

7-6-2015

The Art of Minor Operations: Canadian Trench Raiding, 1915-1918

Colin Garnett

Recommended Citation

Colin Garnett (2015) "The Art of Minor Operations: Canadian Trench Raiding, 1915-1918," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 30.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol24/iss1/30>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Art of Minor Operations

Canadian Trench Raiding: 1915–1918

COLIN GARNETT

Abstract: This paper outlines the tactical, strategic, and psychological aspects of Canadian trench raiding during the Great War. Trench raiding underwent three major evolutionary phases, transitioning from small, improvised affairs, to major undertakings that mirrored set-piece battles. Within this evolutionary process, trench raids served as the laboratory where the Canadians honed their tactical doctrine and experimented with new weapon systems. Trench raiding was fundamental to the development of combined arms tactics that emerged later in the war, and was a key reason the Canadians earned a reputation as elite “shock troops.”

AFTER THE KILLING battles of 1914, the fighting on the Western Front devolved from familiar field warfare to that of positional or siege warfare, with continuous underground trench fortifications that stretched from the Swiss border all the way to the English Channel.¹ These trench lines on the Western Front created a unique and deadly battlefield environment, and strategy and tactics had to adapt to meet these new challenges. One such venue where the Canadians experimented in new weaponry and tactics was the trench raid. These minor operations, carried out with increasing ferocity and complexity throughout the war, were pivotal to the development of the Canadian’s fighting tactics and experimentation in weaponry, communications, and logistics. These raids also had a large part to

¹ John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Random House Ltd., 2001), 116–119.

play in the Allied strategy of attritional warfare, as constant raiding took its toll on men, materiel, and morale.

Canadian trench raiding went through three phases of development, separated by two of the most significant large set-piece battles of the war: the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917.² The first phase revolved around the early development of raids, and culminated at the Somme. The second phase continued in the winter of 1916 and featured mass raids which were more organised and more elaborate in scope. The third and final phase of Canadian trench raiding was characterised by intricate, professional level raids, and carried through the summer of 1917 to the beginning of the Hundred Days. During the course of these three phases, Canadian trench raiding evolved from ad-hoc aggressive patrols into complex, all-arms operations that significantly influenced Canadian combat doctrine and was a base from which they built their reputation as elite shock troops. What follows is a condensed overview of the development of Canadian trench raiding throughout the Great War, which will demonstrate that these minor operations, previously ignored or sidelined by historians, were much more important to doctrinal development in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) than the current historiography suggests.

Considering that raiding had such a widespread impact on the Canadian infantry combat experience, it is surprising to discover the lack of sustained historical investigation into this topic. The only work devoted to trench raiding is Anthony Saunders' *Raiding on the Western Front*, which provides a wide-ranging overview of these operations.³ His broad study does not, however, adequately discuss Canadian raiding in detail, nor does it utilise an adequate range of archival sources to thoroughly analyze the full breadth of these operations. Most of his sources are outdated official histories, and the work is perilously thin in archival research. Despite the lack of scholarship, *Raiding on the Western Front* is an excellent introduction

² See F.P. Todd, "The Knife and Club in Trench Warfare, 1914–1918," *The Journal of the American Military History Foundation* 2, No. 3 (Autumn, 1938), 140–141. Todd offers an explanation of the two major phases of trench raiding. He divides trench raids into two phases that are separated by the end of the Somme: "stealth" and "raid in force." This division is largely correct, but the second phase is more nuanced than that in terms of tactical development and strategic utility. This is why this essay uses the Battle of Vimy Ridge to separate the "raids in force" into two groups: "semi-professional" and "professional."

³ Anthony Saunders, *Raiding on the Western Front* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), ix.



Canadian troops scramble ‘over the top’ in this propaganda photo from 1916. [National Library of Scotland Field Marshal Douglas Haig Papers, (168) O.874]

to the issues that surround these oft neglected operations. Other authors have covered trench raiding in a paragraph of their book, or at most in a chapter. Tim Cook’s *At the Sharp End* and *Shock Troops* discusses raiding in two of his chapters.⁴ J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton collaborated on the popular *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914–1918*. There is only a cursory paragraph on trench raiding.⁵ Desmond Morton also published an excellent account of the Canadian soldier in the Great War, *When Your Number’s Up*. It offers a vivid portrait of the experiences of Canadians during the war, yet again trench raiding only warrants a mere paragraph—lumped in with a discussion of daily trench life and attrition on the battlefield.⁶ Paddy Griffith’s *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916–18* offers an investigation into raiding as a component of his argument that the Allied soldiers were not stereotypically “lions

⁴ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1916–1918* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008), 67.

⁵ Jack Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914–1918* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1989), 38.

⁶ See Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd., 1993), 162.

led by donkeys,” but rather a part of a learning military machine that was adapting to its given environment and developing tactics and strategies to overcome the obstacles presented them.⁷ Similar to Griffith’s work, Bill Rawling’s *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps* examines technology, tactics, and weapon systems.⁸ Weaponry and technology are amply covered, but Rawling downplays the human elements in raiding. Tony Ashworth’s *Trench Warfare: The Live and Let Live System* introduces new and controversial conclusions about the soldiers and their willingness to kill the enemy on the Western Front. Ashworth devotes significant attention to trench raiding, as it was a direct challenge to the ethos of live and let live, yet only within that context.⁹ Individual raids are episodically covered in articles, such as Tim Cook’s “A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy,”¹⁰ Andrew Godefroy’s article which discusses the Calonne Trench Raid on 17 January 1917,¹¹ and Ken Reynolds’s “Under the Cover of Darkness: The Canadian Trench raid of 8–9 June 1917.”¹² All of this research presents a fragmented view of Canadian trench raiding. The historiography also portrays raids as inconsequential operations without their own internal process of learning and evolution. Raids were important intelligence gathering and offensive operations that formed part of the foundation of CEF doctrinal development and played largely into the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) strategy of constant attrition. This article will fill those historiographical gaps, as well as serve to challenge the existing historiographical viewpoint that raids were of negligible battlefield importance. The study of these operations is indeed crucial to understanding how the CEF developed its operational doctrine to become an effective force of “shock troops” that eventually led to important battlefield victories such as Vimy, Hill 70, and the Hundred Days.

⁷ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), 5.

⁸ Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 48.

⁹ Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare: The Live and Let Live System* (London: Pan Macmillan Ltd., 1980), 177.

¹⁰ Tim Cook “A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy,” *Canadian Military History* 8, No. 2 (1999), 8.

¹¹ Andrew Godefroy, “A Lesson in Success: The Calonne Trench Raid, 17 January 1917,” *Canadian Military History* 8, No. 2 (1999): 25–34.

¹² Ken Reynolds, “Under the Cover of Darkness: The Canadian Trench Raid of 8–9 June 1917,” in *Fortune Favours the Brave: Tales of Courage and Tenacity in Canadian Military History*, Bernd Horn, ed. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009), 143.

FIGHTING FOR NO MAN'S LAND

Raids began as an informal reaction to a static battlefield, and had their origins in the combat patrol. Patrols served primarily as a method of information gathering in no man's land, and usually involved only a few scouts reconnoitring the enemy positions. These night-time patrols became common to the battlefield after the open warfare phase degenerated into trench warfare, and within a few months in early 1915 enterprising soldiers had begun to carry out "offensive" or "aggressive" patrols. Instead of avoiding contact, like the reconnaissance patrols, these aggressive patrols sought to attack enemy scouts, working parties, or outposts.¹³

The earliest documented minor operations of the war were carried out by the 1st and 2nd Gerwhal Rifles, an Indian unit, on 10–11 November 1914, when they snuck into German trenches in a "hit and run" attack. The 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers, whose officers trained the Canadians in close combat tactics when they arrived in France in February 1915, performed many fighting patrols against the German lines throughout the early period of 1915.¹⁴

One of the first Canadian raids was carried out by the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), a "reconnaissance in force" against Shelly Farm, St. Eloi on 27–28 February 1915.¹⁵ Shortly after their arrival on the Western Front in December 1914, the PPCLI, which consisted largely of British ex-professional soldier and did not at this stage fight with the Canadian Division, was in the trenches of the southern part of the Ypres salient. The Germans opposite the Patricia's were digging a sap, or parallel, fire trench projecting out into no man's land, and were possibly going to use it as a jumping-off point in a future offensive.¹⁶ Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Farquhar, the PPCLI commander who ordered that his troops meet "aggression with aggression," requested from his brigade commander that he be able to lead a minor operation against this sap.¹⁷ "The

¹³ Library and Archives Canada (LAC), War Diary (WD), 28th Infantry Battalion, 3 June 1918. For further discussion as to why patrols and raids came about as a reaction to the static battlefield, see Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 70–71.

¹⁴ Rawling, *Surviving*, 47.

¹⁵ Sandra Gwyn, *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: Harper Collins Ltd., 1992), 143.

