

## What were the main operational factors that enabled the BEF to achieve such a spectacular success at Cambrai in November 1917 and why did it all go badly wrong.

*Surprise is a very important factor in assault, especially where the approaches are so deep and well covered as to admit of a large number of men being assembled unseen by the defender, for the short rush from the sap-heads to the works; for this reason a bombardment should rarely directly precede the delivery of the assault. Field Service Regulations Pt 1 – Siege Operations.*<sup>1</sup>

The Battle of Cambrai, at the end of 1917, marked a radical shift in the tactical and operational development of the British army on the Western front. Cambrai was by turns a triumph, a lost opportunity and a disaster. This essay will examine the reasons for both the initial extraordinary success, and the ultimate failure of an attack which started with such promise. As will be seen, this failure was twofold: First, the failure to press the attack and secure its objectives, and, secondly, to adequately prepare for the subsequent German counter thrust.

The attack was carried out by Byng's<sup>2</sup> Third Army<sup>3</sup>, primarily by III and IV Corps, in the North and South respectively. The initial assault and penetration of the well developed and formidable fortifications of the Hindenberg Line<sup>4</sup> was to be followed by III Corps taking the Havrincourt-Flesqueres Ridge and the St Quentin Canal to the East by *Coup de Main*, allowing the Cavalry Corps to cross and swing North towards Cambrai, thus securing the East Flank. Meanwhile IV Corps would advance on the vital ground of the Bourlon Ridge. The seizing of Cambrai and the crossing of the Sensée would be followed by a NW advance which would "roll up" the German line from the South.<sup>5</sup>

By 1917 there was an emerging ability of Corps to direct their Divisions within a framework laid down by the Army Commander's declared intent, underpinned with a commonly understood set of standard procedures which were, themselves, compliant with the general doctrine within Field Service Regulations, Part 1.

Further operational refinement and commonality was brought about with a stream of General Staff pamphlets produced by GHQ after July 1916, which addressed lessons learned, and laid down in detail operational and tactical levels of action. Foremost among these were SS135<sup>6</sup>, *Instructions for The Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, 1916; and SS143, *Instructions for The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, 1917, which laid down a common suggested training structure and operational and tactical procedures for the Infantry platoon with its new range of weapons. This gave it a vastly increased and varied firepower, together with an ability to act with much more mobility and autonomy of action than had been the case prior to 1917.

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<sup>1</sup> Field Service Regulations, Part 1, 1909, reprinted 1914. Chapter VIII, p173

<sup>2</sup> Gen (Later Field Marshal) Julian Hedworth George Byng.

<sup>3</sup> Third Army was composed of 19 Divisions in 5 Corps, with three tank Brigades and the Cavalry Corps.

<sup>4</sup> The German defences were judged so strong that they were lightly held by troops of indifferent quality with little artillery support (Crown Prince Ruprecht, quoted in the Official History of the War, Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 (The Battle of Cambrai). (hereafter "OH"), p99.

<sup>5</sup> OH, p17.

<sup>6</sup> *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*. December 1916. Embodying SS119 (Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations, July 1916), designed to bring about a standard level of operational procedures common to each Division.

This increasing commonality of training and standardisation of operating procedures enabled Corps Commanders to devolve more responsibility to Divisional Commanders while, themselves, concentrating more on overall operational planning. Divisional commanders could still, however, choose to alter tactical practice within their commands, and were responsible for designing and delivering their own training, within GHQ guidelines.

As well as the move towards commonality of procedure at Divisional level there were technological advances available to the planners of Cambrai which had not been available in 1916.

The RFC had an ever increasing capability in long range interdiction bombing, fighter cover, and ground support, using bombs and machine gun fire<sup>7</sup>. Aerial observation and air to ground communication continued to improve.<sup>8</sup>

The new Mk IV tank, first used at Messines, while not a further advance in design, was much improved. It was almost proof against the German infantry armour piercing bullet, due to thicker armour with overlap joints where plates met. It was more mechanically reliable and deployable in large numbers. Moreover the Tank Corps had developed tactics to crush or remove wire completely, to enable infantry and cavalry to advance without a preparatory bombardment to destroy wired obstacles. It had also developed methods of trench crossing with the use of fascines, and tactics to destroy defence lines in depth, with infantry co-operation.

