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Lessons From the Mire: The Third Battle of Ypres

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Exercise Solo Flight

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LESSONS FROM THE MIRE - THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES

INTRODUCTION

> *Yet, serious historians recognize the debate between attrition and maneuver as a specious argument, since a strategy of attrition may be a necessary approach under specific circumstances.*
>
> - Frank Hoffman, *Defeat Mechanisms in Modern Warfare*

The Third Battle of Ypres, known to the Germans as the *Flandernschlacht*, or, Battle of Flanders,[1] took place from 31 July 1917 to 10 November 1917 in accordance with the official British War History.[2] The campaign was conducted on the heels of the devastatingly successful British offensive at the Battle of Messines Ridge, from 7-14 June 1917.[3] The Third Battle of Ypres was in actuality a sequence of eight separate allied offensives. The Ypres Salient was an extraordinary deadlock. The ground, weather, and defensive preparations were unprecedented in their combined impact on the mobility and supportability of sustained offensive operations. Both the British and German High Command made radical adjustments to the planning and execution of their operations throughout the course of fighting- in attempts to maximize effectiveness under the conditions. In order to do this, operational goals were set in tactical terms. Objectives were set at the Army level or above, in order to achieve some semblance of synchronized effect and unity of purpose. Integrated systems, dispersion, and manoeuvre have been key themes in the development of modern war capabilities. The lessons observed in the Third Battle of Ypres provide important insight into fighting in a deadlocked theatre with opposing conventional forces. Lessons include the risks of the penetrating attack, the requirement for and the execution of a limited attack, and the management of tempo and firepower. The current war in Ukraine has highlighted the relevancy of the study of trench warfare. To frame the analysis, this paper will highlight the military and strategic perspective of Allied generals in World War 1, challenging simplistic attribution of "attrition warfare" to campaigns. Multiple case studies will provide background and comparisons to the Third Battle of Ypres which will expose key considerations for operational commanders operating in a deadlocked front.

OPEN AND CLOSED WARFARE

Early Offensive Mindset

At the onset of the Great War, the common military perspective amongst the primary fighting nations was that victory could only be achieved by offensive action and manoeuvre.[4] Craig states that: "In accordance with the Schlieffen strategy, the German army swept into Belgium in 1914 with the purpose of crushing French resistance in short order and then bringing

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[1] Jack Sheldon and Peter Simkins, *The German Army at Passchendaele* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, England: Pen and Sword Military, 2007), XIV.
[2] Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations in France and Belgium 1917, Vol. 2* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1948), iii.
[3] IBID.
[4] Stephen Bull, *Trench Warfare* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2003), 24.

the full weight of its power against Russia."[5] Trenches were utilized by all of the warring nations, but as a temporary means to achieve a tactical end.[6] The war of movement quickly ground to a halt on the Western Front, leading to the pre-eminence of trench warfare.

Deadlock

The trench lines established by November 1914 in the Western Front moved throughout the course of the Great War, but by September of 1918 were relatively reflective of the originally drawn positions.[7] Stephen Bull argues that the deadlock in Europe was not simply a strategic failure of high command. The Great War saw the rapid integration and improvement of modern weapons, and massive armies supported by rigid logistic support from rail systems, and a lack of physical space in which to manoeuvre.[8] Bull exudes: "The Leviathans would now only be able to rasp and grind against one another until exhaustion, or technology, or tactical innovation, discovered a chink in the armour."[9] Importantly in all of this was the continuousness of the line. That is, armies were forced to fight and defend in all regions and terrain, regardless of the tactical conduciveness of the land for fighting.[10] Such was the case in the Third Battle of Ypres.

CONSIDERING MANOEUVRE WARFARE

> *The whole edifice of Manoeuvre Warfare rests on the idea that there are two competing forms of warfare, manoeuvre and attrition, one of which is skilled and the other which is clumsy. This construct is false; it makes no sense to favour one form over the other.*
>
> \- William, Owen, *The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud*

Ian Hope provides an explanation and criticism of the limitations on the theory of manoeuvre warfare that are relevant here. In explaining the theory, Hope states that "Manoeuvre warfare envisions winning by 'systematic disruption' through manoeuvre, producing defeat without the need for destruction."[11] The theory is to find enemy weakness, exploit that weakness enabling penetration into the enemy's depth and cause disruption. [12] The mechanics of this form of attack are a German concept called "the tactics of surfaces and gaps."[13] In execution, the forward reconnaissance element is responsible to identify enemy positions (surfaces) and guide the attacking force through seams in the defence (gaps) in order to minimize direct contact and facilitate the exploitation of the position.[14] Once achieved, the rapid reinforcement and expansion

