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British 169th Brigade during the Battle of the Somme



Troops Going Over the Top, First World War (Battle of the Somme), Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore

Callous Waste or Expensive Education?

The Experience of the British 169th Brigade during the Battle of the Somme

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Approximately three million men fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and estimates of the total human casualties tend to hover around one million.¹ Of those one million, British casualties accounted for about 420,000.² In the face of these staggering losses, it is not surprising that one historian concluded, “Clearly, this was, and has remained, one of the greatest disasters ever suffered by the British army.”³ A clue as to how this unprecedented tragedy and waste of human life occurred comes from a British captain named Lance Newnham of the 169th Infantry Brigade in the 56th Division. On July 3, 1916, Newnham wrote a brief account for his superiors about the July 1 assault on the Gommecourt salient during the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. He wrote, in part, “Every man should carry one good grenade (fumite or gas) for dealing with dugouts....Initial fighting will be grenade fighting so men should carry one extra

¹ Robert Cowley, “The Somme: The Last 140 Days,” in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Random House, 2003), 344.

² Tim Travers, “July 1, 1916: The Reason Why,” in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Random House, 2003), 324.

³ Travers, in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, 324.

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bandolier only and 7 or 8 grenades....Every man should be instructed how to use German grenades, whether he is a bomber or not.”⁴ From his statements, he seems almost surprised at the fact that grenades trump the British rifles during a trench-sweeping operation. He expresses this surprise because the “New” British armies organized by Kitchener still had a mindset of nineteenth century tactics, such as the strategic use of cavalry charges and the superiority of the rifle to grenades. The highest British military commanders, such as Sir Douglas Haig, were even more heavily steeped in the old tactics. But in the early part of the 20th century, a tactical change occurred, which historians have termed the “Revolution in Military Affairs,” or RMA.⁵ Specifically, this RMA describes the changing of the nature of war due to the advent of heavy industrialization and new weapons around the turn of the century. For instance, artillery came into its own in the First World War, as it could effectively level trenches and defensive emplacements. Also, machine guns came to dominate the battlefield in a new way as opposed to the traditional superiority of the rifleman. Because of this RMA, the massive British casualties reflected less the failure of British leadership and tactics and more the fatal learning curve that occurred when 19th century training collided with 20th century weaponry. Specifically, the experience of the British Army during the Battle of the Somme, particularly the 169th Infantry Brigade during the July 1st assault on the

⁴ L. A. Newnham, “Lesson’s Learnt—July 1st. 1916.: 169th Infantry Brigade,” from *169th Infantry Brigade: War Diary, July 1916*, in *169th Infantry Brigade: Headquarters War Diaries, July 1, 1916-September 30, 1916*, WO 95/2957, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk (accessed September 9, 2014).

⁵ William Philpott, “The Anglo-French Victory on the Somme,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17, no. 4 (December 2006): 745. EBSCOhost (accessed September 3, 2014).

Gommecourt Salient, illustrates the deadly effects of the RMA, as well as the attempts of the commanders and soldiers to learn the new art of war.

The effects of the RMA actually began at the top of the British military command, and influenced the overall strategies on the Somme. However, historians are at odds over exactly how extensive the influence of the RMA was, and even the very purpose of the Battle of the Somme. Historian William Philpott argued that the primary purpose of the Battle of the Somme was to relieve the pressure from the German attack on Verdun.⁶ Philpott further suggested that the British and French commanders knew that the attack would be a grinding, slogging battle instead of a quick break in the trench warfare, and that the battle was necessary to encourage the Russians and Italians.⁷ In essence, Philpott's position attempted to justify the British commanders, especially Sir Douglas Haig, by arguing that Haig was not surprised by the delays and massive casualties caused by the RMA. Alternatively, historian Elizabeth Greenhalgh contended that the British commanders, again primarily Sir Douglas Haig, intended the Battle of the Somme to be a quick and massive assault to break the German lines, not a massive bloodbath to divert German resources from Verdun. She wrote, "...if [Haig] had indeed launched and fought the Battle of the Somme for over four months in order to relieve the French at Verdun, then he failed in this, as in his true aim of breaking through the German lines and rolling up the German defences towards Arras."⁸ Greenhalgh's position in effect argued that the British attacked at the Somme because they had not yet

⁶ Ibid., 735, 737.

