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Review of "Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front" by Michael A. Hunzeker

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Michael A. Hunzeker, *Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. 264.

All armies adapt, change and evolve during long wars. Just as no plan survives contact with the enemy, no compendium of tactics or doctrines survive contact with extended combat. The army that evolves the quickest often prevails. This transformation includes the lessons of introducing new weapons and technologies on the battlefield, as well as responding to victories and defeats. This is the focus of *Dying to Learn* by Michael Hunzeker, a professor at George Mason University. Using the Great War as his laboratory, he explores how the British, French and German armies learned during a period of catastrophic losses.

Hunzeker offers a model to understand wartime learning, which he calls an ACT framework (assessment, command and training). In his case studies of the French, British and Germans, he seeks to explore how they came to process questions of assault tactics, combined-arms warfare and the elastic defence-in-depth, the three defining characteristics, as Hunzeker presents them, of the warfighting on the Western Front. This is a specialized study, with little attempt to write a narrative and the text is broken up with constant interruptions of subtitles to map on to the theoretical model. Each of the chapters compares the same characteristics through the ACT framework. It grows tiresome for the reader. And yet Hunzeker offers some keen insight into the stalemate on the Western Front and how the three primary adversaries sought to break it. Through systematic analysis, he writes with much authority about firepower, defences, weapon systems and some of the trade-offs in combat. For example, the fighting forces came to understand that heavy artillery bombardments were required to clear barbed wire, but these prolonged assaults also alerted the enemy to a coming attack. To assess the structure of learning in the armies, Hunzeker makes good use of the evolving doctrinal documents that codified the lessons of battle. One key consideration that emerges from the study focuses on centralized and decentralized learning in armies, with each approach leading to compromises in processing lessons in a timely and successful manner. Evolving tactics often required a top-down, centralized learning but a bottoms-up, decentralized implementation. All of this makes for dense reading, with the book sometimes feeling like a doctrinal manual.

While there is value in the ACT framework, the application of a social science model of learning, with necessarily defined structural assessment categories, is bound to remove some of the agency of historical actors or individuals. Studies of British and Canadian divisions, for instance, reveal both the commonalities and the differences between units, suggesting that one cannot simply talk about the British Expeditionary Force as a homogeneous whole, as Hunzeker does in his book. And though Hunzeker has concluded the Germans were generally able to learn faster and more effectively during the war, such as implementing an effective defence in depth by 1917, there were other factors to consider, not the least being that the Germans were fighting on the defensive on the Western Front for much of the war. Furthermore, since this is a study on the learning and processing of lessons of war, the morale of soldiers and units is not included, although the willingness to fight surely has an impact on the success of formations in battle. Questions of terrain and force density, logistics or mediocre staff systems, friction and chance, as well as a host of other circumstances shaped the quality of warfighting. As a result, Hunzeker's conclusions on learning, while often correct, such as the assertion that the Germans came to process the lessons of combined-arms fighting more rapidly than the French or British, do not always account for why the Germans were defeated in their early 1918 offensives. While this is not a failure in the theoretical model, the speed in which combined-arms tactics were learned and disseminated throughout the German forces does not provide sufficient insight into the Great War fighting experience. They may have processed lessons more rapidly, but in 1918, for example, when the Germans were engaging in fast-moving combined-arms battles, they suffered horrendous casualties as they outdistanced their artillery support leading to frontal assaults against prepared positions that were not dissimilar to the experiences of the *frontsoldaten* in 1915. Lessons had been learned, but they did not equate into victory in battle.

There is value in Hunzeker's study, especially in the deep consideration of broad theoretical approaches and classifications to organizational learning in times of great strain. The book's final chapter suggests how the ACT framework might be applied to other non-western armies, unconventional wars and possibly navies and air forces. There are also brief but intriguing case studies in how the US army learned in Vietnam and Iraq. To return to the three evolving Great War armies, *Dying to Learn* is another examination

in an already long list of books that shatters the popular narrative of the war as one of relentless stalemate and unthinking slaughter. Best summed up by the dismissive phrase of lions led by donkeys, Hunzeker reveals how the generals, staff officers and officers at the front were grappling with the complexity of warfighting, studying the problems and implementing change. While the front was often stalemated, there was constant activity and evolution in attack and defence doctrines, tactics and the application of firepower. *Dying to Learn* will be especially relevant to contemporary military service personnel thinking about their own profession as it contends with the complexity of learning in a time of great stress and strain. "War is a classroom," Hunzeker writes, "but not every army is ready to learn" (p. 170).

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*