

*A Portrait of the Soldier as a Young Man: Ernst Jünger at  
Fresnoy, April 1917*

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The author Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) is probably the most well-known non-fictional, German soldier of the Great War. Jünger, who had volunteered for the infantry, served from October 1914 until August 1918 and was wounded seven times. He received the Iron Cross in both classes and the highest Prussian order of merit, the *Pour le mérite*.<sup>1</sup> After the war, Jünger continued service in the *Reichswehr* before he became a professional writer. His memoirs [*The*] *Storm of Steel* – first publication in 1920 and translated into English in 1929 – made him an internationally acclaimed war writer, or *écrivain combattant*, as the French term defines it more aptly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For lack of an academic monograph on the ‘military Jünger’, readers still have to do with the compilation by Nils Fabiansson, *Das Begleitbuch zu Ernst Jüngers In Stahlgewittern* (Hamburg: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 2010). Some related aspects are treated (by literary scholars) in Matthias Schöning, ed., *Ernst Jünger Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2014). The artist has recently received two biographies. See Heimo Schwilk, *Ernst Jünger: Ein Jahrhundertleben* (München/Zürich: Piper, 2007); Helmuth Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger: Die Biographie* (München: Pantheon, 2nd ed. 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For the text and its editorial history see Ernst Kiesel, ed., *Ernst Jünger, In Stahlgewittern: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe der gedruckten Fassungen unter Berücksichtigung der Korrekturbücher*: 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2013). The two English-language translations are based on two different editions with slight

To this day, his writings define our image of Western Front trench warfare to a high degree. After 1945, Jünger faced considerable criticism for his interbellum writings in the Federal Republic of Germany. The accusations aimed at his assumed glorification of war and violence. During the 1970s and 1980s in particular, Jünger became demonized as an aesthetic vanguard for a proto-fascist warrior-ideology.<sup>3</sup> Whereas his literary entanglement with anti-democratic circles in Weimar Germany is beyond question, the appraisal of his Great War texts has clearly changed since then.<sup>4</sup> One reason was the posthumous edition of his war diaries in 2010.<sup>5</sup> These diaries had served him as the narrative base line for *Storm of Steel*. But both texts are very different and historians as well as literary scholars are now able to compare. It appears that the perception of the 'military Jünger' is currently in an interesting process of reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> Ernst Jünger's participation in the 1916 Battle of the Somme and in the Spring Offensive of 1918 is well documented. But it is much less known that he also

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text variations. See Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel: From the Diary of a German Storm-Troop Officer on the Western Front: Translated by Basil Creighton* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929; based on the 1924 edition), and Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel: Translated with an Introduction by Michael Hofmann* (London: Allan Lane, 2003; based on the publisher's 1961 collected works edition which in turn is the early 1920 text). Jünger had a reputation for reworking his texts.

<sup>3</sup> Bernd Weisbrod, "Military Violence and Male Fundamentalism: Ernst Jünger's Contribution to the Conservative Revolution," *History Workshop Journal* 49 (2000): pp. 69-94, Symptomatic for the 1980's literary criticism was a special edition of the renowned German literary magazine *Text und Kritik*. See Wilhelm Krull, "Im Foyer des Todes: Zu Ernst Jüngers "In Stahlgewittern" und anderen Texten über den Ersten Weltkrieg." *Text und Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur* 105/106 (1990), pp. 27-35. See also the fervent contemporary riposte by Jean-Jacques Langendorf, "Ernst Jüngers fünf Kriege," *Der Pfahl: Jahrbuch aus dem Niemandsland zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft* 4 (1990): pp. 39-63.

<sup>4</sup> For Jünger's literary agitation during the Weimar years see Thomas Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: Into the Abyss, 1914-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 75-114, and Nikolaus Wachsmann, "Marching under the Swastika? Ernst Jünger and National Socialism, 1918-1933," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 (1998): pp. 573-589. During the Nazi years, Jünger chose political as well as literary distance from national socialism and – reactivated as a captain in the *Wehrmacht* – served most of the time in Paris under leading military figures of the 1944 plot against Hitler.