¹⁶ Ralph Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, 1914–1919* (Edmonton: Executive Committee PPCLI, 1968), 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30 and Gwyn, *Tapestry of War*, 146.

attack was undertaken with a view of giving a setback to the enemy who, from the sap opposite ... had become very aggressive and was doing considerable damage,” wrote Farquhar.¹⁸

The raid carried out by the PPCLI in February 1915 was technically the first by a Canadian combat unit, but the PPCLI was then serving within a British division and therefore not part of a larger Canadian formation. The first planned and organised raid by a Canadian Division was conducted by the 5th and 7th Battalions on the night of 16–17 November 1915. It was staged at Petit Douve Farm, located in the Ypres salient.¹⁹ This raid featured thorough planning of all aspects of the preparation and execution of the raid, and set the tone for Canadian raids that would follow throughout the war. It was, according to General Sir Douglas Haig, a “model raid.”²⁰

There were significant lessons that were learned from the Petit Douve raid: careful planning and preparation were vital to the infantry assault, artillery cooperation with assault teams was crucial, detailed scouting patrols were essential for reconnaissance and wire cutting, and skilled raiding specialists were also considered vital to successful operations.²¹ The after-action report submitted by the 7th Battalion went into extensive detail in analysing the raid, and offered lessons for improving future operations. Special attention was paid to scouting, which was seen as important to the proper training and planning of the enterprise.²² “So completely were the preparation made that when the night of the attack came everything and every party was in its place,” observed the operational report.²³ Important “lessons learned” documents like this were circulated among the Canadian forces and, in this case, throughout the British army, to share success and failure and ultimately to hone the art of the raid.²⁴

¹⁸ LAC, WD, PPCLI, Appendix XIV “Attack on German Sap,” February 28, 1915.

¹⁹ Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The First Canadian Division at War, 1914–1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 260.

²⁰ Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914–1916* (Toronto: Penguin, 2007), 293.

²¹ Rawling, *Surviving*, 50; and LAC, RG9 v.4106, 22/5 “Appendix IV: Report on Minor Operation, ‘Reasons for Success,’” 19 November 1915.

²² LAC, RG9 v.4106, 22/5 “Appendix IV: Report on Minor Operation, ‘General Summary,’” 19 November 1915.

²³ LAC, RG9 v.4106, 22/5 “Appendix IV: Report on Minor Operation, ‘Attack Practice,’” 19 November 1915.

²⁴ Tim Cook, *The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie* (Toronto: Penguin, 2010), 142.

RAIDS ON THE MESSINES/PLOEGSTEERT BARRICADE, DECEMBER 1915

News of the exploits at Petit Douve circulated quickly throughout the BEF, and soon a spirit of competition encouraged other commanders to organise raids of their own. One such enterprise was undertaken by the Lord Strathcona's Horse (LSH), and took place at a position called The Barricade on the Messines/Ploegsteert road on the night of 8–9 December 1915. The objectives of the raid were “to attack and bomb the Germans in the trench behind the Barrier ... to capture a prisoner ... to lay a charge of Gun-Cotton in the barrier ... to be exploded.” Scouting of the barrier was done in the days prior to the operation, and it was deemed to be lightly defended. Preparations were made by forming assault parties, cover patrols on the flanks, and machine guns in support.²⁵ Artillery support was not arranged to better preserve the element of surprise for the infiltrating raiders.

The attack saw a small patrol of three scouts leading the assaulting party of one officer and twelve men, five of whom were dedicated grenadiers outfitted with extra grenades. They had a difficult time of sneaking up to the barrier, for “the night was very still, and it was most difficult to make any movement unheard.”²⁶ When Lieutenant Gault, the officer leading the raid, and two of his party neared the barrier they encountered a full garrison of German soldiers. In the chaos that ensued, grenades were thrown in rapid succession, and “the surviving Germans threw out ... very large bombs. These bombs must have contained a very large explosive charge ... Lieutenant Galt and the two leaders appear to have been killed by [these] explosions.” The Canadians were not able to force their way into the German position, and within minutes they were then beset by some forty German reinforcements from the north side of the barrier, who forced the raiders to withdraw.²⁷

The raid had failed, although the official report filed by Brigadier-General John Seely stated that “The primary object of the enterprise was attained, since there can be no doubt that a very large number of Germans crowded in the narrow barrier must have been killed and wounded by the bombs dropped unto them...”²⁸ With all but two of the

²⁵ LAC, RG9, v4017, 34/16, “Report on Minor Operations Carried Out By ‘Lord Strathcona's Horse’ On Night December 8th / 9th, 1915,” 9 December 1915.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

assaulting party either killed or wounded, and there being no prisoner captured or no explosive charge set, the raid—notwithstanding the face saving report—was a defeat, and it revealed the danger of raiding even with careful preparations. While a number of Germans were bombed, the LSH lost an intrepid leader in Lieutenant Gault as well as aggressive raiders. This was one of the most costly aspects of trench raids, as the casualties were usually the most skilled fighters. The raid had achieved its main objective, but the lost numbers of skilled men seemed a steep price to pay.

The Canadians took stock of their failure and endeavoured to put hard-learned lessons to use with another attack against the barricade on the night of the 14–15 December. This time the task fell to the 5th Battalion. Learning from the previous assault by the LSH, the 5th Battalion's "Operational Order #61" called for very close cooperation between the artillery and the assaulting parties. Heavy artillery bombardments would pound the German trenches opposite during the preceding days, and increase in ferocity at zero hour in order to support the raiders. As the barrier was in a strategic position overlooking the surrounding terrain, "the attack had to be made at night as by day the attacking parties would have come under the enfilade fire from machine guns. ... To ensure a successful enterprise, close co-operation by the artillery was essential."²⁹ The operation orders dictated that the assault party of the 5th Battalion was to rush the barricade, demolish it, and also establish a listening post on their side of the barricade. Each of the three special parties was given combat instructions specifically for their individual role in the infiltration, assault, holding, and demolition phases of the raid.³⁰

In the days preceding the operation, the enemy position was bombarded by artillery in order to thin the German garrison and cut the barbed wire. A scouting patrol observed the enemy lines as trench mortars lobbed explosives at the barricade in order to "make the Germans disclose their plan of defence."³¹ At 4:00 a.m. on 15 December, the covering bombardment commenced its support barrage, and the three assault squads, each consisting of one officer

²⁹ LAC, RG9, v.3984, 4/9, "Report on Minor Operation Night 14/15th December 1915," 15 December 1915.

³⁰ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 84/1, "Appendix 'B': Operation Order No.61 by Lt. Col. G.N. Tuxford," 14 December 1915.

³¹ LAC, RG9, v.3984, 4/9, "Report on Minor Operation Night 14/15th December 1915," 15 December 1915

and fourteen men, infiltrated no man's land to their jumping off point. At 4:50 a.m. they were ready to assault.

The attack met with little opposition. The main resistance came from the German machine guns and artillery further to the rear, which quickly opened fire in support of their beleaguered garrison. There was a delay in getting past uncut wire, but the provisions in each of the three squads for two wire cutters each allowed for a minimum of time spent being exposed in the open to shell or small arms fire while in the vulnerable position of cutting through the wire. The assaulting parties quickly destroyed the barricade with explosive charges, and withdrew before they were caught in German SOS artillery fire, which was expected to come crashing down on the raiders to assist in the enemy garrison's defence. Casualties for the 5th Battalion raiders were slight, with one officer and one private slightly wounded. The survivors snatched two German prisoners and "portions of three bodies and three rifles."³² On the Western Front, where intelligence gathering was difficult due to the danger of reconnoitring no man's land, even a body or parts of a body could provide vital information on an enemy formation.

Artillery support was central to the safe withdrawal of the raiders back to friendly lines. According to Lieutenant-Colonel George Tuxford's battle report, artillery from the 1st Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, harassed key German defensive and reinforcement points, and machine guns covered the withdrawal of the assaulting parties. This exfiltration process apparently transpired without incident due to in-depth planning and the raiders' knowledge of the battlefield.³³ "The essential feature of the operation was surprise," wrote one officer, and it was widely felt that casualties were low because of it. Planning, preparation, intelligence gathering, and close cooperation with supporting elements all combined to make the 5th Battalion's raid successful. The LSH raid did not feature artillery closely supporting the raiders, and the preparation and intelligence gathering had been hurried. Although in any raid some of the success was owed to chance, in the case of the 5th Battalion's raid the organisers minimised

³² LAC, RG9, v.3984, 4/9, "Report on Minor Operation Night 14/15th December 1915, 'Results'," 15 December 1915.

³³ LAC, RG9, v.4053, 23/12, "To G.O.C., 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, Capture of Enemy Advanced Barricade on Messines Road," 15 December 1915.

dependence on luck by having ample knowledge of their battle-space and by having a well-orchestrated system of combined-arms assault.

