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Page 1 / 3

The German Army On Vimy Ridge, 1914-1917 by Jack Sheldon, foreword by Gary Sheffield; Pen & Sword, 2008. ISBN: 978 1 84415 680 1 pp361 including Appendices & Bibliography, £25.00

Jack Sheldon's latest opus, *The German Army on Vimy Ridge, 1914 to 1917* is another *tour de force*. Once again, his book reflects the extraordinary effort that has been invested in providing us with unique testimony to the largely unknown, but visceral fighting that occurred here for most of the first three years of the Great War.

The book continues the well-established format of providing minimal contextual and overarching narrative on the battles fought, but a wealth of primary-source material from diaries and memoirs (most notably Crown Prince Rupprecht at the highest level), to official unit histories, letters, diary extracts and other documentation that demonstrate German courage and suffering in equal measure.

In addition to the collection of translated and mainly previously unpublished German archive material, *The German Army on Vimy Ridge* will be a revelation for most readers on the details of the Franco-German struggle at Vimy and the Lorette Spur between 1914 and 1916. It documents the bitter fighting in the autumn and winter of 1914 and the early part of 1915, as well as the Franco-German view of the disastrous Aisne Offensives in 1915. Loss of life and limb on both sides was appalling, especially as many of the positions that were won and lost on countless occasions (especially on the Lorette Spur) were so badly exposed throughout to incessant artillery and machine gun fire.

However, this awful existence did have its lighter moments. For example, on New Year's Day 1915, Reserve Leutnant Gruber of the 6th Bavarian Infantry Regiment recorded:

'Our trenches were so close that we could shout to one another. On this occasion, a German-speaking French soldier shouted across to us: "You stupid Bavarians! You are nothing but eaters of black pudding and sauerkraut!" It turned out that he was a former waiter from the restaurant in the Stadtpark in Nuremberg. On another occasion when he started a long speech criticising the Kaiser etc ... and threatened to slit our throats, we drowned him out by singing a few Bavarian songs. The French vented their anger at this by loosing off a few shots.'

By the time of the Anglo-French autumn offensive, one would have imagined that German troops in the Vimy/Lorette/Aisne sector would be inured to the French attacking methods and possess virtually impregnable fortified defences. In many places this was undeniably true, but French efforts were not entirely in vain. For example, Jack Sheldon notes that, according to German records:

'There can be no doubt that the defence faced a serious crisis in the early days of the renewed French offensive. The period 24-29 September ... saw the loss of several areas of tactical importance and cost the Saxon 123rd Infantry Division no fewer twenty three officers and 595 other ranks killed; thirty-five officers and 1,029 other ranks wounded and a further thirty officers and 1,525 other ranks missing, presumed killed or captured. The survivors were



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exhausted, shaken and so worn down by the [intensity] of countering the initial French assaults that they were no longer in a fit state to continue. ... [Other units] were rushed forward into the desperate battles around Vimy Ridge [and were] thrown into battle with little briefing and less preparation.'

From the late-spring of 1916, the German defence was faced by a different enemy and a more aggressive attitude to "holding the line", as British formations replaced the French in the Vimy sector. Offensives on the scale of 1915 were substituted by intense patrolling and raiding activity and, of course, more systematic mining beneath the respective front lines. By the winter of 1916, units that had been "slugging it out" on the Somme were confronting each other once more after moving to the Vimy area "for a rest". ...

For example, the Bavarian 17th Reserve Infantry Regiment occupied the Pimple after defending the sector between Eaucourt l'Abbaye and Le Sars throughout October and most of November 1916. Not long after they arrived they encountered the Canadians as they came into the line at Vimy after their bloody battles around Courcellette and Regina Trench between September and November.

The latter part of the book continues in the same vein, tracking the German record of the increasing pressure felt as the British & Canadian efforts in the war above and below ground in this sector bore fruit with the disastrous loss of the previously German-occupied Vimy Ridge on 9th April 1917. In this part, which leads to the failure and subsequent recriminations, the book provides a remarkably balanced and honest view taken from German sources and from the observations of the High Command to those of the Company and platoon officers, NCOs and men who fought here at that time.

Finally, although German offensive tactics were to prove wanting in 1918, this book gives clear German evidence that the lessons of Vimy would not be lost on the subsequent exploitation of defensive methods. Jack Sheldon notes:

'Dwelling on failure was something in which the German Army never indulged. ... Once all the material had been studied and commented on at Army HQs, Rupprecht signed off a paper [on the lessons learned], sending it to OHL and all the Armies under his command.'

Many of the ideas for improved defensive methods within this document were those of Oberst Fritz von Lossberg, who applied the lessons bought in blood around Vimy Ridge to the problems of Flanders, especially after another German defensive failure at Messines. He utilised the six weeks' grace between Messines and the launching of the British "Third Ypres/Passchendaele" Offensive to extraordinary effect.

Jack Sheldon's *The German Army on Vimy Ridge* is another comprehensive, authoritative and unique record of the reality, rather than myth, of German experience of the First World War that few of us have had the opportunity or privilege to understand previously.

It is an excellent reference for academics and lay-readers alike, and provides a wealth of personal and often poignant accounts of the conflict fought here between 1914 and 1917. The quality and size of most of the map illustrations could be improved and there is room for some tighter editing in parts, which I trust will happen when the book is published in paperback in due course. Overall, however, this is another first-class addition to the First



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Page 3 / 3

World War historiography and the growing access to for us all on the German experience of the Western Front.

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