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[5] Gordon A. Craig, "Delbrück: The Military Historian," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 344-345.
[6] Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y: Holmes & Meier, 1980), 1.
[7] IBID, 4.
[8] Bull, *Trench Warfare*, 24.
[9] IBID, 24.
[10] Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, 3-4.
[11] Ian Hope, *Misunderstanding Mars and Minerva: The Canadian Army's Failure to Define an Operational Doctrine* (School of Advanced Military Studies: 1999), 30.
[12] IBID.
[13] William Lind, "The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare" in *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, ed. Richard D. Hooker (Novato: Presidio Press, 1993), 10.
[14] Lind, "The Theory and Practice of Maneuver, 10.

of the penetration is critical.[15] Maintaining the initiative with offensive action in depth enemy positions will allow the attacker's decision-making cycle to outpace the defender.[16] Decentralized command and control is a prerequisite to allowing the necessary freedom of action. [17] Hope states that: "This formula is the same in all types of war, at all levels of war, and in all environments of war."[18] This was not found to be the case in the Western Front, as will be shown.

William Owen uproots the oversimplified description of the Great War "…as the poorly conducted slaughter of armies through the ineptitude of the general officers involved."[19] He points to the physical conditions that set the deadlock already described, and further emphasizes that "…The generals all understood wars of manoeuvre and mobility because they had studied and trained for these, as the field regulations and military writing of the time indicate."[20] The current doctrinal Operational Functions -Find, Fix, Strike, Exploit - are pre-World War One (WW1) concepts that were being taught by French General Ferdinand Foch from 1903.[21] As such, wars of mobility were the norm prior to the deadlock created in the First World War.[22] As Owen states: "The static attrition of the Western Front was an unexpected aberration."[23]

A common misunderstanding of Manoeuvre warfare is that it is a superior form of warfare, born out of the mire in the Western Front. Owen puts it plainly:

> The whole edifice of Manoeuvre Warfare rests on the idea that there are two competing forms of warfare, manoeuvre and attrition, one of which is skilled and the other which is clumsy. This construct is false; it makes no sense to favour one form over the other.[24]

There is a danger as a military community in adhering to this line of thinking. If we truly believe manoeuvre warfare to be superior in all circumstances, we will dismiss the lessons learned in the Western Front in the Great War paid for with the blood of a generation. We need to consider how to fight in a deadlocked front where exploitation means destruction, up until the point of total defensive line collapse. The art in this will be knowing when and how to make the wager and press the enemy into collapse, or, convince the enemy to commit to the offence too early. If ill-timed, as the Allied soldiers in WW1 experienced in the Third Battle of Ypres, it will mean tragedy.

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[15] IBID.
[16] Hope, *Misunderstanding Mars and Minerva: The Canadian Army's Failure to Define an Operational Doctrine*, 30
[17] IBID.
[18] IBID, 30-31.
[19] William F. Owen, "The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud," (2008), 4. http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/.
[20] IBID.
[21] IBID, 3.
[22] Owen, "The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud," 4.
[23] IBID.
[24] Owen, "The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud," 2.

Early Attempts at Penetration and Exploitation – Managing Surprise and Preparatory Fires

In the spring of 1915, there were multiple attempts to penetrate the German defensive lines on the Western Front, which have been explained by Tony Ashworth in his book *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*.[25] These case examples show the evolution of thought leading into Third Ypres and provide lessons still applicable today.

Neuve-Chappelle

In March of 1915, the British executed an attack on Neuve-Chapelle. The attack concentrated four divisions in two and a half miles to create a penetration of a poorly defended position that was not fully developed. In order to maximize surprise, the attacking force opted for a short 35-minute preparatory barrage to support the break-in. The initial attack was greatly successful, with the British forces seizing their objectives in only five hours, however, a failure in communications meant that the reserve forces were not immediately committed to exploitation. This gave the Germans time to reinforce the breach and re-establish a line.[26]

Vimy Ridge

General Foch designed France's May 1915 attack on Vimy ridge which prioritized preparatory fires over surprise. He utilized five days of preparatory artillery fires in order to breakdown the German defenses prior to attempting a penetration. As a result, German mobilized reserve counter-attack forces were able to repel what was successful initial penetration. In this case also, the lack of a rapid commitment of reserves into the line breach, and communications were contributing factors to the failure of the attack.

Aubers Ridge

Simultaneous to the attack by France, The First Army under General Haig conducted a deliberate attack north of Aubers Ridge which spanned nine miles. Despite the fact the German defensive lines were well-prepared with concrete machine gun positions, deliberate wire obstacles and dugouts, Haig conducted the assault after only forty minutes of artillery fire. This attack was a complete failure: it failed to make any meaningful, even temporary penetration into the German defensive lines, without the commitment of German reserves. In a second attempt on May 15, Haig utilized four days of preparatory fires prior to attacking. In this attempt, as was seen in Vimy Ridge, the extended fires gave the necessary warning for the Germans to prepare and orient their reserves to counter the penetrating attack such that no exploitation of the German depth could occur.[27]

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[25] Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, 50-51.
[26] Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, 50.
[27] IBID, 50-51.

