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Review of "On the Dangerous Edge: British and Canadian Trench Raiding on the Western Front 1914-1918" by Kenneth Radley

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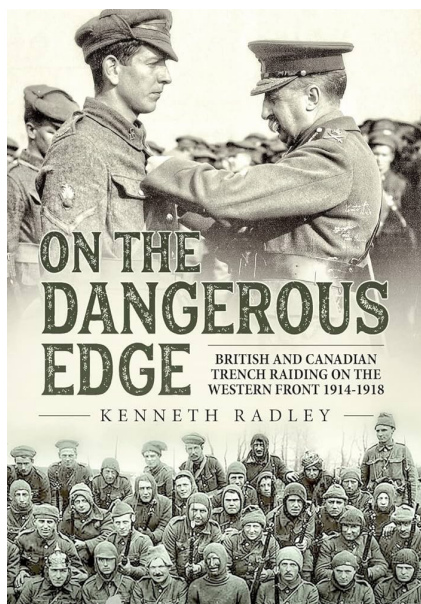
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Kenneth Radley. *On the Dangerous Edge: British and Canadian Trench Raiding on the Western Front 1914-1918*. Warwick: Helion, 2018. Pp. 526.

“Am I as offensive as I might be?” So read the Monty Pythonish question to platoon commanders in a British First World War training document. While it seems deeply comical decades later, the phrase was no laughing matter. The question was meant to incite junior officers to keep up pressure on the Germans across No Man’s Land through aggressive patrolling and raiding. The large-scale battles at Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele and other major campaigns are the signposts around which the war is often remembered, but for the tens of thousands of soldiers along the Western Front that snaked for hundreds of kilometres more often time was spent in trench garrison duties. Within the interconnected trench system, soldiers endured shellfire, mortar bombs, chemical agents and bullet fire. The casualties rarely diminished, and lucky was a battalion that rotated through the line without losing some men in its week-along service at the firing line. Adding to the mayhem and carnage was trench raiding, the subject of this fine book.

Kenneth Radley is a retired lieutenant-colonel who holds a Ph.D. from Carleton University. He is the author of several books, including *Get Tough, Stay Tough: Shaping the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (2014).¹ His studies are firmly grounded in the archival record and very dense. They are often too long, like this book, usually because Radley feels compelled to insert every bit of evidence he has found in his prodigious research. And so, where two examples make the point, Radley uses five, or even more. But *On the Dangerous Edge* remains an important study, which is based on a mining of archives in Canada and Britain, and a careful reading of published sources and eye-witness accounts. “The aim of this present study,” he writes in the introduction, “is to examine the nature, purposes, mechanics, execution and value of trench raiding in the BEF” (Introduction). He carries it off through a number of thematic chapters that set the stage for the reasons behind raiding, the challenges of conducting these minor operations, and how they were experienced by the

¹ Kenneth Radley, *Get Tough Stay Tough: Shaping the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2014).



soldiers at the front, before a detailed chronological study of trench raiding through each year of the war.

Raiding, said British Private W.A. Tucker, was the worst example “of murderous lunacy devised by short-moustached, over-medalled morons, who had never been nearer the trenches than distant Amiens and had assaulted nothing harder than Franch tarts” (p. 224). That harsh indictment of senior officers who ordered these raids was echoed by other soldiers who shuddered or quietly wailed at trench raiding. Others found it exhilarating and an opportunity to strike back against the enemy. Assaulting the Germans by leaving the relative safety

of one’s trenches, navigating the craters of No Man’s Land, and then launching an attack on the enemy was meant to dominate the enemy forces in the static war. Casualties were suffered by both sides in the chaotic brawl to follow, and raiders could be caught by alert sentries or machine gunners in vulnerable positions. And yet the raids also had value by inflaming a unit’s aggression, in honing combined arms tactics (with many of the raids involving coordinated artillery and machine gun barrages), and in gathering important intelligence on the enemy. Senior officers ordered raids for some of these reasons, including the fear that their soldiers were not being aggressive (or offensive) enough. The gathering of intelligence was questionable, however, and the snatching of a terrified German sentry usually did not result in much actionable information. Other intangibles included those junior officers who led raids for glory or to allow a battalion commander to brag about his unit’s success. These factors and more are drawn out by Radley in his detailed study of British and Canadian raiding along the front. His analysis of the evolution of raiding is first-class and this study will be of value to historians seeking to understand the sophistication and brutality of warfighting along the Western Front.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*