

# When the Learning Curve Falls: The Ordeal of the 44th Battalion, 25 October 1916

WILLIAM STEWART

*Independent Scholar*

Email: [dr.william.f.stewart@gmail.com](mailto:dr.william.f.stewart@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

*On 25 October 1916, a battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division suffered a stinging repulse in a poorly planned operation. This paper examines how, sixteen weeks into the Somme campaign, senior commanders could launch such a poorly conceived operation that violated current operating principles. The attack ran counter to the overarching notion that the British Army experienced a 'learning curve'. The paper describes the reasons for the failure and argues the learning curve was not a simple monolithic process but multiple curves contingent on circumstances, commander competence, and the pressures from superiors.*

During the night of 25 October 1916, a meagre number of exhausted, wet, cold, and angry survivors of the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division trudged to the rear after yet another abortive attack on Regina Trench during the Somme campaign.<sup>1</sup> Their confidence in the high command was seriously impaired by the incompetently planned and executed attack, and the battalion took months to recover its edge. This was the fourth Canadian attempt to capture Regina Trench, and only one operation—on 21 October—captured and held even a portion of the objective. This paper examines how, sixteen weeks into the Somme campaign, the senior commanders at the corps, division, and brigade levels could launch such a poorly conceived operation that violated current operating principles.

The attack ran counter to the overarching notion that the British Army, and by extension the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), experienced a 'learning curve' over the course of the war and during the Somme campaign.<sup>2</sup> The term is a

---

<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge the assistance of Roger Deeks and Aimée Fox Godden, Geoff Jackson and Stuart Mitchell for their suggestions, and Tim Cook for his always insightful comments.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see William James Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp.14, 38-9;

conceptual framework to explain how the British and dominion forces evolved from the mass and largely de-skilled formations of amateurs in 1916 to the potent all-arms offensive army of 1918. While most historians focused on tactical and operational aspects of the BEF accept the central premise, it is still contested in the broader academic community, with critics attacking its suitability in whole or in part.<sup>3</sup> This article aims to address the concerns that examples of failures to learn would invalidate the notion. More recently, historians now reference multiple learning curves as well as multiple models of how this learning occurred.<sup>4</sup> This reflects the reality of an irregular pattern of improvement across the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and CEF at different command levels, formations, and arms.

Bruce Henderson of the Boston Consulting Group in 1968 first popularised the term 'learning curve' in the business world in referring to the reduction in production

---

Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), p.526; Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Review, 2002), pp.150, 179; Peter Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014), pp.22, 149.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.73-6; George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.26; David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* (W. W. Norton, 2014), pp.397-8; Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War 1914-1918* (OUP Oxford, 2013), p.199; Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914-1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), pp.281-4.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of multiple curves, see Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.247-9; Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915* (Farnham, Surrey ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), pp.1-2. For examples of discussions on learning models, see Robert T. Foley, 'A Case Study in Horizontal Military Innovation: The German Army, 1916-1918,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, Iss. 6 (2012): pp.799-827; Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine : France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Elliot A. Cohen, 'Change and Transformation in Military Affairs,' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27, Iss. 3 (2004): pp.395-407; Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, *The Sources of Military Change : Culture, Politics, Technology, Making Sense of Global Security* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

costs for a specific product over time.<sup>5</sup> The social sciences also use the concept on the basis that: 'Most tasks get faster with practice'.<sup>6</sup> While the results of a single set of trials may show an erratic pattern, as the experimenter runs more trials the curve rises and evens. In terms of the 'Learning Curve' of the British Army, this applies, as each discrete formation had its own set of trials that when added to all the other formations shows an increased proficiency across the army. However, this masks the experience of individual units, which might show great variability from the general trend as units endured significant turnover in personnel and leaders from action to action. The ordeal of the 44th Battalion represents an example of this vagarious pattern.

### Planning

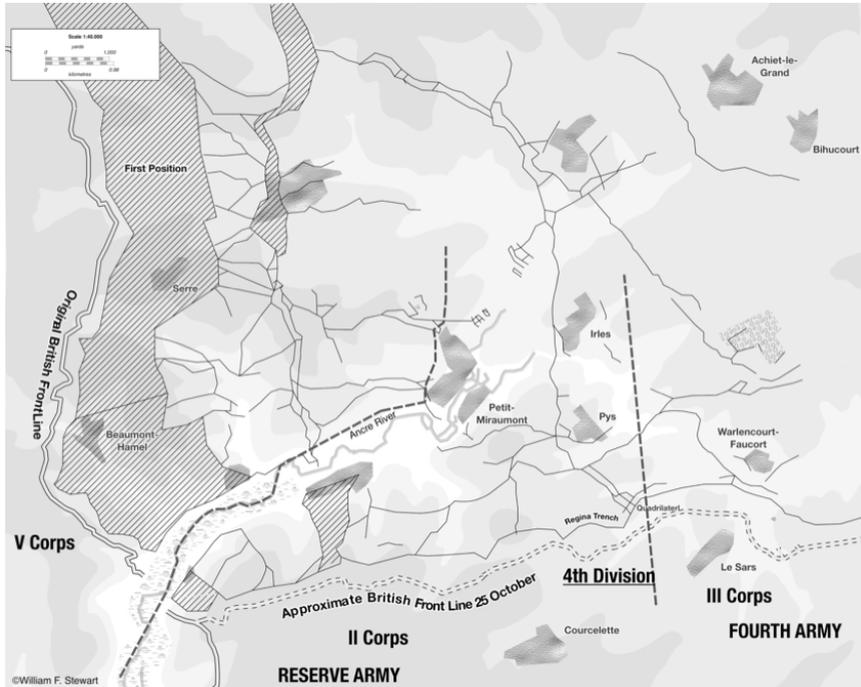
The 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion's fiasco was originally a minor adjunct of a much larger offensive—an army level assault north and south of the Ancre River. The genesis of the operation lay in an ambitious plan by General Sir Douglas Haig, the commander-in-chief of the BEF, to move the focus of the Somme offensive to the north and away from the unpredictability of coordinating operations with the French.<sup>7</sup> Originally conceived as a multi-army attack, Haig had to scale back its scope to an offensive by the reinforced Reserve Army commanded by the aggressive General Sir Hubert Gough (see Map 1). This attack, to take place on 23 October, had to be postponed repeatedly due to weather.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Henderson, 'The Experience Curve,' Boston Consulting Group, [https://www.bcgperspectives.com/content/Classics/strategy\\_the\\_experience\\_curve/](https://www.bcgperspectives.com/content/Classics/strategy_the_experience_curve/), (29 June 2015).

