

To Villers-Bretonneux: With Brigadier-General William Glasgow, DSO, and the 13th Australian Infantry Brigade

Peter Edgar

Reviewed by Neil James

This book, based on Peter Edgar's MA Thesis, is more than just an account of one battle. As the sub-title summarises, it is the story of the 13th Brigade. It recounts how the brigade was raised from splitting the 3rd Brigade after the Gallipoli campaign, how it was trained, and how its officers and men learned from the bitter experiences of trench warfare on the Western Front. It also analyses how the men of this brigade experimented and innovated, and how they were molded by the brigade's very able commander, and by its leaders at all levels, into a very effective fighting formation. Many of these lessons remain highly relevant to warfare today

This is a particularly well-researched and well-written account that ably supplements and refreshes the voluminous detail of the official histories. By concentrating on the development and feats of one AIF brigade, it allows the reader to absorb many insights into the experiences, disasters and triumphs of the First AIF in France.

By the end of April 1918 the 13th Brigade had existed for two years and two months, or 790 days. The war experience of its commanding officers and other more experienced officers and soldiers went back three years, or some thousand days if we include the landing at Gallipoli. The brigade had trained in Egypt for 95 days and had been in France for a further 687. Some 206 days out of this 687 (almost 30 per cent) had been spent in the front line, including 26 days (around four per cent) in battle.

During this 26-month period the 13th Brigade fought seven major pitched battles: Mouquet Farm, Second Mouquet Farm, Noreuil, Messines, Polygon Wood, Dernancourt and Villers-Bretonneux. Five were deliberate attacks requiring the crossing of no man's land and coming to grips with a literally entrenched enemy. One, Dernancourt, was a defensive action (followed by a counter-attack). The last, at Villers-Bretonneux, was a hasty counter-attack at night.

Near the end of its second year on the Western Front, Edgar aptly observes: 'At Dernancourt [04-07 April 1918], despite some flaws, the brigade demonstrated competence at all levels and superb control and cohesion of its units. Above all, the success of the Villers-Bretonneux counter-attack revealed a brigade at the height of its powers. From the brigadier and his staff down, the brigade worked together like a champion team'.

To Villers-Bretonneux is a first-class analysis of how this brigade developed from scratch to such a high standard of operational professionalism. Edgar re-emphasises the

truth of the old military axiom about needing to train, and needing to train as you would fight. He also reminds us that it is a complacent myth to assume that Australians are somehow natural soldiers, and that as a country we can supposedly afford to neglect all those things that are needed to maintain a professional army. He concludes: 'How did these

men become effective? Australian soldiers needed no training, so claims the mysterious "myth of the digger". What do we find in the records? The men of the 13th Brigade trained assiduously and they trained eagerly, showing keen interest in new weapons and new tactics. They trained in the Egyptian sun and in the French snow. They trained before battle and after battle. Between the first and second battles of Mouquet Farm they trained. On the morning of Villers-Bretonneux they had begun to train'.

Although the book includes excellent potted biographies of various officers and other ranks Edgar has concentrated on the cohesive whole of the brigade rather than the many individuals who comprised it. He focuses his study on the collective achievements of the men of the 13th Brigade as a team. Moreover, he is not afraid to do so in terms of the great issues at stake in World War I. Nor does he shy away from highlighting the great victories that this brigade, and 21 other Australian ones like it, helped win in the wider strategic and moral contexts.

This is a book structured and written to suit both the buff and the general reader. The balanced summary at the beginning of Chapter 3, concerning some academic skirmishing in the military history theatre of the so-called 'history wars', is both entertaining and informative. His historical discussion in Chapter 5, of the tactical problems in assaulting across no-man's land on the Western Front, is a lucid and concise analysis. The discussion in the 20-page concluding chapter alone is well worth the price of the book, certainly to a professional soldier.

To Villers-Bretonneux, dedicated to the author's great uncle who was killed with the brigade at Noreuil, is a pleasure to own and read; well-researched, well-written, well-indexed, clear maps and tables, relevant old and modern photos with good captions, well-footnoted and very well-presented by the publisher. The book is a most fitting intellectual and practical tribute to the over 12,000 men who served in that fine 4000-man formation between 1916 and 1918. ♦

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