Somme

In 1916, in The Battle of the Somme, General Haig was again striving for exploitation, not simple attrition. Prior and Wilson summarize as follows:

> Haig was convinced that he could deliver a devastating bombardment over a wide front. The extent of the frontage was crucial to his plan. It meant that in the centre of the attack, his calvary - along with assaulting infantry – could drive through the gap free from interference by enemy fire from the flanks. So, at last, they would break out into open country, with all its opportunities for exploitation.[28]

The attack was a failure, and the sought penetration was never achieved.[29] Prior and Wilson conclude that despite Haig's intent, there was a distinct lack of artillery concentration – half of what was seen in Neuve-Chappelle in 1915.[30] The developments in the employment of artillery in the Western Front is a subject in and of itself.

These case examples can be seen to be trying break out of the deadlock and show some level of manoeuvrist thinking- even as early as 1915 select battles were attempting to concentrate enough force or firepower to provide the advantage needed to break into and exploit the German depth. The notable exception to the manoeuvrist approach is that the continuous line of defence made it such that all but Neuve-Chappelle were aimed at the German's strength.[31] The key takeaway is not how well aligned, or not, they were with manoeuvrist principles. The Generals were trained, thinking officers trying to employ warfare concepts in a scale of war never seen. Their failures and successes should be viewed in that light to gain the most, lest we, a generation of manoeuvrist-trained western militaries, re-learn their lessons under similar circumstances in the future.

Of all the examples described, the situation in Neuve-Chappelle appears to have been the most ripe for what Britain and France were trying to achieve: breaking into and exploiting an incomplete defensive position. Due to the weakness of the position, using measured fires to achieve surprise and reduce the effect of the German counterattack was an effective option. However, as seen, with Foch's inability to execute the immediate commitment of reserves at the point of penetration, the hope of exploitation was lost. In the highly developed positions, no solution for a sustainable penetrating attack had been found.

The lesson of caution is as follows: A penetrating attack on a well-prepared defensive position, containing depth and manoeuvrable reserve forces requires enough fires to alert the defender, which will trigger their reserve. On the Western Front in 1917, commanders were faced with a deadlocked war with highly developed defenses sited in depth, unprecedented fires and massed reserves. Under such circumstances, how should the attack be viewed? This point

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[28] Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 19.
[29] IBID.
[30] IBID, 21.
[31] A further point of study could be an exposition of probable line weaknesses along the Western Front and consider any opportunity they could have afforded to an attacker on either side in achieving a meaningful penetration and exploitation in depth.

frames the later discussion on General Gough, and General Plumer and their fundamentally different approaches in the Third Battle of Ypres.

STRATEGIC INFLUENCES

Naval

Prior and Wilson challenge the notion that in the Great war, commanders "…were incapable of designing anything more imaginative than operations of mutual slaughter."[32] They posit the following: "This, it needs to be said, misrepresents not only what commanders like Haig and Joffre and Falkenhayn initially intended to achieve, but what, after the event, they claimed to achieve."[33] The purpose of fighting in Ypres was tied to strategic goals. Haig's vision was that a breakthrough in Ypres would facilitate a pursuit to the coast, where, coupled with an amphibious assault the Allies could secure the Belgian coastline.[34] The German control of the ports in Belgium posed a significant problem for the British merchant fleet, and by extension, the British Expeditionary Force.[35] Geoffrey Till explains that "Because the Channel was so narrow, so thick with merchant ships and so close to enemy bases, the threat for U-boat attack was particularly serious there."[36] The ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge had been captured by the Germans in 1914, and since that time had been built up to hold a significant German naval presence which facilitated the deployment of German naval ships directly into the Channel.[37] The naval threat further increased from the end of 1916 into the spring of 1917 due to increased numbers of U-boats, the introduction of the UB II boats, and the commencement of unrestricted submarine warfare by the Germans on 1 February 1917.[38] Losses increased over the course of the winter, peaking at 860,000 tons in April.[39] Ultimately, while gravely concerning to the strategic leaders in 1916-1917, the German submarine operations failed to achieve the crippling effect on the Entente War effort; the British Navy was able to keep the Germans at bay enough to continue to sustain operations- without a successful breakthrough and control of the ports on the Belgian coastline.[40] Regardless, understanding the naval threat to resupply in Europe is essential to having a meaningful perspective on the way Ypres was viewed, and the reasons for its prioritization as a strategic focus for offensive land operations in 1917. Additionally, if controlled, the Belgian ports offered the British forces shorter lines of communication for the essential resupply operations.[41] Indeed, the oversimplified view criticized by Prior and Wilson does not appropriately frame the situation. There was tangible, strategic logic to the emphasis on Ypres which can explain some of the urgency, and aggression in which the offensive campaign was undertaken in 1917- under the most terrible and unfavorable conditions.