⁷ Ibid., 735, 737.

⁸ E. Greenhalgh, "Why the British were on the Somme in 1916," *War in History* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 171. EBSCOhost (accessed September 3, 2014).

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recognized the deadly effects of the RMA, so Haig was surprised when he could not achieve a decisive breakthrough.

Interestingly, Haig's writings in his war diaries support both of these interpretations. On June 15, 1916, he wrote that the objective of the Fourth Army's attack was to capture the Pozières heights, and "...*secondly*, (a) If Enemy's defence broke down, occupy Enemy's third line (on line Flers—Miraumont), push detachment of cavalry to hold Bapaume and work northwards with bulk of cavalry and other arms so as to widen the breach in Enemy's line, and capture the Enemy's forces in the re-entrant south of Arras."⁹ Evidently, this was Haig's goal and preferred outcome. However, Haig was not so blind to reality that he did not have a contingency plan in case the cavalry breakthrough failed to occur. His next orders read, "(b) *If Enemy's defence is strong* and fighting continues for many days, as soon as Pozières heights are gained, the position should be consolidated, and improved, while arrangements will be made to start an attack on the Second Army front."¹⁰ Later, however, after the debacle of July 1 and as the hopes for a breakthrough, or even a victory began to fade away, Haig began to mention the objective of relieving Verdun. He wrote on July 12, "The disadvantage...is that we must hold the German troops in our front. If the attack was allowed to die down, they might continue the attacks at Verdun and elsewhere."¹¹ By late July, it had become clear that a breakthrough was nearly impossible, and so Haig shifted the primary goal of the Battle of the Somme to something more achievable, namely easing the German pressure on the

⁹ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters: 1914-1918*, ed. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 191. Italics original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191. Italics original.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

defenders of Verdun. In fact, evidently he received a letter from the CIGS¹² that read, in part, “*The Powers that be*’ are beginning to get a little uneasy in regard to the situation....Whether a loss of say 300,000 men will lead to really great results, because if not, we ought to be content with something less than what we are now doing....It is thought that the primary objective—relief of pressure on Verdun—has to some extent been achieved.”¹³ Haig replied, “Pressure on Verdun relieved. Not less than six Enemy divisions besides heavy guns have been withdrawn.... Successes achieved by Russia last month would certainly have been stopped had the enemy been free to transfer troops from here to the Eastern theatre.”¹⁴ So on the international perspective, Haig initiated the Battle of the Somme for a combination of objectives, including the need to support Russia and the other allies, to sustain British and French morale, and also siphon some of the German resources from Verdun. For his local objectives, Haig desired a strategic assault that would enable the cavalry to break the stalemate of trench warfare and roll back the German trenches. However, the fact that Haig thought so highly of cavalry and its potential to break through the German trenches in the face of machine-gun fire is a textbook example of the RMA. Haig still thought that a 19th century cavalry charge could be effective in the face of 20th century German machine guns. However, Haig’s ability to recognize that German resistance might hinder a cavalry attack shows that his strategy still existed in a deadly middle phase between old tactics and the modern killing machines available with the RMA.

¹² Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Probably General Sir William Robertson.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 213. Italics original

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

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In addition to influencing Haig's master strategy, the RMA also heavily influenced the experience of individual units of the British Army, such as the 169th Infantry Brigade. Haig's local plan for the battle of the Somme required two divisions of the Third Army, the 46th Division and the 56th Division, to attack the Gommecourt salient, the northernmost sector of the Battle of the Somme. However, the attack was not expected to succeed, at least on the whole, because the main purpose of the attack on the village of Gommecourt was to act as a feint for the main attack by the Fourth Army further south.¹⁵ Furthermore, the German fortifications and defenses around Gommecourt were exceptionally strong.¹⁶ One historian wrote, "The salient here was of both symbolic and practical importance to the Germans as their most westerly position on the Western Front..."¹⁷ In order to accomplish this foredoomed attack, the 46th Division would attack the northern flank of the salient and the 56th Division would attack the southern flank. As part of the 56th Division, the 169th Brigade would take part in this assault. This particular attack illustrates how the British lagged in learning the RMA, but also how they were endeavoring to make up that loss, albeit with slow and bumbling attempts.

