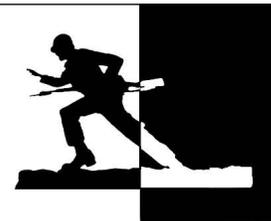


Book Reviews



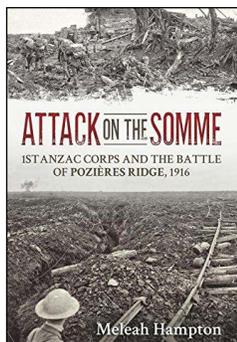
***Attack on the Somme:
1st Anzac Corps and the
Battle of Pozieres Ridge, 1916***
By Meleah Hampton
England: Helion & Company,
Limited, 2016, 232 pages

Reviewed by Maj Timothy
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In *Attack on the Somme*, Dr. Meleah Hampton, currently with the Military History Section of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), presents the Battle of the Somme for 1st Anzac Corps. Popular memory places Australia's primary contribution to the Great War at Gallipoli. Pozières Ridge, however, was even bloodier and their pointless sacrifices greater. Dr. Hampton analyzes the battles as both an individual campaign and as a learning experience for the Australians. Commanders and their actions, both Australian and British, are assessed using contemporary documents more than retrospective memoirs. These sources, often written on the line during the battle, allow Dr. Hampton to present the Australians' successes and failures at the brigade and division levels in near-real time. As a result, the reader gains an appreciation of the friction present during planning and execution for the 1st Anzac Corps.

On 23 July 1916, as part of the ongoing Somme Offensive, the 1st Australian Division launched an attack on the village of Pozières that differed from previous efforts to capture the town. The attack, while successful in capturing the town, was hampered from the beginning by a lack of coordination and planning at the army level. General Hubert Gough, commander of the newly-created Reserve Army, "called spur of the moment conferences without representation from [neighboring] Fourth Army to begin planning uncoordinated attacks within his sector." Gough's lack of coordination was emulated by his subordinates as the battle continued over the next six weeks. Furthermore, the capture of Pozières represented the high-water mark, but even its significance was limited by the failure to capture the German defensive lines to the east and northeast.

On 27 July 1916, the 2nd Australian Division replaced the 1st Australian Division in the trenches. The 2nd Australian Division's mission was to capture the German lines. Their approach to that task, however, was markedly different from that of their predecessor, especially with regards to training and fire support coordination. Dr. Hampton provides thoughtful analysis of the different planning styles. She dissects the application of artillery and its coordination with infantry objectives and finds it was uneven across commanders. Even the involvement of their higher headquarters' staff in the matter



failed to rectify woefully inadequate fire support planning and execution. In the midst of this planning, German defensive fire severely limited Australian logistical preparations or reconnaissance opportunities. As a result, the hastily-planned and executed attack on 29 July was a failure.

Dr. Hampton places Australian failures within a wider context of British Expeditionary Force (BEF) operations. She ascribes some of the failures of August and September to the change in British campaign strategy. Previously, attacks in Reserve Army's area of operation were in support of attacks by Fourth Army. After the overall strategy changed on 30 July 1916, the attacks of Reserve Army were to be "an end in themselves." With this change in operational design, 1st Anzac Corps began planning and executing a series of actions that were largely in support of II Corps' 12th Division to their left instead of predominately supporting Fourth Army's main effort on the right. This change in role, while not tactically changing the nature of the battle, did change the campaign objective for 1st Anzac Corps and made its efforts increasingly in vain.

The bulk of Dr. Hampton's work focuses on the change of Anzac operations from one of disrupting attacks and economy-of-force operations to one of constant pressure. She relates division after division coming through the line launching nearly six weeks of operations that can best be summarized as displaying initiative but poor judgment. Reserve Army's desire to continuously attack the Germans led to ongoing attacks that were only loosely tied to Reserve Army's concept of operations and "attacks were being conducted on such a small-scale that had they not been so costly in lives they would be inconsequential." These uncoordinated attacks sapped Australian troop strength, supplies, and morale, all while being part of "the seduction of being able to report a 'success.'" The goal of being able to report any success led to the frittering away of combat power with limited correlation to larger army or even BEF goals. These piecemeal attacks frequently displayed a lack of coordination between infantry and artillery, inadequate coordination or liaison efforts between adjacent units, and progressively smaller objectives.

By late August, General William Birdwood, commander of 1st Anzac Corps, reduced assault objectives to a distance of 50-100 yards with, at best, limited artillery support on the objective itself. In 1916, "danger close"-type fire restrictions were 200 yards from friendly troops, resulting in Australian forces frequently having to abandon their frontline trenches during pre-assault bombardments. This, in turn, forced them to retake ground they previously held. Furthermore, even when they could stay in their trenches prior to an attack, Anzac troops frequently received short rounds from their own fire, with minimal ability to find protection or adjust those short fires onto the Germans. As a result of this constant grinding

loss for minimal ground gained, Dr. Hampton damningly states, “there had simply been no purpose in 1st Anzac Corps’ operations. There had not been for several weeks.”

