



BOOK REVIEWS

Special feature – books that are NOT easy reading...

War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope 1914-1918 edited by Brian Bond; limited edition of 300 numbered copies, pp 204, November 2006. Price £75.00 inc p&p ISBN 978-1-905968-00-8

Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914-18, Andy Simpson, (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006) ISBN 1-86227-292-1 Hardback £25.00

The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War by David T Zabecki, Routledge (London & New York) 2006. (408+xxiv pp) ISBN: 0-415-35600-8 RRP: £75 (Hardback)

As a civil servant I am delighted to be able to present reviews of three books about the operational level of warfare in the First World War. The level of command that manages the day to day battle with armies of clerks wielding chinagraph pencils and telephones, using stationery by the rainforest and occupying chateaux with, hopefully, well-stocked wine-cellar. As dull and devoid of human interest as you could wish for and two of our reviewers describe their chosen tomes in the phrase that heads this feature. But if, like me, you look forward to books of this type on the grounds that they might actually tell you how Generals make decisions then you may be in for a treat...

We'll start with the easiest one – although I found the hardest part of Stanhope was understanding the 'humour' behind the practical jokes with which he and his colleagues entertained themselves.

War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope 1914-1918 edited by Brian Bond;

Review by Andy Simpson

As its title suggests, this handsome volume contains the Earl of Stanhope's memoirs of his service in the Great War, drawn partly from letters he wrote home at the time and partly from memory as he assembled the document between 1919 and 1927. He did not write them for publication and consequently produced an unvarnished and revealing account of personalities and events.

Stanhope served in the trenches with the Guards during the first winter of the war, and thereafter held a succession of Staff jobs. Initially he was a GSO3 (General Staff Officer, Grade 3) at V Corps, based in the Ypres Salient, and stayed in the post from February 1915 to December 1916. On promotion to his majority, Stanhope moved to II Corps as a GSO2, and stayed there from January 1917 to January 1918. After this he went as a GSO1 to the Supreme War Council at Versailles, but in May 1918 he was asked by Lord Milner to be a Parliamentary Secretary to the War Office. Ever mindful of his duty, he did, only to find that he had passed up promotion to Brigadier-General for work which was neither interesting nor paid. However, he put up with it until the post was abolished in December 1918.



Though Stanhope himself viewed his stint in the front line as a crucial experience which stood him in good stead when on the Staff, for the historian his time at corps is of greater interest. Staff memoirs are not terribly common, and at the corps level even less so. Stanhope himself felt that staff work at corps was more interesting than elsewhere since the corps had its integral heavy artillery, engineers, RFC Squadron and other services but was still close enough to the front line for its staff officers to be able to keep in touch with and visit troops there. Indeed, he was glad to use such visits as an excuse to escape from the strain of long hours spent in his office, though he felt that some senior officers were in the front line too much, and that Walter Congreve was positively foolhardy when there. He may have had a point, since Congreve famously lost his left hand to shellfire when on such a visit in 1917. Stanhope also felt that corps had an advantage over divisions in moving less frequently, so their staffs could acquire detailed knowledge of their area and provide useful advice to incoming divisions. Apart from getting out to visit other formations, his work often seems to have consisted of routine office matters rather than the planning and decision-making which were the preserve of more senior officers. However, he attended enough meetings and conferences to form interesting (and at times idiosyncratic) views on a number of formations and their officers. These constitute the most interesting feature of the book, even though one may not invariably agree with them.

Stanhope was highly critical of GHQ, considering it so isolated that he referred to it as a “lomasery” (it is a curious coincidence that J.F.C. Fuller used the same term for GHQ in his memoirs, published in 1936). He also alleged (incorrectly) that it was mostly officered by cavalrymen and never lost an opportunity to make an unfavourable remark about it. Predictably, therefore, he was highly critical of both Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig. The practical difficulties senior commanders might have had did not occur to him, for example when he excoriated GHQ for not sending tanks to follow up the Germans when they retreated to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917, without realising the problems associated with actually getting the tanks to the devastated area. And of course he was entirely unaware that tanks at this time were very much a one-shot weapon and needed to be husbanded for the forthcoming Arras offensive.