<sup>5</sup> Helmuth Kiesel, ed., *Ernst Jünger: Kriegstagebuch 1914-1918* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> See John King, "Wann hat dieser Scheißkrieg ein Ende?" *Writing and Rewriting the First World War* (Schnellroda: Edition Antaios, 2003), and Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017; German 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2013), particularly the chapter on Jünger, pp. 63-90. See also Galili Shahaar, ed., *Deutsche Offiziere: Militarismus und die Akteure der Gewalt* (Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2016). The latter, collected volume is interesting in two ways: First, and contrary to the title, the book offers no thoughts whatsoever on 'militarism.' Second, four of the ten chapters alone deal with Ernst Jünger.

took part in the 1917 Battles of Vimy Ridge and Arleux, two military operations that have a particular importance for Canadian military history.

The aim of this article is to apply the new sources and discussions for a reassessment of war experience in the Great War. It thereby seizes a suggestion brought forward in recent scholarship that individual coping strategies in the trenches need more attention.<sup>7</sup> Following a brief analysis of Jünger's institutional framework – the regiment –, a movement profile will therefore be compiled in order to understand the temporal as well as spatial constraints and contingencies Jünger was faced with during the course of battle.

Space with its three layers – environment, terrain, and landscape – has become a paradigm in military history and Ernst Jünger a key witness if it comes to the spacialisation of the Great War.<sup>8</sup> The particular layer of space in our context is terrain, the “tract of land as regarded by the physical geographer or the military tactician.”<sup>9</sup> But it is in the very logic of war experience that it transforms terrain into landscape, the layer of space that later serves as a medium for the interpretation of destruction and war.

Secondly, the criticism of *Storm of Steel's* literary representation of destruction will be taken up and its original function in the war diary will be reassessed. Was the author driven by an individual, aesthetic motivation or does the diary offer alternative, possibly more prosaic explanations for Jünger's urge for observation?

The operational case study of April 1917 will also serve to shed new light on the experience of violence within the broader phenomenon of individual war experience: How much and what kind of violence did the infantry officer Ernst Jünger actually experience during the battle? And does this example allow us to draw further conclusions with regard to the experience of violence in 1914-18?

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Christoph Nübel, *Durchhalten und Überleben an der Westfront: Raum und Körper im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014), pp. 12-13, 99-207.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from the Concise Oxford English dictionary in Peter Doyle and Matthew R. Bennet, “Terrain in Military History: An Introduction.” *ibid.* eds., *Terrain in Military History* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), pp. 1-7, here 1.

## Fusilier Regiment 73 and the Battle of Vimy

In order to explain individual soldiering in this conflict, historians might be well advised to interpret it within its institutional environment, which – as Wencke Meteling has argued – for the majority of First World War frontline soldiers was the regiment.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the advantage of relative representativeness, the regimental level offers insights into regional peculiarities, an important factor in Imperial Germany, a state and a society strongly guided by federal traditions. Besides, the regiment functions as a practical level to assess the social fiber of the military, including questions like officer-man-relation or motivation.<sup>11</sup>

For the duration of the war, Ernst Jünger served in the Prussian Fusilier Regiment 73, a unit with some peculiarities.<sup>12</sup> *Fusilier* in 1914 had become a traditional denomination in the Prussian-German army and it did not refer to any organizational or tactical peculiarity. The infantry regiment had its garrison in Hanover, capital of the Prussian province of the same name and family seat of the House of Hanover.

From a literary historian's point of view, 73<sup>rd</sup> Fusiliers was special in so far as it had among its ranks three well-known German writers: Ernst Jünger, his brother Friedrich-Georg, a poet and an essayist, and Herman Löns, a popular prewar-author who had fallen in the Champagne as early as September 1914.

