



Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly. *The British Army and the First World War*. Armies of the Great War series. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

By Richard Roy, PhD

This book is the British contribution to the Armies of the Great War series. The objective of the authors was to examine “the British Army in the First World War drawing upon the full breadth of the historiography and intimate knowledge of the primary sources.” They have done so in superlative, almost encyclopedic, fashion. While thoroughly recounting the organization of the army and its subsequent

campaigns and battles, the authors also provide cutting analysis and insights into some of the myths surrounding it. This book is not for the casual reader, but, much like Andrew Green's comments on the Official Histories, there is a wealth of information here for those who study the text closely. It makes a substantial contribution to the understanding of the British Army's role in the First World War.

This book consists of thirteen chapters. The Introduction serves as a mini-historiography. It clearly sets out the competing perspectives: The British Army's efforts were ill-conceived and a waste, or, the British Army successfully learned as the war unfolded and became one of the deciding forces. Chapters 1 to 4 provide the context to the organizational issues that the British faced in recruiting, organizing and fielding the army: Chapter 1 covers the pre-war army; Chapter 2 covers the recruitment and training of the officer corps; Chapter 3 covers the British nation in arms and its structure—regulars, territorials, volunteers and conscripts; and Chapter 4 covers the internal workings of the army—discipline, morale and the experience of war. Chapter 5 discusses the broad strokes of British strategy and the employment of the army. Chapters 6 to 10 cover the campaign on the Western Front with each year allocated its own chapter. Chapter 11 describes operations that took place elsewhere—Africa, Gallipoli, Palestine and Mesopotamia.

The great strength of this book is the enormous detail it contains. The narrative reveals the enormity of the challenges faced by the British Army in mobilizing, recruiting, training, equipping and fighting. It recounts how the British Army evolved over the course of the war into perhaps the most effective Allied army. In some measure, therefore, the authors support John Terraine's "revisionist school" which advances the view that many, many factors affected the performance of the British Army during the war but that it gradually improved. So, besides the general linear narrative structure of the text, the improvements in the Army are mapped with some underlying themes. These themes will be discussed below as they both indicate the constant and continual struggles to improve the British Army in the midst of the campaign and expose lessons still relevant to modern military operations. These themes are the importance of organizational culture, the capacity to innovate, the capability to conduct large-scale operations, and the quality of military leadership.

Organizational culture crucially affected the selection of higher commanders, the paucity of trained staff officers, and even operational practices. Though the officer corps was massively expanded during the war, the regular force officers dominated the high command positions with very few outsiders—territorials or reservists—rising to higher ranks despite the number who had proven themselves in battle. The high command remained a “closed shop,” according to the authors. This regular versus reserve antipathy, which, of course, is alive and well today, was also reflected in the treatment of many Territorial Force and New Army divisions. The training of British staff officers before the war was not vigorously pursued. During the war neither staff college, Sandhurst nor Woolwich, responded effectively to the increased demands for staff. This left many formations with staff that was woefully undertrained, with assigned officers expected to learn on the job. This had a negative influence on the quality of planning within fighting formations. Finally, organizational culture also affected operational practices and tactics. For example, the new technical branches always tried to establish themselves as separate entities—like the machine gun corps—versus being integrated into brigade and division structures in the first instance. More troublesome, early in the war the Royal Garrison Artillery may have been the most effective branch of that arm, but it was regarded as highly unfashionable and therefore its techniques and procedures were ignored. Thus, social prejudices operated to the detriment of a quick and competent development of the artillery battle. Given the massive expansion that occurred with mobilization and the inter-mixing of such a variety of men and skill sets, one might expect that organizational culture of the British Army would have changed significantly. It did not, according to the authors, and this had an unfortunate influence in some areas.

Innovation and adaptability are the watchwords for a successful military. It is not a question of “if” the British Army was innovative during the war but how innovative it was. Innovations generally need to occur in equipment, organizational structure and tactics. It is important to note that fielding such a large army was more novel than innovative as all the continental powers already had such structures. But for Britain being able to field it from the starting condition of the army did demonstrate a particular genius. Innovation was somewhat halting in the production of both pragmatic and “war winning” weapons. The need for pragmatic items like grenades, mortars and better machine guns was not recognized early, their introduction often

contested, and successful models required considerable re-engineering but were eventually set right. Similarly, in the first years of the war the British shot what artillery ammunition they had on hand but slowly re-adjusted the mixture (shrapnel versus high explosive) and fuse types in response to the condition on the battlefield. Other artillery improvements including aerial observation, the creeping barrage and prioritizing counter-battery fire greatly enhanced British operational capabilities. The “war-winners”—gas, tanks, etc.—typically never lived up to their initial hype and suffered from poorly conceived rapid introductions into the front lines but ultimately made useful contributions. Equally important, organizational innovation can be seen in the refinement of the artillery command structure at the highest level, which led to its much more effective application. Perhaps the weakest area for innovation and adaptability were at the tactical level. This is not because the British Army did not eventually discover a highly effective method of conducting battle (the bite and hold technique), but that they took so long to standardize it and disseminate it across the army. Here again organizational culture was telling. Though as early as 1916 these methods were being discussed, they were not widely disseminated, and every individual commander had too much say in the training and practices of their own commands and could reject or modify any tactical advice from higher levels. The British Army did demonstrate a capability to innovate across multiple disciplines but could have done so much earlier.