<sup>6</sup> F. E. Ritter, & Schooler, L. J., 'The Learning Curve,' in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Pergamon, 2002), 8603-8605.

<sup>7</sup> TNA, WO 158/246, OAD 182, 17 October 1916; Wilfrid Miles, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1916*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan & Co., 1938), p.391.

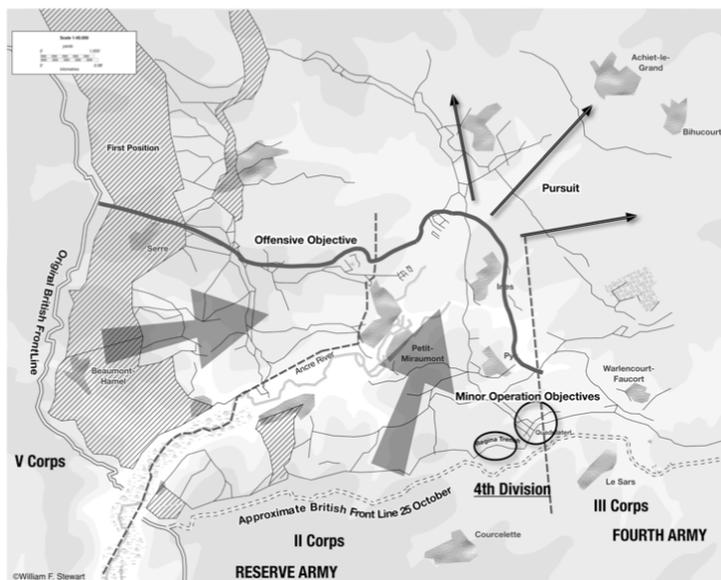


Map 1: Reserve Army Operational Situation 25 October 1916

On 21 October, the Reserve Army issued its orders for the II Corps to attack north to take Miraumont, Pys, and Irlès along the Ancre River valley (see Map 2). The II Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Claud Jacob, included the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division and the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Divisional artilleries (CDA) which remained on the Somme when the Canadian Corps left for Vimy—the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's artillery was training in England. The V Corps to the north of the Ancre would have to punch southeast through the thick German defences running from Serre south to Beaumont Hamel, so Gough gave the more aggressive part of the plan to the II Corps as it faced sparser defences. The Reserve Army also wanted the II Corps to attack to the east to capture the Quadrilateral—a formidably fortified position at the junction of three major trench systems creating a quadrangle that had frustrated the Canadian attack on 8 October—in conjunction with operations of the Fourth Army's III Corps on the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division's right. On 21 October, II Corps issued its orders for the major attack, but unusually for an operation order, it vaguely indicated that 'some hours after Zero Hour, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division' was to advance to capture the Quadrilateral and the spur of ground to its north—this was the genesis of the 44<sup>th</sup>

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

Battalion's attack.<sup>8</sup> Typically, operation orders provided specific tasks and timing on the Somme. Two days later, the corps commanders met with Gough regarding the offensive and decided that the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's Quadrilateral attack would happen after the major offensive owing to uncertainty regarding the Fourth Army's plans.



Map 2: Reserve Army Offensive Plan 21 October 1916

As a preliminary operation, the II Corps attacked on 21 October on a front of 5,000 metres to capture most of Regina Trench. The 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division assaulted on a 600-metre front with its objectives captured in fifteen minutes and with comparatively few casualties.<sup>9</sup> This success undoubtedly influenced the slack preparations for the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion's attack.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the notion that the minor attack was part of a larger offensive, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's operation order specified the attack objectives, frontage, force, and

<sup>8</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v5069, II Corps O.O. No. 45, 22 October 1916.

<sup>9</sup> Miles, *Military Operations 1916* v2, 2: pp.461-3; G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: R. Duhamel, Queen's Printer, 1964), pp.190-1.

<sup>10</sup> Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2005), p.292.

indicated that the division would provide a machine gun and artillery barrage plan.<sup>11</sup> The postponement of the major offensive did not cause the division to revise the order—a key mistake. The first objective of the 4th Division's order was an 800-metre section of Regina Trench, not captured on 21 October, which would give visibility over the Ancre River valley. It ran from the right flank of the portion of Regina Trench captured by the 11th Brigade, to where the trench crossed a country path at the 110-metre contour line (see Map 3). To further ensure observation of the German defences to the east, the 44th Battalion was also to capture a spur running 125 metres to the northeast. The second phase would consist of three battalions capturing the Quadrilateral and spur to its north. Typically, on the Somme, responsibility for bombardment planning was either at the corps or division level depending on the scale of the attack. Any failures in the artillery plan, therefore, were the division's responsibility. No trace of the artillery barrage plan was found in the existing archival material. As noted before, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's artillery was still in England, so the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> CDA supported the attack, with the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> CDA responsible for the artillery plan. This was unlike the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion attack on 9 September in which the Canadian Corps' artillery commander created the bombardment and barrage plan. Assigned artillery included four artillery brigades and the rate of fire for the attack was half of that for the attack on 21 October, with two-thirds the density of guns.<sup>12</sup> The barrage consisted of three bounds starting in front of Regina Trench, switching to it, and then a distant lift to Below Trench. Only one heavy battery supported the attack by firing on Below Trench to the east.

---

<sup>11</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4859, 4th Division War Diary, OO 15, 22 October 1916.

<sup>12</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4961, 3rd Canadian Division Artillery War Diary, 3rd Canadian Division Artillery, OO 39, 23 October 1916; LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4971, War Diary, 12th Brigade CFA, 1st Division Artillery, OO #70, 23 October 1916.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS



Map 3: 44th Battalion Objectives 25 October 1916

Initially, given the uncertainty of the attack's timing, the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade issued a proposal for the minor operation in two phases. The first phase's objective was the remaining

portion of Regina Trench. The proposal gave the timing: 'This operation will, if possible, be carried out on the afternoon previous to the main operation of the II Corps, but should it not be thought feasible the 44<sup>th</sup> will conform to the movements of the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade'.<sup>13</sup> The proposal later triggered a strongly worded critique in the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion's regimental history.<sup>14</sup> This was unfair as it was not an operational order but rather a proposal and reflected the uncertainty emanating from the army, corps, and division. What was faulty was the inordinate detail in how the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade specified the first phase of the operation. Essentially, the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion had little control over how to conduct the operation

