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# **Storm Troopers and Trench Raiders**

**Innovation and Perception of German and Canadian Specialized Assault**

**Units in the First World War**

by

Simon Zimmermann

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## 1. Introduction

The initial approach of the German Army on infantry tactics before 1914 was antiquated at best. There are three distinctive attributes which can be applied to the German infantry of 1914 during the outbreak of First World War and the first engagements in Belgium and France: order, discipline and cohesion. Lieutenant Carl Reichmann of the US Army correctly formulated in 1893 the common perception of German infantry: “They evidently intend to handle their infantry in close lines in the next war. [...] They prefer to lose men than to lose control of the officers over them.”<sup>1</sup>

The art of attack from German Infantry and their way of deployment in battle was much the result of Prussian experiences in the hundred years prior to the war and are a fine example of how battlefield tactics did not succeed in keeping up with technological innovation and the necessities of modern warfare. Despite the extensive increase in firepower of a regular infantry company due to the mass distribution of magazine rifles holding multiple cartridges, machine guns and hand grenades, tactics in the German Army still called for dense formations.<sup>2</sup> The close-order drill of Prussian origin sacrificed flexibility to let company and platoon officers and NCO’s gain a loose sense of direct control over their respective units. This particularly German approach in infantry tactics was reflected in the drill pamphlet ‘Drill Regulations for Infantry’ of 1906, which was one of the last training manuals distributed among the officers of Imperial German Army prior to the war. Cohesion in the ‘skirmish line’, the German standard attack formation, was granted a higher priority than the needs of the individual soldiers to gain full potential of their defensive and offensive capabilities. Statements like “Under no circumstances should the cover of individual soldiers be given

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Reichmann Papers (Mss 49), Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

<sup>2</sup> Jackman, Steven, ‘Shoulder to Shoulder: Close Control and “Old Prussian Drill” in German Offensive Infantry Tactics, 1871-1914’ in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (2004), pp. 98; Brook, Risa, ‘Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed?’ in *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2003), pp. 154.

higher priority than the unity of the whole formation”<sup>3</sup> in the ‘Drill Regulations for Infantry’ show how much emphasis was given on avoiding to break up the formation, even if it meant almost certain death for individual soldiers. Disarray was considered to be the greater evil than combat casualties.

According to the ‘Drill Regulations for Infantry’ of 1906 the infantry attack on company level generally consisted of one or more platoons closing in the enemy while the other platoons were supposed to give support with continuous rifle fire to suppress enemy resistance.<sup>4</sup> The platoons closing in to the enemy then had to pluck their bayonets onto their rifles, followed by a general assault in close combat: “In close proximity to the enemy, soldiers should lower their rifles, shout ‘Hurra’ and assault the enemy position”<sup>5</sup>. The officer’s order to assault was to be accompanied by the company’s signallers and drummers.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the ‘Drill Regulations for Infantry’ openly encouraged Officers to seek close combat even if combined suppressive fire of both rifles and artillery were not entirely successful in their task.<sup>7</sup> The reliance on close combat engagements, coupled with a very old fashioned way of signalling orders, demonstrate the extent of the method obsolescence of German infantry tactics.

While the German approach in infantry tactics still demonstrated some initial successes against adversaries who favoured similar dense formations, like the French Army for example, it nevertheless quickly showed its downsides against entrenched enemies who defended their position with concentrated rifle fire.<sup>8</sup> Especially in Belgium and Northern France in the engagements with the British Expedition Force German infantry tactics effectively showed their method obsolescence with their devastating ratio of low territory

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<sup>3</sup> Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie* (München, Kriegsministerium, 1906), pp. 54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 68-69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 101.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Howard, Michael, ‘Men against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914’ in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 513-517.

gains to high casualty ratings. The British soldiers who held the line in the Ypres salient against the German Fourth Army in November 1914 were professionals, many of them veterans of the Second Boer War in 1899-1902, who knew what to expect in modern infantry warfare, which tactics proved useful and which ones were better discarded.<sup>9</sup> Even the Prussian Guard Corps, alleged elite troops of the German Imperial Army, was not able to shift the battle significantly in favour of the German side. As they marched in the standard close-order 'skirmish line' of the German infantry into the fight the Guard soldiers posed as an easy target to the battle hardened British sharpshooters and were quickly reduced by concentrated rifle fire.<sup>10</sup> Although the Prussian Guard on the other hand never had a chance to live up to their alleged reputation in a modern infantry battle due to the long peace period prior to the war and therefore consisted largely of inexperienced soldiers whose only noteworthy characteristic was their often aristocratic background, as Bruce Gudmundsson accurately noted, the news of their demise at Ypres still was certainly enough to demonstrate the obsolescence of German infantry tactics and sufficient in making sure that this message was carried to a large and influential audience.<sup>11</sup>