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[32] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story,* 7.
[33] IBID, 7.
[34] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 32.
[35] Geoffrey Till, "Passchendaele: The Maritime Dimension," in *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (Great Britain: Leo Cooper, 1997), 75.
[36] IBID, 75.
[37] Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground* (London, Great Britain: Cassell, 2000), 29.
[38] Till, "Passchendaele: The Maritime Dimension," 75.
[39] IBID, 76.
[40] Till, "Passchendaele: The Maritime Dimension," 85-86.
[41] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 29.

French Alliance

The catastrophic failure of General Nivelle's Chemin des Dames offensive, led to a growing mutinous sentiment and loss of a willingness to fight amongst French Ranks.[42] This is highlighted as a primary concern for Haig in the Official History that states:

> …progressively during July and through August and September the first consideration with Sir Douglas Haig was the dangerous condition of the French army: that army must be preserved, and the Germans must be kept from it by attack.[43]

The Ypres battlefield strategic goals were twofold: penetration and exploitation to the Belgian coast, and as a fixing force to keep the German reserves from attacking a weakened French Army. As counterintuitive as drawing German strength to the area you aim to collapse the defensive line appears, that was the strategic mindset of Haig as the campaign was developed. [44]

HAIG

Steel and Hart provide important context to the operational perspective of General Sir Douglas Haig, borne out of his time as Commander I Corps during the First Battle of Ypres in 1914. When the German offensive in the sector had completed and the Ypres Salient was established, Haig concluded that the Germans had lost an opportunity to give a crushing blow to the British - in his view as the British soldiers were unlikely to have been able to hold the line under continued pressure.[45] This affected Haig's approach to the Third Battle of Ypres - he was resolved to exploit his advances, and provide the final blow when the opportunity arose.[46] This perspective falls in line with Echevarria's explanation of Clausewitz's view on the pursuit: "The energy with which we choose to pursue our foe, Clausewitz believed, largely determines the extent of our success." [47] Haig's design of the campaign for the Third Battle of Ypres was in line with this premise. Echevarria continues his explanation: "… winning the battle itself was only part of the task; the second, more critical part was to exploit it..."[48] General Haig was adamant that attack maximized pressure on the Germans, in order to break the line. Haig did not envision the Third Battle of Ypres to be a long, protracted engagement, but rather desired that a breakthrough would enable the assault on the Belgian coast to begin by 7-8 August.[49] Importantly, General Haig was convinced the German line was ready to break, due to the

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[42] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 26,30.
[43] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol. 2*, 184.
[44] The challenges created in the Ypres campaign by as a result of the interdependence of the French and British government act as a warning in future conflicts. A worthwhile investigation would be the viability of sustained, deadlocked conflict with high attrition rates in tactical organizations comprised of many nations, and therefore beholden to many strategic imperatives. The enhance Forward Presence Battle Groups and Brigades currently deployed in the Baltic States and Poland serve as current examples.
[45] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 18-19, 292-293.
[46] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 19.
[47] Antulio J. Echevarria II, "6 Combat, War's Only Means," in *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.
[48] IBID.
[49] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol*. 2, 124.

massive impact of the Somme, Verdun[50] and the Spring Offensive campaign in 1917- largely influenced by his Chief Intelligence Officer, Brigadier General John Charteris.[51] Haig held on to this hope throughout the majority of the Third Battle of Ypres, up until the commitment of the Canadians at the Second Battle of Passchendaele; the Canadians had been held in reserve as the exploitation force[52], a task for which they were never required.

GOUGH

General Gough was selected by Haig to lead the opening battles of the Third Battle of Ypres due to his aggressively offensive style, and his inexperience and relative youth that would make him more subservient to Haig.[53] Despite the fact he had been selected on 30 April, General Gough did not take command until after the battle of Messines fought from 7-14 June 1917.[54] On 8 June, General Plumer requested three days' additional time to support the movement of artillery for a subsequent attack[55]- to seize 1200 yards of the Gheluvelt Plateau, and key terrain in the vicinity of Westhoek.[56] At this point there was a transfer control of the II and VII Corps to Gough's Fifth Army.[57]

The Situation

The Official British History records that "In peace-time the land possessed a good drainage system; this had been for the most part damaged or destroyed during the fighting of 1914-1915."[58] There was partial restoration complete by 1917,[59] but in the course of fighting artillery had turned areas of the farmland into a mire.[60] Due to the high water-table, trenches would often hold water, necessitating "duck-boards" and pumps to drain the systems.[61] Further, The Steenbeck River that ran between the second and third lines had been subject to continuous artillery fire and had created a muddy bog.[62]The low ground combined high water table led the German's defence to build hundreds of concrete bunkers to house their primary fighting positions.[63] After the devastation at Messines, the Germans were sufficiently concerned to further improve their defence, building three additional defensive lines making a cumulative five lines of German defences across the front, with seven in the Gheluvelt Plateau.[64]

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50 Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 29
51 IBID, 60.
52 Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 159; Steel, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 261.
53 IBID, 50.
54 Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol. 2*, 32.
55 IBID, 89.
56 Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 57.
57 IBID, 57.
58 Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol. 2*, 125.
59 IBID, 125.
60 Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, 3.
61 Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol. 2*, 125.
62 Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 71.
63 IBID.
64 IBID.