The significance of the raids on the Messines/Ploegsteert barricade is that they demonstrated the emerging importance of combined arms assaults in overcoming the primacy of the defensive. The hallmarks of successful major operations later in the war—planning and training, ample intelligence gathering, coordination with supporting elements, detailed infiltration and exfiltration plans, and coordinated platoon tactics—all can be seen in these raids. Where the LSH did not incorporate many of these essential elements, and thus encountered great difficulty in the assault, the following raid by the 5th Battalion was successful because it did. These raids demonstrate the vital battlefield learning that took place during these “minor” operations. These were two raids that were executed one right after the other, against the same unit and location, and yet had drastically different outcomes due to the fact that the 5th Battalion learned from the hard lessons the LSH raid had taught them. From one raid to another, CEF doctrinal development was evolving.

THE HAIGIAN REFORMS: RAIDING TRANSITIONS FROM ETHOS TO DOCTRINE

General Sir Douglas Haig took over command of the BEF in December 1915, and very soon sought to change the way his divisions were fighting. He was well aware of the alarming inertia and lack of aggression in the front lines, possibly as a reaction to notions of live and let live that permeated the battlefield, and sought to encourage aggression against the enemy. General Haig also used raids as part of a new grand strategy of attrition. Haig knew that the war was not going to be won by a big breakthrough, but he believed that the way to beat the Germans was through constant wearing down of their forces, materiel, and morale.³⁴ John McNaughton, a lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion, elucidated this point: “Numerous patrols and

³⁴ Walter Reid, *Architect of Victory: Douglas Haig* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 2006), 355–56; and Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 181. For a further discussion of the role of attrition and the lack of technical change in the Great War, see Andrew Liaropoulos, “Revolutions in Warfare: Theoretical Paradigms and Historical Evidence: The Napoleonic and First World War Revolutions in Military Affairs,” *The Journal of Military History* 70, No. 2 (April, 2006), 380–382.

raids have been busy ... We must keep worrying him tho[ugh] and not give him time to collect or concentrate his guns or forces.”³⁵ Raiding provided pressure on German logistics; it also forced the enemy to concentrate his forces closer to the front, which made them vulnerable to shellfire.³⁶ Private John Law, a machine gunner of the 19th Battalion, recalled the tension that Canadian raids caused on German troops: “During the night some of the men went over and tied ropes to his barb wire, and at a signal all pulled together in our own trenches. Fritz hearing the noise, thought a raid was coming, vacated his front line and turned on his artillery in his own trenches...”³⁷ Constant strain on the enemy morale and nerves was one latent goal of attrition, where the enemy would hopefully be reduced to such a state that nervous sentries saw raiding parties in every shadow or men refused to go out on offensive patrol for fear of capture.³⁸

While frequent raiding attrited the enemy, one consequence was that the most essential element of its success—the element of surprise —was diminished. With raids occurring frequently all along the front, the Germans prepared their defences for the nightly raids.³⁹ While the earliest “model raids” featured many months of scouting, training, and planning before zero hour, later raids provided the units with much less time for preparation. This meant a lack of preparation for a raid, hurried raids, improper reconnaissance prior to a raid, and, as a result, more casualties suffered and failed raids.

Despite the aforementioned problems with frequent raiding, multiple operations provided the Canadian infantry with opportunities for tactical and technological experimentation. The 28th and 29th Battalions performed a joint raid on the night of 30–31 January 1916 at Spanbroekmolen that exemplified this rapid change in tactical and technological doctrine. The impetus for this raid came from Colonel D.E. Macintyre, who was the 28th Battalion’s scouting officer. His reconnaissance of the area began on 23 December 1915, at a point called Madelstede Farm.⁴⁰ He went out many times into No Man’s Land to reconnoitre the enemy trenches, and the vital diagrams and

³⁵ Canadian Letters and Images Project (CLIP), John McNaughton, letter, 20 March 1917.

³⁶ Robert Foley, “What’s in a Name: The Development of Strategies of Attrition on the Western Front 1914–18,” *The Historian* 68, No. 4, (2006), 723–724.

³⁷ CLIP, John William Law, letter, 22 August 1916.

³⁸ Reid, *Architect of Victory*, 356; and Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 181.

³⁹ Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 301.

⁴⁰ LAC, MG30 E241, D.E. Macintyre papers, 23 December 1915, 101.



Raiding party returning after a raid, showing barrage behind them. [Field Marshal Douglas Haig Papers, (53) D.1156]

intelligence he uncovered demonstrated the importance of patrols in preparation for a raid.⁴¹ From this reconnaissance it was decided to undertake a raid in order to obtain prisoners and other forms of identification.⁴² Instead of using artillery as a means to cut the German wire, Macintyre utilised his expert scouts to cut the wire by hand well in advance of the raiding party. This tactic was crucial in preserving the element of surprise.⁴³

Lieutenant C.R. Myers of the 29th Battalion recounted that the scouts on the night of 30 January “went out to cut a lane through the German wire; this was ... done right under the muzzle of a machine-gun.”⁴⁴ With the wire cut, the raid was clear to be executed. In his memoir D.E. Macintyre described the start of the operation: “We heard a volley of bombs and instantly the air was fully of flare rockets

⁴¹ LAC, WD, 28th Infantry Battalion, reconnaissance sketch N24 pt61, 9 December 1915, and for Macintyre’s sketch of the enemy trenches see LAC, WD, 28th Infantry Battalion, reconnaissance sketch “Trench Cross-Section,” 31 January 1916.

⁴² LAC, RG9, v.4140, 1/11, “6th Canadian Infantry Brigade Order No.47,” 28 January 1916.

⁴³ LAC, WD, 28th Infantry Battalion, “General Report of G.O.C. 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade,” 3 February 1916.

⁴⁴ Canadian Bank of Commerce, *Letters from the Front, Being a Record of the Part Played by Officers of the Bank in the Great War, 1914–1919, Volume 1* [Hereafter referred to as LFTF] (Canadian Bank of Commerce Press, 1920), 86.

and the jig was up. There we were all tangled up in the wire... The alarm had been given, men were running along the walks inside, sentries were speeding up their fire so I had to act quick.⁴⁵ The attack by the 29th Battalion, who attacked mere minutes ahead of schedule, alerted the Germans on the 28th Battalion's front. The 28th Battalion's raiders immediately rushed their attack to capitalise on their advanced position before all surprise was lost. Aided by weeks of planning and preparation, and aggressive action, the Germans were "clearly taken by surprise," according to the after-action report, and there was hardly "any organised resistance."⁴⁶

The raid taught many valuable lessons. The 6th Brigade's commander, Major-General Huntly Ketchen, remarked in his report the benefit of "the possibility of successfully cutting the thick enemy wire ... by hand, and without artillery preparation, which, if employed, does away with the element of surprise."⁴⁷ The deployment of infiltrating expert wire cutters, as well as the ample use of patrols and scouting to thoroughly map out the routes of attack and withdrawal was a valuable observation, and one that influenced future raids.

RAIDING EVOLVED: RAIDS INTO THE SUMMER OF 1916

Where the January 1916 Spanbroekmolen Raid succeeded, other raids in early 1916 did not. For example, the 10th Battalion executed a raid north of La Petit Douve Farm on the night of 4-5 February 1916. According to Brigadier-General L.J. Lipsett's report, while traversing the gaps that the scouts had made in the German barbed wire, the party of fifty raiders was ambushed from multiple directions. A fierce firefight ensued that eventually degenerated into hand-to-hand combat. The raiders retreated with one killed, seventeen wounded, and three missing.⁴⁸ Brigadier-General Lipsett went on to note that "considering the difficult position in which they were ...

⁴⁵ LAC, MG30 E241, D.E. Macintyre papers, 29 January 1916, 112.

⁴⁶ LAC, RG9 v.3858, 84/3, 28th Battalion, "General Report of G.O.C. 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade," 3 February 1916.

⁴⁷ LAC, RG9 v.3858, 84/3, 28th Battalion, "General Report of G.O.C. 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 'Deductions,'" 3 February 1916.

⁴⁸ LAC, RG9, v.4017, 34/9, "Narrative of Minor Enterprise Carried out by the 10th Battalion, on Night of 4/5th February," 5 February 1916.

I think they were fortunate in not having greater losses.”⁴⁹ Proper reconnaissance of the area, and the deployment of protective flanking patrols, would have forewarned the raiders of the German ambush, but it is worth remembering that the enemy, too, was anxious to win control of No Man’s Land.

The essential nature of situational awareness and careful intelligence gathering prior to a raid proved beneficial to the Canadians just a few days later. The 2nd Battalion planned to raid against D-3 trench on 8–9 February using Bangalore ammonal explosive tubes to destroy the wire and create a path for the raiders into the enemy trench.⁵⁰ This attack, however, was called off due to a bright moonlit night, which would have left the raiders vulnerable. An advance patrol also observed that the Germans were “very active in their wire and also in their trenches and were very much on the alert.”⁵¹ Careful intelligence gathering saved the 2nd Battalion from what could have degenerated into a costly frontal assault. Commanders in charge of a raid, due to their detailed knowledge of the terrain and reconnaissance information, always weighed the option to carry out or abort the assault, right up until the moment of attack. Many raids were aborted due to a rapid change in the tactical situation, where the attack, if carried out, would be too costly for the limited gains to might achieve. In this case that tactical awareness to abort the assault saved the lives of the 2nd Battalion’s raiders. This also suggests flexibility in command structure that, uncommon among the BEF at the time in terms of major operational planning, allowed the raiding officers increased operational authority that was free from top-down interference. This freedom would erode as raids became more commonplace within an increasing operational tempo later in the war.