The 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade issued a proper operation order the next day specifying that only the first phase of the attack, the capture of Regina Trench, would take place on 24 October.<sup>15</sup> By this time, the terrible weather and ground conditions forced a 24-hour delay in the major offensive—the high command would subsequently push back the army offensive by another five days on 25 October.<sup>16</sup> The 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion's plan repeated the outline from the 10 Brigade's operation order and assigned A Company on the left, B Company in the centre reinforced by C Company, and D Company on the right. After capturing Regina Trench, the first two waves of the centre company were to advance to take the spur and dig in. The centre company would have to advance 800 metres with the other companies only a somewhat shorter distance, a bound four times longer than the Reserve Army's recommended advance to the first objective of 200 metres.<sup>17</sup>

### **III-Omened Regina Trench**

By mid-October, weeks of artillery fire had badly battered Regina Trench but diligent German effort to rebuild the defences ensured it was still a strong position. 4<sup>th</sup> Division intelligence reports indicated that the Canadian artillery severely damaged the barbed wire obstacles but the Germans repaired the damage overnight. For instance, patrols reported that the wire in front of the trench was no obstacle to an infantry attack on the 16, 18, and 19 October, but on 23 October a patrol found the wire was up to three metres deep and one-metre-high in front of the trench. Fog prevented any observation on the night of 24 October.<sup>18</sup> The defences were a deep trench, with dugouts to protect the defenders during the day from shelling. There

---

<sup>13</sup> TNA, WO 95/3895, War Diary, 10th Brigade, 10th CIB Proposals for Minor Operation, 22 October 1916.

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Stanford Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), p.47.

<sup>15</sup> TNA, War Diary, 10th Brigade, 10th CIB OO 17, 23 October 1916.

<sup>16</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v5069, II Corps War Diary, 23, 25 October, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> LAC, RG9 III-C-3 v4089, 20/4, Notes on Offensive Operations, 13 August 1916.

<sup>18</sup> LAC, 4th Division War Diary, 16-24 October 1916.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

was also a secondary line 100 to 150 metres behind it that was outside the bombarded zone that sheltered defenders and machine guns that could fire on the attackers once they passed over the crest of the spur.<sup>19</sup> Although described in the reports of the attacking battalions on 8 October, the artillery plan overlooked it.

The 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion would directly attack positions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reserve *Ersatz Infantry Regiment* of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Ersatz Division*. The division formed in Flanders in August 1915 from independent units, and in June 1916, younger recruits and returned wounded replaced the older men. Its companies were at full strength when it moved into position on 15 October. Captured reports suggest it suffered from problems with straggling, and it was not highly regarded later in the war. After the Somme, it remained on a quiet sector on the Eastern Front, indicating the German High Command regarded it as poor.<sup>20</sup>

The Loupart Woods, Below Trench position, and the Quadrilateral to the east overlooked the attack sector and exacerbated the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's challenge. Machine gun and rifle fire from these positions would enfilade the advancing Canadians and inflict heavy losses if not neutralised. This sector was primarily in the Fourth Army's area, and it was encountering its own set of problems, so the zone was not directly attacked.<sup>21</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Division staff recognised this challenge as early as 15 October in discussions with Gough as these positions threatened any advance to the north.<sup>22</sup> The 24<sup>th</sup> *Infantry Division*, a pre-war regular division from Saxony, defended the position. It had suffered heavily when committed against the Australians at Pozières in early August. Withdrawn and rebuilt, the German High Command inserted it into the line in the night of 13/14 October. Saxons had a reputation for being easy-going, but the division was an effective defensive formation capable of punishing any advance on Regina Trench if not properly suppressed.<sup>23</sup>

The German defensive arrangements were predicated on mutual support, such that positions not only defended their direct front but enfiladed enemy advances on

---

<sup>19</sup> LAC, RG9 III-C-3 v4227, 14/7, 4th Cdn.Div., G-52-5, 15 October 1916.

<sup>20</sup> LAC, MG30 E40, Erlebach Fonds, Narrative of the Enemy's Side I. Battles of the Somme 1916, War Narrative Section CEF, July 1920, p.30; General Staff Intelligence Section, *Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army Which Participated in the War (1914-1918)* (Government Publishing Office, 1920), p.115.

<sup>21</sup> William James Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London: Abacus, 2010), p.458.

<sup>22</sup> LAC, Summary of Intel, 9 October 1916.

<sup>23</sup> LAC, Narrative of the Enemy's Side, p.27; Section, *251 Divisions*: p.343; Andrew Lucas and Jorgen Schmieschek, *Fighting the Kaiser's War: The Saxons in Flanders 1914/1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2015), p.24.

adjacent sectors. As one commentator on the British Official History reported, 'We used to pound the hell out of our objective and often did not appreciate the German method of defence was that no place really defended itself, but defended its neighbour'.<sup>24</sup> This meant the attackers had to not only neutralise the defenders on the attack front but those on the flanks. Successful single-battalion attacks were of necessity resource intensive. Assuming the defenders had to be neutralised on each flank for a distance of 500 metres and with an attack frontage of 500 metres per battalion, single battalion attacks needed suppressing fire for a frontage of 1,500 metres.<sup>25</sup> While a two-division attack of eight battalions, similar to the 8 October attack, needed only neutralising fire for 633 metres per battalion on average. As a result, the demand on artillery resources for a single battalion attack was proportionally far greater—almost two and half times—than that of a multi-brigade attack. The planners of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, and even many in the British army on the Somme, seem to not have recognised this requirement.

### **Units and Commanders**

Lieutenant-General Claud Jacob, the 53-year-old commander of the II Corps, was a rarity among corps commanders on the Western Front, as one out of only two Indian Army officers who led a corps in the BEF.<sup>26</sup> Also, he lacked any formal staff training. Jacob, a Royal Military College Sandhurst graduate, transferred to the Indian Army in 1884 after two years' service in the Worcester Regiment.<sup>27</sup> He had an unremarkable career in the Indian Army and was on his last assignment before retirement.<sup>28</sup> The war plucked him from obscurity, and he rapidly rose from commanding an Indian infantry brigade on the Western Front to leading the Meerut Division in 1915. Jacob then successfully rebuilt the shattered 21<sup>st</sup> Division after Loos—a telling sign, as many commanders of the Indian Corps were not well respected by the British regulars.<sup>29</sup> He received command of the II Corps in May 1916. The high command considered him a safe pair of hands as a corps commander, and he survived Gough's regime through the Passchendaele campaign, although junior

---

<sup>24</sup> TNA, CAB 45/136, 162-5, Comments, BOH, Mostyn, 15 March 1937.

<sup>25</sup> This was the ideal range for the German MG '08 machine gun. Graeme Chamley Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1940), p.64.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-18: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p.516.