Army commanders were officers he saw more frequently and he was forthright in his views. Unsurprisingly, he thought highly of Plumer, even before the latter acquired ‘Tim’ Harington as his Chief of Staff (from which circumstance some have claimed his success stemmed). Curiously, he appears to have held Edmund Allenby – surely one of the most personally objectionable of the BEF’s senior officers – in some esteem. He also seems to have respected Hubert Gough, and considered that Fifth Army attacks were well planned; however, Gough’s tendency (not shared by Plumer) to launch small attacks to tidy up objectives which had not been taken in the main assault caused high casualties. Sir Henry Rawlinson, Stanhope felt, was a general with more style than substance, backed up by an able Chief of Staff (Archie Montgomery). Sir Henry Horne of First Army he had less contact with than the others, but was horrified, he claimed, to find in early 1917 that Horne’s ideas for the forthcoming Battle of Arras were the same as everyone had held before the Somme. This is perhaps borne out by Horne’s famous comment made during a conference before the battle of Flers-Courcelette in September 1916, that *“I could never follow what is the value of a creeping barrage”*.

The corps commander Stanhope had most affection for was Claud Jacob of II Corps, whom he twice in the book describes as ‘beloved’. Jacob obviously had in a high degree the ability



to win the affection of his subordinates, as well as a good measure of common sense and good judgement, and Stanhope compared him to the posturing and ridiculous Aylmer Hunter-Weston of VIII Corps with predictable results. His attitude to Hew and Edward Fanshawe as GOCs V Corps (the latter succeeded the former) then provides an interesting example of how different diarists can perceive the same people or events in different ways. While Stanhope thought highly of Hew Fanshawe and was by no means dismissive of his brother, Aylmer Haldane, who as GOC 3rd Division served under both in 1915-16, felt that their corps provided an excellent example of how not to run one. V Corps, he alleged, was too inclined to leave its divisions to their own devices – in effect the corps staff looked after the back areas only - and abdicated all responsibility for the front line. Another lesson for the historian on the importance of critically looking at one's sources is Stanhope's admission that when he was GSO2 at II Corps the corps War Diary was destroyed in an office fire, so he had to 'concoct' one from the relevant divisions'.

Obviously, the officers Stanhope had most contact with were the Brigadier-Generals, General Staff (BGGs) of the corps in which he served. Of most interest were his contrasting views on Hugh Jeudwine (later GOC 55th Division) and Gerald Boyd (later GOC 46th Division). No doubt our Secretary General will approve of his admiration for Jeudwine at V Corps, as a staff officer with energy and 'ginger'. Stanhope described him as *'the best BGGs that I met with in the war'*. However, he had less time for Gerald Boyd (whose reputation as a commander was made when his 46th Division stormed the Hindenburg Line in September 1918) in the same job, describing him as *'slapdash in his methods'*.

It is hoped that this gives a flavour of the quality of this excellent memoir, of which a short review can only provide a sample. It should not be assumed from the foregoing that the book consists entirely of anecdotes about generals, including as it does descriptions of Stanhope's experiences at various formations and dealing with many people, and making valuable points about the role of corps in planning operations and in their day-to-day workings. Brian Bond has painstakingly edited it and backed his work up with a first-rate introduction. In addition, the four-part index is to be commended. It is not a cheap book, but the production standards are outstanding and the design very attractive.

Editor adds:

I am most grateful to Brian Bond for sending me a review copy. Perhaps unsurprisingly Andy Simpson had already purchased a production copy of Stanhope and so I was able to hang on to the review copy (which does not have the same production standards but did not cost me £75)! I agree entirely that it is Stanhope's descriptions of life on the staff that are particularly valuable – his gruelling three months in the line in the winter of 1914/15 were spent in "Le Pissoir de France" where the ground was particularly low-lying. I was surprised at how much travelling Stanhope does. He is constantly visiting the line and eventually intrigues successfully to get up in an aeroplane. He is frequently under fire and recounts with relish a trip to Ypres when his motorcade of trade unionists, pacifists and teetotallers is shelled. Apart from the character studies there are many anecdotes and japes, the humour of which is sometimes difficult to appreciate today. But I think we would all smile his story about taking Haig on a visit to the Thiepval battlefield in March 1917 where they come across *"a group of unburied men who were good neither to the eye nor the nostril."* They then have to seek shelter from a snow storm under an old tarpaulin inhabited by two old soldiers *"during their cooking operations and who, when asked if they had ever been over the top,*



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](#)

promptly replied, “We belong to the 18th Division, we are always going over the top.” The conversation then became “decidedly pointed....”

We now turn the tables on Andy with a review of his own book...

Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914-18, Andy Simpson

Review by Jim Beach

This review must begin with a declaration of interest. I have known Andy Simpson for many years; sharing the same doctoral supervisor in Professor David French. The content of this volume therefore came as no surprise when it was published. However I consider it to be a major contribution to the literature on the BEF and one that is likely to remain an ‘industry-standard’ volume for many years to come. No serious student of the British Army in the First World War can afford not to read this book.