31 July 1917

Gough planned to attack on a roughly eight-mile front, with the objective to advance between 4000 and 5000 yards in depth to be accomplished in four stages- on the first day of battle.[65] This plan was not without its detractors. Brigadier General Davidson, a staff officer under Haig, expressed his concern in the ambitiousness of the plan stating in a memorandum that:

> We should not attempt to push infantry to the maximum distance to which we can hope to get them by means of our artillery fire, our tanks, and the temporary demoralization of the enemy. Experience shows that such action may, and often does, obtain spectacular results for the actual day of operations, but these results are obtained at the expense of such disorganization of the forces employed as to render the resumption of the battle under advantageous circumstances at an early date improbable. An advance which is essentially deliberate and sustained may not achieve such important results on the first day of operations but will in the long run be much more likely to obtain a decision. By a deliberate and sustained advance, I refer to a succession of operations each at two- or three-days' interval, each having as its object the capture of the enemy's defences, strongpoints, or tactical features, to a depth of not less than 1,500 yards and not more that 3,000 yards. It has been proved beyond doubt that with sufficient and efficient artillery preparation we can push our infantry through to a depth of a mile without undue loss or disorganization.[66]

Even General Haig, despite having the responsibility to approve the plan, had reservations about the goals for 31 July.[67] Of note, as Prior and Wilson correctly point out, despite the lofty goals of the plan for 31 July, General Gough was not seeking a decisive breakthrough, he was setting the stage for one. It was, in fact, an extended "bite and hold "operation.[68] In support of the offensive, Steel and Hart note that "every available gun that could be spared was earmarked for Ypres." The artillery preparatory fires commenced on 16 July.[69] Air observation was extremely important to direct the preparatory fires, to direct, and provide imagery for targeting, especially due to the fact that the German front-line was on a reverse slope, out of view of the British ground force.[70] In execution, much of Brigadier General Davidson's concerns with the plan were realized. The gains made by the Fifth Army were asynchronous; whilst the divisions on the West and center of the position were able to gain approximately 3000 yards of ground, the Gheluvelt Plateau had only moved the line 1000, exposing the further advanced divisions to enfilade fire.[71] The dispersal, disorganization, and communications breakdowns in the frontline after the assault degraded divisional commander situational awareness to the point they could not properly

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[65] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 74.
[66] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 67
[67] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol. 2*, 128
[68] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 75.
[69] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917 : Vol. 2*, 135.
[70] IBID, 133-134.
[71] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 95-96.

employ their reserves.[72] As a result of the extended advance, artillery support could not concentrate or provide the accuracy necessary for crucial barrages.[73]

August

August 1917 in Ypres was subject to uncharacteristically high rains- rains had commenced on 31 July and were almost continuous for three days.[74] All but three days in August saw some rain.[75] As a result, the British Official History records that:

> For the time being it converted the shelled areas near the front into a barrier of swamp, four thousand yards wide, and this had to be crossed over in order to reach the new front line. The margins of the overflowing streams were transformed into long stretches of bog, passable only by a few well-defined tracks which became targets for the enemy's artillery; to leave the tracks was to risk death by drowning.[76]

The critical effect the rain was having on the artillery support and mobility, the air observation, combined with the exhaustion of the infantry divisions after the 31 July attack on Picklem Ridge led Davidson, once again, to urge caution to Gough.[77] Haig issued guidance that he should patiently delay operations until weather conditions, and thus the ground conditions improved- and then only advance the centre of the line once the lagging front in the Gheluvelt Plateau could be aligned.[78]

The Gheluvelt Plateau was never achieved by Gough. Gough's three main attacks in August, under the most hellish conditions were, as the Official British history describes "fruitless and costly." [79] Haig attributed the failures in the attack to a lack of patience to attack such that concentration of fire on the enemy defences and artillery was not achieved.[80] Prior to the attack on 16 August Haig had advised Gough for a concentrated attack on a focused objective, however, Gough proceeded to attack across a broad front mirroring the opening attack on 31 July.[81] As a result of his failures, on the 25 August II Corps was transferred back under the Second Army, and General Plumer was given the lead on the campaign in Ypres.[82]