Raiding continued throughout the spring and summer of 1916. On 29 July, the 10th Battalion carried out another raid. It was a bold operation that was executed in broad daylight. The majority of raids took place during night in order to preserve the element of surprise, so for a raid to be executed during daylight the level of intelligence and artillery support was necessarily elaborate. Support even came from the skies, as an aeroplane was scheduled to fly over friendly lines

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ LAC, RG9, v.4016, 33/22, “Report on Minor Operations carried out on the night of 8th/9th February, 1916,” 9 February 1916.

⁵¹ Ibid.

in order to distract the enemy.⁵² Advanced wire cutters were sent out the night before to clear paths in the enemy wire. The raid then unfolded with clockwork precision. The raiders had a dedicated team of telephone signallers who kept them in constant communication with their supporting elements of artillery, trench mortars, and headquarters. An official report noted the “vital necessity of close communications ... The fire ... could be turned on or off according as the situation demanded thus ensuring ... better results from the expenditure.”⁵³ The importance of communication, always important in executing complex operations such as raids, suggested that the 10th Battalion had learned from its past mistakes and applied the lessons to good effect.

Hard lessons were learned, and sometimes re-learned, by the different Canadian units as they continued to raid into the summer of 1916. The Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) carried out a raid on 18 August 1916 that resulted in heavy casualties and failed to achieve its objective. Everything was planned accordingly, but poor intelligence gathering and bad luck led to the raiders being ambushed at their point of attack by an enemy garrison that was unexpectedly heavily-manned. Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. Hill explained in an addendum to his report to senior officers “that the party had no idea that the enemy trenches were manned so strongly.”⁵⁴ The raid had failed to achieve its objective and the raiders retreated with one killed and fifteen wounded, three mortally so.⁵⁵ Lieutenant-General Julian Byng, commander of the Canadian Corps from the summer of 1916 to June 1917, commented that “It is regrettable that this raid did not succeed in obtaining identifications and that their casualties were severe. However, I do not think that their efforts were fruitless or their bravery wasted.”⁵⁶ Byng’s optimistic assessment is highly debatable, with the men who lost good comrades that night likely questioning if their lives had not indeed been wasted.

⁵² LAC, Rg9, v.4106, 23/7, “19th Canadian Battalion Operation, July 28th, 1916,” 28 July 1916.

⁵³ LAC, RG9, v4106, 23/7, “Raiding Operation carried out by 19th Canadian Battalion, 29th July 1916, supported by C.F.A.,” 29 July 1916.

⁵⁴ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/3, dispatch report, Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. Hill, “Headquarters, 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade,” 16 August 1916.

⁵⁵ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/3, “Report on Minor Operations Carried Out by the RCR on Night of 17/18th,” 18 August 1916.

⁵⁶ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/3, dispatch, “Canadian Corps G.260, Second Army,” 22 August 1916.

The continual planning and execution of raids throughout 1916 provided commanders with a rich resource of information on how to shape the infantry attack doctrine for major assaults. Moreover, lessons learned did not stay within the Canadian divisions, which numbered three by the summer of 1916. Reports of the early raids soon garnered interest from their French allies, who in February 1916 sent a request for some of their officers to become *attachés* in order to study Canadian raiding.⁵⁷ Although the battles in which the Canadians took part in during late-1916 to spring 1917 indicate a marked improvement in attack doctrine and logistical preparation compared to the blunderings of 1915 and early 1916, the extent to which Canadian raiding influenced this change remains difficult to pinpoint. However, raiding provided a wealth of knowledge, and hard-learned lessons through constant experimentation, and much of the battle-craft was later inculcated into the attack doctrine and logistical preparation for major assaults.

LEARNING LESSONS: RAIDING IN THE WINTER OF 1916–1917

Despite the fact that the many raids executed in mid-1916 provided the CEF command with a wealth of information and doctrinal lessons to draw upon, the failure to achieve victory at the Battle of the Somme proved that there were still many lessons to learn in terms of how to effectively overcome the enemy's defenses. The Canadians turned to raiding to try and affect a solution. From late November 1916 to April 1917, there was a second era of Canadian trench raiding, where Byng's forces launched more than sixty major raids and numerous other smaller ones. These raids allowed the Canadians to learn, adapt, and improve attack doctrine and coordinate technology.⁵⁸ This second phase of the evolution of raids featured a gradual departure from an ad-hoc and elite ethos of raiding, to a systematised and standardised doctrine throughout the BEF. During this period, raids evolved from improvised secondary actions to major attacks that proved integral to the overall battle plan, and served as a key component of the overall BEF strategy of attrition. With a greatly

⁵⁷ LAC, RG9, v.3865, 101/6, "Attachment of French Officers to Study Methods Used in 'Minor Night Operations,'" 22 February 1916.

⁵⁸ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 57.

increased tempo of raids in the winter of 1916, and the integration of raids into standard BEF offensive strategy, the second phase of raiding also saw these operations function as a laboratory to test solutions to the failures in attack doctrine witnessed at the Battle of the Somme.

Starting in late November, Canadian raids occurred with increased frequency, with at least a few raids every week. Raids were particularly plentiful in the Souchez sector of the Western Front. The 2nd CMR raided at the unremarkable trench grid reference A.23.a.5.4 on 21 November, with the raiders advancing behind a creeping barrage of artillery shells: the same tactic that was used in the latter stages of the Battle of the Somme, and would be a prominent operational aspect of the assault on Vimy Ridge in April 1917. The combination of accurate artillery cover, and the blowing of a Bangalore explosive to create a gap in the German wire, provided the strong party of raiders with the element of surprise, the ability to get through the wire, and continued close support for their attack.⁵⁹ The raiders fought hard in the enemy trench and bombed the dugouts on their 150 yard-wide front. With the enemy dugouts full of soldiers, the German casualties were thought to be high, as raiders tossed grenades and Stokes demolition bombs into positions. Prisoner identification was obtained, and the official report believed that “considering the opposition met with, our casualties were slight.”⁶⁰

Not all raids that month provided fruitful intelligence information, despite being successfully carried out. This was demonstrated when the Canadians undertook two raids on the night of 27 November 1916 in the same general sector of Souchez. The 31st Battalion attacked the trench system of M.32.c.9-1/2.2-1/2, just north of the town of Souchez, at 3:30 a.m. with a small attack party of fourteen raiders.⁶¹ Their aim was to inflict casualties and secure identification, and the raid was designed to take place very quickly, with only three minutes allotted for the raiders to carry out their objectives.⁶² At zero

⁵⁹ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/4, “Raids Carried Out By the Canadian Corps, October–December 1916, ‘Nov.21,’” 4 January 1917. Note: The document had the date of 4 January 1916 on it, but that must have been a typo considering the dates of the raids it was discussing. January 1917 therefore seems much more likely.

⁶⁰ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/4, “Raids Carried Out By the Canadian Corps, October–December 1916, ‘Nov.21,’” 4 January 1917.

⁶¹ LAC, WD, 31st Infantry Battalion, 27 November 1916.

⁶² LAC, WD, 31st Infantry Battalion, “T.N.85, 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade,” 25 December 1916.

hour, the raiders attacked simultaneously with the commencement of the supporting artillery barrage. Private Donald Fraser of the 31st Battalion recounted that “they made their way over the desolation of No Man’s Land under [a] rifle grenade barrage.”⁶³ A rifle grenade was a small artillery weapon that used the normal rifle to fire a modified grenade on a parabolic arch to the target. This gave the raiders increased medium-ranged forward firepower, with the grenade able to soar over 200 metres. Rifle grenade parties would soon become prevalent in supporting Canadian raids, as they offered powerful forward “artillery” to cover the raiders’ assault and to destroy obstacles such as machine gun positions.

The 31st Battalion’s raiders attacked the German trenches and then split up into two groups, one going left and the other right. The left party continued through demolished trenches and found no Germans for thirty yards.⁶⁴ The right party encountered a small garrison of five Germans, two of whom were killed while the other three withdrew. The raiders were going to get the bodies back for intelligence purposes, but owing to obstacles and wire they were forced to abandon their effort for fear of being held up and caught in their own barrage or a German counterattack. Therefore, the raid resulted in little useful intelligence for the effort, but several Germans were killed, enemy trenches were destroyed, and no Canadians were injured.⁶⁵ This type of fighting alone would not bring the Allies victory on the Western Front, but raids gave psychological and instructional benefits to the men who carried them out, and provided them with an outlet for their frustration by allowing them to cross No Man’s Land and strike back at the enemy whom bombarded them with remorseless artillery with impunity.

The 8th Battalion raided at the same time as the 31st Battalion, but to the south of Souchez village. Its attack yielded a similar lack of clear-cut results.⁶⁶ The first detachment of raiders found no Germans upon entering the trench, possibly due to the fact that they fled after working parties or patrols observed that their wire had been cut and

⁶³ Donald Fraser, *The Journal of Private Fraser 1914–1918: Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985), 236. See also LAC, WD, 31st Battalion, “Special Report on Raid,” 27 November 1916, for details of the start of the raid.

