



Against the Tommies: History of the 26 Reserve Division, 1914-1918

By David Bilton

Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2016, 176 pages

Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck, USMC Reserve

With *Against the Tommies*, David Bilton edited and republished *Die 26. Reserve-Division im Weltkrieg 1914-1918*, a German unit history originally published by the staff officers of the 26th (Württemberg) Reserve Division in 1920. The book is divided into a preface and two parts (1914-1916 and 1917-1918). As Bilton notes in the preface, the German army was under far fewer censorship restrictions than the Allies. As a result, “this permitted the production of accounts... that reflect what the German soldier saw and experienced, warts and all, in every theatre.” Some were published during the war while others, like the original text, were published after the war, drawing extensively on primary material. Due to the German’s relative lack of censorship, *Against the Tommies* contains a wide breadth of images capturing the daily existence on the Western Front for the men of the 26th Reserve Division through the war.

The photos contained in *Against the Tommies* are chronologically organized. As a result, similar images appear in both sections, allowing readers to see the evolution in equipment, the battlefield, and the men. The photos present life both in the trenches and in the rear. While a disproportionate number are of the division staff, the common soldier and NCO are readily prevalent. The enlisted soldiers are rarely named except for decorated patrol or squad leaders. Just as impressive are the photos documenting the increasing destruction of towns like Miraumont and Thiepval.

The book’s primary shortcoming is its lack of analysis. Bilton remarks in the preface that “the narrative is a mixture of translation... reduction and addition.” Given that there are only 12 pages of text and a bibliography consisting of two sources (neither of which is *Die 26. Reserve-Division im Weltkrieg 1914-1918*), it is hard to identify what is added. While the book is not designed to be a full history of the unit’s battles, it was surprising to see the entirety of the Somme Offensive, where the division fought against “at least six English (sic) divisions,” given only three paragraphs. The Battle of Arras only has two paragraphs, neither of which delve into the role of the division as an Eingreifdivision (counter-attack division) or how German tactics had changed by 1917.

There were multiple missed opportunities to expand the original text and provide a fuller understanding of the actions, men, and equipment of the 26th Reserve Division. As an example, Part One begins with a brief sentence saying 26th Reserve Division has an active component sister division but does not explain the parallel nature of the German Army nor the nature of reserve service in pre-war Germany. Such an explanation would help flesh out the context the men of the 26th Reserve Division encountered at war’s outbreak.

Bilton has opened up the visual history of 26th Reserve Division to an English-language audience with *Against the Tommies*. For those looking for more understanding of the men in the photos, it would be illuminating to read books like Peter Doyle and Robin Schäfer’s *Fritz and Tommy: Across the Barbed Wire* that explains the circumstances behind the images.