Andy has focused on British Corps-level command. To say that this is a neglected area would be an understatement. Having had a place at the top table, so to speak, the Army commanders and their headquarters have received a great deal of attention over the years, most notably from Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. Divisions, due to regional affiliations and/or their contemporary sense of identity, received attention from a first generation of semi-official historians and now from a second generation of archival historians often prompted by their own familial connections. Caught between the two, the Corps have lacked historiographical glamour, although their Australian and Canadian cousins have been better served by their nations’ historians. Often left to command quiet sections of the front, the Corps has perhaps been seen as more administrative than operational. But as Andy shows, as the war progressed, these commanders and their headquarters became vital cogs in the BEF’s way of war, particularly in relation to the management of artillery resources.

The book begins by looking at the doctrinal framework established by the *Field Service Regulations* and the way in which I Corps conducted itself in 1914 and 1915. Then, using a sample of seven Corps records, it goes on to examine the evolution of Corps command during the rest of the war. This is done chronologically using the main campaigns of the BEF for delineation. It concluded with a fascinating chapter on ‘the daily life and work of British Corps Commanders’. The picture painted is of Corps headquarters evolving from administrative ‘post-box’ to critical directors of frontline operations. The great strength of the book is that it builds up, from a credible empirical base, an account of what Corps actually did. Much of this is perhaps mundane or arcane, but through weight of evidence Andy is able to take on likes of Martin Samuels and Tim Travers on many crucial points. For example from examining the records of five Corps he argues that Tim Travers suggestion that ‘discussion was discouraged’ in the BEF is not borne out by the dialogue between Armies and Corps in the run-up to 1 July 1916.

Being a ‘converted-PhD’ the book cannot be described as an easy read. The text really demands more than a passing familiarity with the British Army and events on the Western Front. It is therefore a book for scholars rather than skimmers. However I know that the ranks of the BCMH are filled more with the former than the latter. I am also sure that they



will be delighted to benefit from the many years of hard archival labour that Andy devoted to the production of this volume. We await his next big project with great interest.

Editor remarks:

As ever, a personal account can bring life even to a supposedly lifeless bureaucracy such as a Corps Headquarters. As Captain Guy Chapman asks in ‘A Passionate Prodigality’¹ “What did one do at Corps HQ? My first job was the colouring of seven secret maps with eight different inks for the great offensive which should succeed the offensive after the next offensive which should follow the Arras battle now being staged.... A week and I duly presented my report... but no doubt it was filed; and a year later the Boche wiped out my poor recommendations – if they were ever followed – out of existence, by pushing through as far west as Corps HQ itself.”

On the relations between Divisions and Corps he explains “Divisions were always insisting, like intelligent children, that their own methods were right, and being reproved in the mother-knows-best style. I have a distinct recollection of the GSO 2 murmuring into the telephone: ‘But you ought not to have done it, old fellow, except on an order from us. ‘Tell you what, I’ll send you an antedated wire telling you to do it. That will regularize the position.”

And on the vexed question of decorations being awarded to Staff Officers the subaltern who runs the MT pool (wounded at Loos) expostulates “The old man has just offered me the MC for the fourth time. I’ve refused again. Damn it, if I couldn’t get one with the Brigade of Guards I’m not going to pick it up this way. He’s given one to that little squirt he’s just taken on. It isn’t decent.”

And now to our final challenge. As a student of the Russian and Soviet Armies Michael Orr can certainly be expected to spot a difficult read when it appears.

The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War by David T Zabecki,

Review by Michael Orr

It would seem from the price they are charging for this book, that David Zabecki’s publishers expect the purchasers will chiefly be academic libraries. That is most unfair to a book which should interest any serious student of the First World War. Popular interest in the German 1918 Offensives was generated by (and almost limited to) Martin Middlebrook’s account of 21 March, “The Kaiser’s Battle”. More recently, Martin Kitchen’s “The German Offensives of 1918” covered the whole series of offensives, though constrained by space limitations and, in the eyes of many, a tendency to accept the Germans’ own valuation of their tactical superiority.

1 Guy Chapman *A Passionate Prodigality*, London 1933. Chapman served with the 13th Royal Fusiliers but also did stints at Brigade, Division and Corps so that his beautifully written memoir (he was a barrister; brush up on your double first in English and Classics to follow the allusions) offers a wide-ranging view of staff life on the Western Front.



