, but for many, the rifle was the first instrument of work they had had in their hands for years. One of Roy's denizens cynically dismisses an indifferent democracy now crying for help from those it had previously abandoned. This passage is paralleled almost exactly in Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* where the central character speaks in much the same way about the country that has no use for him and those who like him at the moment but which will soon call on him (and them) to dispel the gathering clouds of war. Hugh MacLennan puts these final words to the tune of "The Old Grey mare" — "there are no bums in the Jarvis