The 169th Infantry Brigade's assault on the village of Gommecourt occurred on July 1, 1916, the first day of the nearly four-month long bloodbath. Ironically, one of the first problems with the assault from the standpoint of RMA and military tactics was the fact that the British army was over prepared to a certain degree. The British softened up

¹⁵ Martin Gilbert, *The Somme: Heroism and Horror in the First World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 54.

¹⁶ Peter Hart, *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), 114.

¹⁷ Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 134.

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the German lines by initiating a massive bombardment, beginning seven days prior to July 1 and continuing up until the attack. One British gunner wrote, “We fired about 800 to 1,000 rounds per day, the equivalent of many tons.”¹⁸ Because the bombardment effectively smashed the German trenches, the British first wave expected to be able to take the first German lines relatively easily, so they were heavily loaded down with equipment so they could consolidate and hold the ground they gained. One soldier recalled that the equipment the British prepared to carry on the Somme consisted of, “bombs in the pockets, sandbags, spade, kit, rations, extra ammunition round the neck...the rifle...a pannier which weighs 46 lb...”¹⁹ This meant that the British soldiers were unable to run, or move as quickly through the German machine gun fire as they should have been. However, to mitigate some of this risk, the 56th Division commanders had dug a new frontline trench closer to the German lines.²⁰ Also, to counter the German machine guns, an artillery smokescreen covered the Gommecourt attack so that the German gunners could not see their targets.²¹ However, the smoke also evidently added the confusion experienced by some of the attacking troops.²² Thus, although the British were inexperienced with the RMA and were more prepared for a German counterattack rather than a vicious first assault on the trenches, they were trying to compensate with

¹⁸ Lieutenant W.E. Walters-Symons, in Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War: A History of World War I in the words of the men and women who were there* (Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2004), 153.

¹⁹ Sergeant Ernest Bryan, in *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, 148-149.

²⁰ Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972): 63.

²¹ L. A. Newnham, “Diary of Gommecourt Attack (Provisional),” in WO 95/2957.

²² Hart, 116.

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such features as new frontline trenches and experiments with artillery bombardments and smokescreens for the infantry.

Ironically, despite the drawbacks and the fact that the attack was only intended to be a feint, the 169th Brigade was one of the few groups who actually managed to achieve their objectives across the entire Somme battleground, at least initially. Lance Newnham, acting as the Brigade Major for the 169th, recorded that by 7:50 am, “L.R.B. reached all their objectives.”²³ Partly because of the smokescreen, and partly because the artillery fire had successfully cut the wire, the 169th Brigade actually managed to go beyond their objectives and move closer to the point where they were supposed to rendezvous with the 46th Division.²⁴ Haig recorded in his personal diary on July 1, “The Gommecourt attack was also progressing well. 46th Division had northern corner of Gommecourt Wood. 56th Division by 8 am were in Enemy’s third line trench. But eventually right brigade of 46th Division did not press on.”²⁵ While the 169th Brigade and the 56th Division attack from the southern flank went far better than expected, the German defenders defeated and drove off their counterparts of the 46th Division on the northern flank. This meant that the 169th Brigade, along with the rest of the first wave from the 56th Division could not link up with elements of the 46th Division in order to continue to press the Germans.

A lot of the failure of the 56th Division and the 169th Infantry Brigade was due to new technology and the uneven preparation produced by the RMA. The British bombardment had done substantial damage to the German lines, allowing the 56th

²³ L. A. Newnham, “Diary of Gommecourt Attack (Provisional),” in WO 95/2957. L.R.B. is the London Rifle Brigade. The 169th Brigade was a “Londoner” Brigade.

²⁴ Travers, in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, ed. Robert Cowley, 325.

²⁵ Haig, 196.

