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Peter Hart, *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2008. Pp. 589. ISBN 978-1-60598-016-4.

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Peter Hart, as a Director at the Imperial War Museum, is well-positioned to write a book about this “battle,” among the most infamous in the First World War. He has drawn judiciously on voluminous original materials, including an extensive collection of survivor interviews, to produce a nicely textured, updated analysis of the entire campaign. While most of the text deals with the trials of the soldiers and units at the tactical level, these are tied rather well to the higher direction of the campaign, with concise summations of the strategic necessities the commanders operated under.

As in Martin Middlebrook’s *First Day on the Somme, 1 July 1916*,¹ the model for the present book, Hart begins with stage-setting and follows each separate event or episode based on participants’ testimony. Mercifully, the substantial selections are always apt.² The opening day of the operation takes 210 pages. The steady repetition of the same tale—moving up, waiting in awe for the bombardment to finish, forming up and walking across no-man’s-land until machine-gunned or killed by artillery fire—loses its initial impact after a while. If Hart intended that effect, he succeeded. The pattern continues throughout the book, but the following days and months do indeed change in particulars, offering welcome relief and expanding our understanding of the reasoning of the leaders and the limitations they faced.

Hart carefully details site selection and preparation for the battle—campaign, really—and its supporting infrastructure. The latter comprised the stocking of ammunition, building firing positions in an essentially open plain, digging wells to water the principal motive power of horses, metaling farm roads built to handle nothing larger than wagons, and extensive mining activities.

Hart’s major contribution, however, is the extension of the narrative and testimony beyond the first day. In particular, he demonstrates the learning that took place within the British Army and the adaptation of tactics to the palpable realities facing the soldiers. For example, the Battle of Morval, beginning 25 September, was designed to be “a real ‘bite and hold’ affair, with objectives limited to the new German front-line system and a total advance of just 1,200–1,500 yards” (412). The advance would remain well within range of the British field artillery, which would not need to be displaced forward, wasting precious time setting up for a renewed advance. Further, most importantly, counter-battery practices had been refined and augmented to have significantly greater effect since the opening phase in July. Tank operations, Hart notes, were “more sensibly integrated into the attack plan,” and had “at a stroke ... been placed in their proper context ... [as] a *potentially* useful adjunct to the deadly combination of infantry and artillery” (412).

The lesson is “well known,” even if not true, that in this war in particular, artillery conquered, infantry occupied. Hart makes this point repeatedly, attending to the complimentary issues of density and quality. Haig, he points out several times, often extended the attack frontages unnecessarily, diluting the effectiveness of the guns. Hart stresses right from his opening pages that the early days of the war established the need for greater numbers of guns of various types and capabilities, with a shift away from shrapnel-firing field guns to heavier calibers with ammunition and fusing designed blow up trenches rather than merely showering the troops with sprays of shrapnel. He notes that, as the campaign progressed, British artillery targeting improved. But neither artillery nor mining of whatever extent could be the whole solution. When the British used 60,000 pounds of ammonal to obliterate the Schwaben Höhe Redoubt and many of the deep dugouts nearby, nothing outside the blast was fatally affected and when the Tyneside Scottish tra-

¹ NY: Norton, 1972.

² This general form is developed in fuller detail by a tangentially related book published in cooperation with the Imperial War Museum—Peter Barton’s, *The Battlefields of the First World: The Unseen Panoramas of the Western Front*, rev. ed. (London: Constable, 2008). In it may be found photographs of many whose written words speak from its pages. Whether intended or not, the effect ranges from revolting to numbing.

versed the 800 yards between their jump-off line and the gaping hole in the ground, they were killed in droves by machine-gun fire from flanking positions.

Hart also discusses the struggle for air superiority, noting that the Somme battle began in the air well before a shot was fired on the ground. Both sides had come to understand the importance of aerial reconnaissance, which, of course, necessitated control of the air. At this period, the British had an edge in technology with the introduction of the DH2 and the FE2b fighter planes, despite claims for the superiority of the German Fokkers. Advocates of airpower notwithstanding, only a few bombing attacks were very effective—Hart notes one in which a bomb hit an ammunition dump, destroying most of a German unit in the immediate vicinity (203).