<sup>27</sup> 'Field-Marshal Sir Claud William Jacob GCB GCSI KCMG,' [http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main=inc/c\\_jacob](http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main=inc/c_jacob), (2 March 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Robbins, *British Generalship*: p.156.

<sup>29</sup> Kathryn Louise Snowden, 'British 21st Infantry Division on the Western Front, 1914 - 1918, A Case Study in Tactical Evolution' (Masters, University of Birmingham, 2001), p.17; Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory*: p.297.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

officers thought him afraid of Gough.<sup>30</sup> Gough in his autobiography called him the 'soundest officer in the British Army'.<sup>31</sup> Further, he reviewed intelligence reports of the enemy defences and the artillery barrage and protective fire plans before approving an attack.<sup>32</sup> Lloyd George considered him as a replacement for Douglas Haig in January 1918 which indicated his high reputation with the political authorities.<sup>33</sup> His positive attributes, as will be seen, did not appear to be engaged in this operation.

The Canadian government offered the 4<sup>th</sup> Division on 19 January 1916 in the aftermath of Prime Minister Robert Borden's surprise announcement of the increase of the CEF's authorized strength to 500,000 men, and the British Army council accepted it at the end of January.<sup>34</sup> The 44-year-old commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was Major-General David Watson from Quebec City. This tall and athletic officer was a consummate political general with a decidedly mixed record. Even Patrick Brennan in his generally positive article on Watson, indicated Watson's command would 'forever be associated with some of the most costly setbacks suffered by the Canadian Corps'.<sup>35</sup> In fairness, his division generally performed well on the Somme. While it was expedient, he closely associated with Sam Hughes, the mercurial Canadian minister of militia and defence. For instance, Watson accompanied Sam Hughes on his pre-war visit to the British and French manoeuvres.<sup>36</sup> In 1914, as a Militia officer commanding the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment in Quebec City, Watson was the

---

<sup>30</sup> Robbins, *British Generalship*: pp.189-90.

<sup>31</sup> Michael LoCicero, *A Moonlight Massacre: The Night Operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917: The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres* (Solihull, West Midlands, England: Helion, 2014), p.78.

<sup>32</sup> LoCicero, *A Moonlight Massacre*: p.77.

<sup>33</sup> David R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (Newark, London: University of Delaware Press; Associated University Presses, 1983), p.240.

<sup>34</sup> LAC, RG24 v1812, GAQ 4-3, Offer of a Fourth Canadian Division, 19 January 1916; LAC, RG24 v1812, GAQ 4-3, Colonial Secretary to Governor General, 31 January 1916; LAC, RG24 v1812, GAQ 4-3, Cubitt to MacDougall, 121/Overseas/1604, 11 February 1916; Geoffrey Jackson, 'The British Empire on the Western Front: A Transnational Study of the 62nd West Riding Division and the Canadian 4th Division' (PhD, University of Calgary, 2013), p.16.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Brennan, 'Major-General David Watson: A Critical Appraisal of Canadian Generalship in the Great War,' in Andrew B. Godefroy, (ed.), *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership 1914-1918* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), p.111.

<sup>36</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-1 v4734, 144/10, Biography, David Watson.

wealthy managing director of the Conservative-Party-aligned *Quebec City Chronicle*.<sup>37</sup> He commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at the Second Battle of Ypres with distinction and earned the promotion to command the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade in September 1915. In April 1916, he received the 4<sup>th</sup> Division owing to Sam Hughes' political machinations, as his record in command of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade was not especially distinguished. The Canadian Corps commander thought Brigadier-General Henry Burstall, the corps artillery commander, was a better choice, but Hughes overruled him.<sup>38</sup> Watson's 'brilliant and arrogant,' also 'supremely confident, forceful, and pointed,' GSO 1, the 26-year-old Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Ironside, purportedly dominated Watson.<sup>39</sup> 'Tiny' Ironside at 6' 4" loomed over Watson both literally and metaphorically, and had a poor opinion of Watson, stating, 'He had risen above anything that he should have done and was at a loss commanding a Division'.<sup>40</sup> This was an opinion shared by the well-respected senior British administrative staff officer Brigadier-General George Farmar.<sup>41</sup>

The commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade was Brigadier-General William St Pierre Hughes, 52, a veteran of long service in the Militia, including fighting in the 1885 North-West Rebellion.<sup>42</sup> Pre-war, Hughes was the Chief Warden of the Kingston Penitentiary and commander of Kingston's 14<sup>th</sup> Princess of Wales Own Regiment. Tall, and gangly, he raised and led the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion through the Battle of St. Eloi Craters. Hughes, received the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade in July 1916, after Sam Hughes' 'Personal Representative' in England strong-armed Hughes' division commander to withdraw an adverse report.<sup>43</sup> He was well-respected by his battalion—they carried him on their shoulders when he was promoted—but pressure from Sam Hughes got him the

---

<sup>37</sup> 'Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online - Sir David Watson,' [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id\\_nbr=8411](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id_nbr=8411), (19 March 2013).

<sup>38</sup> LAC, RG9 III-A-1 v114, Alderson to Carson, 23 April 1916.

<sup>39</sup> Brennan, 'Major-General David Watson,' p.149; Jackson, 'British Empire on the Western Front,' p.18.

<sup>40</sup> Ironside did also say Watson 'treated me very well indeed and I could not have had a more happy and successful two years than I had with the Canadians'. McGill Archives, MG4027 C1, Urquhart Fonds, 12, General Ironside Comments, 18 December 1934; Edmund Ironside, *High Road to Command: The Diaries of Major-General Sir Edmund Ironside, 1920-1922* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), p.71.

<sup>41</sup> McGill Archives, MG4027 C1, Urquhart Fonds, 13, General Farmar Comments, 1934.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen J. Nichol, *Ordinary Heroes: Eastern Ontario's 21st Battalion C.E.F. In the Great War* (Almonte, ON: Stephen J. Nichol, 2008), p.5; LAC, RG150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 4601-22, W. St. Pierre Hughes Service Jacket.