⁶⁴ LAC, WD, 31st Infantry Battalion, “Special Report on Raid,” 27 November, 1916.

⁶⁵ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/4, “Raids Carried Out By the Canadian Corps, October–December 1916, ‘Nov.21,’” 4 January 1917].

⁶⁶ LAC, WD, 8th Infantry Battalion, 27 November 1916.

knowing that a raid might soon follow that night. The other party attempted to enter the German lines, but met stiff resistance and uncut wire that forced their withdrawal, but only after one officer and five privates were killed, and an additional officer and thirty privates were wounded.⁶⁷ No prisoners were secured, and further casualties were caused to the 8th Battalion's men from German artillery retaliation.⁶⁸ Both raids indicated that more lessons had to be processed, especially in clearing enemy barbed wire at the jumping off point of a raid without alerting the Germans to the possibility of a raid.

Yet despite these setbacks, there was an indication that the intense schedule of trench raids was beginning to tell on the enemy. Captain Maurice Pope of the 11th Brigade Intelligence Staff remembered: "The German Army will receive a tremendous hammering ... and I very much doubt if they will have an appetite for any more. ... We are raising the devil with him these days and twenty four hours never pass that there is not a trench raid within actual sight."⁶⁹

Raids were being planned and executed with great regularity, and the lessons they were teaching about wire cutting, infiltration, attack doctrine, and other operational aspects would be very useful for future operations. In February 1917, a First Army dispatch containing "some of the points which have been brought most prominently to notice, and to which much of the success of the raids may be [ascribed]," outlined sixteen major areas where successful raids were providing lessons for battlefield tactics and doctrine that would be employed in future battles.⁷⁰ The essential elements outlined in the report, for example, were exactly those which characterised the planning and preparation of the major battles. These included: reliable and complete information gathering; an emphasis on reconnaissance, the need for careful preparations, the emphasis on thorough training for all ranks, the preservation of the element of surprise, the effective cooperation with supporting elements such as artillery and machine guns, the need for the attacking infantry to closely follow the creeping

⁶⁷ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/4, "Raids Carried Out By the Canadian Corps, October-December 1916, 'Nov.27,'" 4 January 1917].

⁶⁸ LAC, WD, 8th Infantry Battalion, 27 November 1916.

⁶⁹ Maurice Pope, *Letters from the Front*, (Toronto: Pope & Co., 1993), 78.

⁷⁰ LAC, RG9, v.4149, 15/11, "Some Notes on Raids," 20 March 1917. For smaller unit operations, see also LAC, RG9, v.4148, 14/8, dispatch "3rd Canadian Division, B.M.R. 510, Brigadier-General A.G. MacDonell, 7th Infantry Brigade," 9 March 1917.

barrage, and finally, the successful counter-battery work.⁷¹ These fundamental features would be the cornerstone of battle planning in 1917. Successful raids also had the ability to raise a unit's morale, as a raid that went smoothly and accomplished its objectives with the minimum of casualties provided the raiders with the satisfaction of having harassed the enemy, and perhaps moved a step in the right direction towards ending the war.

The month of December 1916 saw Canadian raiding intensify in frequency. On 9 December at 4:40 a.m., the 60th Battalion raided at a trench point called Forges Sap, but were unable to penetrate the deep wire in front of the German position.⁷² This failure occurred despite using a ten-foot Bangalore explosive on the area to be attacked. However, not enough wire was blown up, so the raiders resorted to throwing grenades at the German garrison and then retreating back to friendly lines. According to the war diary, the raiders inflicted casualties with their grenades, and experimented with the use of a more powerful thrown grenade in the improvised form of ammonal explosive in a large metal tin, but they had been unable to penetrate the enemy lines and had not completed their orders.⁷³

Only an hour after the 60th Battalion's raid began, the 3rd Battalion raided to their north just outside of Souchez. Planning for the raid began on 30 November, with teams practicing on recreated trenches behind the lines that were made with the aid of reconnaissance plane photographs. Their training completed on 6 December, the raiders returned to the front lines to carry out their assault.⁷⁴ Their eighty-three-strong twin-pronged attack entered the German trenches at two points simultaneously. According to the official report, "they found the trenches heavily manned and inflicted many casualties, among which [two] officers are claimed to have been killed."⁷⁵ The entire raid took eight minutes to complete, in which time the raiders cleared 100 yards of enemy trench and destroyed fourteen dugouts with large charges of gun cotton.⁷⁶ The 3rd Battalion

⁷¹ LAC, RG9, v.4149, 15/11, "Some Notes on Raids, 'xvi,'" 20 March 1917.

⁷² LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/4, "Raids Carried Out By the Canadian Corps, October–December 1916, 'Dec. 9,'" 4 January 191[7].

⁷³ LAC, WD, 60th Infantry Battalion, 9 December 1916.

⁷⁴ LAC, WD, 3rd Infantry Battalion, "Report on Minor Operation," 9 December 1916.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ LAC, WD, 3rd Infantry Battalion, "Report on Minor Operation, Results of the Raid," 9 December 1916.

raiders also captured an enemy machine gun, a significant prize of any raid because it deprived the Germans of that weapon, could have provided intelligence information, and served as a trophy to enhance battalion pride. To that end, the raid also apparently had a positive effect on the unit's morale, as it "greatly increased the esprit de corp and [the entire] party [were] keen for another such operation."⁷⁷ Not only were the veteran raider's spirits raised, but the raid also served to instruct new recruits in the intricacies of trench warfare—in effect, "bloodying" these new men: "70 [percent] of the personnel [were] composed of draft men who had never seen a fight before, and who now know from experience that they are superior to the enemy."⁷⁸

In the midst of the partial successes and failures of that month, one raid stood out as an indication of the continually evolving tactical learning curve. The 3rd Battalion's failed raid on 9 December 1916 was compensated for by the wildly successful and innovative raid pulled off by the 1st CMR Battalion on 20 December at a point called Lille Road, which was situated south of the town of Souchez.⁷⁹ Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng had ordered a large assault to penetrate deeply into enemy lines. It was also to be carried out in daylight, which would surprise the enemy but might also leave the attackers vulnerable.⁸⁰ This raid was on a very large scale, with twelve officers and 410 other men assigned to the various assault parties. With heavy artillery and trench mortar support, the raiders attacked and penetrated not only the front line trenches, but their support and secondary trenches as well.⁸¹ This operation demonstrated two very important facets of the continual evolution taking place within Canadian raiding. First, it revealed that the impetus of minor operations was by this time transferred from the lower echelons of command to the higher levels of command, reaching all the way up to the corps commander. Second, the fact that the raid was ordered on such a large scale, was to take place in daylight, and was charged with penetrating the enemy lines so deeply shows that the Canadian high command was attempting to push the envelope on raiding,

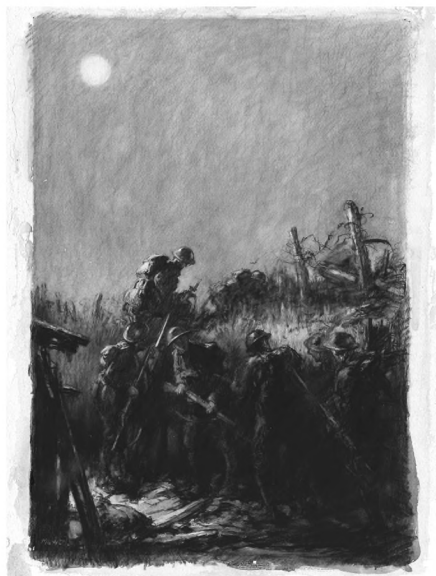
⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ LAC, WD, 1st C.M.R., 20 December 1916.

⁸⁰ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 83/2, "Extract from Report of G.O.C. 3rd Canadian Division on Minor Operation Carried out by the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade," 2 January 1917.

⁸¹ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/4, "Raids Carried Out By the Canadian Corps, Dec 20 1916," 4 January 1917].



Trench Raid. Sketch by H.J. Mowat.
[Canadian War Museum Beaverbrook Collection
of War Art 19710261-0431]

making these operations more and more intricate and daring. This raid was, in essence, a miniature battle. Raids like this revealed the bleeding of these minor “battles” into major set-piece attacks, as the operational preparation and battle-planning were nearly identical to a conventional battle, if only on a smaller scale.