Advances in artillery methodology were such that the ability to predict the impact point of individual guns, by measuring bore wear and the muzzle velocity of each gun, meant that fire could be accurately predicted. This, combined with newly available accurately surveyed maps, meant that artillery fire could be delivered without warning, pre registration by fire no longer being needed.<sup>9</sup> The CRA of 9 Div, Brig Gen HH Tudor<sup>10</sup>, proposed an entirely predictive supporting barrage to achieve surprise. Furthermore he advised the use of neutralising, rather than destructive, Counter Battery Fire against German gun positions and the extensive use of smoke to mask the attack.

Prior to the attack the six Divisions of III & IV Corps, which would work with the tanks on the initial assault, had carried out combined training with the tank Brigades they were to assault with. While valuable, this training was of limited duration, each Infantry battalion having no more than two days to train with the tanks.<sup>11</sup>

The combination of all these factors, together with careful planning and the preservation of almost total secrecy<sup>12</sup> during the pre assault preparations, combined with successful camouflage and concealment

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<sup>7</sup>Lt Col JFC Fuller had originally proposed low level air support as an alternative to artillery support for his planned "tank raid" on the Hindenburg Line, in order to achieve surprise. He was, at the time, ignorant of the development of predictive gunfire. It was his plan which would be expanded upon and become the battle plan for Cambrai.

<sup>8</sup> OH p30. See also OH, Vol IV Chapter VI.

<sup>9</sup> For a full explanation of the evolution of unregistered shooting see the OH, pp10-13

<sup>10</sup> Brig Gen H H Tudor, CRA 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Div and a leading proponent of scientific gunnery.

<sup>11</sup> OH, pp 32-35. This short period did not give time for a close understanding and trust to develop between the Infantry and the tank crews they would work with.

<sup>12</sup> Total secrecy was not gained. 5 men of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, taken prisoner in a trench raid on the 18<sup>th</sup> gave information that an attack was to take place from the Havrincourt sector. On the 19<sup>th</sup> Nov German infantry and artillery observers detected "unusual activity" on the British side. The German 54<sup>th</sup> Division, opposite Havrincourt, assumed a

measures during the assembly of the attacking forces, should have enabled the mounting of a cohesive, high tempo operation to achieve the Army Commanders intent.

Initial success was due to the achievement of almost complete surprise, for the first time since the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in 1915. At 6:10am on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1917 the artillery barrage commenced as the tanks and infantry moved over their start line. The two fold shock effect of accurate unexpected gun fire on the German artillery locations combined with the massed tank attack<sup>13</sup> and the close infantry support<sup>14</sup>, in most of the attacking Divisions, resulted in the attacking formations breaking into, and through, the main Hindenburg defences in less than four hours. The largest operation the RFC had ever mounted provided ground support to attacking troops, and deep interdiction bombing raids in the German rear areas.

At first it appeared that the possibility of a sustained, rapid, high tempo operation might be realised. However, from the start of the attack there were problems with communications. The misty conditions, which aided surprise, prevented visual signalling and the armoured telephone cables, laid by the signallers as they advanced, were repeatedly broken by the advancing tanks. The mobility of the advance itself hampered a command system used to advances measured in hundreds, rather than thousands, of yards in depth. Divisional HQs and Brigade HQs did not move forward far enough either to be able to communicate adequately with their subordinate Units, or to exert control. The immediate result was that Brigade, Divisional and Corps HQs were unsure of the progress of the battle. The only reliable communication was by runner or pigeon.

A delay outside Flesqueres, in the IV Corps area was the first check to the advance. Maj Gen G M Harper, GOC 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division had decided on novel tactics for his infantry / tank co-operation<sup>15</sup>. Both the tank formations and the closeness of tanks to infantry were changed, with infantry following tanks at much greater distance than recommended by the Tank Corps.

