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Review of "An Army of Brigadiers: British Brigade Commanders at the Battle of Arras 1917" by Trevor Harvey

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Trevor Harvey. *An Army of Brigadiers: British Brigade Commanders at the Battle of Arras 1917*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2017. Pp. 433.

The brigade level of command is all too often given short shrift by historians. Battalions and their commanders are chronicled in the pages of regimental histories, while Division, Corps, and Army commanders are sometimes the subject of biographies or campaign histories due to the sheer scale of their exploits. Brigades and their commanders fall in the awkward middle ground, their organisations too fleeting to be embraced by a community and too small to attract the interest they deserve. Trevor Harvey's *An Army of Brigadiers*, based on his PhD completed at the University of Birmingham, provides a welcome addition to the scholarship.

More than 600 brigadiers commanded an infantry brigade in the British Expeditionary Force or its colonial counterparts during the Great War—116 of them during the Battle of Arras. *An Army of Brigadiers* examines the officers who commanded an infantry brigade on the Western Front between the Battle of the Somme and the end of the Arras Offensive. The book begins with an analysis of the backgrounds and experiences of these commanders, and then moves on to five case studies (one from each Corps in the Arras sector): Brigadier-Generals F.O.W. Loomis of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade, H. Pelham Burn of 152 Infantry Brigade, R.O. Kellett of 99 Infantry Brigade, A.B.E. Cator of the 37 Infantry Brigade, and N.J.G. Cameron of 151 Infantry Brigade.

The introduction and first chapter are particularly interesting. Harvey examines the role of the brigadier as outlined in the relevant manuals and service regulations, and as described in their own words. He moves on to an excellent analysis of the Arras brigadiers. He looks at their backgrounds (route to commissioning, age, operational experience, Staff College training, etc.), as well as their decorations and casualty rates. Harvey provides ample tables of data to support the text. We learn that the average brigadier at Arras was neither an amateur nor a "Colonel Blimp" content to stay in his dug-out away from the front. Most had seen service in the Boer War, began the Great War at the rank of major, and had served in various command and staff positions. By 1917, their average age was forty-one and they had a forty per cent casualty rate. Of interest to the Canadian

reader is the fact that Harvey gives due credit to and analyses of the brigadiers from the British Dominions.

Harvey's first case study is of Canadian F.O.W. Loomis, commander of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade (2 CIB) at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. The biography begins with some context, describing the general situation the Canadians faced in the Arras sector before the battle (four pages), followed by a biography of Loomis (three pages). The next thirteen pages provide biographies of Loomis' battalion commanders, brigade majors, and staff captains. The remaining twenty-five pages address the business of commanding a brigade.

Loomis and 2 CIB rotated into the Arras sector under First Army on 21 October 1916, and departed on 15 May 1917. They spent 121 days on the line, and 96 days in the rear. Loomis principally saw his role as gathering and coordinating intelligence; a function, Harvey shows, that Loomis performed well in the weeks leading up to Vimy Ridge. Harvey devotes sections to brigade training, trench holding, and raiding in the months before the battle. On 7 April 1917, Loomis moved his staff up to his advanced battle headquarters for the assault on Vimy Ridge. The attack was launched on the 9th, but Harvey gives it little discussion, simply noting that "the details of 9 April have been described elsewhere" (p. 116). Harvey picks up the story again with the 2 CIB attack at Arleux later that month. Harvey's four other biographies are similarly structured, although they generally provide lengthier descriptions of their fighting at Arras.

The above breakdown might seem needlessly detailed but, given the subtitle of *British Brigade Commanders at the Battle of Arras 1917*, potential readers should know what this book is and is not about. It is not a traditional biography of the brigade commanders, nor is it really a study of the Battle of Arras. Harvey does not pretend otherwise; he sets out on the first page that the Battle of Arras really only provides a temporal nexus—a point in time connecting the case studies—and is hardly the focal point of the study. This treatment of the battle reflects one of the central themes of the book: that the brigadiers' most significant contribution was not on the battlefield, but rather in training, maintenance of morale, logistical support, and intelligence preparation beforehand: "oilers of the works" (p. 29). In short, the brigadiers earned their keep in the days leading up to the battle, but once it had started they had next to no control over unfolding circumstances.

Harvey's approach has pros and cons. I certainly appreciated that it illuminates the components of the brigade command team—shedding light on the brigade majors, staff captains, and the battalion commanders—and that the narrative reflects that there was much more to life on the Western Front than the battles on which scholarship has generally focused. However, I found the limited treatment of the Battle of Arras to be largely unsatisfying. The set-piece nature of the Battle of Arras and technological limitations precluded much flexibility, but surely the brigadiers strove to exercise a degree of control once the battle began. How did they try? What worked? At what stage of the battle did they reassert command and control of their brigade? How did the five case studies differ in their approaches? These ideas are addressed in passing in the introduction, but then get little attention in the case studies themselves.

An Army of Brigadiers is an interesting read for the military historian and will provide scholars with an excellent foundation for further research. It is well footnoted and includes seven appendices including lists of brigade commanders at the Battle of Arras, Distinguished Service Order citations, and the relevant Orders of Battle. Combined with British historian Peter Simkins' work on brigade command and control in the Great War, Peter Hodgkinson's prosopographical analysis of British battalion commanders in the Great War, and Canadian historian Douglas Delaney's work on professional development and standardisation across the British Empire from 1902 until 1945,¹ Harvey's work provides an important step towards understanding how British and Dominion commanders prepared for and fought on the Western Front.

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¹ See Peter Simkins, "‘Building Blocks’: Aspects of Command and Control at Brigade level in the BEF's Offensive Operations, 1916-1918," in *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-1918*, G.D. Sheffield and D. Todman, eds. (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), 141-171; Peter Simkins, "A Man on the Spot: Brigadier General R.E. Sugden, CB CMG DSO and Bar," *Firestep: The Magazine of the London Branch of the Western Front Association* 8, no. 1 (2007): 5-12; Peter E. Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); and Douglas Delaney, *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).