Although the results of the Second Boer War already showed prior to the First World War to a great extent the weaknesses of tight formations in modern warfare to all international military observers and even initiated a discussion on infantry tactics in the German Empire, the actual impact on German infantry tactics remained almost nonexistent in the end. The results of the Russian-Japanese War somewhat mitigated the observations on the Second Boer War in the eyes of many traditionalist minded Army officers and, although in complete

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<sup>9</sup> Howard, Michael, 'Men against Fire: Expectations of War in 1914' in *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1984), pp. 46-47; Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 9-10; Travers, T.H., 'The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation in British Military Thought 1870-1915' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1978), pp. 534-537.

<sup>10</sup> Eisenhart Rothe, Ernst von, *Das Ehrenbuch der Garde: Die Preußische Garde im Weltkriege 1914-1919* (Berlin, Wilhelm Kolk Verlag, 1920), pp. 139-140; British pre war tactics favoured 'fire and movement' drills, which can also be found in the drills of the Canadian militia. See: Griffith, Paddy, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-1918* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 48-49; Watson, Alex, 'For Kaiser and Reich: The Identity and Fate of the German Volunteers, 1914-1918' in *War in History*, Vol. 12 (2005), pp. 65-66.

<sup>11</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 11.

disregard to the costs of human lives, seemed to acknowledge their support for infantry attacks in dense columns.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese Imperial Army had modelled their infantry tactics after the German Drill Regulations and as they came victorious out of the war, German officials saw it as proven that the German infantry tactics were successful in the field, paying no attention to the fact that the Japanese had modified the skirmish line to a more dispersed pattern during the war to decrease their devastating losses.<sup>13</sup> The German Field Regulations of 1908 then became a shallow compromise of both the views of modernistic and traditionalistic minded officer. The emphasis on a decentralized chain of command on company and platoon level in the German Army however granted officers and NCO's a sense of freedom in regard to their final approach on the battlefield.<sup>14</sup> As a result some German officers who used this freedom to have their units deployed in a more loose and dispersed pattern often had better results in battle in the beginning of the First World War than those units which were commanded entirely 'by the book'.<sup>15</sup> Herein it becomes especially clear that the German Army lacked consensus to formulate a consistent approach in its infantry tactics, considering that the Drill Regulations called for contradicting methods of both unity and cohesion and also a somewhat loose approach of early small unit tactics in dispersed formation.<sup>16</sup>

The British General Sir Ian Hamilton concluded, based on his impressions on modern warfare in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that "the greater and prouder an army may be, the more immovably it stands rooted in its own conservatism, so that it becomes at last absolutely incapable (as a body) of incorporating the experiences of others. Thus it comes that your military attaches may discover points of training and efficiency of the most vital

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Jackman, Steven, 'Shoulder to Shoulder', pp. 99; Howard, Michael, 'Men against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914', pp. 517-518.

<sup>14</sup> Kriegsministerium, *Field Service Regulations of the German Army 1908* (London, Harrison and Sons, 1908), pp. 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Roxborough, Ian, 'Organizational Innovation: Lessons from Military Organizations' in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2000), pp. 371-372.

importance, and the bulk of their brother officers pay no more attention to them”<sup>17</sup>. The insufficient pre-war tactics which failed to grasp the reality of the modern battlefield, combined with heavy casualties German troops and the alleged elite of the Prussian Guard in particular suffered at the Western Front, catalysed efforts within the German Army to finally reshape its approach on infantry tactics on basis of battlefield experience, an remedial action which had been largely ignored for so long due to the stubborn conservatism within the Army’s command.<sup>18</sup> “The experiences in war [...] show that bullets quickly write a new tactics, that bullets make short work of obsolete formations and create new ones. But at what cost! In the Franco-Prussian War superior leadership and a better artillery permitted us to pay the price. At the outbreak of war the usual custom is to prepare troops, that have been trained under obsolete regulations, for fighting on a strange theater of war by certain ‘Field Service Regulations’”<sup>19</sup>, the German Leutnant-General William Balck accurately stated shortly after the First World War had ended.