Whether this was responsible for what followed is not clear but when leading elements of the 51st Division reached the small valley before Flesquers and the Division moved forward, after a halt to wait out the preparatory barrage, the attack was not well coordinated. The official history states that “no properly combined assault of tanks and infantry was organised”. It appears that both tanks and infantry entered the village at various times but support between the two arms was not achieved. Worse, the handling of the tanks was inept, a column of tanks, in line astern, breasting a rise outside the village being destroyed one after the other.<sup>16</sup> The lack of longer combined infantry/tank training and the failure to insist on adherence to a single set of tactics by Divisions were clear weaknesses here.<sup>17</sup>

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state of readiness at midday on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November and received a Regiment of the Corps reserve and some extra gun batteries as reinforcement. (OH pp 47-49.).

<sup>13</sup> The entire strength of the Tank Corps was used, a total of 476 tanks, two thirds against the first objective and one third, plus survivors from the first objective, against the second.

<sup>14</sup> The infantry platoon was now a formidable tool, trained to use all its available weapons and new tactics, as laid down in SS143, Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action, February 1917.

<sup>15</sup> The OH records that “*The 51<sup>st</sup> Division devised a system of its own*”, something the Divisional commander had the right to do at this stage of the war. This Division was not alone. 62<sup>nd</sup> Division “*did not believe that it would be possible for platoons or sections to follow a specific tank. No such close affiliation, therefore, was practised.*” (OH pp34-35.).

<sup>16</sup> This was a tactic not authorised by the Tank Corps, and between 16 and 18 tanks were destroyed. (The number of tanks destroyed is not entirely clear. The estimate given here is that of David Fletcher, archivist at the Tank Museum, Bovington, in a conversation of June 2009.).

<sup>17</sup> It was not until June 1918 that General Sir Ivor Maxse became the first Inspector General of Training and this function was finally taken over by GHQ.

There was a further failure when the flanking Divisions either side of the 51<sup>st</sup> Division reached their respective objectives of Graincourt and Premy Chapel, some 3500 yards past Flesqueres. The Germans in Flesqueres were now in the bag of a long narrow salient, with both the 62<sup>nd</sup> Division in Graincourt and the 6<sup>th</sup> Division in Premy Chapel able to fire on their rear. Encircling the Flesqueres defenders would have been a simple matter but there was a long delay before HQ 51<sup>st</sup> Division, still three miles behind the old British Front Line, was aware of the situation at Flesqueres, and not until 2pm that 6<sup>th</sup> Division was asked by III Corps whether it could assist the 51<sup>st</sup> Division. There was then confusion between III and IV Corps as to what action was being taken. The resulting delay in dealing with the situation meant that, when night fell, Flesqueres remained in German hands.

At the St Quentin canal tanks had arrived at Marcoing by 10:50am and prevented the demolition of the railway bridge. At Mesnieres two infantry companies succeeded in crossing the canal, but were pinned down by stiffening German resistance. The road bridge at Mesnieres collapsed when a tank tried to cross just after mid day. The Cavalry Corps, which was to sweep across the canal and wheel towards Cambrai over the Masnieres – Beaufort Line were slow to advance and failed to seize the initiative. A lack of reconnaissance meant that they had failed to find an unmarked bridge some 1600 metres to their left<sup>18</sup>. At 3.30 a squadron of the Fort Garry Horse managed to cross the canal at one of the locks. They were the only cavalry to do so during the duration of the Battle, returning later that night. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> November the original objectives planned for Fuller’s “tank raid” had been achieved in some style, with an unprecedented breaching of one of the strongest trench systems on the Western front, and an advance of three to four miles over a six mile front, all at the cost of just over 4000 casualties.

This was the result of:

- Meticulous planning and the preservation of secrecy during the preparatory phase.
- Coordinated use of predictive gunfire and shock action by armour combined with infantry.
- New infantry tactics at platoon level – leading to enhanced capability and flexibility.
- Use of air power in close support of the assault and as a deep interdiction weapon.

