



Jack Sheldon *The German Army at Cambrai* Pen & Sword 2009, pp337 £25.

With *The German Army at Cambrai* Jack Sheldon continues his indispensable series of books about the German Army in the Great War researched from regimental histories and other works published in the 20's and 30's. These are supplemented by archival sources from Munich and Stuttgart although, in the case of Cambrai, such sources are sparse since relatively few formations from Bavaria or Württemberg participated in the battle of November 1917.

Compared to the battles on the Somme and at Passchendaele, Cambrai is both relatively small and short. Indeed, the German defence on 20 November is found primarily from a single division, the 54<sup>th</sup>, with elements of two more on the flanks and another arriving. 54<sup>th</sup> Division was clearly well-served by its historians and we have detailed accounts down to platoon level of how the defences were laid out and manned. We can follow the intelligence indicators received by the GOC, General von Watter, the assessments he made and the decisions he took. Once the action starts we have some incidents being covered by two or even three witnesses.

Transferring some of the information to a map, as I did for a battlefield tour, a vivid picture emerged of regimental sectors 2kms wide and no less than 8 kms in depth. Adding timescales one could see that General von Watter was not fooled by the British deception measures at all. His patrols, POW interrogations, indicators such as the dead body of a tank man, a diminution in British patrol activity, coloured flags and markers, greater air activity and the sounds of more locomotives than usual all informed his assessment. He knew an attack was coming, placed his division on full alert, issued his limited stock of armour-piercing bullets, informed higher command and placed his reserve on standby.

Unfortunately, as is the way of assessing intelligence when the other side does something new, he made several misjudgements. He assumed that the bombardment would last several days thus giving him and his superiors time to react and he discounted the threat of a massed tank attack on the grounds that they would not be able to cross the trenches.

The British attack thus developed far more swiftly than anyone anticipated with the result that when he committed his reserve regiment to restore the front line it never got there because the position had already been overrun and it ran into a mass of British tanks and infantry forming up for the next assault – end of counterattack.

There is also extensive coverage of the command misunderstandings on the German side from the diaries of the Gruppe (Corps) commander, General von der Moser who really did not get on with his superior, von der Marwitz at Second Army. There is a good explanation of the way in which the General Staff old boy network could actually undermine the respective commanders by intriguing behind their backs. Moser's diary entry for 18 November on page 25 *et seq* will strike a chord with anyone working in any big organisation!

It was not only the Germans who got their intelligence assessments wrong, however. The British calculated that no German reinforcements would arrive for 48 hours. In fact 107 Inf Div was actually detraining at Cambrai on the morning of the battle and more divisions were



on the way. There was a significant misunderstanding between von Watter and 107 Div, however, with von Watter thinking that Corps had effectively placed it under his command to deal with the anticipated attack whereas it was a) not where he was told it was and b) failed to respond to his orders. This misunderstanding by the infallible General Staff was obscured after the war and Sheldon's research into and discussion of the subject is illuminating.

In his note at the beginning of the book Sheldon explains that the quality of the German regimental histories is highly variable. When crawling through the book to mark a map we can see how true this is because the coverage is actually very uneven and it is hampered by the lack both of an Order of Battle and of a deployment map. The maps provided do depict the defences in good detail but a lot of work is needed from other books to work out divisional orbats and then plot features such as regimental boundaries. Since the author had clearly done a lot of work to tie up the eyewitnesses with particular locations and trenches a numbered plan such as is provided in the Somme book would have saved this reader a lot of work. Whether the absence of maps and orbats is due to publisher, accountant or author I cannot say but it does mean that to get the complete German picture you need the German orbat from Bryn Hammond's book<sup>1</sup> close to hand as well as a modern map to pick out the placenames.

Hammond's orbat and Sheldon's text also reveals that the Regiments of the different German divisions are not deployed next to each other but are intermingled like German and Italian units at Alamein. This is because 20 Landwehr Div on the German right and 9 Reserve Div on the left were both much weaker in numbers and weapons than 54<sup>th</sup>. They also seem to have contained a much lower proportion of historians in their ranks than those of Infanterie-Regiment [von Manstein](#) (Schleswigsches) Nr. 84 or Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 27. The several excellent accounts from these Regiments at the key point of Flesquières contrast with that in the other important sector La Vacquerie to Lateau Wood which is much more sparse. This may not be the fault of the author of course but it does serve to validate the comments in his note on sources p. xiii.

Despite these frustrations this book is essential reading whether you are studying the battle of Cambrai itself or wider aspects of the withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in April 1917, the Line itself or the conclusions that the Germans drew from the battle when looking ahead to the Kaiserschlacht.

**Andy Grainger**

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<sup>1</sup> Bryn Hammond *Cambrai 1917, the Myth of the First Great Tank Battle* Weidenfeld 2008 (reviewed M&C 24 Spring 2009)