An important military feature of the unit was that it had fought on the Western Front alone. As part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the Fusiliers took part in the coup de main on Liège on 6 August 1914, and fought along the Marne in 1914. In early 1915, the

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<sup>10</sup> Wencke Meteling, "German and French Regiments on the Western Front," Heather Jones, Jennifer O'Brien, Christoph Schmidt-Supprian, eds., *Untold War: New Perspectives in First World War Studies* (Leiden and Bosten: Brill, 2008), pp. 23-61, here 61.

<sup>11</sup> See Alexander Watson, "Junior Officership in the German Army during the Great War, 1914-1918," *War in History* 14 (2007): pp. 428-453.

<sup>12</sup> The archival records of the regiment were destroyed in the Army Archives in 1945. Nevertheless, two regimental histories offer a reasonably good insight into its organizational and operational history. See Max von Szczepanski, *Erinnerungsblätter aus der Geschichte des Füsilier-Regiments Generalfeldmarschall Prinz Albrecht von Preußen (Hann.) Nr. 73 während des Weltkrieges 1914-1918* (Oldenburg/Berlin: Verlag Gerhard Stalling, 1923), and Hans Voigt, *Geschichte des Füsilier-Regiments Generalfeldmarschall Prinz Albrecht von Preußen (Hann.) Nr 73* (Berlin: Bernard & Graefe, 1938). For the operational history of Vimy see Franz Behrmann and Walther Brandt, *Die Osterschlacht von Arras 1917: 1. Teil: Zwischen Lens und Scarpe* (Oldenburg/Berlin: Verlag Gerhard Stalling, 1929), and Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on Vimy Ridge 1914-1917* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008), pp. 229-327.

regiment saw fighting around Perthes and was transferred to the newly established 111<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division on 25 March 1915. The regiment fought southeast of Verdun (Les Éparges) and moved into the Somme sector where it stayed – with periods of relief – until November 1916. In February 1917, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Fusiliers took part in the retreat on the *Siegfried-Stellung* (known as Hindenburg-line in British military history), followed by the defence of Vimy Ridge. It was thrown into the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of Ypres in October and, during 1918, participated in the German spring offensive, followed by the retreat of the German forces in France.<sup>13</sup> This itinerary was consequential for both the unit's tactical understanding and the perception of the conflict among its soldiers – including Ernst Jünger.

Finally, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Fusiliers had a particular British tradition, insofar as it had earned a reputation as one of King Georg III foreign regiments during the defence of Gibraltar. In 1793, the regiment received from the King the honorary denomination as Gibraltar regiment. The King of Prussia (and German emperor) Wilhelm II acknowledged this tradition in 1901 by awarding the unit with a unique blue-coloured cuff-title.<sup>14</sup> So, the Canadians that went up Vimy ridge in 1917 fought against a 'British' regiment, and one that had defended a Rock before.

On the eve of the Battle of Vimy, the regiment formed part of 111<sup>th</sup> infantry division, which had just finished a tour of construction work along the *Siegfried-Stellung* as part of the reserve of Army Group *Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern*. On 6 April, the regiment was ordered into a reserve position in the sector of Lens – Henin-Liétard – Douai, i.e. right behind the ridge. On the evening of 9 April, Fusilier Regiment 73 was temporarily attached to the 79<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division that was bearing the brunt of Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's initial attack on the strongpoints of Vimy and Farbus.<sup>15</sup> On the next morning, the regiment ordered its 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to approach the ridge. It suffered heavily during this approach through curtain fire.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, 1<sup>st</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Szczepanski, *Erinnerungsblätter*.

<sup>14</sup> See Christian Senne, "Das 'Gibraltar-Ärmelband': Die Geschichte eines militärischen Ehrenzeichens 1784-1918." Sandro Wiggerich and Steven Kensy, eds., *Staat Macht Uniform: Uniformen als Zeichen staatlicher Macht im Wandel?* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011), pp. 186-199.

<sup>15</sup> See Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, ed., *Die Kriegführung im Frühjahr 1917* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1939), pp. 209-221; also Jack Sheldon and Nigel Cave, *The Battle for Vimy Ridge 1917* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007), pp. 139-161.