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Division to overrun all three consecutive German trenches on the south side of the Gommecourt salient, but its counterbattery fire was not effective at silencing the German artillery. The Germans bombarded No Man's Land so efficiently, that they successfully cut off the first wave of British attackers in the German trench system by preventing reinforcements from getting through. Captain Newnham recorded the progress of the fight. At 8:30, he wrote, "Our troops...moving forward," and at 8:35, "Germans appeared coming out of GOMMECOURT PARK with their hands up."²⁶ Then, the report successively gets worse and worse for the Gommecourt assault. At 9:00, Newnham wrote, "New C.T.'s not being dug across NO MAN'S LAND," at 10:10, he learned that "digging of the new C.T. impossible owing to heavy enemy barrage and ...casualties numerous."²⁷ The smokescreen did nothing to stop the shrapnel from the German shells raining down on No Man's Land, and the Germans effectively severed the link between the attacking troops and their reinforcements with their artillery barrage.²⁸ The fighting raged desperately in the German trenches, because in the success of the initial attack, many of the trenches were not properly cleared out and the men of the 169th Brigade began to run out of grenades and bullets. They were not used to the way that the RMA had changed the way warfare worked. It was not enough to simply overrun the German trenches; they also had to be cleared of survivors and machine gunners who had taken refuge in the deep German dugouts. Newnham continued, "11.15 Two Platoons Q.W.R. attempted to cross NO MANS Land but frustrated by heavy barrage...11.35 Q.V.R. reported impossible to get men forward. Bombers of reserve...trying to get forward were

²⁶ L. A. Newnham, "Diary of Gommecourt Attack (Provisional)," in WO 95/2957.

²⁷ Ibid., C.T. is a Communication Trench.

²⁸ Hart, 117.

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hit directly on leaving our trench...11.51 L.R.B. report impossible to cross NO MAN'S LAND owing to heavy barrage and M.G. fire..."²⁹ Several later attempts to send reinforcements across to the men in the German trenches in the early afternoon also failed due to the tremendous German barrage and also German machine gunners, who became active in the trenches that the first wave had bypassed. At this point in the battle, because the 46th Division had been driven back from the northern flank of Gommecourt, the Germans could concentrate all their remaining forces on eliminating the men of the 169th Brigade and other units of the 56th Division who had captured their forward trench systems.³⁰ Newnham wrote, "L.R. B. report at about 3p.m. they had a Lewis gun and 40 unwounded men...remainder all casualties."³¹ From then on, despite desperate efforts to hold the German front line, the British soldiers who survived the attack were forced back. By 8:00, the British were in the process of withdrawing from the German lines and making the deadly trek across No Man's Land back to their own trenches, and an hour later, no unwounded British soldiers remained in the German lines.³²

Thus, the RMA contributed heavily to the failure of the 169th Brigade's attack on Gommecourt. The failures and miscalculations are directly attributable to the RMA. Because the Gommecourt attack was intended to be a diversion, the British soldiers did not receive the artillery support they needed in order to receive reinforcements to exploit, or even hold the ground they gained. Schooled in the tactics of the late 19th century, the

²⁹ L. A. Newnham, "Diary of Gommecourt Attack (Provisional)," in WO 95/2957. Q.W.R. is Queen's Westminister Rifles, Q.V.R. is Queen Victoria's Rifles, and M.G. stands for machine gun.

³⁰ Hart, 122.

³¹ L. A. Newnham, "Diary of Gommecourt Attack (Provisional)," in WO 95/2957.

³² Ibid.

British commanders and soldiers were still in the process of learning how to effectively use machine guns, grenades, and artillery fire. The British soldiers simply had not counted on the power of the German artillery to cut off No Man's Land, and they had underestimated the amount of grenades needed in trench fighting. Furthermore, they had not properly cleared the trenches that they had taken.

Yet, the Gommecourt attack did provide an opportunity to relearn this changing art of war, and the reports of the 169th Brigade illustrate the British attempt to bridge the gap in their knowledge concerning the RMA. One thing the British learned in the attack was how useful machine guns can be for the attacking parties. Brigadier General E.S. Coke, the commander of the 169th infantry brigade, wrote in regards to the British Lewis guns, "As far as can be ascertained, these guns did excellent work, being chiefly employed to fire down short exposed lengths of fire and communication trenches, and they caused considerable casualties to parties of the enemy who were advancing along their trenches to bomb our positions."³³ Secondly, the necessity for the first wave to carry plenty of ammunition was sadly emphasized by the failure of the British trench mortars. General Coke recorded, "Owing to the small number of shells that got across, nearly the whole of the carry party being killed and wounded at the outset, and to the heavy barrage preventing further supplies being sent, these mortars fired very little. If the ammunition supply could have been maintained, I consider that the mortars would have been invaluable when employed..."³⁴ Lastly, the British learned that the first wave needed more grenades. E. J. Harrington, a captain in the 169th, reported that the supply of

³³ E. S. Coke, "Report on Tactical Employment of Lewis Guns on 1st July, 1916," in WO 95/2957.

