



Charles Messenger, *The Day We Won the War. Turning Point at Amiens, 8 August 1918*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008. pp. xxi + 279. Maps. Illustrations. ISBN 978-0-297-85281-0. £20.00.

Charles Messenger has produced the first substantial work more or less solely devoted to the Battle of Amiens. Most others which cover it do so as part of an overview of 1918 as a whole or the Hundred Days more particularly. Given that this work necessarily can go into more detail than any other on the subject has, it affords the reader (or this reader, at least) numerous fresh insights into the battle and its planning.

The approach is, perfectly reasonably, largely chronological. The background to the battle, from Cambrai onwards, is given in the opening chapter, then the planning and preparation in chapters two and three, and another two chapters provide a narrative of the first day's fighting. A separate chapter deals with the RAF dispositions, planning and preparations for the battle and covers the first day from its point of view. The French air force's actions on 8th August are also mentioned. Thereafter the book deals with the second, third and fourth days of fighting and concludes by describing the battle's impact. In addition, there is an interesting postscript about the officer who discovered the plans of the Hindenburg Line on the first day of the battle.

The narrative is clear and entertaining, with eye-witness quotations interspersed throughout the text. The chapter on preparations is particularly useful, dealing with the logistics of the battle and moving the troops, material and tanks into position in far more detail than I have come across before. This was particularly difficult for the Canadians, who had to come from the Ypres sector in complete secrecy in nine days. It also outlines the French plan of attack, which is especially praiseworthy given that the French have often been almost airbrushed out of accounts of the battle altogether. This is carried on in the operational narrative so we are given a picture of the battle as a whole and not just of the British part. Messenger's focus on air power is also commendable and the effectiveness of the German air service during the battle came as a revelation to this reviewer.

This excellent book is also well-provided with maps and photographs, the bulk of them not found in the other books dealing with Amiens, plus a very useful diagram of an Australian brigade attack formation. Well worth buying.

**Andy Simpson**

#### **Editor adds**

I read this book in two or three days before sending it off to Andy Simpson for review and agree entirely with what he says. The coverage of the planning, from political and strategic context to those dumping ammunition on the ground is fully covered including the options available to commanders and why they selected the courses of action that they did.

A key factor in 1918, perhaps for the first time in the War, is the impact on operations of the shortage of manpower. *'The Cabinet therefore are anxious about the future. They do not want to end the war in an absolutely exhausted condition, if this can be avoided.'* So writes the CIGS, Sir Henry Wilson to General John du Cane just before the offensive.



But we are in a new style of war now. Cyril Falls writes “... *if we take the knock this time after Ludendorff has shown us how it is done, we may as well give up.*”

What a lot of questions are prompted by this view which was so widely held at the time and indeed still is! Cambrai was the first battle of the new warfare with its predicted artillery fire, rigid security and extensive training yet Haig's characteristic efforts to push the limited resources too far and the German counterattack led to a sense of '*yet another failure*' so that the style of the German offensives in March 1918 gave the impression that it was the Kaiser's Army that had created modern warfare rather than the Allies.

The desire to retain surprise, which predicted artillery fire now made possible led the military planners to keep the Government unaware of the offensive until a week beforehand. The politicians were worried about another Passchendaele – a symptom of Lloyd George's suspicion that Haig would just lose thousands of men uselessly if he was given reinforcements and which itself caused Foch to believe that the British were not as fully committed to the war once he hears a rumour that the BEF will have to reduce to 30 Divisions (from 60) in the next few months.

On the ground, the manpower shortages translated into battalion strengths of 200-300 men. But platoons of 30 hardened and skilful soldiers with 2 Lewis guns and lots of rifle grenades possess much more combat power than platoons of 50 untrained riflemen earlier in the war. The Germans have deployed in depth to try and counter the immense firepower of the allied artillery though they are hampered by a shortage of wire (which in any event often gives away the location of a position) and dubious morale. Nevertheless the Germans still fight hard – the BEF still loses 120,000 men in August although the figures are also beginning to reflect influenza casualties as well as battle ones.

There are a great many illuminating anecdotes and quotations in this book – if you want to find out what the load of a supply tank was and how it fitted into the resupply plan then it is here. But the story that that struck a chord with me – as it may with anyone who has had to find their soldiers at an RV is on pp 176-7, a real CO's Nightmare:

Lt Col Sadler of 17<sup>th</sup> Australian Bn had ordered his Battalion to an RV whilst he went for orders at Brigade HQ. He then sent a succession of officers to order it up but they, and finally he, were unable to find it. In fact, the men were there all the time sitting amidst head-high corn eating a midday meal. Eventually, seeing other troops moving off, their o/c took them forward to the start line on their own initiative which they reached with ten minutes to spare!

The book presents a picture of an army that is battle-hardened and skilled at handling the new style of warfare where the tempo is much faster than even a few months before. Because artillery can fire accurately off the map it is possible to launch an operation in a couple of weeks rather than in two or three months and keep the troops concealed – yet the staff can handle it. Many aspects of the operations – such as Col Sadler's above - are strikingly similar to those of WW2 – modern warfare has indeed arrived.