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BOOK REVIEW

Mont St Quentin: a soldier's battle

by Bill Billett

*Rosenberg Publishing Pty. Ltd: Dural, NSW; 2009; 184 pp.; ISBN 9781 8770 58875;
RRP \$36.50 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 570.3 BILL 2009*



My thanks to David Leece for his sensitivity in giving the review of this book to a former commander of the 2nd Division. Needless to say the battle lies deep in the psyche of the Division and particularly so in those who have interested themselves in its history. (I recall reading a substantial Mont St Quentin treatise produced by the Headquarters of the 5th Brigade.)

It is significant that in 1993 three former commanders of the 2nd Division joined the government-conducted 75th anniversary commemoration 'Return to the Western Front' and paid homage at the 2nd Division memorial at Mont St Quentin. In the circumstances, it is somewhat surprising that the author chose not to contact the 2nd Division which was represented again at the memorial in 2008 (the 90th anniversary).

Mont St Quentin's claim to fame was that during the Great War, after four years of attrition, the Allies at last broke through the enemy's defences on 8 August 1918 and continued fighting eastwards until confronted by Germany's last bastion on the Somme, the Mont St Quentin-Péronne complex, which the Germans were determined to hold. That determination was crushed by a series of attacks by the Australian Corps in an horrendous battle that was waged between 31 August and 5 September 1918.

David Rosenberg, the publisher, has a long history of helping aspiring military writers and I would have liked to

have reported favourably on this book, but, sad to say, I cannot. Although the battle deserves publicity, it deserves far better than this book.

The book comprises 184 pages, but only 68 pages are given to the actual battle (Bean took 100!). The author appears to have read widely (but only from British sources) and adds a deal of padding to reach book size without regard to the relevance of the material – this particularly applies to the final chapters of the book and the appendices. High-sounding chapter headings like 'Analysis: Ingredients of Victory', 'Tactical Training' and 'Command and Strategy' give rise to expectations that are not met, while 'Historical Sources – Appendix 1' and 'Assessing Battlefield Performance – Appendix 11' serve no relevant purpose.

It appears that Billett carried out a thorough reconnaissance, and now that virtually all diaries have come to light, there is an abundance of material. Indeed, the actual story has the potential to be a good monograph provided it is accompanied by maps, which this one lacks, to help identify a profusion of places and events.

As regards the original memorial, the author says "it is thought it was taken back to Germany". A photographic exhibition mounted in the town hall in Péronne, when pilgrims were welcomed by the mayor in 2008, had a photograph of the memorial cut in pieces lying at the foot of the plinth.

Gordon Maitland