In Haig's preliminary concept, successive devastating attacks would break the German line and create an opportunity for exploitation in depth, nullifying the range and effect of German artillery.[83] Conceptually, attritional means would facilitate manoeuvrist ends. The lesson observed from Gough is that concentration of devastating firepower is a hard requirement. In

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[72] IBID, 94.
[73] IBID.
[74] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917: Vol. 2*, 183.
[75] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 97.
[76] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917: Vol. 2*, 183.
[77] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 100.
[78] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story, 100*.
[79] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917: Vol. 2*, 206.
[80] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 105.
[81] IBID, 31.
[82] Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917:* Vol. 2, 206; Prior, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 108.
[83] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 96.

order to effectively seize limited objectives under deadlocked conditions, tempo must be regulated by firepower, and advance limited to the extent by which firepower can hold the advantage. This cannot be dismissed when considering current, or future conflicts.[84]

PLUMER

In Plumer's original concept for the Battle of Messines, he had envisioned advancing only 1500 yards, though, at the behest of Haig stretched his objectives to 3000 yards.[85] The great criticisms of Messines have been the overexploitation to depth objectives leading to unnecessary casualties from German counter-attack and artillery, and the under-exploitation of success[86]- in the sense that the delay in the commencement of the Third Battle of Ypres gave unnecessary time to the Germans to make marked improvements to their defences, as previously described. It has been surmised that Plumer's experience at Messines shaped his plan for tackling the Gheluvelt Plateau.[87] Plumer's plan was structured, methodical and limited; the plateau would be taken in four stages, with six days in between each stage[88] which sought to advance roughly 1500 yards.[89] Advances were strictly limited to seizing what was now understood to be the lightly defended disruption zone[90] (to be described in the following section). Once taken, consolidation and defence on the given objectives were prioritized over than tactical exploitation of opportunities.[91] This centralized control on the shortened and limited advance gave several advantages to Plumer's divisions. It ensured artillery fires could be sustained ahead of the assaulting element, and it extended the range the German counterattack would need to go to make contact with the assaulting British element- giving more time for deliberate consolidation and reorganization. Plumer's concept of fires maximized attrition on the forward German positions, and provided protection for the assaulting element. For the attack on Menin Road, in addition to the preliminary bombardment and creeping barrage, further depth barrages blanketed the majority of the objective area with concentrated sustained fires. This fire would persist for nine hours after the assault had reached their limit of exploitation to protect the consolidating soldiers.[92] The limited attack had the effect it sought to achieve in the successful Battles of Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde.[93]

The repositioning of artillery and preparatory fires were enormous considerations that competed tempo with firepower under General Plumer. An important point that needs to be emphasized was identified by Prior and Wilson:

> What has been noticed about Plumer's succession of operations – even while the weather held- is their steadily diminishing yield…In good part, the reason lay in

[84] An object of further study would be the level of concentration in the battery and counter-battery fires in the attacks during Ukraine's summer offensive in 2023.
[85] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 221.
[86] IBID, 59.
[87] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 221.; Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 113.
[88] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 220.
[89] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 113.
[90] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 221.
[91] IBID.
[92] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 115.
[93] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 257.

> …the progressive diminution in the time-gap between operations. This was a consequence of Haig's conviction that the enemy were teetering on the brink of collapse and must be given no pause, combined with his determination to accomplish a swift advance towards the coast…[94]

In preparation for the Battle of Poelcappelle, the deteriorating weather and ground conditions made the movement of artillery and ammunition forward and gun employment extraordinarily problematic- essentially nullifying the ability for the British to conduct preparatory counter-battery, and diminishing the effectiveness of the barrage.[95] Despite the failure in Poelcappelle, Plumber, with Haig's encouragement, launched the First Battle of Passchendaele only three days after, with a goal of moving 2500 yards under the most abhorrent ground conditions.[96] After this disastrous battle Haig abandoned his aspirations for the coast, and committed the Canadians from the reserve to the final objective.[97]

CURRIE

Under the Command of Sir Arthur Currie, Commander of the Canadian Corps, the Canadians were tasked with seizing the Passchendaele village and ridgeline.[98] The plan and preparations for attack brought back the winning principles that had brought success to Plumer's first three battles in Ypres. Currie requested time to prepare his soldiers, site and prove his artillery and Haig agreed.[99] The attack was to be conducted in three stages, consisting of advances of 500 yards,[100] with a minimum of four days in between. [101] Through the most severe adversity, and with exposed flanks[102] due to failures in advance on either side of them,[103] the Canadians seized the ridgeline by 6 November,[104] though fighting to attempt to improve the position continued on into December.[105] Once again, a properly planned, resourced and disciplined limited attack proved effective.

