



The Battle of Arras: An Overview

by **Everett Sharp**

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The Battle of Arras was a major British offensive during the First World War. From 9th April to 16th May 1917, troops from the four corners of the British Empire attacked trenches held by the army of Imperial Germany to the east of the French city of [Arras](#). The ground and date chosen for the battle was dictated by a desire to cooperate with the French, whose forthcoming offensive, planned by their [General Nivelle](#), was to fall on the German positions topping the Chemin-des-Dames ridge, an area of high ground north west of Rheims. Closer cooperation with the French was ruled out, as the devastation of the Somme battles in July to November 1916 had so destroyed the infrastructure behind the lines that another offensive physically linked to the right flank of the French armies was judged unlikely to succeed. However, an attack in the Arras region was not the choice of the British Commander-in-Chief, [Field Marshal Haig](#), who wanted the main effort of his armies to be directed north, around the Ypres salient. He hoped to clear the Belgian coastline, increasingly important to the Germans' submarine offensive, and capture the strategically important railhead of Roulers, whose loss to the Germans would seriously hamper their war effort on this sector of the Western Front. However, Haig's plan was overruled by [Lloyd George](#), the British Prime Minister, who also made attempts to have Haig put under the direct control of Nivelle.

Following heavy losses in the fighting on the [Somme](#), the Germans had taken the decision to shorten their lines. For the preceding nine months, Russian prisoners and support troops of the German army had been engaged in building a fearsome new defensive position, called by the British 'The Hindenburg Line'. Beginning with local retirements, by the 18th March 1917 the German army had completed their withdrawal behind this line. This created serious complications for the British, dislocating their battle plans on the eve of the offensive. For the French the problem was even more acute, as their forthcoming attack was intended as a breakout from a salient that no longer existed. However, Nivelle decided to proceed with the attack. The British were to begin their operations a few days before those of the French, the intention being that the German reserves would be transferred north to counter their attack around Arras. With these now committed to battle, the much larger French force would punch through the German lines to the south and roll up the German army unopposed from the rear. This was to be the knockout blow on the Western Front, and Nivelle had boasted that his offensive would end the war. This was proved not to be the case.

Geographically, much of the battlefield of Arras is relatively flat. However, to the north of the city rises Vimy ridge, held by the Germans and dominating the local countryside. Capture of this ridge formed one of the major British objectives of the battle: so long as it was held by the Germans, the British lines of communication were under constant observation.

The Arras offensive has been divided into ten distinct actions, comprising battles, and flanking, subsidiary and

subsequent attacks. The first two actions of the first phase, The Battle of Vimy and the simultaneous First Battle of the Scarpe, took place during the 9th '14th April. These are considered to have been a great success for the British and Imperial troops.

Attacking Vimy Ridge, the Canadian and British forces of General Horne's First Army were able to eject the German defenders; here and in the attacks south of the ridge made by General Allenby's Third Army, advances were preceded by a considerable artillery barrage comprising both high explosives and gas. Third Army's attack was so successful initially that advances were made up to a depth of three and a half miles, the farthest advance achieved in the west since the advent of trench warfare in 1914. This sudden triumph seemed to offer the possibility of a breakout, and cavalry were rushed forwards in the hope of pouring them through the gap and attacking the enemy's lines of communication. Such hopes, however, proved bloodily deceptive.

Further south, the flanking attacks by the Australian and British troops of General Gough's Fifth Army at Bullecourt on the 11th April, and those of the German forces of General von Falkenhausen's 6th Army at Lagnicourt four days later were both stalemates.

After a pause that allowed the rotation of exhausted units (and that also allowed German reinforcements to pour into the area), General Allenby's Third Army undertook phase three, The Second Battle of the Scarpe, fought on the 23rd to 24th

Farther north, General Horne's First Army was committed to a subsidiary attack on La Coulotte on the 23rd April. Working in conjunction with Third Army, both took part in The Battle of Arleux, 28th ' 29th April, the much larger fourth phase of the offensive.