The failure of the ‘Drill Regulations for Infantry’ of 1906 and their following update in the German Field Regulations of 1908 however did not initiate a complete revision of infantry tactics in the German Army, but lead to a series of tests which were designed to deploy a more streamlined new version of elite infantry which was supposed to be capable to meet the demands of the modern battlefield and trench warfare. As large numbers of troops were needed at the fronts and at garrison duties in the German-occupied territories across the war theatre in Europe, conducting small tests with a limited number of troops remained the only method the German Army could afford without seriously endangering the ongoing war efforts. The origin of this process lies arguably in the accidental creation of the decentralised

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<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, Sir Ian, *A Staff Officer’s Scrap Book: During the Russo-Japanese War* (London, Edward Arnold, 1905), pp. 313.

<sup>18</sup> For Military Innovation through defeat in battle, see: Rosen, Stephen Peter, ‘New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation’ in *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1988), pp. 138; Luvaas, Jay, *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought 1815-1940* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Balck, Leutnant General William, *Development of Tactics: World War* (Fort Leavenworth, The General Service Schools Press, 1922), pp. 8-9.



command structure, essentially a 'laissez faire' stance on small unit infantry tactics, which was first promoted in the German Field Regulations of 1908 due to the mentioned lack of consensus in the higher echelons of the army on how to judge the results of the Second Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War.

The result of this process was a new type of specialized assault infantry which were later during the war commonly referred to as 'Sturmtruppen' (lit. 'storm troopers' or 'assault troops') or 'Stoßtruppen' ('shock troops'). The first Assault Detachment of the German Army was created by Major Calsow of the German Eighth Army in March 1915 on basis of a pioneer battalion which were considered to have the most suitable equipment and training for trench warfare.<sup>20</sup> Calsow was soon relieved of this duty in August of the same year by Hauptmann Wilhelm Rohr when his first prototype detachment did not meet the expectations of his superiors in combat.<sup>21</sup> Rohr on the other hand, a professional soldier of the 'Garde-Schützen-Bataillon' ('Guard Rifle Battalion') in which he commanded a company and participant in the failed infantry operations in the Ypres salient during the first year of the war, was by his personal experiences familiar with the shortcomings of the German infantry tactics. As his original unit was a light infantry battalion which already practiced a doctrine that demanded greater individual initiative and pursued an attack formation in a more dispersed pattern than regular infantry, he was able to combine his expertise with the pioneer-based detachment his predecessor Major Calsow had already formed.<sup>22</sup> During the course of the training Hauptmann Wilhelm Rohr's 'Sturmabteilung Rohr' ('Storm/Assault Detachment Rohr') tested numerous tactics and was able to prove its effectiveness during the Battle of Verdun in 1916.<sup>23</sup> After the battle it subsequently became the prototype of many more storm trooper formations to follow, drawn from the most able soldiers of 'Jäger' (lit. 'hunter', 'light

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<sup>20</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Samuels, Martin, *Doctrine and Dogma: German and British Infantry Tactics in the First World War* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> British General Staff, *Handbook of the German Army in War: January, 1917* (Yorkshire, The Scholar Press Limited, 1917), pp. 41.

infantry’) battalions which were then retrained by seasoned storm troopers of the ‘Sturmabteilung Rohr’ to fit into their new role as assault infantry.<sup>24</sup> Since their founder Wilhelm Rohr was a former member of the Guard and the storm battalions were modelled to be a means to turn the war in Germany’s favour, storm troopers readily gained the reputation of being the German Army’s new elite force, her alleged skilled and proud craftsmen of war.<sup>25</sup>

The Canadian militia and its contribution to the war in Europe, the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), on the other hand were completely different in almost every regard in comparison to the Imperial German Army. Canada, a nation with a relatively non-militaristic culture within the British Empire, had prior to the outbreak of the First World War only a few men to call upon. The permanent force of the militia consisted of only 5.000 men in total between 1904 and 1913. If deemed necessary by the Canadian government this active force could be strengthened by additional non active militia forces: Each year up to 55.000 men underwent basic militia training.<sup>26</sup> The meagre peacetime participation in the voluntary service from a total population of roughly 5 millions shows that the majority of Canadians considered military training, at least in the absence of war, of no importance.<sup>27</sup> In comparison to the standing armies of the major European powers the Canadian contribution to the Army of the British Empire seemed almost absurdly small. Geographical wise Canada was situated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in a relatively peaceful part of the world. Its embedment in the British Empire also provided a sense of security for the Canadian society and allowed for the creation of only a small armed force to guard her borders. Widespread enthusiasm in rifle shooting though resulted in the creation of many civilian rifle associations in all of Canada’s provinces