<sup>43</sup> William F. Stewart, *The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), p.115.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

brigade.<sup>44</sup> Hughes had less than a month with the unit before it left for France. Hughes' brigade major was a British regular army officer and Sandhurst graduate, Captain V. B. 'Rammer' Ramsden of the South Wales Borders. He was commissioned in 1908 and was serving as a staff officer when appointed to the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade on 2 July 1916.<sup>45</sup> Watson would later excoriate Ramsden and the rest of Hughes' brigade staff for incompetence, presumably for failures on the Somme.<sup>46</sup>

The 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion was part of the all-western 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade. The battalion, formed in February 1915 from three Winnipeg Militia regiments, arrived in England in October 1915. But, by May 1916, five separate drafts of officers and men had drained it of 1,200 replacements, resulting in a husk of a unit remaining.<sup>47</sup> Selected by Watson and Ironside for the 4<sup>th</sup> Division in May 1916, it received 842 other ranks and 18 officers indicating how few of the original 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion men remained.<sup>48</sup> The unit had to retrain in a little over three months before leaving for France.<sup>49</sup> As a result, the battalion on arrival in France in August 1916 was still green and undertrained. The attack would be its first significant action. It went into the assault with only 400 men, because of casualties, illness, detachments, and men left out of battle.<sup>50</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel E.R. Wayland, a 47-year-old grain exporter from Fort William (now Thunder Bay), commanded it. Born in England but a resident of Canada for over twenty-five years, Wayland was the senior major of the 95<sup>th</sup> Lake Superior Regiment at the start of the war.<sup>51</sup> Wayland was serving as the second-in command of the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion

---

<sup>44</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4930, 21st Battalion War Diary, 13 July 1916.

<sup>45</sup> 'LG 28111 Appointment of Gentlemen Cadets,' *London Gazette*, 21 February 1908; 'LG 29419 Commands and Staff,' *London Gazette*, 28 December 1915; 'LG 29686 Commands and Staff,' *London Gazette*, 25 July 1916.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes' Staff Captain, Captain J. S. Gzowski, was Hughes's son-in-law. 'The Other Hughes: Brigadier General William St Pierre Hughes DSO VD,' [https://onedrive.live.com/view.aspx?resid=C70204216F58E5E6!2094&ithint=file%2c.doc&app=Word&authkey=!AFvKDmNQw7\\_EDko](https://onedrive.live.com/view.aspx?resid=C70204216F58E5E6!2094&ithint=file%2c.doc&app=Word&authkey=!AFvKDmNQw7_EDko), (12 September 2015), , 1914 #7521

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Wilson, 'Guide to Sources Relating to Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force - Infantry Battalions,' (Library and Archives, Canada, 2012), 218.

<sup>48</sup> Russenholt, *6000 Canadian Men*: p.21.

<sup>49</sup> LAC, RG41 v13, CBC Interview Robinson, 44th Battalion.

<sup>50</sup> LAC, RG24 v1906, DHS 5-7-39, 44th Battalion History Comments.

<sup>51</sup> George F. G. Stanley, *In the Face of Danger: The History of the Lake Superior Regiment* (Port Arthur, Ont.: Lake Superior Scottish Regiment, 1960), p.6; LAC, RG150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 10166, E.R. Wayland Service Jacket.

while it was still in Canada when he transferred, so he had no active service.<sup>52</sup> His selection was due to his experience with the 95<sup>th</sup> Regiment, his time with the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and his staunch support of the Conservative Party.<sup>53</sup> He led the unit through the Somme to December 1916, when he left for England, because of injuries suffered in May 1916, although there were indications that Watson was unhappy with Wayland's command.<sup>54</sup> Wayland was five years older than the average Canadian battalion commander on the Somme and that along with his injury limited his impact in the campaign.<sup>55</sup> The author of the regimental history suggested in a later CBC interview that Wayland was not up to the rigours of the campaign, and that there were deficiencies in the battalion's leadership.<sup>56</sup>

### **Attack**

Conditions were so ghastly that the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion took eight hours to get into position on the night of the planned attack. In a later interview, one participant reported that the men had to advance along the top of the communication trenches despite the risks of artillery, sniper, and machine-gun fire, because mud and muck so obstructed the communication trenches.<sup>57</sup> Adding to the troops' exhaustion was the burden of carrying 220 rounds of ammunition, 4 grenades, 5 sandbags, and either a pick or a shovel. This indicates the battalion's inexperience, as veteran units tried to minimise the weight carried.<sup>58</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Division later claimed that men's equipment was so coated with mud it weighed 120 pounds—not much less than the average weight of the men.<sup>59</sup> Owing to the delay in getting into position, the men's fatigue, and clogged rifles, the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade had to postpone the attack by one day.<sup>60</sup> The men remained in the sodden trenches for a further twenty-four hours in pouring rain, which further enervated them.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> LAC, Wayland Service Jacket; Department of Militia and Defence, *The Quarterly Militia List of the Dominion of Canada (Corrected to June 30, 1914)* (Ottawa: Department of Militia and Defence, 1914), pp.98, 288.

<sup>53</sup> LAC, RG9 III-A-1 v234, 6-W-153, Wayland to Carson, 15 March 1916.

<sup>54</sup> LAC, Watson Fonds, MG30 E69, David Watson Diary, 5 & 6 January 1917.

<sup>55</sup> William F. Stewart, 'Byng Boys': A Profile of Senior Commanders of Canadian Combat Units on the Somme 1916,' *War in History* 23, Iss. 1 (2016): p.69.

<sup>56</sup> LAC, 44th Battalion History Comments.

<sup>57</sup> LAC, CBC Interview Robinson, 44th Battalion.

<sup>58</sup> Russenholt, *6000 Canadian Men*: p.49.

<sup>59</sup> LAC, RG9 III-C-1 v3843, 44/1, Lessons to Be Derived from Operations on the Somme, 23 December 1916.

<sup>60</sup> TNA, War Diary, 10th Brigade, 24 October 1916.

<sup>61</sup> LAC, CBC Interview Robinson, 44th Battalion.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

Promptly at 7:00 a.m. on 25 October supported by a desultory barrage, the battalion's troops climbed out of their trenches and slowly advanced in the clinging mud (see Map 4). The artillery barrage was so weak that unsuppressed German machine gun and rifle fire, followed shortly by an artillery barrage, slaughtered the attackers. Untroubled by Canadian shelling, the defenders stood waist high to shoot the Canadians.<sup>62</sup> Fierce fire from Regina Trench and effective enfilade volleys from the Quadrilateral and Below Trench on the right scythed down the attackers and forced the survivors to go to ground long before they reached Regina Trench. No attackers even reached the German wire, and many survivors had to wait to nightfall to return to the original front line. The battalion suffered approximately 50% losses with 32 killed, 159 wounded, and 23 missing, with almost all the missing having died on the battlefield.<sup>63</sup> The death total was probably understated, as a search of the War Graves database indicates 68 deaths from the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion from 25 October to 30 October 1916, with 29 having no known grave.<sup>64</sup> This probably understates the total as more men may have died from their wounds after this date. Some of these losses might have resulted from earlier injuries, but that number was likely quite small. The battalion history reported the casualties, exhaustion, and anger at the incompetence of the high command undermined the battalion's confidence in its leadership.<sup>65</sup> The battalion's war diary later reported in surprising candour that 'Many of the men suffering from exhaustion and exposure' and that 'the Moral [sic] is somewhat shaken'.<sup>66</sup>