These attacks and the last three major actions of the battle were successful only insofar as they relieved pressure on the French Armies, whose own offensive, begun on the 16th April, had run into serious trouble. While advances had been made, this was not the knockout blow promised by Nivelle; casualties were excessive, and the stark contrast between the promises of the French generals and the realities of the fighting caused a collapse in French morale. On the 3rd May, the men of the French 2nd division refused to attack; many of the units were described as going on 'strike?', or more simply, [mutinying](#). The French army was in real danger of disintegration, and the offensive was abandoned on the 9th May.

As the French armies still held over two thirds of the Western Front, Field Marshal Haig now had to keep pressure on the German forces and so prevent any attack on the badly shaken French. Concern for the Russian front were also growing as news of the [revolution](#) began to arrive in the West. The relief of the allied armies, however, came at the cost of Haig's own troops. Third Army was compelled to fight phase five of the offensive, the Third Battle of the Scarpe, between the 3rd ' 4th May, and another major action, the Capture of Roeux, on the 13th ' 14th May. Finally, General Gough's Fifth Army undertook a flanking operation, the Battle of Bullecourt, on the 3rd '16th May.

With the Battle of Bullecourt, the Arras offensive ended. In Canada, the taking of Vimy ridge has come to be mythologised as the heroic battle in which their national conscience was forged. Less romantically, the battle

might be summed up for the majority of the troops involved by the Australian nickname *The Blood Tub*. This term, although used by Australians to describe 'their' Bullecourt, can equally evoke the experience of many in a battle that took a greater daily death toll than any other fought by the British Empire in the First World War.

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Arras: The Forgotten Battlefield

by Paul Reed

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During the late 1980s I interviewed several hundred British and Canadian veterans who had fought in the First World War. It will be no surprise that many of them served at Ypres or on the Somme, but a place that equally came up in these interviews was Arras. Veterans who had survived the Somme experienced Arras as their next major battle and many of them in fact almost felt that the 1917 battle was just an extension of what they had experienced the previous year. But as I began to do background research to these interviews it was clear that the historiography of Arras was severely lacking compared to those other famous battlefronts of the Great War. In fact it was while researching one of the veterans experiences in primary sources at the then Public Records Office I encountered historian Jon Nicholls. Nicholls became the first author since the official historian in the 1940s to write about Arras and following the publication of his *Cheerful Sacrifice* in 1990 the 1917 battle has attracted the attention of only two other authors, myself and Peter Barton. The 1918 operations when the German Army was halted on the Arras front have never been written about, and the final August operations have attracted the attention of a handful of Canadian academics. Why is Arras so forgotten?

In every respect, it shouldn't be. Arras perhaps more than any other battlefield gives us the First World War in microcosm. When the British Army took over the Arras sector in 1916 it was very much a static front; typical of the attritional warfare taking place along all four hundred and fifty miles of the Western Front. In this it reflected well the experience of the typical British Tommy; monotonous day to day trench warfare, but with often a high daily casualty rate with losses from sickness in times of poor weather as much as from enemy activity. The 1917 battle clearly demonstrates lessons learned from the Somme in the early phase of the 'Learning Curve'. Historians have yet to clearly explain why the Third Army commanded by Julian Byng 'the hero of Vimy the previous year' was able to largely stop the German offensive when the lines buckled on the Somme at the same time, and the following month in the Battle of the Lys. The Canadian Corps operations taking them from Arras to Cambrai in the late summer and autumn of 1918 are the epitome of the skilful fighting force the BEF had become in the final stage of the war.

Yet despite the fact that the fighting at Arras reflects almost every aspect of the experience of the BEF in WW1 it remains under-studied, if not neglected. And it is not just among historians; visitors to the Western Front gravitate towards Ypres and the Somme. Both these areas are well set up for tourism, with clear trails, numerous guidebooks and even smartphone Apps. As such they both get visitors in the hundreds of thousands with sites like Thiépval and Tyne Cot edging towards half a million people passing through each year. Arras, with perhaps the exception of Vimy Ridge (which some think wrongly as a separate battlefield), has nothing like this yet has as much, if not more to offer. Visitor's Books in the British cemeteries show that visits tend to be focussed; a family coming to visit a relative's grave. Casual tourism is rarer. Part of that is probably because there is no focussed museum for Arras; no starting point. The Wellington Quarries have attempted to breach that gap but the very nature of that site means it is too focussed. Arras cries out for an Historial or In Flanders Fields.

