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A Lesson in Success
The Calonne Trench Raid,
17 January 1917

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"I hope that the Canadians are not in trenches opposite you, for they on the darkest night jump suddenly into our trenches, causing great consternation and before cries for help can be answered disappear again into the darkness..."

- From a letter found on a captured German soldier, 1917.

The Allied armies slugged it out on the Western front for nearly four years before finally achieving the breakout sought since November 1914. The four-division strong Canadian Corps led this "spearhead to victory." Its commander was Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, and his corps was commonly referred to as the "shock troops" of the British Expeditionary Force and as "the enemy's elite soldiers" by the German high command. This reputation stemmed from the Canadians' impressive record of success in raiding the German lines throughout the war. The Canadian Corps' flexibility, and initiative, the aggressiveness of its soldiers, and their ever improving skills of fire and movement continually added to the growing legend of Canadians being masters of the art of the trench raid. One operation in particular, a raid against the German lines along the Lens-Bethune railway northeast of Cite Calonne on 17 January 1917, was almost text-book in its execution and resulting effect.

The trench raid was by no means a Canadian invention, but as historian Daniel G. Dancocks once wrote, "If [the Canadians] had not initiated this form of warfare, they certainly elevated it to an art form." Trench raiding had originated as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) policy of maintaining the offensive esprit de corps and avoiding the morbid monotony of trench warfare by constantly harassing and demoralizing the enemy. The British, "in contrast to the French, who when not engaged in a major offensive tended to observe an unofficial truce,... emphasized the necessity for continual aggressiveness in defence." In February 1915 the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry raided the German lines opposite them and thus undertook the first operation of what would later become a trademark of the Canadian Corps. The Canadian staff soon realized the advantages of trench raiding, and after the second battle of Ypres (April 1915) they implemented a vigorous raiding policy.

The Allies spent the first months of 1917 in extensive planning and preparation for the spring offensive. At the end of the previous year the French high command had decided to make a strong thrust across the Aisne rather than continuing the battles of attrition on the Somme. In addition, General Nivelle, commanding the French, asked Field Marshal Haig to continue with the planned attack south of Arras, starting a few days in advance of his own main attack. Haig agreed, but insisted that his attack extend north to include the Vimy Sector. Haig was convinced that only strong pressure could force the Germans off the ridge. In January 1917 this area fell within the British First Army Sector and was sitting opposite the Canadian Corps.

Extensive raiding by Canadian troops preceded the attack on Vimy Ridge. Almost every battalion was required to engage in some activity to gain as much information about the enemy and familiarize its own troops with the ground.
Played out like miniature versions of the actual assault, by 1917 raids were mounted in daylight rather than under the cover of darkness like the year before. Since allied troops were fighting from west to east, they also enjoyed a few hours more twilight behind them while the rising sun silhouetted the German positions. Furthermore, by 1917 raiding parties had increased dramatically in size compared to the handfuls of men who undertook earlier raids. Raiding and patrolling also kept the Germans nervous, forced them to abandon their own forward posts and patrolling, and limited their ability to detect an attack which was being prepared against them. A series of raids were carried out along the Canadian front right up until the day before the assault on Vimy Ridge, constantly testing the German defences and keeping German morale low.

The most important factor influencing the raiding concept was the geography of the western front. Geography had a direct influence on survivability because the terrain provided little in the way of natural obstacles for either side to take advantage of. Much of Belgium and Flanders, where the Canadian Corps fought its battles, consisted of low ridges, rolling hills, or wide expanses of flat open terrain. The many wooded areas had been reduced to little more than a collection of hurst stumps by continuous shell and machine gun fire. With little or no natural cover, soldiers were forced to dig themselves into the ground to survive. Thus, within a short while the whole western front consisted of a series of interconnected trenches protected by row upon row of barbed wire entanglements and machine guns. Artillery, machine guns, or snipers could easily halt the advance of an entire battalion.

Beyond the trenches lay wire entanglements of every and any shape, strewn out across the entire western front, and often without any tactical considerations beyond local needs. Wire was placed on top of wire where it had been damaged, cut, or destroyed. Soon a sea of entanglement had been created on both sides of no-man’s-land. At first entanglements were situated only a few meters beyond the firing step, but they were moved out from the trenches to push enemy bombers from the firing range. Oftentimes laid in successive belts and constantly checked by working parties, wire was very helpful in countering infiltration of any kind.

Trenches developed as a result of the need for creating defensive positions from which to repel enemy attacks and counter-attacks. Both sides created an extensive series of field works, well supplied with small arms, machine guns, and supported by artillery, which led to the inability of either the British or the Germans to continue to maneuver. Maneuverability was vital to the maintenance of the offensive, and without it, the best either side could hope for was to consolidate their present gains.