---

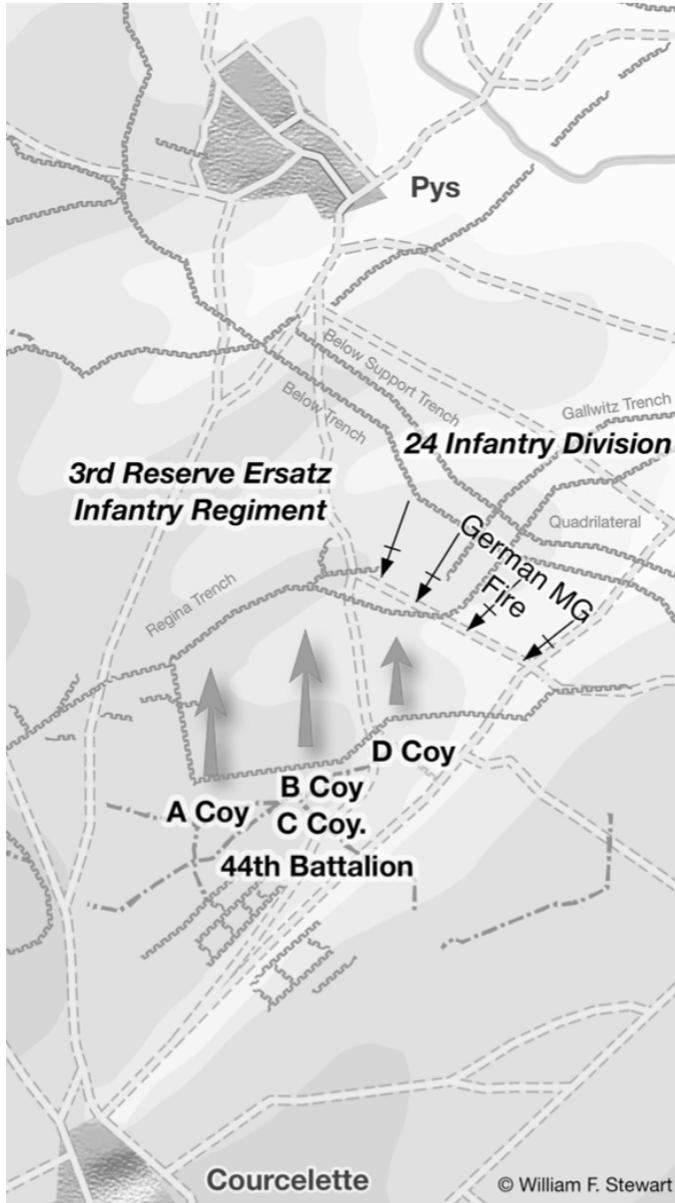
<sup>62</sup> Nicholson, *CEF*: p.191.

<sup>63</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4939, 44th Battalion War Diary, 25 October 1916.

<sup>64</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 'Find War Dead,' <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx?cpage=1>, (4 March 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Russenholt, *6000 Canadian Men*: p.53.

<sup>66</sup> LAC, 44th Battalion War Diary, 27-8 October 1916.



Map 4: 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion Attack 25 October 1916

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

Reports from the battalion, brigade, and guns all agree that the artillery support for the attack was far too light. The key defensive positions at the Quadrilateral and Below Trench were untouched, and the barrage on Regina Trench was weak and inaccurate. Hughes later claimed the artillery commanders told him that the guns were unregistered.<sup>67</sup> One man claimed he saw only one shell fired during the engagement, and, while this was an exaggeration, the artillery barrage was woefully inadequate. The commander of the brigade machine-gun company also reported he received no orders to fire a barrage but decided to do so to provide moral support for the attackers.<sup>68</sup> The planned shell density was considerably less than in previous engagements and this does not factor in that many pieces firing were unregistered and so inaccurate.

### Aftermath

One of the striking aspects of this lamentable battle was how the different command levels shaped its narrative. The 44th Battalion, both in the immediate aftermath and its subsequent regimental history, ascribed the repulse to the weakness of the supporting artillery fire, resulting in German machine-gun and artillery fire slaughtering the attackers, and the terrible field conditions.<sup>69</sup> The battalion was convinced the blame lay with the 10th Brigade.<sup>70</sup> A brigade staff officer claimed Hughes would not allow a barrage map be drawn, which is odd as that was the responsibility of the divisional artillery.<sup>71</sup> The 10th Brigade also blamed the weak and unsatisfactory barrage and machine gun fire from the flank, while the 4th Division, in explaining the fiasco to the II Corps, focused on the heavy German machine gun fire from the right flank.<sup>72</sup> The 4th Division was trying to avoid taking the blame for the inadequacy of its planning and fire provision, and Watson, a consummate schemer, later shifted the responsibility for the debacle to Hughes. When Sam Hughes fell in November 1916, and with the 4<sup>th</sup> Division now serving in the Canadian Corps, Watson worked to dismiss Bill Hughes. Watson stated: 'I am divided between my sense of duty and my personal regard for our former minister, who would naturally feel very bad, if I had to make an adverse report'.<sup>73</sup> He pressured Lieutenant-General Julian Byng, the commander of the Canadian Corps, to replace Hughes, and Byng

---

<sup>67</sup> Nicholson, *CEF*: p.191. Note the reference document can no longer be found at the LAC.

<sup>68</sup> LAC, 44th Battalion History Comments.

<sup>69</sup> Russenholt, *6000 Canadian Men*: pp.50-51; LAC, 44th Battalion War Diary, 25 October 1916.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholson, *CEF*: p.191.

<sup>71</sup> LAC, 44th Battalion History Comments.

<sup>72</sup> TNA, War Diary, 10th Brigade, Intelligence Report, 10 CIB, 26 October 1916; LAC, II Corps War Diary, Ironside to II Corps, 25 October 1916.

