

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division in the Great War: engine of destruction*

by Colin Campbell

*Pen & Sword Military: Barnsley, South Yorkshire; 2018; 320 pp.; ISBN 9781526747037; RRP \$52.99 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library call number 570.12 CAMP 2018*



This is a history of a British Territorial Force infantry division, the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division, which fought during the Great War on the Western Front from 1915-1918. It is an updated and more objective version of Major F. W. Bewsher's *The History of the Fifty First (Highland) Division, 1914-1918* (William Blackwood: Edinburgh, 1921). The new version draws on more-recent research, official records and first-hand accounts; and it challenges the Division's post-war critics.

The Division arrived in France on 5 May 1915. It took part in an unsuccessful attack at Givenchy in June, which revealed weaknesses in training. The rest of the year was spent relatively quietly in the Somme Valley and, from March 1916, on Vimy Ridge. In 1917, by now regarded as a leading assault division, it fought on the Somme at High Wood and Beaumont-Hamel, at the Battle of Arras, at Third Ypres (Belgian Flanders) and Cambrai (November). In 1918, it faced two of the German spring offensives; and, in the build-up to the final allied offensive, in an attack with the French and the Italians in the Champagne in July. During the final 100-days offensive, the Division fought in the Second Battle of Arras, 26-30 August, and at Valenciennes in October. Interestingly, some Australian doctors were posted to the Division during its time in France.

The Introduction notes, refreshingly, that the perception of accuracy and lack of bias in unit and formation war diaries could be flawed. Many other histories have used the war diaries as 'gospel'.

The author, Colin Campbell, is a fervent Scot. He has provided statistics on percentage enlistments and casualties from Scotland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. There are a number of Scottish quotes – some can be easily understood by Australians, others less so.

When training in Bedford, the Division was gutted by the transfer out of six of its infantry battalions and some medical units. Organisation charts, which would have assisted the reader, are not provided to illustrate these and subsequent organisational changes (such as the linking of battalions and the re-designation of infantry battalions as pioneer battalions). Such re-organisations can affect the fighting cohesion of units and formations, but it is not explained how the Division built up teamwork and spirit.

The character of a division is usually moulded by its commander. During the Great War, the 51<sup>st</sup> Division had four commanders. The first was a regular soldier, Major General Colin John Mackenzie, who had raised the 51st Division in the Territorial Army in 1911. Mackenzie was replaced on 23 August 1914 by Brigadier-General Bannatine-Allason. The book does not explain why this

occurred, but Mackenzie's subsequent record suggests incompetence – inclusion of a brief biography of Mackenzie may have evidenced this. Major-General George M. Harper became the Division's third commander in September 1915 and successfully led the division during the majority of its fighting. He left early in 1918 to take command of IV Corps, to be succeeded by Major-General G. T. C. Carter-Campbell.

Harper led the first successful attack by the Division, the capture of Beaumont Hamel on 13 November 1916. It had been a first-day objective on 1 July 1916. Harper promoted the capture of Beaumont Hamel by the Division both to raise the Division's morale and to enhance his own reputation.

The chapter on the Battle of Cambrai is headed 'CONTROVERSY Cambrai'. Over the years, other writers have blamed the Division for many of the failures of the battle. The author raises a number of good points defending the Division's reputation, but does not push the case for the Division hard enough. Cambrai was an all-arms battle that was fought without adequate communication or co-operation.

The book has several deficiencies in addition to those already mentioned. In any war history, maps help the reader understand the manoeuvring of the units over the terrain – the maps herein are generally less informative than the maps in Brewer's 1921 version of the history. Also, the book has repeated the often-quoted view that, after Third Ypres, Lloyd George withheld reinforcements to Haig – a number of recent authors have discredited that view.

The writer has incorporated a number of first-hand accounts into the narrative, not all successfully. While some of those accounts enhance the history by adding detail to a particular event, other accounts add confusion as it is not clear whether the described circumstances applied only to a platoon or applied more broadly to a whole brigade.

This book's outstanding feature is that it explains some of the issues that researchers face when consulting primary sources such as unit and formation war diaries. It also explains the convention extant at the time that 'blue-on-blue' incidents were not to be mentioned.

The book will appeal to descendants of men who served in the Division, to members of units or affiliated units associated with the Division, and to readers interested in the conditions suffered by the soldiers on the Western Front. The book, however, does not add significantly to the existing information about the battles in which the Division participated.

**John Hitchen**