The 1st CMR was supported by a secondary “dummy raid” by the 4th CMR of seventy-four men designed to cover the withdrawal of the main raid. They did not succeed in penetrating the German trench line, but they were only tasked with diverting enemy attention away from the primary attack. In this they succeeded, perhaps too much so, for they drew a very heavy bombardment when they were attempting to reach their jumping off point and suffered a number of casualties. The enemy was alert and swept the area with machine gun fire in conjunction with the artillery shells, and it was evident that they were expecting an attack where their wire had been previously cut.⁸²

In an after-action report of the Lille Road raid, it was stipulated that the operation was a complete success and also provided useful lessons for future raid planning. Moreover, this raid anticipated, in all but scale, the planning, preparation, and operational outlay of major battles such as Vimy Ridge. The report stated that “wire cutting in

⁸² Ibid.

broken ground is necessarily very difficult, but broken ground allows of close inspection of the wire, this inspection should be done by daylight.”⁸³ It also suggested that “in the broken ground full of craters troops can be assembled well forward. I think this may be made us of for larger operations, in conjunction with Tunnels.”⁸⁴ These lessons were vital, as they indicated key aspects of preparation for assaults and the easing or elimination of traversing No Man’s Land. To close the distance with the enemy was essential, and this method of pushing soldiers forward, as honed in this raid and others that would follow, was a critical step in taking control of the battlefield. With the lessons of thorough reconnaissance of the proposed battle zone, overwhelming artillery support throughout the attack process, coordination in the all-arms assault, and pushing forward the attacking elements prior to zero hour, raiding had begun to be firmly established in the Canadian battle doctrine by December 1916. The attack on Vimy Ridge incorporated these lessons to great effect four months later in April 1917.

RAIDING LESSONS FORGED INTO DOCTRINE

In January 1917, Canadian Corps headquarters, in an attempt to improve attack doctrine by applying the lessons from raiding, drew up a thorough checklist so raids could be planned meticulously, efficiently, and in order to minimise the chance of failure. This doctrinal document was proof that raiding had become institutionalised throughout the corps. The checklist aimed to provide junior commanders with ample guidelines for raid preparation and execution forged from experience gained since late 1915.⁸⁵

These lessons were also circulating throughout the larger BEF, as indicated by a 28 February despatch by First Army which stated: “the Army Commander wishes to impress on Corps Commanders the importance of special activity on the whole of the Army front, with a view of discovering any indication of withdrawal of the part of the enemy. Raids will furnish the best means of securing prisoners,

⁸³ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 83/2, “Extract from Report of G.O.C. 3rd Canadian Division on Minor Operation Carried out by the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade,” 2 January 1917.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ LAC, RG9, v.4209, 1/12, “Detailed Sequence for Raid Preparation,” January 1917.

and therefore, information; if the raids find the enemy's trenches and there are signs of withdrawal, every effort will be made to regain touch."⁸⁶ Byng took the order and added a personal note to his junior officers: "The Corps Commander is confident that all divisions of the Canadian Corps will make it their business to get the earliest possible information of any withdrawal on the part of the enemy."⁸⁷ Raids had become part of the established doctrine and war-fighting among BEF units on the Western Front.

The junior leaders seemed to respond positively to these systematised and standardised raids. Charles Henry Savage, a sergeant of the 5th CMR, wrote that "making raids had become a real science and large ones ... were very carefully planned. Besides having officers and men out for weeks practicing on dummy trenches, every precaution was taken to avoid confusion in No Man's Land."⁸⁸

The increased tempo of raiding in the post-Somme era posed some problems. Although frequent raiding allowed the Canadians to hone their attack doctrine, junior officers were increasingly pressured by the high command to pull off more and more raids with limited time to plan and prepare operations. The 31st Battalion's raid on Thelus on 29 March 1917 aptly demonstrates the problem of frequent and ill-prepared raids. Orders called for a pincer attack, with two parties advancing slightly apart and working toward each other. This was not a unique tactic, but it was contingent on both parties keeping pace with one another. "Luck did not favour the right party which suffered rather heavily," reported Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Bell.⁸⁹ This attacking party was assailed by German grenadiers, suffering delays and casualties. As well, Bell mentioned that "the groups moving northward had great difficulty in recognizing their positions in the trenches," resulting in the raiders being ambushed by German rifle-grenadiers and suffering further casualties.⁹⁰ According to Bell, "Major Seaton had a difficult task in the preparation of the scheme on short notice and carrying it out without opportunity for practice, and with troops new in the locality."⁹¹ The lack of time

⁸⁶ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/6, dispatch "Canadian Corps, First Army No.G.S.516/37(a)," 23 February 1917.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ CLIP, Charles Henry Savage, memoir, 1917.

⁸⁹ LAC, WD 31st Infantry Battalion, Operations Report, 30 March 1917.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

for preparation and training led to increased instances of mistakes, confusion, and dead soldiers.

While raids became more frequent in the winter of 1916–1917, they were far from uniform. The terrain and enemy positions often dictated the nature of a raid. An operation that was geared to reconnaissance was different than one that aimed at “search and destroy.” The size of raids also varied, ranging from a mere handful of men to well over a thousand. Alfred Andrews, a captain from 2nd Battalion and veteran from the First Contingent, wrote of a daring raid in 1917: “On March 14 Fitzroy and Templeman tried a one man raid. They got into a German front line and cleaned out a post but had to get out quick ... It was an unofficial raid that couldn’t be reported. Fitzroy knew no fear...”⁹² On 1 January 1917, the 42nd Battalion launched a nine man stealth raid, while on the 17th of the same month the 20th and 21st Battalions launched a monstrous operation that totalled 875 men.⁹³ This raid was the famous “million dollar scrap,” in reference to the estimated monetary value of the ammunition expended in the supporting artillery barrage.⁹⁴ The Calonne trench raid was essentially a small battle, much like the previous pioneering Lille Road raid carried out by the 1st CMR in December 1916.

The Calonne raid was another demonstration that the Canadians were applying to operations the lessons learned from the bloody debacles on the Somme and previous raids. These important lessons had been circulated throughout the corps, moving up the chain of command to corps headquarters, where many were codified and sent back down for lower headquarters to augment what Byng termed “any new form of Bosche killing.”⁹⁵ Most importantly, the Calonne raid was a clear foreshadowing of operational battle-craft that the Canadians would apply to future major operations. These newer “battle raids” differed from the set-piece assaults only in number of troops committed, the scale of the operation, and that they were not aimed to hold the ground they assaulted. They even had their own support operations, whether they were artillery shoots, patrols, or small raids.

One of the primary roles of raiding was to destroy the enemy morale as part of the overall battle of attrition. Yet that attack on

⁹² CLIP, A.H.J Andrews diary, March 14, 1917.

⁹³ Rawling, *Surviving*, 102.

⁹⁴ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 58.

⁹⁵ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 59.

morale could work against the raiders, particularly when raids went wrong, casualties mounted, and many good fighting men lost their lives. This is especially evident in light of the 1 March 1917 raid. It was one of the largest raids ever carried out by the Canadian Corps, and their most significant failure. The raid was executed by battalions from the 4th Division, which were relatively new to the battlefield on the Western Front and who were eager to make their mark, especially in relation to the other three veteran Canadian divisions. The failure of the 1 March raid was felt throughout the ranks of those involved, and eventually throughout the entire Canadian Corps via rumour and shared reports, as a lesson in futility and waste.⁹⁶ If there was any consolation, the raid re-taught very hard lessons that admittedly should have been known already to those organizing the enterprise, and it also served as a poignant reminder of the sheer danger and immense risk of trench raiding, and what happened when planners diverged from established doctrine, past lessons, and the philosophy of careful planning and preparation that had made past Canadian raids successful.

Raiding tactics during the second era of trench raiding were applied to large-scale operations. One thing that Major-General Louis Lipsett of 3rd Division noticed after a raid by the 1st CMR in late December 1916 was the usefulness of infiltration into No Man's Land prior to zero hour.⁹⁷ These jumping off points allowed the raiders to sneak closer to the enemy trenches prior to the offensive, reducing the time the attackers had to spend in crossing the killing zone between the front line trenches. This concept, developed and experimented during raiding, found its way into the attack plans of all four divisions at Vimy Ridge.

Artillery was proving to be the crucial factor in any successful offensive, and the effective trio of crushing preparatory bombardments, a protective creeping barrage, and infantry-wielded heavy weapons, the combination of which would propel the Canadians to victory at Vimy Ridge on 9 April 1917, were first battle-tested in minor operations. One such experimental and educational raid was executed by the 42nd Battalion on 1 April 1917. The raid featured a complicated barrage of artillery, trench mortars, rifle grenades, and indirect machine gun fire while the raiders advanced in teams of bombers, riflemen, Lewis gunners, and engineers.⁹⁸ Each squad and

⁹⁶ Cook, "A Proper Slaughter," 8.

⁹⁷ Rawling, *Surviving*, 103.

⁹⁸ LAC, WD, 42nd Infantry Battalion, April 1, 1917.

support arm had its own vector of fire and its own role in the support of the raiding parties. This provided accurate tactical fire support—bombarding enemy emplacements and troop garrisons.⁹⁹ The men entered the enemy trench under this intense shower of combined arms firepower to wreak havoc among the German communication trenches. The raiders then quickly and efficiently withdrew with only one man wounded.¹⁰⁰ This example of a combined-arms assault featured the same tactics that the Canadians would employ against the Germans on Vimy Ridge eight days later.¹⁰¹ Raiding had evolved to mirror major operations.