However, despite this undoubted success, the key objectives outlined for Third Army’s expanded attack plan had failed to achieve two of the key objectives set for it by the C in C. The Bourlon Ridge had not been seized, and no major incursion had been made East of the St Quentin canal. Third Army had failed to create any real operational tempo, while German resistance was showing signs of stiffening. The committal of the whole tank corps meant that the strength of the armoured attack could only be reduced with each action.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of November III Corps were ordered to advance over the St Quentin canal while IV Corps were ordered to take Bourlon. The Cavalry Corps were to cross the canal and carry out their original instructions. The day was clearly to be a continuation of day one. The lack of fresh tank crews and fresh tanks resulted in delays, and failure to deliver tank support, for some attacks. Progress East of the St Quentin canal was not possible. IV Corps continued to advance towards the Bourlon Ridge. The attacks carried out by both Corps on the 21<sup>st</sup> are described as “feeble and ill coordinated<sup>19</sup>”. With most of the troops almost exhausted, and tank losses not being made good, this is hardly surprising.

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<sup>18</sup> British Intelligence had compiled a list of known crossing points between Crevecoeur and Noyelles. Of the 14 mentioned 9 should have been capable of taking Cavalry. There seems to have been no real search for any alternative crossing and only the Fort Garry Horse were seen to exhibit anything in the way of Cavalry “dash”.

<sup>19</sup> OH p. 116.

On the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup> Haig considered progress made. Bourslon Ridge had not been reached, let alone taken, and the wheeling movement across the St Quentin canal towards Cambrai, which would have secured the flank during the taking of the Bourslon feature was abandoned. There is no mention of Haig's previous reservations and declared intent to shut down the attack if suitable progress was not made<sup>20</sup>. GHQ assessed that the German Army would be capable of counterattack within 48 hours. Third Army had only three divisions in Reserve and GCHQ had only two other divisions, previously ear-marked for deployment to Italy, to call on. No apparent thought had been given to moving Divisional HQs forward (Haig remarks that he thought "Divisional Commanders should be closer up so as to "take a grip" of the battle." on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November ).<sup>21</sup>

Reasons for failure of the overall battle plan:

- Communications failure at an early stage leading to confusion at Division, Corps and Army level as to the battlefield picture.
- The failure of Corps and Divisional HQs to move far enough forward to command the battle.
- The failure of III Corps to recognise the check at Flesquieres and co-ordinate action to aid 51<sup>st</sup> Div and continue the advance in a timely manner.
- Failure of the Cavalry Corps to seize the initiative and carry out the advance beyond the St Quentin canal.
- Failure to provide an adequate reserve of infantry or tanks

Haig appears to act with unjustified optimism at this point in deciding to continue the battle. Moreover he appears to be directing it too, surely the job of Commander Third Army<sup>22</sup>. Bourslon Ridge was not captured, although both Bourslon Wood and Bourslon Village were. The German presence on the shoulders of the ridge was not eradicated and fighting continued, with Third Army becoming weaker and the Germans stronger. Haig remains optimistic. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of November Haig records in his diary being told by Charteris<sup>23</sup> that "His (German) troops are very thin on this front except at Bourslon."<sup>24</sup> He also appears to ignore the fact that, having abandoned the intention of using the Cavalry Corps as a flank guard East of the St Quentin canal and turned his advance from East to North East he is presenting a flank to German forces. Indeed, from the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November on the attention of Third Army seems to have been focussed almost entirely on the Bourslon area while the danger of a classic pincer movement on the new salient by the Germans was, apparently, unconsidered.