The achievement of this objective created a protruding salient.[106] The salient, while extending the German line, [107] created an unfavorable tactical position; as Steel and Hart note

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[94] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 164.
[95] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 257, 265.
[96] IBID, 274-275.
[97] IBID, 280.
[98] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 280.
[99] IBID, 281.
[100] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 171.
[101] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 281.
[102] Mark Osborne Humphries, ed., *Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917-1933* (Waterloo, ON: LCMSDS Press of Wilfred Laurier University, 2008), 56.
[103] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 288, 290-291
[104] Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 177; Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 299.
[105] William F. Stewart, *A Midnight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917: The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres*, Vol. 28 (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2019), 1.
[106] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 294.
[107] Sheldon and Simkins, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, 207.

"…perversely, every step forward actually worsened the severity of the new salient jutting out from the British lines and centered round the Passchendaele Ridge."[108]

Dominating fires were proven to be a prerequisite to an effective limited attack. Balancing the weight of fires with tempo is of the utmost importance, and the responsibility of the commander. In the case of the Poelcapelle and the first Battle of Passchendaele, the measure was wrong- a misjudgement on the ability to break the line led to defeat, at great human cost.[109]

GERMAN DEFENSIVE ADAPTATIONS

> *The depth of the penetration was limited so as to secure immunity from our counter-attacks, and the latter were then broken up by the massed fire of artillery…Our defensive tactics had to be developed further, somehow or another. We were agreed on that. The only thing was, it was so infinitely difficult to hit on the right remedy.*
>
> *General Erich Ludendorff, German GHQ* [110]

The German defensive plan in July 1917 had been adapted to maximize siting in depth, in what General Hagenlücke characterizes as a "principle of elasticity"[111]; forward outposts created a disruption zone with local and divisional counter-attack forces held in depth, out of the impact of the bombardment of the front lines. This concept was born of the experience in the Somme and Verdun. [112] The defence system was encapsulated in the *Grundsätze für die Führung in der Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskreig* published on 1 December 1916 which translates as *Basic Principles for the Conduct of the Defence-Battle in Position Warfare*.[113] This design's aim was to minimize unnecessary casualties forward, allowing their mass to counter-attack when forces were most vulnerable- when they were attrited, disorganized, and exhausted after an assault. This proved highly effective against General Gough. As seen, while primary objectives were taken with relative ease, it was in fighting for depth objectives, not subject to the preparatory bombardment, that allies took most of their casualties. Following the battle of Langemark, when General Haig transferred the authority of the campaign from General Gough to General Plumer, the effectiveness of the German defence decreased dramatically. This caused frustration and confusion in the German General ranks.[114] The attack on Menin Road, taking place on 20 September, effectively nullified the use of counterattack. In the course of this battle eleven counterattacks were attempted, with ten failing and only one making moderate gains of a few hundred yards.[115] General Plumer's more conservative approach that relied on concentrated fires and limited objectives, followed by an aggressive use of artillery against maneuvering counter-attack forces had a devastating effect and were an effective counter to elastic defence. For this reason, following the Attack on Menin Road, the Germans reverted to forward siting soldiers and machine-guns, and repositioning counter-attack divisions further forward in an effort to stop the

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[108] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 294.
[109] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 277; Edmonds, *Military Operations in France and Belgium 1917, Vol. 2*, 334, 345.
[110] Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 241.
[111] Hagenlücke, "The German High Command," 46.
[112] Hagenlücke, "The German High Command," 46.; Steel, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 42-43.
[113] Hagenlücke, "The German High Command," 46.
[114] Hagenlücke, "The German High Command, 53.
[115] IBID.

steady advance.[116] This tactic once again proved completely ineffective. The 4 October Battle of Broodseinde was so costly for the Germans they changed tact once again, re-adopting the elastic defence on 7 October, with the concession that they would lose ground in further defensive engagements.[117]

THE GREATEST WAGER – WHEN TO CHOOSE THE PENETRATING ATTACK

It was distinctly the disciplined lack of exploitation that unraveled the German defence. This historical point is worth deliberate consideration. If the attacker desires to move the line forward, without the aim of penetrating the overall defence, then tightly controlled advances with limited objectives supported by massed firepower need to be considered as a viable tactic. The tempo in which objectives were taken was controlled at the Army Group level under General Plumer. Considering the operational functions, "Find, Fix, Strike, Exploit," the strike was measured, and the exploit was omitted. In battles of this scale, under deadlocked conditions, the commitment to attempting exploitation must be a deliberate decision, rather than a theoretical drill.

ROMMEL – KOLOVRAT RIDGE

Trench warfare has many faces. The lessons observed in Ypres in 1917 should be *considerations* for commanders when considering an offensive approach against a well-prepared position sited in depth, but not be reduced to a formula.