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Geyer, Michael, ‘German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945’ in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 543.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholson, Colonel G.W.L., *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918* (Ottawa, Queen’s Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1962), pp. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Wood, James, *Militia Myth: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896-1921* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2010), pp. 28.

and helped to deliver at least basic skills in the maintenance and usage of firearms to a greater part of the Canadian population.<sup>28</sup>

Canada's only neighbour on the continent, the United States of America, found the Canadian defensive capabilities unimpressive and measured her potential in war only on basis of her ally Great Britain. In 1888 the American politician Benjamin Butler pondered the possibility of a war between the United States and Great Britain in his published article 'Defenseless [sic] Canada' and concluded that Canadians were mediocre at best as opponents: "Hers is not a war-like people. Her peasantry do not take readily to war either by sea or land. Her enlistments for land service are not the most creditable nor produce large result."<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough many Canadians largely shared the American view in their characterization, although they tended to put it naturally in slightly more positive light. The Canadian historian George Stanley described his countrymen as "Essentially a civilian people, an unmilitary people, they have, through historical necessity, fought to preserve their freedom and their identity. [...] no men have fought better; no men have as quickly discarded the skills of war for the farms and factories of peace."<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps one of the most striking facts of the Canadian military history in the First World War that the army of such a distant and seemingly unwarlike society would be the first nation to deploy an innovative and effective infantry tactic in attritional warfare.

The official infantry tactics Canada practiced in her militia prior to her involvement in the First World War however had a strong leaning towards firing drills and helping recruits adjusting the sights of their rifles and taking correct aim even when they did not possess a strong eyesight, including teaching methods of aiming in strong wind.<sup>31</sup> The Canadian infantry drill seemed in this regard better suited for the modern battlefield with their strong

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 42-43.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, Benjamin, 'Defenseless Canada' in *The North American Review*, Vol. 147, No. 383 (1888), pp. 442.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley, George, cited in: Wood, James, *Militia Myth*, pp. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Manual, Firing and Bayonet exercises with the order of Guard Mounting for the use of the Canadian Militia* (published by Authority, 1894), pp. 52-56.

emphasis on firing training in contrast to the German pre-war tactics which favoured a distinctive prominent role of the bayonet in comparison. However, the Canadian militia still considered volley firing drills in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an effective method of directing fire in warfare. The manual on firing and bayonet exercises of 1894 claimed that “Experiments have shown that [...] a succession of volleys is more effective than an equal number of shots fired individually. [...]. For these reasons volley firing is continued in the attack as long as possible, and in order to give full effect on the power of the rifle [...] section leaders should be thoroughly trained, and constantly practised in the control of fire”<sup>32</sup>. However, it remains debatable how much of an impact these drills had on the Canadian soldiery as most of them underwent only a short annual training and were therefore not as thoroughly trained in their army’s rather old fashioned firing drills. The Canadians had only a comparatively small exposure to military training in their life, very much in contrast to the German infantry, which was largely based on conscripts in usually two years of national service according to the statutes of April 15<sup>th</sup> 1905.<sup>33</sup> In comparison to the German Army the Canadian militia likely was rather amateurishly drilled and less disciplined. This argument gets further proof in regard to Canada’s alleged infantry formations in combat, although the official drill manuals of the Canadian militia do not extensively address the question on pre-war attack formations. There is however a small reference to this particular subject which mentions infantry should be deployed in either a single line or divided into smaller sections, but no information on how much space each soldiers were supposed to keep from each other.<sup>34</sup> Considering that Canada favoured volley firing, at least in their drills, officers who commanded ‘by the book’ likely tried to keep their troops in close order to direct their fire. In regard to Canada’s involvement in the Second Boer War there is however no proof that the Canadians ever used volley firing drills in conjunction with a tight, cohesive formation in

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<sup>32</sup> *Manual, Firing and Bayonet exercises*, pp. 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Art. 59 Abs. 1 of the Constitution of the German Empire* [Online]. Available: <http://www.verfassungen.de/de/de67-18/verfassung71.htm>

<sup>34</sup> *Manual, Firing and Bayonet exercises*, pp. 48-50.

actual combat. As combat service would show these shortcomings in drill actually proved helpful to the Canadians as they were less prone to cohesively stick to outdated tactics and rather tried to adapt to the situation all by themselves.

