



The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)

Page 1 / 2

Dale Blair *The Battle of Bellicourt Tunnel: Tommies, Diggers and Doughboys on the Hindenburg Line.* Frontline Books, 2011. xxiv + 184 pages. 11 maps & 14 illustrations. £19.99

Fourth Army's assault on the St Quentin Canal and the associated Hindenburg Line defences on 29th September 1918 is an action which has been studied many times since the event and the atmospheric Riqueval Bridge has been the scene of innumerable battlefield tours. The assault on the Hindenburg Line over the Bellicourt Tunnel by the II American Corps, supported by the Australian Corps failed but 46th British Division succeeded in crossing the Canal itself and thus "Breaking The Hindenburg Line" (the title of the Divisional history). The operation has generally been the subject of national point-scoring rather than analysis and most accounts have concentrated on either the American, Australian or British point of view. Dale Blair is therefore to be congratulated on studying the operations of all three armies in equal depth and trying to reach a balanced assessment of the reasons for failure or success. Overall he is less inclined to blame the tactical inexperience of the American troops, especially their supposed failure to "mop up" as they advanced, than the operational failures of Haig, Rawlinson and Monash who did not do enough to compensate for the greenness of the American divisions in their battle planning and who should have been prepared to delay the assault until an effective start line had been obtained. However it is difficult to recommend this book without some serious reservations.

This is basically a tactical history and Dale Blair describes the fighting at battalion level and below in great detail. But the narrative is often very hard to follow because the maps are totally inadequate. They are in fact enlargements of maps in Volume VI of Bean's Australian Official History. Anyone familiar with Bean's volumes will know that they are very generously provided with maps but that most of them are hardly larger than a postage stamp. Enlargement is therefore not a bad idea but the result here is very poor, producing black and grey maps with a fuzzy typeface. They are actually less clear than the originals. More critically, they are not very helpful in understanding the text. To take one example, The Knoll, Guillemont Farm and Quennemont Farm and Malakoff Farm were key, inter-related terrain features yet none of the maps in Blair's book show them together (there is at least one map in Bean which does so). The text naturally refers to trenches by name but hardly any of the maps show the location of any trench at all (again, they can be found in Bean). If Frontline Books wish to market themselves as serious publishers of military history they should respect their customers and their authors enough to commission decent maps.

Frontline Books might also consider employing an editor who can correct the author's clumsy phraseology and even grammatical errors. To pick a few examples from almost any page of the book: "the numeric deficiencies" of divisions (p. xxiii) "errant nonsense" (p. 34), "a view that Monash happily ascribed to in his post-war memoirs" (p. 56), "the carriage of the canal line" (p. 143). The author or the publisher seem confused about the apostrophe. "Corp's" appears more than once, as does "visitor's" as a plural (p. xxii & 77).

However, my main reservation about this book is Dale Blair's tendency to criticise decisions without justifying the alternative he offers, which is armchair soldiering, not military history. For example in discussing the difficulties of the artillery planning for the 29th September attack Blair writes that "...after consultation with the artillery commander it was decided that a change to the barrage plan was impracticable in the short time available – though it surely



The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)

Page 2 / 2

could have been arranged in the available twelve hours or more by a dedicated G staff?. If an historian is going to set his judgement over that of an experienced practitioner he surely needs to provide some evidence to back it up. How long did it take to develop or even revise fire plans in late 1918 and to duplicate them and distribute them to more than one corps? Has Blair researched reaction times in other operations? In the Conclusion, Blair criticizes the generals for refusing to postpone the 29th September attack because it was part of a sequence of offensives arranged by Foch. “It is difficult to see how a delay of a day or even two would have had any negative effect on the operation or the grand strategic outcome”. Again, this is a case that needs arguing, not assuming. Foch had a very clear view of what he was trying to achieve in this sequence of operations, separated only by a day or so. He was trying to overwhelm Germany’s last powers of resistance by continuous pressure on a wide front, “tout le monde à la bataille”, and the northern and southern arms of his grand offensive were running into logistic problems. Delay in the centre would hardly have been acceptable to the Generalissimo who saw the offensive gathering momentum on an “inclined plane”. Ludendorff’s collapse at the end of September, which was followed by the first German requests for an armistice would suggest that it was worth keeping up the pressure. Delay might not have changed the “grand strategic outcome” but it might have threatened Allied cohesion without reducing the human cost of final victory.

Michael Orr