In his book *Attacks* Erwin Rommel provides personal perspective on the German Tolmein Offensive in 1917. Rather than participating in the main attack on Hill 1114 to be conducted on 25 October, Rommel proposed using a small force to attempt a penetration roughly 1000 yards west of the main attack.[118] Rommel recalls "If one did not wish to wait on the time-consuming artillery preparation, the question of surprise penetration of the 3d Italian line not under attack came to mind."[119] His Commander, Major Sproesser, agreed to the attempt; Rommel was authorized the use of two rifle companies and one machine-gun company which was less than he had requested (four rifle companies and two machine-gun companies) but came with the promise of support if a break-in was achieved.[120] Rommel successfully conducted the surprise attack, with no fires support on the break-in, and true to his word Major Sproesser reinforced success with mass, enabling a deep penetration of the Italian defence, achieving catastrophic success in exploitation. This was highlighted in Orders on November 3, 1917, by the German Alpine Corps Commander General von Tutschek:

> The capture of the Kolovrat Ridge caused the collapse of the whole structure of hostile resistance. The Württemberg Mountain Battalion under its resolute leader, Major Sproesser, and his courageous officers was the main one active here. The capture of the Kuk, the possession of Luico, and the penetration of the Matajur

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[116] IBID.
[117] Hagenlücke, "The German High Command," 53.; Steel and Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, 255-256.
[118] Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, *Attacks*, First ed. (Vienna, Virginia: 1979), 219-220.
[119] IBID, 219.
[120] IBID, 220.

> position by the Rommel detachment initiated the irresistible pursuit on a large scale.[121]

Rommel, through boldness and audacity in the exploitation phase achieved victories completely disproportionate to the size of his force. Rommel writes:

> In twenty-eight hours five successive and fresh Italian regiments were defeated by the weak Rommel detachment. The numbers of captives and trophies amounted to: 150 officers, 9000 men, and 81 guns. Not included in those figures were the enemy units which, after they had been cut off on Kuk, around Luico, in the positions on the east and north slopes of Mzrli peak, and on the north slopes of Mount Matajur, voluntarily laid down their arms and joined the columns of prisoners moving towards Tolmein.[122]

Incredibly, the Rommel Group sustained only 36 casualties- 6 dead and 30 wounded in the course of the fighting.[123] Importantly, the resolve of the Italian combatants, who surrendered in masses, was called into question. On this point Rommel reflects:

> In the battles from October 24 to 26 October, 1917, various Italian regiments regarded their situation as hopeless and gave up fighting prematurely when they saw themselves attacked on the flank or rear. The Italian commanders lacked resolution. They were not accustomed to our supple offensive tactics, and besides, they did not have their men well enough in hand. Moreover, the war with Germany was unpopular. Many Italian soldiers had earned their livings in Germany before the war and found a second home there. The attitude of the simple soldier toward Germany was clearly displayed in his "Evviva Germania!" on Mzrli.[124]

The terrain, and the enemy are critical contrasting factors when in comparison with The Third Battle of Ypres. In Ypres, the Allies faced a determined, disciplined enemy in terrain so pulverized with artillery and saturated with water that the movement of people, guns and supplies was extraordinarily difficult. The Rommel Group penetration action at Kolovrat was under conditions where the group could move under cover in the mountains to identify and take advantage of a weakness in the line defence.[125] It is evident then, that under the right conditions, the manoeuvrist approach remains a viable consideration even against a prepared defensive position, sited in depth. In this case, surprise was achieved by making best use of the initiative and bold manoeuvre of a subordinate commander, with no fires to support the break-in, and exploitation had the effect sought. The risk is applying this as a formula for success under all conditions. In the mire in Ypres, the depth and strength of the position, the persistent observation, determination of the German defenders and extreme ground saturation,

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[121] Rommel, *Attacks*, 275.
[122] IBID, 274.
[123] IBID, 275
[124] IBID, 274.
[125] Rommel, *Attacks*, 222-226.

required massed fires, and limited objectives to set conditions for a penetration and exploitation, which, in 1917, never came to be.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the failures and successes in the Third Battle of Ypres brings forth many lessons in fighting in a deadlocked front. Limited offensive action, that does not seek to exploit, has been shown to be a viable option for commanders. The aim of such a limited attack, and cost of the aim, needs to be carefully considered. Such actions must provide a marked advantage, or, progress towards the ability to provide a decisive strike on the line that will create a general line collapse - if such a collapse will contribute to the overall strategic aim. In the case of the Third Battle of Ypres, the strategic advantage offered by the Belgian ports was a justification for the cost, at the onset. The stubborn pursuit to Passchendaele when this strategic aim was no longer viable only increased the salient and decreased the viability of the line - this point should be remembered. Central to the manoeuvrist approach is the decentralization of command. In the Tolmein offensive, Rommel embodied the validity of the argument. Under Ypres-like conditions, where localized exploitation is either impossible or futile, consideration must be given to the retention of authority to penetrate and exploit at a higher level of command. Under such conditions this must be the burden of the commander: to judge the state of the enemy and overall factors and only commit to an attempt at penetration when conditions, whether opportunistic, or created by previous attritional preparation, are optimal, and required.

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