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BOOK REVIEW

Beaten down by blood: the Battle of Mont St Quentin-Péronne 1918

by Michele Bomford

Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW; 2012; 293 pp.; ISBN 9781921941948; RRP \$29.99 (softcover)



The capture of Mont St Quentin and the fortress town of Péronne between 31 August and 5 September 1918 was a great feat of Australian arms during the final Allied offensives of the Great War. The Germans knew the significance of the Australian victory. The original 2nd Division Memorial at Mont St Quentin, which depicted a digger bayonetting a German eagle, was one of few memorials desecrated by the Germans during World War II.

The book's author, Michele Bomford, a high-school history teacher, has a link to the battle – her grandfather served in the 20th Battalion, 2nd Division, in World War I. Her research for the book was supported by an Australian Army History Unit Grant in 2009. She hopes that this book will “establish this significant victory in the Australian collective memory of the Great War”.

While this is a great story and has been researched well, the book is not easy to read and contains many errors and deficiencies.

The author laments that “it is virtually impossible to establish an order of battle” for the Germans. The Germans, however, may have intermingled their units deliberately to cosset their less reliable troops with more reliable troops. Rommel used the same cossetting deployment to attempt to put some backbone into the less reliable Italian units at Second El Alamein.

The author, throughout the book, has classified the German machine guns as “heavy”. At this time in 1918, the German Army was using two machine-gun variants in its divisions: the MG08, a tripod/sledge-mounted medium machine-gun; and a lightened version, the MG08/15 with a bipod. Both were medium machine-guns which used the same barrel and the same 7.92 mm ammunition. Within a German division, there were about four MG08/15s to every MG08. Overstating the enemy's firepower makes any subsequent victory over the enemy seem boastful. The Australian achievements do not need this embellishment.

There are many maps in the book, but several are hard to read. On page 55, there is a description of a plan to ‘bounce’ the Somme. A place name, ‘La Maisonette’, is mentioned on the page, but it is not marked on the map on the facing page 54, despite there being room on the map to do so. In Chapter 4, there are three maps which are provided in a confusing sequence: the attack of 31 August 1918; followed by the plan for 28 August; and then the amended plan for 30 August. Similarly, the map which shows where each Victoria Cross was won by an Australian during the battle, would be better placed at the end of the narrative about the actions.

Throughout the telling of the story, whenever the name of a soldier is introduced, a mini-autobiography is given. This disrupts the flow of the story. This information would be better put as a footnote to the page or in an appendix to the book.

The story is based on the Australian Corps battle. Four divisions, three Australian and one British, participated. As the battle had a number of phases, it would have helped the reader had the author documented the location of all units during each phase and what each unit was doing.

The author describes the efficiency of the Australian Corps staff work; however the staff were unable to step up 3 Squadron to Proyart until after the battle.

In places the author's expression is clumsy e.g. Monash's experience as “commander of 4th Brigade and the 3rd Division at Gallipoli and in France” and “field guns in front of both 9th and 10th Brigade troops fired a creeping barrage”.

The British 32nd Division, after the advance to the bank of the Somme and after the attempt to ‘bounce’ a number of Somme River crossings, expanded its frontage to the north to allow the 5th Australian Division to cross the Somme and to attack Péronne from the north-west. At least the location and activities of its brigades for each phase should have been briefly mentioned.

After the description of the battle, the author then describes the roles taken by other arms and services units; however she only selectively mentions units. As a consequence, the overall corps maintenance plan is not adequately described.

At the conclusion of the narrative, the author should have provided a few paragraphs to show how Mont St Quentin was the stepping stone for the subsequent Australian Corps operations against the Hindenburg Line.

The book is of interest to students of Australian battles, “the 100 days' Advance to Victory”, infantry manoeuvre battles and combat leadership. Monash's drive pervades the story. Unfortunately, the book is hard to read and it is hard to grasp the details of the battle. The book provides much information about the battle, but it is unlikely to “establish it in the Australian collective memory of the Great War”.

Shortly after the publication of *Beaten down by blood*, a shortened version was published as part of the Army History Unit's Australian Army Campaign Series. Hopefully, it contains fewer deficiencies than this version¹.

John Hitchen

¹Michele Bomford (2012). *The battle of Mont St Quentin- Peronne 1918* (Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW) 140 pp.