Most trenches on the western front were based on a similar concept or pattern. Trenches were constructed four to six feet in width and approximately six to eight feet deep. Every trench was supposed to have a fire step and parapet so that the infantry could fire at the enemy and be able to take cover if necessary. Trenches were also dug in a zigzag pattern so that if the trench was overrun the infiltrators could not fire their weapons down the length of the trench and hit everyone at once. Trenches were normally connected to other parts of the line and to the rear by smaller communication trenches, normally anywhere from three to five feet wide. Most trench systems had some form of revetting and cover, as well as traverses and sandbagged tops and sirdings. German trench systems were often much better constructed and more complex than allied lines, containing many interesting features such as deep elaborate dugouts, bomb stores, and well-camouflaged sniping posts. These deadly structures became the priority targets of Canadian raiders and for good reason. A single machine gun nest, well sited and manned by an efficient gunner, could easily halt the advance of an entire battalion.

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The Calonne Raid

Bully Grenay, a town northwest of Lens, had become the reserve and training area for the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade (2nd Canadian Division) in the winter of 1916. Engineers of the 4th Field Company under command of Major H. W.A. Foster, MC with No.2 Company (he was also overall commander of the raid). Each company consisted of four platoons, and two sappers from the 4th Field Company accompanied each platoon. The three companies from the 21st Battalion were led by Major George S. Bowerbank (officer commanding the 21st Battalion element), Captain P. Brocklebank, and Major F.D. Raymond. An accountant from the Sarnia branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, George Bowerbank had been with the battalion for almost three years, and was a very experienced officer. He had already been mentioned-in-despatches for displaying gallantry and devotion to duty on more than one occasion. Both Major Raymond and Captain Brocklebank had seen extensive service at the front as well, proving themselves to be capable officers. Under these leaders the soldiers of the force were able to maximize success against the Germans.

Men chosen for the raid spent a period of time out on aggressive patrols into no-man’s-land to familiarize themselves with the terrain. This had become standard practice, so that the soldiers had less chance of becoming lost while...
on the actual raid. It was also a way of ‘climatizing’ the raiding troops with the environment in which they were going to conduct the operation. This helped to build the confidence of the individual soldier because he knew where he was going and what he was supposed to do and was better able to carry on should his superiors become casualties. Patrolling was complimented by training sessions on wadels constructed by the engineers. On the morning of 5 January 1917, the sappers along with the infantry went through the dummy German trenches on a practice run under the supervision of the Corps Commander. Lieutenant-General Julian Byng was satisfied that the men were being properly trained and looked towards the operation with confidence in its success.

On 27 December 1916 the enemy wire was completely scouted, and the procedure of systematically destroying it began using medium trench mortars and stokes guns. The Left Group, 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery, undertook this task. Enemy entanglements consisted of five or six rows of angle iron knife rests close laced together, and it was hoped that the artillery would satisfactorily destroy the wire prior to the raid. If not, members of the first wave in the storming line, were to be carried by soldiers during an attack, or isolated from their neighbours and taken out. These were the prime targets. The Canadians had become well aware of the German defence-in-depth tactics. Instead of attempting useless frontal assaults and sustaining high casualties, the Canadians were to prove them wrong. Canadian planning for the raid had been thorough. Consistent observation of the German lines had revealed many of their machine gun emplacements, trench mortars, and dugouts. These were the prime targets. The Canadians had become well aware of the German defence-in-depth tactics. As each position was taken by the Germans mutual support weakened, and eventually the whole defence melted away leaving a gap through which troops could maneuver. The Canadian infantry had also learned to screen their own flanks with machine guns supported by artillery. This allowed for increased maneuver if it was necessary to repel any attack. The Canadians were to prove them wrong.

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21st Battalion soldiers practice communications.
the 21st Battalion each were awarded the Military Medal, as were Sapper H. Arnold and his teammate, Sapper T. Conely. The latter pair had been responsible for a majority of the damage caused by the sappers against the German defences.

**Military Effectiveness**

By definition, military effectiveness is the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) excelled at honing this process. Using its initiative, flexibility, and lessons learned on the battlefield, the CEF was able to develop standard operating procedures that became a role model for the entire British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and its Allies. The military doctrine and operational orders developed by the Canadian staff, based on the extensive experience of its soldiers, was widely circulated throughout the entire BEF and the French Army for instructional purposes.

This extensive experience was gained from a continuous series of trench raids and minor operations that were carried out against the German forces on the western front. The trench raid, noted historian Bill Rawling, "was the laboratory" by which the Canadians developed a successful battlefield doctrine. Lessons learned in the field were immediately analyzed and where possible, used to improve doctrine. Doctrine was then quickly disseminated back to the troops through training and staff exercises. The new principles became the tactics that eventually broke the stalemate of trench warfare and brought about a decisive victory against the German Army in the west.