<sup>73</sup> LAC, MG27 II D12 v4-7, Perley Fonds, v7/3, Watson to Perley, 25 November 1916.

initially resisted by giving Hughes a severe reprimand which suggests Byng was not convinced Hughes deserved removal.<sup>74</sup> Watson also demanded Hughes adversely report on his staff or he would replace him. Hughes fought to retain his son-in-law but sacrificed the others, and Watson grudgingly agreed.<sup>75</sup> This was not enough for Watson, and he kept demanding Hughes' supersession, which he accomplished on 18 January 1917.<sup>76</sup> Patrick Brennan believes Hughes was responsible for the failure, and undoubtedly Hughes was not a first-rate brigadier; nevertheless, he was not the main culprit in the defeat.<sup>77</sup>

## **Analysis**

Placed into an impossible situation, the failure was not the battalion's fault. Instead, the proximate reasons for the repulse were a poorly planned and sparse artillery barrage; too few troops, attacking too broad a front in too much depth; troop exhaustion; and weather and field conditions. The supporting fire was deficient as reported by the battalion and brigade—even a field artillery brigade reported that the barrage was light.<sup>78</sup> This resulted from an incompetent fire support plan and shoddy command arrangements resulting in inadequate registration. Compared to previous attacks, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's artillery plan was inadequate. In a single battalion attack by the more experienced 1<sup>st</sup> Division on 9 September, the artillery fire had three and half times the density of the 25 October attack. Even the 21 October attack was two and two-thirds times greater, with either attacks or an artillery barrage on each flank.<sup>79</sup> On 25 October, the artillery did not shell the defenders on both flanks, with the result that heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from the Quadrilateral and Below Trench massacred the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion. As Nicholson in his *Gunners of Canada* pointedly observed, 'The surprising thing is that with the infantry attack being delivered on a relatively quiet front, the task tables for the operation

---

<sup>74</sup> LAC, Watson Diary, 4, 5, 7 December 1916; Brennan, 'Major-General David Watson,' p.118.

<sup>75</sup> LAC, Watson Diary, 13 December 1916.

<sup>76</sup> LAC, Watson Diary, 4, 6, 8, 10 December 1916; LAC, Wayland Service Jacket.

<sup>77</sup> Brennan, 'Major-General David Watson,' p.138.

<sup>78</sup> LAC, War Diary, 12 CFA, 25 October 1916.

<sup>79</sup> On 25 October, the barrage had an average of one gun firing on 16.7 metres of front at two rounds per minute which gave a density of .12 rounds per minute per metre. On 9 September, the barrage had one gun per 14 metres, firing at 6 rounds per minute, with a fire density of .43 rounds per minute per metre. On 21 October, the figures were one gun per 12.5 metres at a rate of 4 rounds per minute and a fire density of .32 rounds per minute per metre. LAC, War Diary, 12 CFA, 1st Division Artillery, OO #70, 23 October 1916; LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4957, War Diary, GOCRA Canadian Corps, OO #22, 7 September 1916; LAC, War Diary, 12 CFA, 1 CDA OO #59, 18 October 1916.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

reveal that the flanks received little attention in the barrage'.<sup>80</sup> In summary, the planned concentration of fire on 25 October was significantly less than previous comparable successful operations and left a critical defensive sector untouched.<sup>81</sup>

The actual concentration of fire on 25 October was far less than planned owing to an egregious error by the commander of the 1st Divisions artillery—the de-facto artillery commander for the 4<sup>th</sup> Division—in moving the 1<sup>st</sup> CDA, the majority of the guns for the barrage, before the battle.<sup>82</sup> As a result, they had little opportunity to register given the dreadful weather—a point admitted to Hughes who passed this information to Watson.<sup>83</sup> Without registration, artillery fire was inaccurate in 1916, and so even less effective than planned. Thus, the combination of a flawed scheme and poor command arrangements meant a weak barrage. On the Somme, ineffective artillery preparation resulted in attack failure. As an II Corps battle analysis from September 1916 stated, 'If the artillery plan is complete and the gunners are given full time to carry through their programme, the battle is three quarters won before our infantry appear on the scene at all'.<sup>84</sup> With the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the battle was three-quarters lost before it began.

The frontage of the attack was excessive for a weakened battalion. It attacked on an 800-metre front with 400 men on 25 October. Earlier successful Canadian attacks, such as at Courcellette, were on a 200 to 300 metre sector per full-strength battalion. The 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade's 21 October victory involved six companies on a total frontage of 550 metres.<sup>85</sup> Assuming each of the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade's companies was as weak as the 44<sup>th</sup>'s hundred men companies, this gave a density of over one man per metre. In contrast, the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion advanced with one man per two metres; half of the

---

<sup>80</sup> G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada; the History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), p.269.

<sup>81</sup> Like all the divisions in the II Corps, the 4th Division was supported by other divisions' artillery. This applied to the Canadian Corps during its operations on the Somme, as well. The artillery plan was developed by the Commander, Royal Artillery of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division Artillery Brigadier Herbert Thacker, an experienced officer who had already served six weeks on the Somme. The failure in planning was not due to inexperience.

<sup>82</sup> LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4958, 1st Canadian Division Artillery War Diary, 22, 23 October 1916.

<sup>83</sup> Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada; the History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery*: p.291; Nicholson, *CEF*: p.191; LAC, 44th Battalion History Comments.

<sup>84</sup> TNA, WO 158/344, II Corps, G.1564, 19 September 1916.

<sup>85</sup> Cook, *At the Sharp End*: p.511; LAC, RG9 III-D-3 v4944, 87th Battalion War Diary; L. McLeod Gould, *From B.C. To Baisieux: Being the Narrative History of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion* (Victoria, B.C.: T.R. Cusack, 1919), p.32.

successful attack. Further, this does not consider the advantage of participating in a multi-division attack on 21 October. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division made a serious error in committing too few men to the attack.

The distance the battalion needed to cover to reach Regina Trench was unreasonable, especially considering the muddy conditions. The battalion was to advance 400 to 800 metres; far in excess of the doctrinaire distance of 200 metres.<sup>86</sup> This resulted from a continuing failure of first the Canadian Corps and later the 4<sup>th</sup> Division to dig jump-off trenches closer to Regina Trench. Gough criticised the condition and position of the Canadian forward trenches in early October and the Canadians did not address it.<sup>87</sup> Byng later commented that his Canadians 'will fight, and die, if necessary, in the last ditch, but by God, gentlemen, I cannot get them to dig that ditch'.<sup>88</sup>

A lesser factor was that the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion's men were exhausted by the time of the attack after their debilitating move and twenty-four hours spent in the rain in their jump-off positions. The continuing wet and cold weather and the muddy ground exacerbated this. While this affected their energy and enthusiasm for the attack, the failed barrage was a far more critical factor in the failure. Given the weather, there was likely not enough time to move another battalion into position without a real risk that the move could not be completed in time.