<sup>16</sup> See Sheldon, *German Army*, p. 314.

Battalion – Jünger’s unit – took a defensive position in Fresnoy, so did 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion around Arleux-en-Gohelle.

On 14 April, the 79<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division (including 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion/Fusilier Regiment 73) was ordered to retreat to this reserve position. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion remained in Fresnoy, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion moved to Viller near Flers and the battered 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion went to Arleux. The following days saw the continuation of the fighting around the so called *Arleux-Nase* (Arleux bulge) with a regular rotation of the battalions. When the Canadian attack on Arleux was launched on 28 April, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was quickly surrounded and annihilated on the very same day.<sup>17</sup> Now the Fresnoy position, home of Jünger’s battalion, had become the regiment’s first line. Two days later, on 30 April, the regiment was relieved and marched off into the hinterland. On 3 May, the Fresnoy position was overtaken.

The regiment’s fighting around Vimy was defined by the rather unpleasant weather condition (snowfall and cold rain), a hasty mobilization and the detrimental effect of the barrage behind the ridge during the first two days.<sup>18</sup> We observe heavy casualties for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the first two days, whereas the other two battalions remained rather unmolested. It took until 24 April when the situation was becoming more and more strained in the Arleux sector, resulting in the loss of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion on 28 April. At this point, the German lines had been transformed into a loosely-connected network of crater positions.<sup>19</sup>

### **“A more distant look” – Jünger’s whereabouts in April 1917**

Second lieutenant Jünger served as a platoon leader in 2<sup>nd</sup> Company/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. He had been on leave in early April. As it happened, he reported back to his regimental headquarters right around midday of 9 April. In this situation, the regimental staff was completely occupied with the upcoming alarm. So Jünger received the order to lead 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion’s baggage to Beaumont. The following day, 10 April, the battalion moved to Fresnoy, where Jünger was ordered to set up an observation post.<sup>20</sup> This course of

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<sup>17</sup> Szczepanski, *Erinnerungsblätter*, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> Behrmann/Brandt, *Osterschlacht*, p. 170.

<sup>19</sup> Szczepanski, *Erinnerungsblätter*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 232.



events indicates that his late return from leave had inhibited his immediate reassignment to his actual position as a platoon leader. Instead he was ditched to special purpose mission – *z.b.V.* (*zur besonderen Verwendung*) in German military parlance.

On 12 and 13 April, his diary places him detached from his unit as a traffic controller on the crossroad Arleux – Fresnoy, Fresnoy – Oppy. The entry in his diary leaves no doubt about the relevance of this mission: “I sat in my cold hut that luckily for me stood right at the corner. I ordered the corporal to summon every passerby. After seven hours I retreated happily to my basement and slept like a log until 1300 hours.”<sup>21</sup>

On 14 April, Lieutenant Jünger received the order to set up a communication post (*Nachrichtenssammelstelle*) at Fresnoy.<sup>22</sup> He was, therefore, given 42 soldiers, including runners, telephone-, radio-, and signaling lamp operators and carrier pigeons. It appears that Jünger rather doubted the practicality of this post. However, under the impression of the events ahead of Fresnoy he quickly came to terms with his new situation. On 15 April, his diary states: “Life seems to be quite cozy here. Actually, everything runs autonomously. My only job is to keep an eye on the general order and on joint action.”<sup>23</sup>

He spent the following five days establishing contact with adjacent communication posts. During these day trips, on foot or by bicycle, Jünger paid a visit to the villages of Hénin-Liétard, Arleux, Drocourt and Bois Bernard. On 17 April, he wrote: “So far, I have had nothing to do. My basement is furnished, snugly and warm, and I am spending comfortable days.”<sup>24</sup>

On 20 April, this comfortable situation was beginning to change when heavy artillery was zeroing in on Fresnoy, including his snug basement. Ernst Jünger now switched into an individualized mode of defence in the depth. He quickly left his basement, and in the diary we find the note: “I went down the farm track to Bois Bernard to gain a more distant look at this situation.”<sup>25</sup> One day later, on 21 April,

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<sup>21</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 233.