Canada dispatched a small contingent of her militia to aid her British allies in South Africa in 1899, although the British Army did not regard the Canadian militia a considerably effective fighting force and considered their contribution to the war at first more symbolic in its nature to demonstrate solidarity among allies than an actual means to win the war.<sup>35</sup> For Canada the Second Boer War was considered an ideal opportunity to gain international recognition, due to the fact that Canada was a relatively new dominion within the British Empire and had gained her independence in 1867.<sup>36</sup> As such the Canadian troops were at first not intended to be used in combat and were only on garrison duty in South Africa, until three separate British formations suffered a disastrous defeat in December 1899 and the Canadian contingent suddenly quickly rose in significance for the British war effort.<sup>37</sup> The Second Boer War therefore became the first major involvement of Canadian infantry on a modern battlefield. Initially the Canadian soldiers suffered from similar tactical errors like their British allies. The bayonet charge in the battle at Paardeberg Drift on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1900 against concealed Boer marksmen which had themselves carefully deployed over the area resulted in the death of many Canadians, who did not even know from which direction most of the Boer rifle fire was coming.<sup>38</sup> As the battle continued however the Canadians quickly abandoned their initial tactic and adopted the Boer approach in infantry tactics. The well staged and executed fire fight between the Canadian and Boer soldiers at Paardeberg subsequently managed to pin the Boer forces down in their trenches and, with no way to

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<sup>35</sup> Schull, Joseph, *Laurier: The First Canadian* (Toronto, McMillan of Canada, 1965), pp. 381.

<sup>36</sup> Rich, E., 'Canadian History' in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1971), pp. 849.

<sup>37</sup> Horn, Colonel Bernd, 'Accidental Heroes: The "Royal Canadians" Redeem British Honour at Paardeberg' in *Show no Fear: Daring Actions in Canadian Military History*, ed. Colonel Bernd Horn and Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2008), pp. 213-214.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 223-224.

retreat, led to their unconditional surrender.<sup>39</sup> The Canadian forces as a result achieved the first major British victory in the Second Boer War. As the war in South Africa progressed Canadian casualties remained very low. According to the Canadian Captain Ernest Chambers only 65 Canadian soldiers were killed in combat in the three years of war out of 7.349 officers and men of the contingent who served in South Africa.<sup>40</sup>

The adaptability Canadian troops showed during their involvement in the Second Boer War would become one of their most distinctive traits and would greatly contribute to their approach in specialised infantry tactics in the First World War. Furthermore it showed that Canadian troops at the front line in a war were ready to neglect the lessons of their pre war training in certain circumstances in favour of own methods.<sup>41</sup> The idea of trench raiding in the First World War in this regard was again an ad hoc development during the beginning of trench warfare on the Western front, supported by the amateurish nature of the Canadian Expedition Force which encouraged her frontline soldiers to formulate their own tactics according to the change from mobile to attritional warfare. Since their leaders rather stuck to British oriented drill regulations, impulses in tactical innovation were essentially left to basic infantrymen in the field.

The Canadian infantry initiated trench raids as early as February 1915, almost immediately with the introduction of trench warfare on the Western Front.<sup>42</sup> Although trench raiding was not a method which was only practiced by the Canadian Expedition Corps, the Canadians however were the first to deploy it. Other nations only followed their example. “Trench raids would probably come under the heading of trench annoyance and were first instituted by the Canadians, who achieved so much success in this form of harassing the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. 229-231.