That the dangers of the fog of war affected attackers more than defenders is major theme in the book. The inability to communicate effectively gave rise over time to the practice—even official policy—of commanders at certain levels not leaving their command posts in order to be able to report regularly, even though destruction of forward communications made such reports unreliable. Here also, the air arm was not yet a constructive force. All sorts of measures were attempted, but until reconnaissance aircraft could carry aloft a reliable transmitting mechanism, reports would always be late, and even then, the ability to distinguish friend from foe on the ground required considerable training and experience. As the soldiers learned, the enemy's aircraft could be a nuisance, but their observation balloons were a most reliable warning of forthcoming artillery fire.

Another interesting thematic thread in Hart's account is the speed with which most men adapted to the slaughter all around them. As Second Lieutenant Montague Cleeve put it, "But we had not to mind—eventually one just got over it, thought nothing of it. Dead bodies all over the place, we couldn't help it—we were alive and that's what mattered" (215). Men seem to have become psychological casualties more from the effects of massive bombardments than the sight of the dead and wounded. The question of how this may inform our study of post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) is complicated by the way the British Army classified and handled such casualties over the course of the war, an issue beyond the scope of this work, but clearly hinted at in the soldier testimonies.

Hart demonstrates how the British learned from their experiences as the battle wore on for days and weeks. For example, the 8th Devons had suffered badly on 1 July; two weeks later they stole into no-man's-land at night and positioned themselves close to the German lines. This allowed them to escape the defensive barrage that fell (relatively) harmlessly behind them. In addition, supporting British artillery had been ordered to employ only high explosive, delay-fused ammunition. This was done to prevent the effects of friendly fire—premature detonation in the remaining trees or errant shrapnel rounds (267).

In early November, Haig urged Gough to launch yet another attack. He noted that the situation in Romania had become acute and the Russians were wondering what the British were accomplishing, since very little movement was observable. This larger overlay is often ignored as critics curse Haig. That the Romanian problem was settled by von Mackensen in short order took that issue off the table, but Russian suspicion played out in another way as Roosevelt pushed Operation TORCH partly in response to similar pressure. War is a political act.

Grim as all of this was, Hart's "Assessment" is well worth reading, even if it, too, has to be gruesome. The British suffered some 419,654 casualties, 131,000 dead by his accounting. The French suffered some 204,253 casualties although their records are notoriously bad, and of course the Germans suffered as well—losing between 450,000 and 600,000.

Hart often challenges conventional wisdom; though he may not always be fully convincing, he offers especially cogent alternative arguments in the strategic realm. He is particularly sharp in his criticism of the "Easterners." "Defeat at Gallipoli probably did greater damage to the standing of the British Empire than any imaginary victory could ever have achieved" (531). The evaluation of Haig and his staff is as balanced as one is likely to find: Hart asks why they were so slow to learn what in retrospect seem obvious lessons, yet gives weight to the role of inherited strategic demands.

Hart says his “main interest is in the insights into the human condition granted by studying the conduct of men of all ranks under conditions of incredible stress, fear and suffering” (13). In this he succeeds, but he does a good bit more. He certainly extends the work of Middlebrooke previously mentioned and provides some novel and interesting analyses. Some will wrongly see “excuses” in his interpretations; in fact he has put his finger nicely upon the realities of “learning while doing” under strategically ambivalent conditions and direction. It takes time to see and comprehend the “lessons” of warfare and longer still to provide remedies. Hart’s pragmatic analyses make his book an excellent addition to the World War I scholar’s library; it is also worth reading for professional soldiers—if only for the “how not to” lessons. Though non-specialists may find it heavy going, it does have the excellent quality of returning periodically to the larger strategic context so often absent in mere “battle” narratives. It will likely be the new standard for the bottom-up narrative of the campaign, but, more importantly, it will challenge and inform the next strategic interpretation of the Battle of the Somme.³

³ The book is unusually well equipped with clear, relevant, readable maps—a true godsend. Hart and his editor are to be strongly commended for avoiding the use of original maps, which simply do not reproduce well in 6x9 books.