The reasons for conducting raids and small-scale operations were numerous. In addition to those reasons stated above, the raid acted as a "mini-version" of potential larger scale operations. In 1914 the tactics used by the British Army were of little use in the environment of the western front. Technology had put an end to the continuous series of trench raids and minor operations.

Installations were destroyed, especially dugouts, saps and mines, and in general havoc was caused in that particular part of the enemy line. Raiding gave the artillery sufficient chances to practice and counter-battery fire. In the latter Canadian gunners became experts, which served as an extremely valuable asset in operations in 1918.

By conducting raiding operations, tactics, equipment, and techniques could be tested without fear of large troop losses. The Canadians suggested that if techniques could be effectively developed to survive and win at trench warfare, these could then be developed further on a large scale to break the German lines and force a decision in the war. The raid had other uses as well. It was an effective way of testing the enemy defences and measuring (and therefore also lowering the morale of the enemy. Prisoners were taken, enemy units were identified and enemy strengths were estimated. The capture of documents and equipment were important for intelligence purposes. During the Douve River raid in November 1916 Canadian raiders secured "a prize to Canadian Intelligence Officers" in that the German prisoners they took were all sporting a newly developed rubberized gas mask.

The small arms had developed to such an extent that the machine gun was "cheap, light, requiring few soldiers to man it and firing 450 rounds per minute of relatively lightweight ammunition which posed no very difficult supply problem." It was an inexpensive investment and in return the weapon sprayed a hail of direct fire-death which put an end to almost every major offensive conducted between 1915 and March 1918. Many armies were literally 'bleed white' before alternatives were sought to the brutal frontal assault.

Doctrine and tactics evolved considerably due to the knowledge and experience gained from raiding the German lines. Raids had taken a new purpose. At first designed to simply harass the enemy and cause some damage, by 1917 raids were being used as in the job training for new troops while honing the skills of veteran soldiers. Raids had also grown in size, from a few dozen men of a single infantry battalion to almost a thousand troops from all arms. Combined arms warfare was solidified in Canadian doctrine, and had become the example for all other armies to follow. Later on the implementation of successful unit-level tactics.
enabled the Canadian Corps to take Vimy Ridge, the muddy flats of Passchendaele in 1917, and to break the German lines of defence in 1918. All this reflected well on the Canadian Corps commander, Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Currie, who had always encouraged his officers to think and use their initiative.

Notes

4. At the beginning of the war the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) formed part of the British 27th Infantry Division. The unit was privately raised and equipped by Mr. Hamilton Gault, a wealthy Montreal business man who gave $800,000 to organize the unit. The PPCLI was originally composed solely of veterans and frontiersmen, and would be considered one of the fiercest of all Canadian regiments in battle. Three members of the regiment were awarded the Victoria Cross during World War I, and the unit still lives today as one of three Canadian regular forces units.
12. Both Raymond and Bowerbank were awarded the Military Cross for their role in the Calonne Raid. See Letters From the Front. Volume I, pp.47-48.
13. Corrigall, p.100.
15. Normally sappers went in with the support waves carrying as much as 120 pounds of gear and stores. It is assumed that for raids they would have travelled more lightly, but this was not to be the case.
16. Ibid., p.100.
18. Ibid., p.97.
19. NAC RG9 III D3, Vol. 4930. 21st Battalion, CEF, Reference memoranda to accompany operation order No.73, 16 January 1917.
23. NAC RG9 III D3, Vol. 4930. 21st Battalion, CEF, Reference memoranda to accompany operation order No.73, 16 January 1917. This report contains an appendix attachment of all telephone communications reports that were received during the raid on 17 January.
25. NAC RG9 III D3, Vol. 4930. DHS File 4-30. 21st Battalion, CEF. Documents belonging to the late Lieutenant Colonel Elmet Jones. Officer Commanding 21st Battalion. Each company commander submitted a narrative of their respective area of operations to the Lt. Col. Following the raid. Their notes were donated to the Historical Section of the Canadian Army in June 1928 by Mr. A.S. Fraser who was in possession of the notes at the time.
27. As quoted from The Communiqué. Newsletter of the 21st Battalion CEF.
28. The German officer was a professor from Strasbourg University and spoke good english. See The Communiqué, newsletter of the 21st Battalion CEF.
29. The Germans often chained their machine guns down to two-foot pickets within specific arcs of fire. This hindered attempts at turning the weapon around and firing on retreating troops or into the trench should it be overrun by the enemy. The Canadian answer to this was to simply get the sappers to blow the chains off using small amounts of explosives.
32. Dancocks, p.22.

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