<sup>22</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 239.

Jünger evaded the heavy bombardment of Fresnoy with a trip to Hénin-Liétard in order to “get some new read” and to have a decent shave at the local barber shop. At this point, it becomes apparent that he had been forgotten by his superiors.<sup>26</sup>

On 23 April, the situation in Fresnoy became critical. In the meantime, the village had been largely destroyed, and – to his disfavor – Ernst Jünger now identified heavy 12-inch shells. For the following five days, the diary provides no indications on further excursions. Instead, Jünger was forced to spend the day reading and playing cards in the basement, thereby eagerly noting the timing, the extent and the location of the bombardment. On 25 April, his signaling equipment was destroyed, limiting the capacity of his communication post. On 27 April – that is 13 days after the setting up of the communication post – a first important radio message was received, warning against an immediate attack.<sup>27</sup>

The next day, 28 April, the silent days of Fresnoy were over. Jünger’s basement was hit and destroyed but he escaped uninjured. The basement of the adjacent house was also destroyed, with the grenade killing three of Jünger’s soldiers and injuring one. In a gruesome scene illustrated by a matter-of-fact technical drawing, the officer describes how he helped to recover the mutilated corpses of his soldiers from the ruin.<sup>28</sup> In the evening, Jünger received the information that Arleux was taken and that 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was lost. Now rifle fire could be heard in the vicinity, which in turn prompted Jünger to ask for permission to dissolve the post and to retreat. Two days later, on 30 April, Fusilier Regiment 73 was relieved from the frontline. Jünger marched via Beaumont to Flers. It was here where – for the first and last time during the battle – he had to execute physical violence himself. Confronted with three sergeants who had occupied his billet room, he threatened them with a good threshing: “Reckless energy,” the battle-hardened veteran of Fresnoy noted in his diary, “is the only remedy” against “these lordly ways and the swaggering of these base wallahs”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 240.

<sup>27</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 244.

<sup>28</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, pp. 244-246.

<sup>29</sup> Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, p. 232: “Ich werde die Sache noch gerichtlich anhängig machen, denn dies Grandseigneur-Gebahren und Baronisieren der Etappenschweine wächst einem geradezu über den Kopf. Rücksichtslose Energie ist das einzige Bekämpfungsmittel.”



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## The Fresnoy approach to battle – contingencies and strategies of survival in trench war

The episode, uneventful as it might appear at first glance, opens a surprising perspective on the realities of 1917 Western Front combat. It reveals the specter of individual survival strategies and it enables us to question the author's later narrative in his *Storm of Steel*. However, at the same time, the episode enables us to question the critical counter-narrative of those who took Jünger's later self-image at face value and turned it against him. Did the man behind the Ridge live the war as a sanguinary fighter who retrieved his masculine "power drug" by observing the sublime of destruction?<sup>30</sup> Certainly not.

The analysis of the war diary reveals that Jünger's situation between 9 and 30 April was, first of all, determined by a series of contingencies: He arrived late for the battle; therefore the reassignment to his actual and unquestionably more dangerous job as a platoon leader had to be postponed – as it turned out for nearly a month.<sup>31</sup> For the duration of the battle, Lieutenant Jünger was moved around on ad hoc jobs. His memoirs might be formally correct: his regiment had fought on Vimy Ridge, but neither his battalion nor he himself. When 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion fought an embittered battle on the ridge on 10 April, Jünger and his 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion moved into a reserve position pretty unmolested. When the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was shattered on 28 April, again, his battalion had just left the scene in a regular rotation scheme.