<sup>40</sup> Chambers, Captain Ernest, *The Canadian Militia: A History of the Origin and Development of the Force* (Montreal, The Mortimer Press, 1907), pp. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Morton, Desmond, *When your Number's up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto, Random House, 1993), pp. 5

<sup>42</sup> Godefroy, Andrew, ‘Daring Innovation: The Canadian Corps and Trench Raiding on the Western Front’ in *Show no Fear: Daring Actions in Canadian Military History*, ed. Colonel Bernd Horn and Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2008), pp. 239.

enemy that the operation orders used by them were copied by all the Allies”<sup>43</sup>, Captain Haws Elliot of the British Expeditionary Force stated in his handbook on trench fighting. Development by adaptation however also had its downsides. Canadian losses during the first year of the war were extremely heavy due to the fact that the soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force overall had not found a way yet on how to fight effectively.<sup>44</sup> To develop trench raiding Canadian forces essentially favoured an almost Darwinist ‘survival of the fittest’ approach to find out which tactics could be suitable on the battlefields in France and showed frequently a tendency to ignore orders from their superiors when they did not fit with their fighting style.<sup>45</sup>

The results of these findings strongly confirm the differences of how both storm battalions and Canadian trench raiders came into existence. While storm battalions were the result of an orderly development of the German Army, based on the experiences of the battles in the years 1914 and 1915, trench raiding on the other hand was an ad hoc adoption of front line soldiers to the stalemate of attritional warfare. It also certainly had effects on the self-perception of the new storm troopers they their ‘founder’ Wilhelm Rohr was a former member of a German Guard battalion. Since the guard had failed in battle and could not live up to its alleged reputation, it effectively made way for another formation to take over its suspected role as an elite force.

As this thesis will show, the armies of Canada and Germany had at least in their first steps a strong similarity in their initial aim to formulate a suitable infantry tactic in the ongoing trench and attritional warfare. However Germany’s storm troopers were the result of a comparatively sophisticated and technologically advanced army of a highly militarised society whereas the Canadian trench raiders were deployed by one of Britain’s dominions

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<sup>43</sup> Elliot, Captain Haws, *Trench Fighting: With Diagrams and Illustrations* (Boston, The Riverside Press, 1917), pp. 48.

<sup>44</sup> Morton, Desmond, *When your Number’s up*, pp. 149.

<sup>45</sup> Goodspeed, Donald James, ‘Prelude to the Somme: Mont Sorrel, June 1916’ in *Policy by other Means*, ed. Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell (Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1972), pp. 156-159.

which up to the beginning of the First World War never had a strong emphasis on its military and had its national defence based on a small militia. The most distinctive observation on central traits of both forces is that both had formulated a decentralised command structure in the lower echelons in their army's rank structure which arguably led to a promotion of innovation immediately at the frontlines, providing both armies with ad hoc solutions to come up against the stalemate of trench warfare where other armies failed to adapt adequately in short order. While the decentralised command structure was already a pre-war innovation in the German Army which had accidentally resulted from a conflict of opinions in Germany's pre war drills and the initial creation of the storm trooper battalions can be attributed to a single person, Wilhelm Rohr, the Canadian trench raiders however were a result of the rather amateurish nature of the Canadian Army as a whole which actually subsequently proved to be one of the greatest advantages to her soldiers. The comparatively lax stance in the pre war Canadian militia on a thorough drill and coherent discipline gave her troops ultimately the freedom to adapt to the battle all by themselves instead of showing obedience to outdated tactics like the ones the German infantry entered the war with. However, as the Canadian trench raiders were not recognized as much in their importance in trench warfare by their superior officers in the British and Canadian General Staff as their counterpart in the German Army, they ultimately lacked the institutional support to evolve beyond their roots. Trench raiders were essentially left on their own in terms of assault equipment, selection of personnel and their approach in infantry tactics which then led to a distinctive diversity in their formations.

To date there has been extensive research conducted on German storm troopers. Ex-servicemen who fought in the storm trooper formations the second half of the war like Ernst Jünger contributed much to the storm troopers renown by publishing their war diaries to a broad international audience. 'Infanterie greift an' ('Infantry attacks') from the future Wehrmacht Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, which primarily dealt with his wartime



experiences as an infantry officer but also shared considerations for new tactical approaches, also became a popular publication in the interwar period.<sup>46</sup> However, as this research will only deal with the storm troopers on the Western Front of the war and Rommel was primarily involved in the fights on other fronts, his work will not be considered as a primary source for this dissertation. Moreover both Jünger's and Rommel's works were distinctively influenced by the political views of their authors. While Jünger's war diary can still serve as a source to give a brief impression of storm troopers on a battlefield, it is however rather unreliable to carve out their fighting methods as Jünger illustrated his performance and those of his soldiers in an almost exclusively positive light. Another example of a prominent storm trooper is Ludwig Renn who made a career as a writer in the inter war and post wars period and was involved in German communist movements. In his book 'Krieg' ('war'), based on his war diary, he deals with his war experiences on the Western Front. He occupies a very dystopian and anti war stance in his work, very much in contrast to Jünger and Rommel, who both share cases of individual heroism with their audience and to a degree stress a social Darwinist 'survival of the fittest' view on alleged positive effects of war on a nation and its society.<sup>47</sup>