As we approach the centenary of the Great War one of the debts we owe to the memory of that conflict is to move away from the notion of the Somme and Ypres dominating it all; Arras needs to find its place and historians need to explain what that place might be. Until then the rolling hills around the Scarpe valley will remain a forgotten battlefield of the Great War.

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The Battle of Arras: An Image Set on Flickr

by Kate Lindsay

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The foundations of the Battle of Arras

by Matt Leonard

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95 years ago to the day, the April weather around Arras was utterly miserable. Unseasonably low temperatures combined with snow, sleet and driving rain to transform the area around the beleaguered French town into a muddy hell. The incessant shelling had pulverised the already unstable ground, creating a sea of mud that was to form the backdrop to the first major Allied offensive of 1917.

The Battle of Arras was part of a three-pronged assault on the German lines. Away from the wretched, eponymously named town, the Canadians would launch an attack on the German defences on Vimy Ridge and the French would hurl themselves at the deeply entrenched positions on the Chemin des Dames, as part of the ill-fated Second Battle of the Aisne. The attacks would yield mixed results. The Canadian's superbly planned attack on Vimy Ridge would be an outstanding success, indeed the manner of victory, as well as the skill and courage shown by the Canadians, became a huge source of pride for the country, so much so that Vimy is often considered to be the 'birthplace of the Canadian nation'.

The British would also perform well at Arras. Commanded by General Allenby, the Third Army achieved good initial success, advancing up to three miles in places and successfully overcoming the German front-line defences. However, the inability of Allenby to push home the success meant that in the end the Germans were

able to recover their composure and check the British advance.

On the Chemin des Dames, the story was quite different. The battle was an abject failure. The Germans were already aware of Nivelles's plans, having captured them some two weeks earlier, and the French made little or no progress. The failure was to cost Nivelles his job and cause the Poilu to finally snap. Mutiny swept through the French armies, something that remarkably was not picked up by the Germans.

The initial British success at Arras, the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge and the grotesque charade on the Chemin des Dames all had their roots in the subterranean worlds that underpinned their respective battlefields. On the Chemin des Dames, it was the Germans that took advantage of the many caves and souterraines that lay beneath the steep ridge. They hid their men there during the opening bombardment and then, when the French attacked, they were able to appear from below ground and fire from the slopes of the ridgeline, catching the French in a murderous crossfire, with devastating consequences.

At Vimy, the British tunnelling companies had worked tirelessly during 1916 to win the mining war on the ridge. This they had done with aplomb. Extensive defensive systems had been created enabling the Canadians to attack from a sure footing. 182 Tunnelling Company had also prepared several large mines, but in the end these were not used during the attack on the ridge, such was the speed of the infantry's advance. However, special wombat mines had been prepared in advance. These were holes drilled horizontally towards the enemy, about 3-6 metres deep, which were packed with explosives that would create a deep, protective trench in No Man's Land. Blown once the initial attack had started, these trenches then allowed for the removal of casualties and for communications to be improved with the forward positions.

At Arras, too, the tunnelling companies had been busy. The town was sat on top of numerous subterranean quarries, some dating back to the medieval period, that had been utilised by the French since the beginning of the war. In 1916, the British took over the Arras sector of the line and immediately set about expanding the quarries and linking them with passages and tunnels. By the 9th April 1917, this underground world had become a fully functional platform from which to attack the German positions. Not only had the quarries and caves been expanded to deliver men directly to the frontline trenches in safety, but also this subterranean void now contained kitchens, latrines, washing facilities, a small gauge railway, command and control centres and even a 700-bed hospital.

On the eve of the Battle, the hidden world beneath Arras was able to accommodate up to 24,000 fully equipped soldiers, almost directly below the frontlines. The ability to deliver men like this, straight to the forward positions, proved to be a major step forward from the year before, when many of the casualties on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme had occurred far from the sight of the enemy, as men made their way to their forward positions.