Dr. Hampton provides thoughtful analysis of the different planning and training methods used by the Australian division and brigade commanders. To modern American readers accustomed to a prescribed pre-deployment training cycle, the individualized approach available to Australian commanders nearly two years into the war is a fascinating revelation of how armies prepared or failed to prepare to fight. This uneven approach extended beyond the individual soldier to the staff level as well.

She also examines the learning process of commanders and staffs during the battle. While she finds numerous examples of lessons learned-type documents in the archives, unfortunately for the men of 1st Anzac Corps, the disseminated lessons learned failed to lead to “no practical examples which indicated that what was being written about was actually being absorbed and implemented.” As a result, while the information and analysis might have been available to commanders, its incorporation into the planning cycle or in the attacks themselves was absent, a negligence at the command and staff level with costly results.

Attack on the Somme is an eminently readable counterpoint to parochial histories that place the Australian contribution to the BEF as a uniquely Australian venture divorced from a larger British, or even coalition, effort during the Somme Campaign. Dr. Hampton presents an important critical campaign analysis of one part of the larger Somme Offensive that sheds light on the months the Anzacs fought an increasingly futile sideshow.

Before addressing the book itself, it is important to have a succinct background on the author’s incredible World War II record. Altieri joined the Army in late 1941 and was subsequently sent to Northern Ireland where he served as an artilleryman with the 1st Armored Division. While stationed there, he was told that volunteers were wanted to form up a new unit structured much like the British Commandos. Altieri completed the demanding training program and became a Ranger in July 1942. For the next two years (plus), he served with the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions in combat missions executed in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. Along the way, he earned battlefield promotions to sergeant, first sergeant, and first lieutenant; he also was appointed company commander and received two Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts.

Spearheaders enables Altieri to achieve three things. First, the book provides him a forum to address events of World War II that clearly weighed on him through the rest of his life. He candidly and emotionally discusses these events. These include his first firefight, conducting hand-to-hand combat with his enemy, taking the life of another man, and seeing his fellow Rangers injured or killed on the battlefield. He shares the wide spectrum of emotions and feelings that combat brings to every Soldier.

Second, *Spearheaders* serves as an excellent concise history of the formation of the Rangers and their operations in the Mediterranean Theater. Particularly interesting for readers will be the author’s reflection on the training regimen he and the others went through prior to their deployment in theater. This training was executed by the British Commandos and to say it was demanding is clearly an understatement. Altieri discusses this training as only a Soldier taking part in it can.

Finally, Altieri utilizes the book to pay tribute to a Ranger he greatly respected — his commander, William O. Darby. By the end of the book, readers will clearly understand why Darby was so admired and loved by his men and why they were called “Darby’s Rangers.” Throughout the book, Altieri places numerous vignettes and accounts of displays of Darby’s leadership qualities and technical and tactical competence. The most poignant portion of Altieri’s praise comes after he reflects on his feelings when he learns that Darby is killed in combat on 16 April 1945.

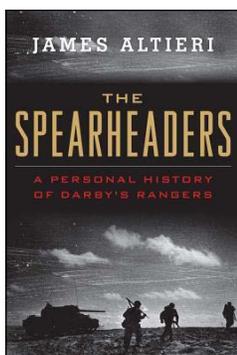
The clear strength of *Spearheaders* is Altieri’s writing ability. He expresses himself in a conversational tone that makes the book an incredibly easy read. It is extremely difficult to put down once you begin. Consequently, you won’t find any footnotes, endnotes, or long bibliography in his volume. From front to back these are Altieri’s words and thoughts.

Spearheaders is every bit as valuable today as it was when it was first released more than 50 years ago. It is a volume which highlights the development and contributions of an elite fighting force. More importantly, it honors those Rangers who were part of that force which achieved so much in World War II. A new group of readers have the unique opportunity to read a book that is clearly a classic.

The Spearheaders: A Personal History of Darby’s Rangers

By James Altieri
Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014,
334 pages

Reviewed by LTC (Retired)
Rick Baillergeon



For readers of military history, the reprinting of a book is almost always a good thing. It places a title back on the market which was normally last seen decades ago. In most cases, the reprint has been supplemented with some nice extras which distinguish it from the original. The best aspect of a reprint is that it exposes itself to a potentially new group of readers. One recent reprint which should unquestionably be experienced by a new readership is James Altieri’s superb volume, *The Spearheaders: A Personal History of Darby’s Rangers* (first published in 1960).