



**Brian Bond ed *Liddell Hart's Western Front*, Tom Donovan Editions, Brighton, 2010. 117 + xviii pp, £75.**

The latest from the Tom Donovan stable of limited editions (300 copies in this case) will come as a surprise to many readers, although Liddell Hart himself did draw on his writings of 1915-16 in Volume 1 of his *Memoirs* and Alex Danchev used them in his biography of the military theorist and commentator *Alchemist of War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998). The writings consist of an essay written in September 1916 and entitled *Impressions of the Battle of the Somme By a Company Commander Who Saw three-and-a-Half Weeks of it*, his letters from France September 1915-July 1916, a five days' diary covering a brief and unpleasant tour in frontline trenches in the Ypres Salient, and a few notes. Brian Bond has added a perceptive Introduction, which comments on *Impressions*, a brief Aftermath and some helpful footnotes.

It is, however, *Impressions* which will raise eyebrows. As Brian writes: 'What immediately strikes the reader is the reverential, even adulatory tone towards British commanders and staff officers, which contrasts sharply with that of the later, waspish critic.' To the youthful Basil Hart (he did not add the Liddell until 1920) Haig, Rawlinson, Gough and others walked on water. In the context of preparing for the Somme attack, the staff, too, were superlative, compared to what they were like the previous year and with the French and German staffs. Indeed, 'a large amount of men among them' have 'a genius for war'. The British artillery was the most powerful on the Western Front. The Royal Flying Corps was also superb in establishing air superiority over the battle area, although, as Brian rightly points out, it was to lose it well before the end of the offensive. Basil was also convinced that Haig had adopted 'bite and hold' tactics from the outset.

Basil's euphoria stems from the fact that his battalion (9 KOYLI in 21<sup>st</sup> Division) did enjoy some success, albeit at a cost of some 500 casualties, when attacking west of Fricourt on 1 July and that, as a company second-in-command, he was left out of battle on that day. One wonders what he would have written if he had been involved in, say, VIII Corps's disastrous assault at Beaumont Hamel. Where his account is of interest is in the preparations for the attack as seen from battalion level and also how quickly an almost shattered battalion could be rebuilt and sent back into the fray.

The letters cover the whole of Basil's service in France, beginning with two Entrenching battalions (yes, they did exist prior to 1918), where his duties were mainly overseeing the digging of reserve trenches and as a draft conducting officer. A spell in hospital followed, with Basil suffering from gastric problems. There follows the brief diary of his time in the trenches in the Ypres sector with 6 KOYLI in November 1915. The conditions could not have been worse – very poor trenches, and flooded ones at that, with a German attack expected imminently. Basil survived this, writing '...despite all the discomforts I am glad of the experience. It is certainly jolly good for your character, and if one sees the humour of things alright.' Very shortly after this he was concussed and shell shocked in a near miss by a German shell. Six months in England and he returned, this time to 9 KOYLI on the Somme. Again, his time with his new battalion was brief, being gassed after his company had just carried out a relief in Mametz Wood in mid-July. It was the end of his active soldiering.



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The letters reveal a young man who demanded much from his parents. Every one includes a request for something or other, whether comestibles, reading material or even ammunition for his revolver. Indeed, they remind me of my own letters from prep school. Yet, they do reflect the feelings of most young officers of the time and, given censorship, are remarkably informative. The two most controversial issues are whether Basil was really entitled to the three wound stripes that he wore and if, during that night in Mametz Wood, his nerve gave way. In the latter, Brian Bond certainly leans towards the Danchev view that it did and thinks that it was possibly because of this that Liddell Hart thereafter advocated moral as opposed to physical courage. As for his post-war change of heart over British generalship, Brian puts forward three reasons. Liddell Hart was very disappointed when he actually came to meet the men he had put on such a high pedestal in 1916. He became disillusioned by the backbiting in their memoirs, and, furthermore, new evidence began to appear during the 1920s, both at home (Basil obtained much information from Sir James Edmonds) and abroad, which revealed that the 1916 bed of roses was actually entangled by many weeds. There was, too, the fact that Basil made journalism his living and journalists need to be controversial, or at least think they do.

Once again, Tom Donovan is to be much thanked for bringing these early writings of Liddell Hart to our attention. Likewise, Brian Bond has done an excellent job in setting them in context. My only reservation is that I feel that the book is deserving of a wider audience than the jacket price and very limited print run would seem to allow.

**Charles Messenger**