



Bryn Hammond, *Cambrai 1917, The Myth of the Great Tank Battle*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008. pp. xi + 500. Maps & Diagrams. Illustrations. ISBN 978-0-297-84553-9. £25

A new history of the Battle of Cambrai is overdue. The existing one-volume studies all pre-date the “revolution” in First World War studies which is familiar to BCMH members. Two appeared as long ago as the 50th anniversary of the battle in 1967 (Robert Woollcombe *The First Tank Battle, Cambrai 1917* & Bryan Cooper *The Ironclads of Cambrai, the First Great Tank Battle*). The 75th anniversary was marked by A.J. Smithers’ *Cambrai, The First Great Tank Battle*. As their titles suggest, all three view the battle from the perspective established by Churchill, Fuller and Liddell Hart between the wars, as the beginning of armoured warfare. All begin with lengthy accounts of the development of tank technology and in their accounts the real origin of the battle lay in Tank Corps headquarters and with Col. J.F.C. Fuller in particular. All concentrate on the opening phase of the battle. William Moore’s *A Wood Called Bournon, The Cover Up After Cambrai 1917* is more concerned with the final stages of the battle and its consequences but broadly follows the party line on Cambrai as a tank battle, although he does mention the development of unregistered artillery fire and even prints a version of a artillery board map. The Official History volume by Wilfred Miles allots equal significance to artillery survey and the tank in the development of the Cambrai Plan but it did not appear until 1948, by which time the myth of the great tank battle was well established in the public mind.

Recently Paul Harris (*Men, Ideas & Tanks* 1995) and Peter Chasseaud (*Artillery’s Astrologers* 1999) have shed new light on the planning for Cambrai and the key technologies which made a successful surprise attack possible. However Cambrai is not the whole focus of these excellent studies and Bryn Hammond is the first author to produce a balanced study of technology, planning and detailed analysis of the whole battle. His book will undoubtedly become the standard work for serious historians and it will be interesting to see how quickly the glacial flow of popular consciousness is re-directed.

Bryn Hammond’s unrivalled knowledge of the development of both tank technology and tactical doctrine and his grasp of the other elements of the combined arms battle are demonstrated in his account of the preparation for the battle. Tanks, artillery, infantry, airpower and logistics are all described and, crucially, their limitations in 1917 are discussed as much as their revolutionary capabilities. The dramatic but false myth of a small group of visionaries fighting to establish the tank as a war-winning weapon in the face of the blinkered reactionaries of the high command is firmly laid to rest. An early part of the Cambrai myth, made current by Haig’s 1918 Despatch, was the story the lone German gunner of Flesquières Ridge. It has been crumbling for some time but Hammond’s detailed and balanced account of the actual events and how the myth grew is a fascinating piece of historiography. In the process, the reputation of General Harper of 51st Division is re-assessed, if not totally restored. In the accounts of Fuller and other Tank Corps officers, followed by most historians because it makes a good story, Harper is little better than a buffoon, wedded to obsolete infantry tactics that wasted the tanks’ potential and led to the disastrous check on Flesquières Ridge. As Hammond makes clear, Fuller’s tactical memorandum was adopted only by V Corps on the right flank. Harper’s variant was in fact a IV Corps decision and therefore also used by 62nd Division, which advanced further than any division on 20th November. More might have been made of the fact that V Corps tanks on Welsh Ridge found themselves just



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as exposed to German field artillery even though their supporting infantry used Fuller's tactics. However, as Hammond makes clear, Harper should not escape criticism, but it is his handling of operations which was at fault, not the training of his division. Harper was slow to react as his division came to a halt, failed to use available reserves and rejected offers of assistance from other formations.

It is important to stress that Bryn Hammond has not simply written a dry account of technology and doctrine. The stories of the men who fought at Cambrai emerge throughout the book and the human dimension is never forgotten. The resources of the IWM's Sound and Documents Archives have been plundered but this is not a simple collection of new anecdotes. These personal accounts are deployed to base the narrative and analysis firmly in reality. The result is a book which will grip the general reader's attention and be a constant reference for the professional historian. It is a model of how to write a battle study, both for its narrative and for the analysis of Cambrai's place in the development of combined arms operations during the First World War and subsequently.

Michael Orr

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