Primary sources like official documents and records from the German Army on small unit tactics and storm troopers in particular are on the other hand very scarce. The destruction of the Reichsarchiv during the last month of the Second World War led to the loss of the majority of documents on the German Army in First World War. Many primary sources, which have been cited in dissertations and other publications in the interwar period, are not available anymore. Although there could be still a number of documents in German archives, this research is however limited by the fact that its author was not able to visit them but had to concentrate on publicly available sources in the United Kingdom and on the internet.

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<sup>46</sup> Rommel, Erwin, *Infantry attacks* (Vienna, Virginia Athena Press, 1979), pp. 7-9.

<sup>47</sup> Lunn, Joe, 'Male Identity and Martial Codes of Honor: A Comparison of the War Memoirs of Robert Graves, Ernst Jünger, and Kande Kamarapp' in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (2005), pp. 723-724.

Secondary sources though are substantial and more detailed than on the subject on Canadian trench raiders. The German interwar Reichswehr of the Weimar Republic as well as the Wehrmacht quickly acknowledged the advantages of storm trooper tactics and tried to integrate them in their tactical considerations. As storm trooper tactics were subsequently essentially deployed by Germany in the Second World War to great success during the first years of the war due to the fact that they perfectly fitted into the 'Blitzkrieg' doctrine, German modern small unit tactics created a considerable international interest in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> Notable secondary sources on the subject of the history of specialized German assault infantry are 'Stormtroop Tactic' from Bruce Gudmundsson which is arguably the most detailed existing post-war research on storm troopers, and 'Doctrine and Dogma' from Martin Samuels which is essentially a comparative study of German and British infantry tactics in the First World War.

There has been so far only little attention been paid to the Canadian contribution to the field of development of modern infantry tactics, despite the fact that both formations were created at roughly the same time in the exact same war on the two opposing sides of one front. As military historians and army officials in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century often judged the power and efficiency of an army's infantry on their professionalism and exposure to regular extensive drill and training, the Canadian Expedition Force in the First World War was largely ignored as it was essentially an army of amateur soldier citizens. Not even Canadian officials themselves paid much attention to their prominent ad hoc developments in infantry tactics.

The Canadian Expedition Force was quickly disbanded after the war and the Canadian militia was reduced to her peacetime strength again.<sup>49</sup> An extensive debate on tactics for a future war however did not occur in Canada like it was the case in the major European

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<sup>48</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. XI-XV.

<sup>49</sup> Snell, A. E., *The C.A.M.C.: With the Canadian Corps during the last Hundred Days of the Great War* (Ottawa, Acland, 1924), pp. 201-202.

powers. The Canadian society once again showed in this regard its rather unmilitary-minded stance. It took another World War, the beginning of the Cold War and Canada's integration into the Western NATO alliance to spark a noticeable interest within Canada in her own military history. The military historian Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson was among the first who published in 1962 a detailed research on Canada's involvement in the First World War. In the following decades his work was subsequently supplemented by more studies on Canadian equipment and tactics by authors like Bill Rawling and Colonel Bernd Horn, as well as a growing number of studies which focus on Canadian military history as a whole from its roots as a small militia within the British Empire to a modern standing army of professionals in the present. Due to its late start the combined amount of research which has been conducted on the Canadian Expedition Force is still comparatively small. Furthermore, the topic of trench raiding has only been addressed by very few studies so far as most authors seem to favour to address the CEF as a whole instead of focusing on a specific branch. Only one article exists so far, published in 2008 by the Canadian historian Andrew Godefroy, which deals exclusively on the subject of the Canadian trench raiders and gives a brief account of their history and their tasks during the First World War. Another Canadian historian by the name Tim Cook also published a few articles on trench raiders, but largely concentrates on a few selected battles instead of the history of the formation as a whole.