It is difficult to understand what was in the minds of Haig or Byng at this stage. It is not until the 28<sup>th</sup> of November that Haig records Byng's intention to "consolidate his present position, reconnoitre and then improve matters as soon as the situation was thoroughly known."<sup>25</sup>, a statement which clearly moves from

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<sup>20</sup> Haig had informed Byng on the 26<sup>th</sup> October that he would shut down the attack in 48 hours, or less, unless results gained, or the general situation, justified a continuation. OH. p17

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Haig, War Diaries & Letters, Edited by Gary Sheffield & John Bourne. BCA 2005. ( Hereafter DH Diaries.). Entry for Nov 22 1917.

<sup>22</sup> The close relationship between Haig and Byng is probably behind this. Byng was a protégé of Haig, to whom he owed his advancement to Army Commander. It may have seemed natural, and acceptable, to both that Haig would intervene as he did.

<sup>23</sup> Charteris, Brig Gen John BGGs (Head of Intelligence Service), BEF General HQ, 1916-1918.

<sup>24</sup> DH Diaries. Entry for 27<sup>th</sup> Nov 1917

<sup>25</sup> DH Diaries 28 November 1917

the constant attacks and counter attacks which had occupied the previous five days, and points to consolidation, rather than continued attack.

Much time had been lost and the preparation of defences to withstand any German counter attack was, apart from some preparations on the Flesquieres Ridge, negligible. The troops of III and IV Corps were exhausted and Corps, Divisional and most Brigade HQs were still not far enough forward to influence the battle in their areas of responsibility. It is at this point that a major failing to regard clear intelligence occurred. Ground and air observers on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of November reported to Third Army that there was increased rail movement towards Cambria from the NW and NE, and towards Busigny from the NE. "Above normal" road and troop movements together with artillery registration and increased air activity were reported in front of VII Corps front. These are clear indicators of a build up prior to an attack. Additionally Commander VII Corps<sup>26</sup>, aware of the weakness both of his defence works, his manpower and his artillery support, made efforts to instil a sense of urgency in Third Army HQ as to the danger of a German attack on his position. There was no real response. Third Army, while admitting that a German attack from both North and South was a likely event<sup>27</sup> had issued no warning order and taken no steps to ensure troops in the rear areas should be readily available.

III Corps, to the left of VII Corps had requested Third Army to relieve its battle weary divisions. Nothing had been done and, worse, two of III Corps artillery brigades had been withdrawn on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November.

There are a number of possible explanations for the behaviour of Third Army at this point. The first is that distance from the battlefield combined with a false sense of security over the events of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of November had led to the Army Staff into a false sense of optimism, consequently failing to pay attention to current intelligence suggesting that German forces were not only capable of mounting a counter attack, but were about to do so.

The same factors may have led to Third Army HQ failing to put works in hand to consolidate gains made, and prepare the ground captured for a defensive battle, in particular the development of villages as defended locations, and the development of the Flesquieres ridge as a defence line. Worse, the Tank Corps were withdrawing to the rear and beginning a programme of complete refitting for vehicles and crews 18 miles SW of Havrincourt.

Whatever the reasons for the lack of response was, Third Army, focussed as it was on the Bourlon Ridge, had entered a phase of command inactivity which was to have dire consequences.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of November the German counter attack fell in the North and South sectors of the salient<sup>28</sup>, the largest effort being against the VII and III Corps sectors, where seven German divisions attacked in the

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<sup>26</sup> Lt Gen Sir Thomas D'Oyley Snow. He and one of his divisional commanders, ( Maj Gen High Jeudwine, GOC 55<sup>th</sup> Div), were among the small number of senior officers then, or later, to fully realise the threat to the South of the Salient. Snow had warned Jeudwine (And GOC 24<sup>th</sup> Div, Maj Gen A C Daly) to be prepared for a German attack on the 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> with its centre of gravity on a feature known as the Banteux Ravine. Snow was absolutely right in his assumption.

<sup>27</sup> Telephone conversation between COS Third Army, ( Brig Gen Vaughan) and BGGs Vii Corps, Brig Gen Burnett-Stuart ). See OH p 169.

