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**Paul Cornish *Machine Guns and the Great War* Pen and Sword 2009
ISBN: 1 84884047 0, Hardback £19.99**

Paul Cornish is the Senior Curator in the Department of Exhibits and Firearms at the Imperial War Museum. (He once let me handle a Lewis gun in their collection, after which I stopped calling it a 'light' machine gun! Anyway, it isn't. It is an Automatic Rifle.) He is the right man to pen this excellent study of all aspects of machine gun work in the Great War.

When I say 'all aspects', I mean the pre-war history, the adoption and production by all the combatant powers, the actual use in battle and the evolution of tactics throughout the war of machine guns proper, and of light machine guns, automatic rifles and the faint beginnings of machine pistols and sub machine-guns. For good measure, Paul also interests himself in cultural history and we get a running commentary on the machine gun as icon and art object and how it has imposed itself, erroneously, on the public perception of what the war was like in the front line.

Paul does a masterly job of reducing the technological data of how machine guns work to an easily understandable level (just about, for this particular technological idiot!), and I came out with a very clear idea of all the things that could go wrong with these weapons in their combat use. The rationale behind adopting particular models is interesting. You won't be surprised to know that procurement ministers having links with the relevant industrialists crops up once or twice!

For me the outstanding aspect of the book is the study of the development of machine gun tactics between 1914 and 1918. We are used to being told how vastly superior the Germans were in this regard, almost from the very start of the war. But Paul shows how the British pioneered the use of the machine gun in the offensive, and led the way in the massed use of these weapons. He rightly stresses the importance of the formation of the Machine Gun Corps in 1915 as a means for these experts to share ideas in their closed environment and to increase their effectiveness exponentially. Anyone who still doubts this should read the German accounts of the effect of indirect machine gun barrages during British offensives. The descriptions of trenches on reverse slopes, out of sight of British attackers and filled with German dead who had been struck in the chest by .303 bullets as they tried to move out of those trenches, will deliver the message.

Just one little caveat that might find its way into the paperback edition. When discussing the German offensive of March 21st, 1918, and the failure of the British defence (p.123), a mention of the dense fog of that morning would be in order.

This is a very fine book and is truly essential reading if you want to understand the fighting in the First World War. And, in case you were wondering, artillery was by far and away the real killer in that war.

John Lee

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