PROFESSIONAL MINOR OPERATIONS: RAIDING INTO THE SUMMER OF 1917

The Canadians continued to drive eastward after Vimy, attacking Arleux in late April 1917 and Fresnoy in early May. Despite hard fighting, the Canadians succeeded in pushing the Germans back. The assault troops and artillery of the Canadian Corps were beginning to develop a very close working relationship, and the change from “fire then movement” to “fire and movement,” as evidenced by these campaigns, was essential to victory in the battlefield. In accordance with these large set-piece battles in the spring of 1917, the corps continued its policy of regular raiding. Raids and patrols were integrated into the main battle plan, being used as means to consolidate territory, and also as a way to prepare for larger assaults.

In the coming months, raids would be used to straighten out defensive lines, which had transitioned from hard-defined trenches with thick belts of barbed wire to a more flexible outpost-based defensive system.¹⁰² The German defensive outposts projected into No Man’s Land, often in a checker-board defence, and would be more concentrated towards the reserve battle lines. These changing defensive strategies, utilised on both sides of the battlefield, were in response to the power of the artillery bombardments and

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Rawling, *Surviving*, 106.

¹⁰² S.G. Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles 1914-1918* (Toronto: Murray Printing Co. Lt., 1926), 66.

the coordinated infantry assault, as witnessed at Vimy Ridge. A looser front line allowed for flexibility in reaction to an attack, and minimised casualties from crushing artillery bombardments. These looser defensive lines also meant the Canadians had to adjust their raiding strategy. It became more difficult for raiders to capture enemy sentries or inflict great casualties on the Germans, usually while they lay vulnerable in their deep dugouts, because the front lines were only very thinly held, and as soon as a raid was detected, the sentries raised the alarm and fled—leaving the Canadian raiders to face the inevitable counterattack in force.¹⁰³

Only a few weeks after Vimy, the 49th Battalion raided Saline Trench in the Douai Plan. Despite thorough preparation and intelligence, and overcoming enemy posts in quick succession, the raiders quickly ran into stiffer resistance further down the trench system. Enemy sentries, seeing the raiders, fled to their rearward positions to summon reinforcements to counterattack. The Canadian raiders were then subjected to heavy interlocking machine gun fire from rearward positions of the enemy's checker-board defensive grid, forcing their withdrawal. This was facilitated by covering patrols in No Man's Land, and the raiders were fortunate to return to their lines with only one wounded man.¹⁰⁴ The battle raid was no longer producing heavy enemy casualties and the procurement of prisoners: new raiding tactics needed to be developed.

Some historians, such as Geoffrey Jackson, might question the value of trench raiding in the months following Vimy.¹⁰⁵ It is indeed true that many raids met difficulties during this time, as the Germans were adapting to the Canadian tactics and countering them more effectively than in the past. However, these raids, when taken into context of the entire war effort and not examined solely within the narrow scope of the few months of operations following Vimy, were still valuable operations. They provided the Canadians with vital intelligence for upcoming assaults such as Hill 70, a battle in which tactics honed during the raids of the summer of 1917 were put to good effect. It was tactics and logistic coordination developed through raiding which allowed the Canadians to attack with a synchronisation and efficiency that served to overwhelm the German defensive positions. Canadian

¹⁰³ Ibid., 109.

¹⁰⁴ LAC, RG9, v.4154, 8/6, "Report on Raid," 25 April 1917.

¹⁰⁵ Geoffrey Jackson, "What was the Point?: Raiding in the Summer of 1917," *Canadian Military History Journal* 19, No. 4 (2010), 31–32.

experience in raiding after Vimy also provided the CEF with ample experience in quickly fortifying recently taken enemy positions against counterattack. At Hill 70, using lessons learned from the previous months raiding, the Canadians put up an extremely effective defence against the repeated German efforts to retake the fortified positions. Although hard lessons were learned during this period, with failed raids intermixed with the successful ones, these operations proved vital to supporting future major battles.

These raids in the summer of 1917 foreshadowed future changes to minor operations, with their role becoming increasingly tied to not only the destruction of enemy morale and materiel, but also to the eventual occupation of ground that had been overrun during raids. On 30 August 1917, the 58th Battalion raided an area known as Nun's Alley on the outskirts of the town of Lens. According to Brigadier-General F.W. Hill's report, the raid was carried out with the following directive concerning the German strongpoint in the sector: "In order to deprive the enemy of this advantage, and to secure for ourselves a similar command of the enemy's trench system, and to enable us to construct our proposed trench east of our present front line, the 58th Battalion was ordered to clear Nun's Alley as far as the crest and to establish a post there."¹⁰⁶ While in the enemy trenches, the 58th Battalion's raiders established a trench block in order to hinder German counterattacks. As the Canadians defended this position, an enemy assault "was delayed by this obstacle ... the precision of the rifle grenade fire stopped his advance, inflicting severe casualties."¹⁰⁷ Raids in late 1917 were becoming essential vanguards to the actual occupation of enemy territory, clearing the way of enemy resistance and strongpoints, foreshadowing the role raids would play in the Hundred Days offensives a year later. These operations in the summer of 1917 were indeed not a waste, especially considering the larger context of the evolution of attack doctrine brought about by the execution of these operations.

THE FINAL HUNTING SEASON: RAIDING IN THE WINTER OF 1917-1918

¹⁰⁶ LAC, RG9, v.4149, 15/5, dispatch, Brigadier-General Hill, "Report, 58th Canadian Battalion, 33/333," 31 August 1917.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

After the Passchendaele campaign was shut down in mid-November 1917, the Canadians did not rest to await the next big battle. The Canadian minor operations over the winter of 1917–1918 were carried out during a period of reorganisation for the Canadian troops. They were still reeling from the terrible slaughter on the Passchendaele front, and needed time to recuperate and reorganise. This period also saw a Canadian infantry that was markedly different than the one that fought over roughly the same ground two years before. As 1918 dawned, the Canadians were a battle-hardened and professionalised infantry formation.¹⁰⁸ As historians such as Shane Schreiber have argued, the Canadians had become a shock army within the BEF, capable of smashing enemy positions and carrying victory where other units have failed.¹⁰⁹ The backbone of this shock army was their proficient all-arms attack doctrine, which they had practiced relentlessly and refined in their laboratory of battle, the trench raids.

Even with the advent of effective battle raids, the Canadians continued also to practice traditional stealth raiding into 1918. Stealth raids were still the most efficient way of gathering intelligence information from the enemy. The 27th Battalion raided on 18–19 February 1918 at Metal Trench, in the Avion sector.¹¹⁰ Thorough reconnaissance was done in the weeks prior to the raid, revealing that at trench grid N.33.d the enemy were not alert, yet always occupying their forward posts.¹¹¹ Due to this it was decided that a small stealth raid would be best to procure intelligence information, and the raid would consist of only forty-nine men.¹¹² On 17 February, patrols discovered that the Germans were shielding these gaps in the wire with their own strong patrols, so the raid was altered on the morning of 18 February to include a crash bombardment of shrapnel shells to support the raiders.¹¹³

At zero hour, 2:00 a.m., the raiders stormed the enemy lines following their shrapnel barrage, which then transitioned to a box barrage to cover the assault. They were also supported by Lewis gun

¹⁰⁸ Tim Cook, “Bloody Victory: The Canadian Corps in the Hundred Days,” in *1918: Year of Victory: The End of the Great War and the Shaping of History* Ashley Etkins, ed., (Auckland: Exile Pub. Ltd., 2010), 163.

¹⁰⁹ Shane B. Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (London: Praeger, 1997), 12–13.

¹¹⁰ LAC, RG9, v.41148, 14/15, “Report on Small Raid,” 19 February 1918.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² LAC, WD, 27th Infantry Battalion, 19 February 1918.

¹¹³ LAC, RG9, v.41148, 14/15, “Report on Small Raid,” 19 February 1918.

positions and rifle grenadiers as covering parties. Splitting into two groups, the Canadian soldiers assaulted down the enemy trenches. As they encountered enemy posts, the raiders attacked with grenades and bayonets, taking prisoner any enemy who survived their onslaught. At 2:16 a.m., the raiders quickly withdrew back to their own lines, covered by the supporting parties equipped with rifle grenades and Lewis guns. The raiders captured six prisoners, inflicted a number of casualties, and suffered no casualties of their own.¹¹⁴ This raid demonstrated the emerging flexibility of Canadian minor operations, where they adapted the parameters of the raid to new intelligence information to provide the raiders with the best chance of accomplishing their objectives.

PROFESSIONALISM ATTAINED: SPRING AND SUMMER RAIDING IN 1918

Raiding continued to be practiced aggressively as the Canadians moved into the spring of 1918. While the principles of raiding were laid down, the soldiers at the front continued to tinker and experiment. One risky method of preserving surprise was to do away with the preparatory bombardment. This surprise tactic was employed by the 58th Battalion on 13 January 1918, as discussed above, with the raiders succeeding in their objective of securing prisoners and information. A complicated crash barrage of trench mortars and rifle grenades had been used instead of artillery, with the hurricane barrage unleashed at the moment of the assault.¹¹⁵ This allowed the raiders to surprise the enemy by not telegraphing their intentions with an artillery bombardment, but still being able to lay concentrated firepower on the enemy's strongpoints and machine guns. The third era of trench raiding saw the infantry forming into self-sufficient assault units, capable of forging ahead on the battlefield and successfully assaulting and overcoming enemy strongpoints without being reliant on heavy artillery.

