

**Peter E. Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. ISBN 978-14-72-43825-6. Pp. xiv, 250. Hardcover. £73.99.**

Peter Hodgkinson's prosopography of the men who commanded infantry battalions between 1914 and 1918 is a significant addition to the growing literature that dissects the First World War British army. Interest in that army has been phenomenal for two decades, as a wave of 'learning curve' revisionism attempts to understand the nature, processes and outcomes of the military experience that produced a war-winning army from the mishmash of regulars, territorials, citizen volunteers and conscripts that fought Britain's first mass war. Leadership is one factor that makes an effective army and much ink has been spilt over the skill (or lack of) of the rapidly promoted generals who learnt war the hard way on the western front. Studies of junior leadership are much rarer and Hodgkinson's monograph is recommended both to those with an interest in this war, and to those who have a more general concern with how armies work.

The body of research which lies behind this study is impressive. Not only has the author striven to identify the 5,000 officers who reached the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel during the war, providing a rich bank of data for statistical analysis, but in many cases he has compiled detailed mini-biographies which puts flesh onto these bare statistical bones and gives identity and character to this diverse yet fascinating group of men. Arguably the battalion commander is the most important figure in the army hierarchy (and not just in this war), whose character and leadership both fashions the martial spirit of the men under his command and determines his unit's fortunes as they are subject to the decisions of higher command. In a rapidly raised and green citizen army such as the one Great Britain mobilized that role is perhaps even more important. In a war in which warfare changed rapidly and attrition through death, wounding, burnout and sacking produced a quick turnover of senior officers, men of energy and talent who had learnt the military trade in the proving ground

of the western front had the chance to rise rapidly, although rarely beyond the level of battalion command. Although as one would expect regular officers dominated command positions early in the war, by the final 'hundred days' campaign, to which Hodgkinson devotes a concluding chapter, 'citizens' with no pre-1914 military experience had started to proliferate at the level of battalion command. These 'temporary gentlemen' were leaders and warriors. One of Hodgkinson's sources for biographical information are the medal citations of his protagonists, for whom the award of the Distinguished Service Order for acts of initiative or bravery seems to appear to be a rite of passage.

The nature of the subject leads inevitably to a repetitious style. Exemplary mini-biographies follow one another in quick succession such that one individual is hard to distinguish from the next, although some focus is provided by structuring the analysis around the battalion commanders of three different divisions, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup>, from the regular, 'new' and territorial armies. Themes investigated include the appointment and fortunes of pre-war 'dug-outs' in the expanding army, the pre-war military experience and professional training of battalion commanders, hiring and firing, and the character and expertise of the men who rose to command battalions. The author concludes that the army responded effectively to the dual challenges of expansion and adaptation to a new sort of warfare, although when it came to promotion the army could not be classified as a genuine meritocracy. The author demonstrates the dominance of regular officers in regular battalion command and the relatively limited promotion of pre-war Territorial Force officers to battalion command throughout the war, confirming statistically the long-perceived bias against officers who came from the reserves. This suggests that the pre-war ethos of the army remained solid, while it was practical in the way it addressed its pressing

need for skilled wartime commanders. This was one of the factors that allowed the British army to match and later to master its more professional German opponents.

Unfortunately, there is no comparison made with enemy or ally. Such comparative research is becoming essential to understand the shifting dynamic of combat and learning in the western front battle school. Still, Hodgkinson has provided an exemplary research methodology for anyone wishing to look at Battalion command in other armies. This book is highly recommended as an important contribution to the study of the British army in the First World War, and of military command more broadly.

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