<sup>28</sup> This was the first occasion that the Germans had mounted a major offensive on the Western front since the Second Battle of Ypres. This is possibly a contributory factor to Third Army's failure to prepare for a major counter attack.

morning mist using infiltration tactics and achieving complete surprise.<sup>29</sup> The attack penetrated the VII Corps front and drove across the III Corps communications zone, catching many formations in the rear of their right flank.

The response of Corps HQs was bedevilled by the communication problems which had prevailed since the 20<sup>th</sup> of November. It is at this point that the failure of Corps to communicate with each other in an adequate manner once more became a cause of difficulty. Perhaps the best example of poor coordination is that of the arrangement for III Corps heavy artillery to aid the VII Corps position on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, by providing fire on possible attack forming up points in front of 12<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Divisions. While agreed between respective Corps CRAs and the two Corps staffs, fire was never provided, VII Corps believing that III Corps had refused to allow the guns to fire and III Corps believing that fire was not to be provided unless asked for by VII Corps, or until the SOS was sent up from the British front<sup>30</sup>.

Three days of confused fighting followed, during which both sides struggled to retain command and control of their troops, with the Germans slowly regaining lost ground and winning new ground beyond the III & VII Corps front line.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December Haig ordered Byng to retire to a sound defence line for the winter and, from the 4<sup>th</sup> of December on, the withdrawal commenced. By the 7<sup>th</sup> of December the battle was officially declared over. The British still held a small salient, of about 2 miles, and part of the Hindenburg Line in the North, while the Germans held a corresponding salient and part of the old III & VIII Corps front line in the South.

The War Cabinet subsequently tasked Gen J C Smuts to look into the conduct of the Battle after the German counter attack of the 30<sup>th</sup> of November. He, like Haig, exonerated the actions of Commanders, down to, and including Corps level. He concurred with Haig's assertion that senior commanders were not taken by surprise on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, and that fault lay with many of the troops being unequal to their tasks, and that training of junior officers and NCOs needed attention<sup>31</sup>.

The Official History is not so kind, laying the blame firmly at Byng's door as far as the following points were concerned:

1. The salient held by III&IV Corps on the 27<sup>th</sup> Nov was particularly vulnerable to attack.
2. That there were indications of German preparations for a counter attack.
3. That there was cause for concern over the vulnerable junction between III & VII Corps (The Banteux ravine).
4. Failure of either Third Army or III Corps to issue warning orders to sub units.

The OH also has scant respect for the poor handling of the Cavalry Corps, which completely failed to show any initiative and sense of urgency on the first day of the attack or, generally, subsequently during the battle. As has been pointed out elsewhere, Cambrai was, in operational terms, a completely conventional

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<sup>29</sup> Haig persisted in the belief that the main German thrust would be from the North. His diary entry for the 1st of December records that the Germans are using 12 divisions on the Cambrai counter attack. The Official History is quite clear that the centre of effort was in the South. ( DH Diaries 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 1917 and OH pp173-175

<sup>30</sup> SOS rockets were, in fact, fired by the front line infantry but these were not seen.

<sup>31</sup> OH pp293-297.-

battle. The failures were conventional failures which had been seen before<sup>32</sup>. The increased capability of the infantry platoon as a tactical unit and the shock effect of massed tanks and predictive gunnery and the maturation of the air arm as part of the all arms battle were well demonstrated at Cambrai, as was the need for more development of command and control procedures at Corps level combined with a reliable and mobile radio network from the Bn back through the command structure.

In my view the operational causes of the failure to predict and defeat the German counter attack can be expressed as:

- Failure at Army and Corps (and GHQ) levels to heed available intelligence as to the German build up, dispositions and intentions.
- The continuing lack of a reliable communications structure from Corps forwards.
- The lack of standard operating procedures at Divisional level.
- Increasing confusion at Corps and Army level and a failure to either issue warning orders before the attack or fully co ordinate operations once the counter attack began. (While there was not a complete paralysis of command after the 27<sup>th</sup> of November there was certainly a lack of clear intention leading to unco-ordinated defensive operations by Corps HQs. After two and a half years of attacking and static trench warfare the BEF seems to have almost forgotten how to fight a defensive battle.).
- Failure at Army and Corps level to consider the effect of fighting a long battle with increasingly exhausted troops, caused by a lack of reserves.

