

4-29-2019

Review of "A Midnight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917: The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres" by Michael LoCicero

William F. Stewart

Recommended Citation

Stewart, William F. () "Review of "A Midnight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917: The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres" by Michael LoCicero," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Michael LoCicero. *A Midnight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917: The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2014. Pp. 517.

It may come as a surprise to many readers that the Canadian attack at Passchendaele on 10 November 1917 was not the culmination of the long lamentable Third Ypres campaign. Nor did the 1st Division gain “complete observation over the German positions to the north-east” on the ridge.¹ Instead, as Michael LoCicero’s *Midnight Massacre* describes, there was one further attempt by the British to seize the remaining high points on the ridge on the night of 1/2 December 1917. Overshadowed by the far more momentous Battle of Cambrai, this engagement did not merit a battle honour and fell outside the official dates of Third Ypres. Carried out by one brigade each of the 8th and 32nd Divisions for a total of seven battalions, the attack featured a night assault without a rolling barrage for its first eight minutes to surprise the defenders. Despite the undoubted courage of the troops, the attack was, as one battalion commander called it, a “bad show” (p. xxvii). LoCicero has the ambitious aim of providing an “in-depth account with a considered attempt to mesh the detailed narrative with rigorous academic inquiry” (p. xxix). By limiting the bounds of time and space of his study, he delves into a level of detail that campaign accounts or unit narratives cannot investigate. As a result, he covers the battle procedure and execution from the highest command levels to the actions of individual platoons. The book is the result of a ten-year research project into the battle and is based on his PhD dissertation from the University of Birmingham. The work is solidly situated in the revisionist school that has moved beyond the ‘bloody fools’ view, and assesses the situation based on the evidence instead of emotion. The result is a unique study which is exhaustively researched, lavishly illustrated, and extensively footnoted. It is a dense work that will appeal to academics and those interested in the mechanics of how the British planned and carried out operations.

The book seeks to answer two crucial research questions: why another attack was necessary and was it more than just a futile effort.

¹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 325-6.

The author casts a wide net in his research efforts. He consulted a broad variety of official documents, personal diaries and letters of participants at all levels, as well as the latest specialist academic research. LoCicero also usefully includes the German perspective from the Munich archives and regimental histories. This research is apparent in the text and the extensive footnotes on each page, which saves the reader from having to hunt down references at the back of the book. He makes good use of field messages to help the reader recognise both what the commanders understood the situation to be and how it actually was. This helps in comprehending the reasoning behind decisions. He also takes the time to sketch the background, character, and circumstances of the participants at all levels and how these impacted the operation.

The book comprises six chapters, twenty-one appendices, and thirty-five pages of introductory material. Chapter One introduces the battle's background, its conception, the defenders, and commanders. The next goes into depth into the formal operational orders issued by the two corps involved and by each level down to the battalions. Chapter Three describes what transpired on the night of 1/2 December and the relative success and failure of the units. Continuing discussion of the battle, the fourth chapter presents the ongoing action during the daylight hours of 2 December as the British commanders tried to understand what occurred and possibly redeem the failures. The penultimate chapter narrates and analyses the German reaction to the attack, the decision to shut down further operations, and how the participants analysed the outcome and derived lessons. The final chapter reviews the operational, strategic, and political consequences of the battle, its costs, and its memory. Appendices cover the operational orders issued by all levels of command, the order of battle, and published German accounts of the battle and other aspects of the action. Numerous illustrations of the ground, terrain, conditions, people mentioned in the text, and contemporary British and German trench maps enliven and inform the text. The extensive quotations from orders that would have been better suited to notes or an appendix result in a stylistic issue. They tend to bog down the narrative and make the text less accessible to the casual reader.

LoCicero describes the reason for the plan as stemming from the twin motives of lessening the major risks of holding a narrow salient and improving the starting point for a renewed offensive in

the spring.² At its heart, the book examines how the commanders tried to square the circle of attacking out of a narrow salient with an unfavourable artillery situation. A further complication was that the attack occurred at the boundary between two divisions from separate corps, both at the end of a shaky line of communications. The driving force in the attack's concept was the commander of the 32nd Division, Major-General C.D. Shute, who had to find a solution to two critical issues. First, owing to the unfavourable field conditions, his supporting artillery had to be deployed parallel to the axis of advance rather than the usual perpendicular arrangement. This made firing an accurate barrage across the attack front exceedingly difficult. Second, the attackers had to cross no-man's-land before the German counter barrage came crashing down. In the glutinous mud, the troops would move too slowly and so be subject to heavy German shelling. Shute's solution, imposed on the 8th Division, was to forgo the standard rolling barrage for the first eight minutes in a night moonlight attack. This would allow assault troops time to capture the German forward zone and escape the counter barrage. He thought moonlight was necessary to allow troops to assemble correctly and advance in the proper direction. The threat of shelling concerned him more than the risk of rifle and machine gun fire. As LoCicero describes, he was wrong. It would be easy to paint a picture of Shute as a British 'Donkey,' but the author has taken the time to explain his motivations, the constraints that shaped his plan, and how the travails of communications limited the exercise of command. The author also highlights the challenges that exist when attacks occur at formation boundaries, and how the importance of the main effort negated the common-sense objections of experienced officers. Recognising that, by 1917, British attacks were the combination of multiple arms, LoCicero covers the vital aspects of logistics, medical care, communications, artillery, and machine guns, and their effect on the battle. Given Shute's fretting about artillery, the one major complaint about the book is that LoCicero should have provided more context on the situation of both the British and German guns and how the British lost artillery superiority.

The battle turned out as some commanders expected, with the German infantry responding quickly to the attack and their rifle and machine gun fire inflicting losses and disorganisation. British

² The British Expeditionary Force had not yet shifted to a purely defensive posture.

attackers reached their first objectives but at the cost of serious disorder and the loss of many of their crucial leaders, such that they were ripe for a counterattack. The recapture of a key pillbox hours before the attack at the junction of the 8th and 32nd Divisions disrupted both formations' assault and added to the confusion and misunderstandings. In the end, the British made only a minor advance and did not improve their position on the ridge.

The author achieves his goal of delivering a full appreciation of an operation, its execution and its consequences from the highest command levels down to individuals. It provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the British art of war on the Western Front circa December 1917. The work shows battle procedures, the execution of a plan, and the outcomes of a small operation that, while not noteworthy in the overall scale of the war, illustrates the British art of war and how it had evolved by December 1917. The small scope allows both reader and writer to understand a complex but tightly constrained situation that is illustrative of the larger picture.

WILLIAM F. STEWART, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*