The Vimy episode fits in a series of fortuities that might be a clue to Jünger's survival. A day-to-day assessment of the diaries reveals that Ernst Jünger happened to be elsewhere whenever his regiment suffered most. Among his 1498 days of service between 6 October 1914 and 11 November 1918, Ernst Jünger spent only 271 days (18 %) in a frontline position, 465 days (31 %) in reserve or on rest, and for 164 days (11 %) he

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<sup>30</sup> See the interpretation by Beatrice Wehrli as quoted in Markus Köhlerschmidt and Stefanie Voigt, *Der knöchernen Zigarrenhalter: Die ästhetische Lust am Schrecklichen im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2014), p. 118.

<sup>31</sup> The reason for Jünger not having been channeled back into his unit has to remain obscure. The strain and chaos caused by the Allied offensive might be an explanation. However, sometimes commanders informally retained experienced junior officers in the run-up to operations in order to be able to refill depleted formations afterwards. See Christian Stachelbeck, *Militärische Effektivität im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die 11. Bayerische Infanteriedivision 1915 bis 1918* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), pp. 151-152.

was hospitalized. He spent 261 days (17 %) in training courses and 135 days (9 %) on leave. In addition, 53 days (4 %) alone count for travel between these different assignments and the diary does not allow a specific attribution for a further 149 days (10 %).<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, his graduation from school in the summer of 1914 and his hospitalization in the summer of 1918 made him miss out on most of the most lethal phases of the Great War – the first and the last six months. To put it pointedly: Jünger's frequent injuries saved him from death. In the case of Vimy 1917, it was not an injury but a regular leave.

However, the situation in Fresnoy was not a result of external contingencies alone. As a clever soldier, he had played quite a role in its coming about. In order to explain this, 'observation' and 'movement' should be understood as his two guiding principles. The reader of the chapter in *Storm of Steel* will easily get the impression that the descriptions of the bombardment were driven by the author's aesthetic motivation. His visual observation of all three layers of space has found ample representation in the diary, the memoirs, and his later texts on war.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, given the proverbial void of the battlefield, seeing as a means of observation could turn into a highly technical and sometimes tedious activity on the Western Front.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore not surprising that most of his texts are even stronger in depicting the sound of battle.<sup>35</sup> The meticulous manner of observation has led commentators to the conclusion that Ernst Jünger found some kind of artistic satisfaction in the destruction of men and the landscape.<sup>36</sup> However, the diaries reveal that the permanent and synesthetic observation was a vital precondition for survival on the battlefield: What types of shells appeared, where and how often? The visual, acoustic and seismic patterns could allow conclusions with regard to the enemy's actions and intentions.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, observation remains a necessary yet passive skill. It needs to be complemented by movement, Jünger's second survival technique in the Vimy

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<sup>32</sup> Compilation on the basis of Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*. I am grateful to Jannes Bergmann for compiling the itinerary.

<sup>33</sup> See Friedrich-Georg Jünger's characterisation of his brother as an "Augenmensch" in Erich J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> See Nübel, *Durchhalten*, pp. 161-166.

<sup>35</sup> See Julia Encke, *Augenblicke der Gefahr: Der Krieg und die Sinne, 1914-1934* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), pp. 111-193.

<sup>36</sup> Bernd Weisbrod blames Jünger for his "laconic voyeurism." See Weisbrod, "Military Violence", p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> Ziemann, *Violence*, pp. 69-70.

environment. So far, his drive for movement, as presented in *Storm of Steel* and other postwar texts, has been interpreted as a means to escape the deadly narrowness of the trenches. According to this orthodox interpretation, the direction of this movement was the frontline and the objective was the ultimate proof of manliness: a man-to-man encounter.<sup>38</sup> However, with retrospect on Jünger's life, Thomas Nevin has argued that "the themes of his most important writing have retreat as their common denomination."<sup>39</sup> Jünger's behavior in April 1917 surely does not qualify as a retreat. But the Vimy episode definitely demonstrates that individual movement has to be understood much more as a permanent and multidirectional activity and one that was not necessarily linked to combat.