It was in an additional note to the findings of the Court of Enquiry<sup>33</sup> convened to examine the Cambrai battle that Ivor Maxse pointed out the major underlying cause of the failure to maintain the initial high operational tempo which, in turn was to lead to the disappointing outcome of a battle which had began so well. Without the ability to read the battle and communicate quickly with superior headquarters and subordinate units the only way in which commanders can maintain tempo is to ensure a level of training which enables formations from division downwards to fight the battle using what would now be called “standard operating procedures” to maintain cohesion and pace while carrying out the commander’s intent.

At Cambrai the British army, partly due to the latitude given to divisions to carry out their own training, and partly due to the constant movement of divisions from one corps to another, lacked both the level of

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<sup>32</sup> See: *Command & Control on the Western Front*, Ed. Gary Sheffield & Dan Todman, Spellmount Staplehurst, 2004, Chap V – British Corps Command on the Western Front, by Andy Simpson.

<sup>33</sup> Convened by Sir Douglas Haig to investigate “The Action fought South of Cambrai on November 30<sup>th</sup>”. It comprised Lt Gen Sir A Hamilton-Gordon (President) Maj Gen Pinney and Maj Gen Ivor Maxse (members). Maxse signed the report but added an after-note of his own which damned lack of training of Divisions, partly caused by their constant movement (Divisions were moved as required) through different Corps (which were usually geographically static.). Speaking of the overall failure to understand defensive doctrine he said that “ *The ignorance arises from the fact that our officers are not taught elementary tactics and that those whose business it should be to instruct them are themselves uninstructed*”. He went on to comment on the varied training of Divisions and its effect on Corps with the comment; “*The writer of this note is acquainted with one corps which during the past twelve months happened to have thirty divisions in it. Of these, two were splendidly trained, a dozen were trying to train and the remainder had little if any system of training at all.*”

(John Baynes, *Far From a Donkey, The Life of General Sir Ivor Maxse*, Brassey's 1995, quoted from documents attached to the Cambrai Report file in PRO WO/54/53 ).

training, of both soldiers and commanders; and the unified approach to battle procedures, which would enable corps commanders to rely on their divisions to fight the battle without constant supervision.

It is also arguable that both Byng and his Corps Commanders had given insufficient thought to the, by now common, problem of maintaining communications throughout the battlefield once battle was joined. It is also arguable that the increasing focus on Broulon Ridge, once the failure of the Cavalry to exploit the area East of the St Quentin canal had occurred on the first day, was a clear case of “mission creep”. And that, rather than “appreciating the situation” they fell into the trap of “situating the appreciation”<sup>34</sup>.

That the British Army was capable of recognising failure and learning from it is also clear. At Cambrai the seizure of a substantial area of the Hindenburg Line showed an increasing grasp of operational ability by what was actually an army which could only just be regarded as trained and fit for purpose after three years of existence.

That the army continued to mature and improve would be shown during the German Spring offensive of 1918, when it bent but did not break, and, most markedly, during the period from the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1918 until the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918, when, as the most capable army on the Western Front, it produced a series of high tempo operations at short notice which finally broke the German army<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Much emphasis is still placed on recognising, and avoiding, this error when Infantry Officer's are taught to carry out both formal and “combat” appreciations, as part of their Land Warfare Centre, (Previously the School of Infantry), Training.

<sup>35</sup> A new pamphlet, SS 135, *The Division in the Attack-1918*, 40/WO/7036, dated November 1918 and issued down to Coy/Sqn level replaced SS 135, *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action – 1916*, 40/WO/3591. A comparison of these two documents shows that the shortcomings found at Cambrai have been addressed and show a clear progression towards unified operational procedures while still embodying the principles laid down in *Field Service Regulations Pt 1*, giving the “man on the ground” lassitude to make his own decisions within the superior commander's intent.