Zabecki is strictly focussed at the operational level and is breaking new ground in two ways. Firstly he has re-discovered a significant cache of German documentary sources. Although the main German Army archive was destroyed by bombing during the Second World War, the US Army had been allowed to copy a significant section of them during the inter-war period, maintaining a liaison team in Berlin from 1919 to 1937 for this purpose. Zabecki has rescued these from dusty neglect in Fort Leavenworth and by combining them with surviving material in Germany, especially in the Bavarian Army archives, he has produced a documents-based study, as one would expect in a work which was originally a doctoral thesis for the Strategic Studies Institute of Cranfield University. But secondly, Dr Zabecki is also Major General Zabecki of the US Army and is seeking to use modern concepts of operational art to illuminate his analysis of these campaigns and simultaneously demonstrate the campaign's relevance to contemporary soldiers.

Zabecki's book therefore begins with chapters which ask "*Why do we still bother with World War I?*" and describe the development of "*the operational art*". Incidentally, there seems to be no reason to introduce the definite article. English and American authors have been writing about "*operational art*" since the 1970s and it is to be hoped that this clumsy neologism will not be copied. Zabecki argues that although the Red Army in the inter-war period, was responsible for the term "*operational art*" and the first proper analysis of the concept, armies were aware of a level of command between strategy and tactics before 1914 and the German Army did use the term "*operativ*", even if for Ludendorff it was almost a term of abuse.

After describing the tactical and strategic realities under which the German Army had to operate in 1918, Zabecki analyses each offensive in detail. A chapter is devoted to each operation, describing its preparation and execution and assessing its conduct. These assessments focus on the crucial decision points and Zabecki's account demonstrates how Ludendorff's refusal to select and maintain operational objectives dissipated the impact of the German Army's tactical successes. These sections may be the most valuable for modern operational commanders and staff officers. By choosing to reinforce tactical success at the expense of securing an operational objective, the Germans made dramatic territorial gains but never achieved the battle of annihilation they were seeking. Most notoriously, during the March Offensive, Operation MICHAEL, Ludendorff reinforced Eighteenth Army south of the Somme at the expense of Seventeenth and Second Armies' assaults on the British Army between the Somme and the Scarpe which were planned as the main effort.

David Zabecki is particularly critical of the failure of the German High Command (OHL) to appreciate the crucial importance of the rail centres of Amiens and Hazebrouck. The German Army's neglect of effective logistic support in both world wars is commonly quoted as a reason for their ultimate strategic failure. Zabecki shows that not identifying and exploiting the enemy's logistic weaknesses was an equally important factor in the 1918 failure. As they reached their Clausewitzian culminating point Operations MICHAEL and GEORGETTE were within a few miles of Amiens and Hazebrouck but the combat power required to secure them had been thrown away in pursuit of easier but empty successes.

Towards the end of his book, Zabecki describes the planning for Operations HAGEN and KURFÜRST which were never implemented. By this stage the reader is watching the disintegration of the German High Command and the Great General Staff system. The atmosphere of unreality at OHL in the last weeks of the war compares to that in Hitler's



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 7 / 7

Berlin bunker in April 1945. It is impossible to read this book and retain any respect for Ludendorff as a strategic commander. In an early chapter Zabecki quotes Holger Herwig's comment "*The truth is that Ludendorff never rose above the intellectual level of a regimental colonel commanding infantry*", which may seem harsh but by the time Zabecki reaches the Conclusion is fully justified.

The book is sub-titled "A case study in the operational level of war" and properly researched case studies do not make for easy reading. However, anyone who is deterred by the technical arguments and pages of tables has clearly never browsed in the Soviet literature. Although the author and his cartographer Donald S. Frazier, have obviously taken a great deal of care in designing the maps, monochrome printing detracts from clarity. For £75 the publisher might have provided colour maps or at least a larger format. In the last couple of years British historians such as Christopher Duffy and Jack Sheldon have re-calibrated our views of the Western Front by exploiting German documentary sources. David Zabecki's volume is a notable addition to this stimulating development in Western Front studies, which have been predominantly Anglo-centric in their source material. We must hope that the next stage will be the appearance of studies which rely on a balanced combination of English, German and French language sources, though these may be collaborative projects.

Editor adds:

That concludes our feature on "*books that are not an easy read.*" Again, as a civil servant, I can certainly understand the remarks about an atmosphere of unreality at the highest levels – we need more books about bureaucratic fantasy – it is the new reality.