³⁴ E.S. Coke, "Report on Tactical Employment of Trench Mortars," in WO 95/2957.

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grenades “as one knows, was what failed in the attack, causing our troops to be completely bombed out of their trenches...Initial fighting will always be grenade fighting.”³⁵

Trite or obvious as these lessons seem, the Battle of the Somme featured a massive opportunity to test British training and tactics against the experience of rushing the German trenches, and to learn how the RMA had substantially altered the battlefield. Unfortunately, the British commanders were often loath to learn such lessons or break with tradition. After the disaster of July 1st, the rest of the Battle of the Somme seesawed back and forth between locally successful British and French attacks, and costly failed assaults. Haig evidently held on to his hope for a cavalry breakthrough at least until early November. He wrote on November 5, “As regards the Cavalry Corps, I said that owing to the state of the ground, the cavalry in the Fourth Army area could not hope to break through this winter, unless a hard frost came!”³⁶ Alexander Aitken, a New Zealand infantryman at the Battle of the Somme, wrote in regards to the cavalry, “‘if’, I thought, ‘in spite of all this the Staff still believes in cavalry charges, then it has learned almost nothing, and the outlook for the infantry, ourselves, is so much the worse’.”³⁷

Yet there were a few local successes, some even involving the 169th Brigade. Because the 169th Brigade and the entire 56th Division had been mauled in the attack on Gommecourt, it did not participate heavily in the later battles of the Somme for some time. Evidently though, sometime around the 17th of September, Aitken recorded, “the

³⁵ E.J. Harrington, “Notes on the Bombing Operations during the Attack on GOMMECOURT,” in WO 95/2957, 1.

³⁶ Haig, 252.

³⁷ Alexander Aitken, *Gallipoli to the Somme: Recollections of a New Zealand Infantryman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 162.

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Londoners on our left attacked at 6 a.m. under a shrapnel barrage and gained their objective, straightening the line at last. They did not, it was said, suffer many casualties, a thing they could hardly afford to do, being reduced by the struggle on the Fringe of High Wood to a mere fraction of their strength.”³⁸ Also, the 56th Division participated in a successful attack on September 24th and 25th, which involved the capture of the German front lines and the villages of Lesbouefs and Morval.³⁹ But as the season dragged on toward winter, mud and poor weather caused the British attacks to peter out as they sought to consolidate the meager gains they had lost so much blood in taking.⁴⁰

The Battle of the Somme can be thought of in at least two ways. The first is to write off the whole battle as a tremendous and staggering waste of life, material and equipment. One historian simply states, “Haig had hoped to win a great victory on the Somme. In this, both he and the French were disappointed.”⁴¹ Given the overwhelming loss of literally hundreds of thousands of casualties and the gravity of the fact that the ground gained by the Allied forces was almost laughably small, this interpretation bears a lot of weight. However, a second way to view the Battle of the Somme is to take into account that the British commanders had been trained in the 19th century, and were inexperienced with how the RMA had greatly altered the battlefields of early 20th century Europe. One historian argued, “...the British high command certainly did not callously send infantrymen to their inevitable deaths...the German army’s collapse would not have

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁹ Hart, 413.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “‘Parade ground soldiers’: French Army assessments of the British on the Somme in 1916,” *Journal of Military History* 63, no. 2 (April 1999):304. EBSCOhost (accessed September 3, 2014).

⁴¹ Greenhalgh, *Why the British Were on the Somme*, 172.

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been so complete in 1918 without the heavy casualties already suffered in 1916 and 1917. Thus, the sacrifices of the BEF and the French on July 1, 1916, and for the rest of the Somme campaign do, after all, have meaning.”⁴² By the time the Battle of the Somme commenced in 1916, war had devolved from an elegant game of strategy and tactics for the aristocracy to a classless slaughterhouse of killing and blood because the RMA introduced new weapons that the industrial nations had yet to learn how to use. So besides a catastrophic waste, the Battle of the Somme can also be thought of as an appalling exam in the school of RMA-defined war. And in this bloodbath, the lessons learned by the 169th Brigade’s brave attack on Gommecourt and the strain they produced on German resources did help the allies to ultimately win the war, if with far more cost than anyone desired.

⁴² Travers, in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, 338.