It goes without saying that it is an essential task of any commanding officer of a communication post to establish contact with his neighbors. But for keeping up this contact, it might have been sufficient to send out one of his men. Jünger alludes in his diary at one point that he was not convinced of the post's necessity anyway. So why this unsteady rambling around? The answer will be obvious if we bring together the two techniques – observation and movement. As an experienced soldier, Jünger realized the imminence for his habitat and he took a professional assessment: He traded in the risk of being accidentally wounded by shrapnel in open ground against the risk of being targeted by heavy artillery in his village. Jünger's editor has therefore put the cart before the horses when he assumed that the protagonist's desire for literature made him neglect the dangers of shelling and pursue his way to the bookshop in a village nearby.<sup>40</sup> It is the other way around. The trip to Hénin-Liétard leads Jünger *away* from a temporary hotspot. If one takes the statement of 20 April quoted earlier – "I went down the farm track to Bois Bernard to gain a more distant look at this situation" – it becomes clear that the purpose of this walk was not to satisfy his pathological lust for watching destruction. Instead, it appeared to him more appropriate to watch the destruction of his own habitat from a more convenient distance.

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<sup>38</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, pp. 157-158; Weisbrod, "Military Violence", pp. 75, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany*, p. 237.

<sup>40</sup> Helmut Kiesel, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," *ibid.*, ed., *Ernst Jünger, In Stahlgewittern*, pp. 7-122, here p. 46.

## Conclusion

“Fighting,” Ilai Rowner concludes in a recent essay, “is Jünger’s absolute and only commitment.”<sup>41</sup> The Vimy episode sheds a different light on the soldier. During the days of Fresnoy, Ernst Jünger enjoyed a freedom very rarely granted to soldiers, and that is to determine one’s own ‘standpoint’, in both a morale and a spacial sense of this word. He chose his standpoints with extreme consideration and he showed no intension to jeopardize this privileged situation by any means. At no point during the course of these events, the reader finds an indication that Ernst Jünger felt a heroic or in other ways “absolute” impulse to move into the direction of the action.<sup>42</sup>

So, in the end, what can be learned from the episode? First of all, the example of Jünger in April 1917 reminds us of the enormous diversity of the experience of combat in the Great War – and perhaps even beyond. It reminds us that when assessing the seductive narratives of battle, we have to spacialize both individuals and organizations with more scrutiny than we have done so far. Yes, Fusilier Regiment 73 fought on Vimy Ridge and it suffered severely. But no: its most prominent soldier experienced violence passively at best and in a comparatively safe environment during this episode of the war. Second, the narrative of observation in Jünger’s writing should not be understood as a *prima facie* expression of an aesthetic or emotional pathology but rather as a post-1918, literary re-interpretation of a profane survival strategy. Finally, the episode reminds us that soldiering during the First World War meant frequent encounters with death – at least in the infantry – but it did not mean necessarily frequent face-to-face-killing situations. Killing and dying in this war remained a predominantly anonymous experience.<sup>43</sup> This diagnosis is not new but it is consequential for the assessment of the long-term effects and the assumed radicalization of the (German) veterans of this war.

The Fresnoy episode therefore helps to peek beyond the rather narrow frame of the heroic narrative. This protagonist did not survive the war because he overcame his enemies one by one and at *arme blanche*’s length. He survived because he was an alert

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<sup>41</sup> Ilai Rowner, “Literature and Evil: Ernst Jünger and Louis-Ferdinand Céline,” Shahar, ed., *Deutsche Offiziere*, pp. 133-156, here 139.

<sup>42</sup> See also Ziemann, *Violence*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>43</sup> Watson, *Enduring*, pp. 6, 32.

observer, one that calculated a risk and took an opportunity.<sup>44</sup> Jünger's Fresnoy approach to battle was not his only way to deal with the lethal conditions of modern warfare, but it was one that has often been underrated or overlooked.

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<sup>44</sup> Alex Watson emphasised individual risk assessment as the "key to surviving death and disempowerment at the front." (*Enduring*, p. 233).