¹¹⁴ LAC, WD, 27th Infantry Battalion, 19 February 1918.

¹¹⁵ Rawling, *Surviving*, 172; and LAC, RG9, v.4053, 24/6, "Report on Raid carried out by 58th Battalion," 13 January 1918. Note that Rawling states the raid took place on 21 January, when in fact the 58th Battalion raided on 13 January, and it was the report that was filed on 21 January.

On 26 May 1918, the 24th Battalion executed a large raid on the German lines near Mercatel, in the Arras sector.¹¹⁶ This raid demonstrated the level of efficiency the Canadians had attained by the spring of 1918, as it was conceptualised, planned, and executed in a matter of only a few days. Thorough scouting was completed in the three nights before the raid, where opportunities for breaches in the enemy wire were marked along with detailed reconnaissance of the terrain near the front line and in No Man's Land. Officers studied the routes and laid down the axis of advance. Two attacking parties of fifteen men each were detailed to assault the trenches, and they were protected by two covering squads equipped with rifle grenades and Lewis guns. The raiders succeeded, despite unforeseen difficulties with previously undiscovered German wire, in crossing to their jumping off point undetected. With no preparatory barrage, at 12:16 a.m. the raiders sprang into the German trenches, immediately shooting two German sentries. They attacked another post, killing one enemy and taking two prisoners, and then proceeded to assault further down the enemy trenches. In the preceding chaotic minutes, they encountered a further garrison of fifteen Germans, who were all killed. With their allotted time in the enemy trenches running out, the raiders retreated with two prisoners, having suffered only two slightly wounded.¹¹⁷ The raid was a complete success and also served to demonstrate the ability of infantry to overcome strong enemy positions without outside support.

EVOLVING FULL CIRCLE: RAIDING IN THE HUNDRED DAYS

With three years of training and preparation against the static German trench system, the war changed abruptly in late 1918, when mobility was restored to the battlefield following the Battle of Amiens. This phase of the war was not conducive to traditional raiding. With these large battles far more frequent than in previous years, where there could be months before major engagements, there is evidence of Canadians engaged in both patrols and raids, but these were often smaller affairs, and usually directed against enemy

¹¹⁶ R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, ed., *The 24th Battalion, CEF, Victoria Rifles of Canada 1914-1919* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Co., 1930), 212-231.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

posts and forward parties.¹¹⁸ These were essentially minor raids to harass and kill the enemy, but on a very small scale and never of the depth or complexity of the intricate operations that took place in the early summer of 1918.

Thus traditional raiding, a product of a static battlefield, was not suited to the open field warfare during the final months of the war. The offensive fronts were simply changing too quickly for raiding to be of any use, since the Germans were retreating too fast to allow raids to be planned.¹¹⁹ Yet pressure had to be kept on the enemy. This change in operational tempo and tactics demanded the return, full-circle, to the aggressive patrols that first spawned trench raids in 1915. For example, when the 116th Battalion attacked during the Amiens offensive, it utilised battle patrols to carry out what could be termed “constant raiding,” where aggressive infantry repeatedly attacked, retreated, and attacked from flanks to overcome the enemy positions. The official report described one instance on 13 August where “Later in the day the 116th Battalion steadily penetrated again, and after midnight had established themselves just east of Middle Wood, which was strongly held by nests of Machine Guns ... Patrols were sent through the village towards Blucher Wood and met serious opposition. Severe close fighting ensued, and the enemy suffered many casualties. About noon an enemy counterattack drove our patrols back on their resistance line....”¹²⁰ The report continued to describe the assault, where on another flank the 52nd Battalion attacked and occupied the village of Damery by the use of minor tactics, employing smoke and rifle grenades to assault the German positions.¹²¹ The Canadians carried out, in essence, “constant” minor operations, adapting a static trench tactic to fight in rapid mobile warfare where there were no trenches.¹²² Due to their constant experimentation and training in raiding, the now elite Canadian shock troops were equipped with tactics and technology to finally break the

¹¹⁸ LAC, WD 28th Infantry Battalion, 6 May 1918.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. See also John Toland, *No Man's Land: 1918, The Last Year of the Great War* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Ltd., 1980), 400.

¹²⁰ LAC, RG9, v.3858, 82/8, “Summary of Minor Operations on Front of 3rd Canadian Division, Aug 12-15 Inclusive,” 15 August 1918.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire*, 127. See also Overseas Military Forces of Canada (hereafter referred to as OMFC), *Report of the Ministry, 1918* (London: Minister Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 1919), 150.

back of the German defenses. Essentially, in the final stages of the Great War, raids made one final evolution: from “butcher and bolt” to “butcher and advance.”

CONCLUSION

The development of Canadian trench raiding from 1915 to 1918 is fundamental to understanding the experience of warfare on the Western Front. That is why it is so surprising that the present historiography has failed to systematically investigate raiding in any sufficient capacity. This oversight in the analysis of the development of attack doctrine within the BEF, and indeed possibly all armies on the Western Front (an excellent subject for further study), has left the story of the learning curve of the BEF half understood. Raiding was indeed more important to the development of doctrine than historians had previously claimed, and this article merely provides a brief discussion of the many areas raiding impacted tactics, technology, attritional strategy, and combat psychology within trench warfare.

Raiding, as it developed through its three major phases of development, evolved from ad-hoc small actions of opportunity to major offensive operations that were in essence minor battles. During the first phase raiding evolved from aggressive patrols to become a laboratory of battle, where new tactical ideas and offensive technologies were experimented with by enterprising battalions wishing to take the fight to the enemy. After the Battle of the Somme, the second phase of raiding saw raids become more commonplace and complex, and their infusion into offensive doctrine throughout the BEF. Raiding had become a standardised, a top-down initiative that was central to the development of CEF attack doctrinal development. This phase also featured specialised infantry assault units employing advanced weapons tactics to overcome the German emplacements. After the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Canadian raiding made another evolution, where the raids were incorporated into the larger battle plan to overcome the German defenses. The Canadians had by now become proficient raiders, using these operations to prepare the battleground for major operations, and consolidate newly won positions following the large assaults. This phase also saw the proliferation of the “battle raid,” where raids were executed on a large scale and featured an all-

arms battle for a prolonged period in the enemy lines. Thus raiding had evolved from its beginnings as improvised sideline operations, into becoming integral components of major battles and overall strategy to overcome the primacy of the defensive.

As Canadian raiding underwent its own doctrinal evolution throughout the war, it was also crucial to the development of the doctrinal learning curve experienced by the CEF. In future studies, it will be proven that raiding was a more crucial component to the larger BEF doctrinal learning curve than historians had previously surmised.

Raiding in the Canadian Corps developed tactics, weaponry, command and control, and had an impact on the psychology of the infantryman's wartime experience. These minor operations also shaped the Canadian soldier's conception of peace and violence on the battlefield, morality and killing in combat, fear and bravery, and morale and the will to fight. Trench raiding was influential in almost all facets of the Canadian combat experience on the Western Front. Despite the hard lessons and losses from the raids, their influence, when taken as a whole throughout the war, was a positive one for the Canadian Corps. Without the lessons learned from raids, the experimentation in weaponry and tactics would have had to be learned in the episodic major battles, where the stakes were much higher, the troop concentrations denser, and the chance of disaster more likely. These "butcher and bolt" operations were therefore a very important factor in the development of the Canadian attack doctrine, and were especially critical in shaping the Canadian Corps' well-deserved reputation as an elite fighting force.¹²³



¹²³ For a much more detailed summarisation of the overall impact of Canadian raiding, and from which material this article is based upon, see Colin Garnett, "Butcher and Bolt: Canadian Trench Raiding During the Great War, 1915-1918," MA, Carleton University, 2011, 146-150.

I am most grateful to Dr. Tim Cook, who has mentored me throughout my career and has remained a good friend and skilled editor. I also would like to thank *CMH Journal*, who agreed to take a chance and publish my work. David Pfothenauer was invaluable in adding a tactical mindset and a keen eye to editing. My friends and family have been most supportive, thank you. I would also like to thank my late dog Georgie, who selflessly consoled me during my hard times, even as she herself was fighting her own battle. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife Shawna, who has remained supportive and loving while I am half a world away. Hopefully there are many more articles where this came from.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Garnett is currently a Canadian PhD Candidate at Australian Defence Force Academy, UNSW Canberra. His thesis, *Not So Minor Operations*, investigates the impact raiding had upon the Imperial Armies' doctrinal evolution. His MA from Carleton University, *Butcher and Bolt*, examined minor operations and tactical development within the CEF. This is his first article highlighting the focus of his work, minor operations in warfare.