REVIEW

Peter Simkins: *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* **(Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books 2014). pp. xviii, 254. Hardback, Illus., Maps, Bibliography. RRP: £25**

Peter Simkins is a distinguished historian of the Great War, currently President of the Western Front Association and author of the definitive book on the raising of Britain's New Armies in the first years of the war.[1] His latest work is a series of essays with a common focus: 'the learning curve' that the British Army followed as it advanced from, in European terms, a small force of professionals in 1914 to a greatly enlarged, increasingly conscript army by 1918, which in the last months of the war successfully took on the major role of defeating the German army in the field on the Western Front. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Simkins was one of the originators of the concept of the learning curve in the mid-1980s. Although most academic historians now generally accept the idea, many have criticized it for its implication that the British Army's education path was smooth and always progressive rather than a series of ups and downs like a rollercoaster.[2] In this book, Simkins seems to have acknowledged this criticism and while often using the term learning curve, he also refers to the army's education as a 'learning process' and 're-skilling' (pp. 10, 102). Nevertheless, he makes a robust and convincing defence of the evolution of the British army's tactical doctrine and fighting capacity on the Western Front from the campaign on the Somme in 1916 until the final push for victory during the Hundred Days from August 1918, during which time 'improved tactics and techniques … finally broke the trench stalemate in France and Flanders' (p.11).

In addition to two introductory chapters—one a general historiographical overview and the other concentrating on the historiography of the 1916 Somme campaign—this book comprises six essays, three dealing with 1916 and three with 1918. Simkins' primary interest is the New Army, the Kitchener formations—especially the 12th and 18th Divisions—created in the first years of the war and this is reflected in the subjects and evidence produced in these essays. Of the three chapters on the Somme campaign, two are case studies, the subjects being the capture of Thiepval by the 18th Division as 'a key point in the learning process' and the attempts to capture Frankfort Trench in November. Both are illuminating, but the most important essay on 1916 is 'The Performance of New Army Divisions on the Somme, 1916', which is less an examination of the learning curve *per se* than a considered defence of the New Army

---

[1] Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916* (1986: Barnsley 2007).

[2] See, for example, Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 11-12, 246-48; John Lee, 'The British Divisions at Third Ypres', in Peter H. Liddle (ed), *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (Barnsley 1997), pp. 251-26; William Philpott, 'Beyond the "Learning Curve": The British Army's Military Transformation in the First World War', RUSI Analysis, https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentray/ref:C4AF99AC8B/#.U7C6KxbG78s (accessed 30 June 2014). My own contribution will be: 'Lessons on the Somme: The Tactical Use of the 2nd Guards Brigade Machine Gun Company at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, September 1916', to be published in 2016 by *The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*.

formations on the Somme. Here Simkins uses statistics derived from his own research to bolster his case that, 'in general', New Army Divisions 'were more effective in battle than the popular "Blackadder"-type perception would lead us to believe' (p. 84). His approach involves using the official histories of the Somme campaign to create a list of all British operations on the Somme undertaken by New Army Divisions from 1 July, '281 separate attacks in all' (p.62). He then classifies them on a seven-point scale from 'successful' to 'outright failures'. This allows him to assess the relative qualities of the New Army Divisions at the mid-point of the war when most had had the opportunity to shake down at the Front in the months, in some cases in the year, leading up to 1 July.

One conclusion he reached is 'that the overall success rate—i.e. with all the [five] categories of success brought together—was over 55 per cent and that the proportion of *total or outright failures* in New Army attacks on the Somme was as low as 35.94 per cent (p. 63). Delving deeper, he argues that, despite the last Divisions formed (K5) having varied performances, the earlier the battalions had been raised in the war, the more successful they were likely to be (p. 64). The one tranche of Kitchener battalions more prone to fail than to succeed were those comprising the fourth New Army (K4), the battalions forming the Divisions numbered from 30 to 35. Simkins points out that most of these were Pals battalions and suggests, rather hesitatingly, that 'the strong social cohesion and community links of the Pals formations by no means guaranteed success in battle' (p. 84). Despite the need continually to reorganise and rebuild owing to great losses as the campaign progressed, the keys to a Division's good performance on the Somme were the devolution of decision-making within the infantry to the commander on the spot, with examples even on 1 July (p. 71); and the ability to keep morale high in most formations, despite the defensive prowess of the enemy and the often difficult and frequently atrocious conditions (pp. 81-84). In Simkins' view, some New Army Divisions performed 'at least as well, and in some cases better than, their Regular counterparts' (p. 84). In this essay, however, apart from a focus on devolution of control to local commanders there is no clear assessment of the learning curve/process, which is dealt with in the other two 1916 chapters, with Simkins stating in the 'Key Point' essay that 'there can scarcely be little doubt that various aspects of the BEF's command, organisation and tactics *did* show a marked improvement during, or as a direct result of, the Somme' (p. 102).

The Somme campaign lasted 141 days and thus, based on Simkins' data, Kitchener's divisions were involved, on average, on two occasions every day. These were not, of course, all full-scale attacks such as those that happened on 1 July, 14 July and 15 September. The 281 'separate attacks' include 'strong offensive patrols, company or battalion actions, and bombing attacks' (p. 62), far smaller enterprises. It is a pity that there are no tables accompanying the essay to show how the various attacks were distributed among the Divisions, as the scales might give a more precise indication of the relative burdens borne by each formation. It is known that, generally, each Division spent two 'tours' of the front line during the Somme campaign, with the expectation that in the aftermath they would be played out, requiring rest, reorganisation and regeneration. Were some Divisions given harder tasks than others? By collapsing his categories into 'successful' and 'unsuccessful', Simkins has missed an opportunity to rank the Divisions in order of effectiveness more precisely. Nevertheless, this essay confirms that most New Army Divisions on the Somme performed creditably and were better than some commentators have suggested.

Whatever the formation, to go through the furnace of the Somme and still be capable of fighting was a notable achievement.

Simkins follows the same approach in his three essays relating to aspects of the fighting in 1918. He makes a stout defence of the British Divisions at Villers-Bretonneux during the great German advance from March, answering the criticisms made by Australian forces at the time. In his final two essays Simkins moves on to the Hundred Days, with a study of V Corps in August on the Ancre and an examination of the 12th Division during the final months of the war. After discussing issues of command and control and leadership (he is particularly interesting on battalion command), Simkins perhaps rather surprisingly concludes that 'for all the BEF's superior logistics, improved technology and highly effective combined-arms tactics in the Hundred Days, the doggedness and resilience of the British front-line soldier remained as important—and perhaps even more important—than the methods he employed' (p.205).

In this book Simkins makes a significant contribution to the debate on the British Army's learning curve during the Great War. His soft spot for the two "Eastern" divisions is clear to see and he uses his deep knowledge of the parts they played on the Western Front in 1916 and 1918 to good effect. The walls of the popular view of the war unfortunately appear to remain impregnable, but this readable book should act as an explosive charge on their foundations.

Reviewed by Professor Michael Durey, July 2015
m.durey@murdoch.edu.au