The description of the major operations of the British Army unveil the predictable importance of tactics, the unpredictable nature of war, and the weakness of the British military leadership in handling large formations—divisions, corps and armies. Core tactical principles, equally important at the formation level as at the platoon level, are well discussed by the authors. For instance, the failure of attacks due to enfilading artillery, rifle and machine gun fire firing from unsecured flanks is often noted. Also noteworthy is the authors’ discussions on issues of the attack versus the defence—how the attack expends itself advancing over the blasted and contested ground until it reaches a culmination point while the defence gathers itself over prepared routes to launch a counter-attack with fresh troops. The unpredictable nature of war is well described. This includes the inability of seasoned professionals to predict the nature of the war in the early years—it was not over by Christmas nor was the stalemate of trench warfare expected. The surprising conditions at the front led to requirements unforeseen just months before, whether mountains of small arms and artillery ammunition, or

forests of duckboards. Even further on into 1918 this unpredictability endured. The German March offensive was not anticipated nor the German collapse in October-November. Though better by 1918, the British high command showed only modest capability to handle large-scale operations. While it eventually discovered a successful battle management process, for many years division and corps operations were poorly coordinated and supported and were often penny-packet operations which posed no great threat to the German defensive lines. When committed to battle, formation commanders often had little information as to the progress of the battle and could do little to influence it or effectively commit any available reserves. A fundamental capacity to handle large formations contributes greatly to success in war and the authors point to many significant operational lessons for modern operations.

The quality of the British Army's high-level leadership remains a lively debate—were they donkeys or the best available? Certainly, Sir John French, the initial commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), had well-recorded faults. For example, there certainly was a shortage of artillery ammunition but he unveiled and promoted the shell scandal more to evade blame than to resolve the issue. In much of the book, Sir Douglas Haig, the second commander-in-chief, is mauled over his many faults but receives a free pass in the final chapter as the best officer available for the post. This may be true. Haig was certainly an astute student of war and had wide experience in command and staff when he was appointed to command of the BEF. I would tend to agree with Haig that the main objective was the destruction of the German Army on the Western Front. I would also agree with the authors' assessment of several of Haig's key faults. First, he was often wildly and nonsensically optimistic about the potential for breakthroughs to occur. This was based on a rosy expectation of how easily cavalry elements could pass through other formations—though as reserve forces they were often poorly placed to exploit success—and a constant, curious belief that the Germans were about to crack. Second, Haig never knew when to call off a battle/campaign. Even though “bite and hold” would prove effective, it usually only gave the attacker the advantage for about a 24-hour period, after which the defender had reinforced the threatened sector and the attacker needed to reset and re-plan for the next bite. Unfortunately, initial success most often led Haig to order immediate renewed attacks for days and weeks on end. Haig somewhat fobbed this off as the Verdun-like need to bleed the German Army, an attritional argument. But attrition does

not work so well if you bleed significantly more than your adversary for no good purpose. This frittering away of manpower caused most of his subsequent problems with Lloyd George. One wonders how different the British Army's experience might have been if the step-by-step "bite and hold" processes would have been used earlier and more fully. Third, and perhaps not explicit in the book, Haig does not appear to have been an effective trainer/mentor at the highest level. As already noted, many corps and army commanders struggled to fight their formations effectively. There were more than enough uncoordinated attacks of insufficient weight and intent that did not merit the cost in men. While there is adequate indication that Haig reviewed his subordinates' plans and made his comments known to them, it is less clear that they were properly guided in how to fight their formations. In the "closed shop" of the British high command, Haig may well have been the best available and, of course, it is mere speculation that another officer from that shop would have conducted the campaign substantially differently.

The value in this book is the strength of the description of practically all aspects of the British Army's experience in the First World War. From pre-war reforms, to the village where Tommy "x" was recruited, to the last 100 Days, the authors tell a detailed, highly informative tale. The thorough and superb analysis in this book uncovers the enormous challenges the British Army overcame in a relatively short period. Despite the hinderances of organizational culture, I believe that, as the authors indicate, the British Army successfully learned as the war unfolded and became one of the deciding forces in the conflict. Was there some unnecessary wastage of men and materiel? Yes, there was, and this is what makes reading on the First World War difficult at times. There were perhaps too many blunders, but as for the British Army as a whole, the senior leadership overcame an enormous learning curve to become more competent by the final months of the war. There is much in this book and a close reading unveils so much more to explore. Any serious scholar on the First World War will find this a fine addition to their library.

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