Ultimately, the attack was a debacle because of multiple command failures from Jacob down to Wayland. These failures fall into the categories of sins of commission—Watson and Hughes—and omission—Jacob and Wayland. Jacob can be faulted for ordering a small-scale mission to proceed after the postponement of the larger operation. Further, despite his reputation for checking plans, it was evident that he did not do so, as a corps commander with Jacob's experience would not launch such a poorly conceived operation. Wayland did not protest that the operation order demanded too much from his unit. This criticism has to be tempered with the realisation that a Canadian Militia officer with no prior active service, in an army environment that did not welcome objections, had limited ability to protest. Wayland had no previous successes or experience to base his challenge upon and so would be vulnerable to the accusation he was being 'sticky', which was a sure path to getting sacked.

There is no evidence of Hughes pushing back against the division's flawed plan, other than passing on the information about the artillery registration issue to Watson.

---

<sup>86</sup> LAC, Notes on Offensive Operations.

<sup>87</sup> LAC, RG9 III-C-1 v3843, 44/5, Reserve Army S.G. 66/25, 6 October 1916.

<sup>88</sup> LAC, RG24 v1825, GAQ 5-67, The Fight for the Craters D.E. Macintyre, 1936?

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

Based on the current operating procedures, Hughes should have realised the impossibility of success with the plan and protested. Hughes should have done more to ensure the resources necessary for success were applied in the attack. Like Wayland, however, he was not in a strong position. He was not Watson's choice for command of the 10th Brigade. Watson had already criticised Hughes twice in August, so he must have known he was on a short leash and was likely cowed.<sup>89</sup> He was a weak brigade commander but at least some part of Watson's later animus stemmed from Watson's desire to shift blame from himself.

Brennan and the regimental history ascribe the majority of the operation's debacle to Hughes, but that is undeserved. Watson, Ironside, and the division staff were primarily responsible.<sup>90</sup> The division specified all main factors in the failure—the paltry and poorly planned fire support, an advance too broad and too deep, and with insufficient forces. Only the weather and the men's exhaustion were not Watson's responsibility. The division and not the brigade planned the artillery barrage, so it is illuminating that, while the battalion and brigade blamed the poor barrage in their reports, the division attributed the repulse to machine-gun fire. A failure as egregious as 25 October had to be assigned to someone in the chain of command, and Watson shifted the responsibility to Hughes.

### **Learning Curve Implications**

How, if the British Army was operating on a learning curve on the Somme, did such an ill-conceived and executed attack be launched? Sixteen weeks into the Somme campaign, the BEF had amassed a large body of bitterly-won experience, which the British and Canadian senior commanders and staff appear to have ignored in this operation. The challenge with the term 'learning curve' is that it is useful in the broadest sense but breaks down when examining individual cases. It would be facile to argue, as some have, that the British Army did not develop over the course of the war, did not learn, and did not improve. The term, however, carries a risk that, while it describes the process of improvement in the macro sense, it can fail when looking at specific levels of command, arms, or individual formations. Further, the notion of a learning curve, when applied to the BEF, differs in an important respect from that of the social sciences or manufacturing. In those worlds, the tasks or trials are run against a static problem. In the case of the British Army, the task was in constant flux. The learning curve therefore operated in a dynamic environment, as the enemy changed their weapons, tactics, organisation, doctrine, communications, defensive arrangements, and supply of material in reaction to their own learning curve and that of their enemies. Rather than a single curve, each formation, arm, and branch

---

<sup>89</sup> LAC, Watson Diary, 8, 30 August 1916.

<sup>90</sup> Jackson, 'British Empire on the Western Front,' p.57.

underwent its own journey, so it is more appropriate to refer to multiple learning curves.

The ordeal of the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion was an example of the erratic pattern of the curve. Jacob of the II Corps had the reputation as one of the more competent commanders on the Somme, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's other operations on the Somme were successful. Why then was this not applied to this operation? Ultimately, it stemmed from a serious underestimation of the German opponent, its origin as a minor subsidiary operation, and the questionable competence of Watson and his staff. Two weeks before the attack, Haig insisted that the Germans were fading and that it was time to take greater risks.<sup>91</sup> Brigadier-General John Charteris, the chief intelligence officer at General Headquarters, echoed Haig's injunction. Charteris claimed in early October, 'There is no doubt that the German is a changed man...His tail is down, he surrenders freely, and on several occasions he has thrown down his rifle and ran away, and altogether there is hope that a really bad rot may set in any day'.<sup>92</sup> These types of statements created an atmosphere that underplayed the Germans' effectiveness and justified taking greater risks than before. The relative ease with which the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade had taken its objectives on 21 October reinforced this attitude.<sup>93</sup>

One of the most significant factors in the defeat of the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion was the commanders' failure to adjust the plan to reflect the changed situation. Conceived as an adjunct operation to a major offensive, it possibly had some merit. Once Gough postponed the major attack, however, this minor operation had its own momentum. This indicates poor planning and command by Jacob and Watson. A lack of understanding of how the German defences worked magnified the planner's misjudgement. Ten days before the battle, Gough pointed out the importance of the Quadrilateral, Loupart Woods, and the Below position, but the artillery barrage and preparation effectively ignored these defences.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with Watson who was a better political infighter than a commander. While the division performed generally well on the Somme, it had more failures than the other Canadian divisions in 1917 and 1918, as witnessed by the abortive gas attack prior to Vimy, the failed assault on Hill 145 at Vimy, the defeat at the Green Grassier during the Hill 70 attack and the issues during the

---

<sup>91</sup> OAD 174, 11 October 1916, WO 158/246, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Jim Beach, *Haig's Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army, 1916-1918* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.215.

<sup>93</sup> LAC, 44th Battalion History Comments.

## WHEN THE LEARNING CURVE FALLS

Drocourt-Queant offensive.<sup>94</sup> This suggests Watson and the division staff were unable to travel up the learning curve as rapidly as did the other divisions. Thus, the learning curve was not a simple monolithic process but multiple curves contingent on circumstances, competence of the commanders and staff, and the pressures from superiors. At the core of the learning process was the willingness of commanders to discover, embrace, and employ the lessons earned at such a bloody cost, and not every organisation was able to move up the curve in a smooth and always progressing manner. In the case of the 25 October attack, the commanders ignored or overlooked the lessons. This does not, however, invalidate the notion. As for the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion, like other battalions, it had good days and bad days, but, similarly to the rest of the Canadian Corps, it steadily improved and became more effective as the war progressed.

---

<sup>94</sup> Brennan, 'Major-General David Watson,' p.111; Tim Cook, "A Proper Slaughter": The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge,' *Canadian Military History* 8, Iss. 2 (1999): p.14.