The majority of the tunnelling and cave extensions beneath Arras had been carried out by the New Zealanders and accordingly the quarries and caves had been given names such as Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin. One of these, *the Wellington Mines*, is now open to the public; it is a subterranean museum that captures a moment in time. On the walls can be found items of graffiti and intricate carvings that contain the distributed personhood of their creators. These unique items of Great War material culture range from simple inscriptions detailing name, rank and unit, to drawings of women, pictures of kings and even a carving of a woolly mammoth (or perhaps an elephant). The walls are also adorned with unique inscriptions left by Maori tunnellers, often in their native language, which tell of the global nature of the conflict, as well as their journey through it.

Intermingled with these personal markings are signs directing the occupants to different parts of the vast cave

network, some of which point upwards - indicating the chalk steps that lead from the underworld up to the surface, to a man-made hell on earth and a battle, that having started so promisingly, soon bogged down into the usual stalemate of trench warfare.

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Tactics and Training - Arras 1917

by Stephen Barker

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There had been much tactical experimentation undertaken by the British Army during the Somme battles in the latter half of 1916. In addition, contemporary Divisional, Corps and Army files held at the National Archives, Kew reveal the extent of GHQ's urgency to learn 'lessons' at that time. As a result, the winter of 1916-17 saw the production of new military manuals that would change tactical level warfare in the BEF.

One of them - *SS143, Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917*, laid the foundations for the way the infantry would fight until the end of the war. Emphasis was placed upon infantry being able to fight its way forward independently of artillery support as a battle developed. At its heart was the belief that the advantages of different weapon types could be brought to bear on the enemy as and when needed.

Consequently, the formations, preparation and training practised for the Battle of Arras were to be different to those used during attacks the previous year.

In the place of a single line of riflemen, *SS143* promoted the self contained platoon comprising a small HQ and four sections of specialists. In simple terms, the attack was to be led forward by bomb and rifle sections, with the rifle grenade and Lewis gun sections following close behind. Upon contact with the enemy, the rifles and the bombers were to seek out the enemy flank and attack with fire, bayonet and bomb. The rifle grenadiers and Lewis gun team were to attempt to suppress the enemy, allowing the other sections to press home their attack.

This flexible use of arms also passed a degree of initiative to the junior officers down the chain of command. In order to encourage these developments, training regimes were to be based upon the following requirements:

(a) *The Offensive Spirit. All ranks must be taught that their aim and object is to come to close quarters with the enemy as quickly as possible so as to be able to use the bayonet. This must become a second nature.*

(b) *Initiative. The matter of control by even Company leaders on the battlefield is now so difficult that the smaller formations i.e. platoon and section commanders must be trained to take the initiative, without waiting for orders.*

(c) *Confidence in Weapons, necessitating a high standard of skill at arms.*

(d) *Co-operation of Weapons is essential on the battlefield and the corollary of (c).*

(e) Discipline is most necessary at all times, and particularly on the battlefield.

(f) Moral(sic) must be heightened by every possible means; confidence in leaders and weapons goes a long way towards it.

(g) Esprit de Corps. True soldierly spirit must be built up in sections and platoons. Each section should consider itself the best section in the platoon, and each platoon the best in the battalion.

One of the ways of fostering esprit de corps was through competition and during training schedules 'Efficiency Competitions' were organised. Such contests were geared towards the development of weapon skills outlined in *SS143*, but also inter unit rivalry and a higher level of general fitness. Here are the activities in a competition organised by 112 Brigade in March 1917:

112 Brigade Efficiency Competition – March 1917														
	Transport	Shooting	Bombing	Bayonet Fighting	Musketry	Lewis Gun	Boxing	Relay Race	Road Race	Stretcher Bearers	Tug of war	Inter-Company	Inter- Battalion	Points Total
6 th Bedfords	3	3		2	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	34
11 th Warwicks	2	2	1	3	1	3			3	2		2		19
10 th Loyals	1		2		2		6						2	13
8 th East Lancs			3	1			2							6
Trench Mortar Battery							1							1

Although the battles of Arras, Third Ypres and Cambrai failed to produce the desired breakthrough on the Western Front in 1917, the basic principles enshrined in *SS143* were sound. In conjunction with effective preparations, efficient staff work, and overwhelming artillery support, *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917* provided a simple tactical blueprint that would play a part in the BEF's victories in 1918.

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