The aim of this research is to examine how the overall concept of both German storm troopers and Canadian trench raiders as specialized assault units influenced the self-perception of their respective personnel and simultaneously address the question if they were perceived differently or identical by others. Following this intention this research will address on how aspects of their force structure, standards and methods in the selection of personnel, battlefield tactics and institutional support helped or ultimately prevented both formations to develop a distinctive esprit de corps. The core hypothesis of this research is that an unmilitary minded society with an comparatively neglected armed force made of amateurs could achieve

through adaptability and an somewhat accidental decentralised command structure due to lower standards in drill similar results in its infantry tactics like an heavily institutionalised and both politically and publicly supported army from a society in which service in the armed forces was considered mandatory by law and social pressure. Although the development of both formations went different routes throughout the war, their initial aim to formulate an adequate approach to break the stalemate of trench warfare and give an army an edge in the ongoing attritional fighting was very much identical, a distinctive progress for two countries which basically shared no other strong similarities in their military. However, despite some striking similarities in both formations, this research will show why the German storm troopers could develop a self-perception as an elite force in the German Army while Canadian trench raiders failed to do so.

The structure of this study will be oriented on the factors stated above. The first chapter will deal with the influence of the force structure and personnel selection on the perception of both formations. The second chapter will address the effects on their tactics on the same subject as will the third and last chapter which will highlight the results of the amount and type of institutional support storm battalions and trench raiders received from their respective army and their country's War Ministry and arms industry.

## **2. Force Structure and Selection of Personnel**

Throughout the year 1916 the 'Sturmabteilung Rohr' remained a rather small infantry formation for the purpose of testing new infantry tactics in conjunction with suitable assault equipment on the battlefield. This process remained unnoticed by the Entente powers despite the fact that Wilhelm Rohr had sent his storm troopers into the Battle of Verdun.<sup>50</sup> In the end the decision to use Rohr's creation as a template for the deployment of larger

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<sup>50</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 59-60.

‘Sturmabteilung’ (‘storm battalions’) alerted the allies of their existence. The Canadian Expeditionary Corps was actually the first among the Western allies to become aware of the new German invention in infantry warfare. It wouldn’t be surprising if Canadian trench raiders had acquired the information of the existence of the storm troopers during one of their raids on the German frontlines due to the fact that gathering intelligence was among others one of their main tasks. Available records however don’t attribute this acquired information to a certain Canadian unit, so this claim cannot be proven with certainty. Existing records and documents of the German Army in the First World War do not cover this particular subject, which as a result means that the Canadian intelligence report is actually the only way to recreate a basic understanding of a storm battalion’s force structure.

According to the intelligence report in one of the war diaries from 16<sup>th</sup> June 1917 of the Canadian General Staff the idea of forming storm battalions originated in 1916 on behalf of Wilhelm Rohr, which essentially proves that the captured documents contained correct information:

“A document captured during our recent operations gives the following information.

STURM BATTALION (Attacking Battalion).

In May 1916 the idea of such a unit was first discussed and STURM BATTALION ROHR was formed. In December 1916 each army formed a storm battalion”.<sup>51</sup>

‘Abteilung’ (‘detachment’) had obviously been wrongly translated with ‘battalion’ in regard to the formation under command of Wilhelm Rohr, which never actually reached battalion size during its first deployment phase in 1916. Also the document makes a brief distinction between storm troopers and ‘Stosstruppen’ which it sees as a separate and pure counterattacking unit, even though both names described in reality the very same troops.<sup>52</sup> Despite these small flaws however, which were most likely the result of an inadequate

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<sup>51</sup> Canadian Corps General Staff, War Diaries, 01.06.1917-31.07.1917, R611-371-2-E, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), pp. 197.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. pp. 197.

translation, the rest of the information given seems perfectly accurate. From the data provided in the intelligence report we can see that an average storm battalion consisted of four companies, a light artillery battery and one flamethrower platoon:

“Composition:

- 2 Infantry storm companies.
- 1 Machine Gun Company.
- 1 Trench Mortar Company.
- 1 Forward battery – Infanterie Geschütz Batterie – equals literally Infantry Gun Battery.
- 1 Flame projector platoon.”<sup>53</sup>

This composition is also somewhat confirmed by an article of a former storm trooper officer published in 1932.<sup>54</sup> Although storm trooper tactics were usually described as being infiltration tactics, the composition of their battalions very much reflects the basic idea of an early approach in combined arms.<sup>55</sup> A storm trooper battalion basically consisted of all military branches and weaponry which had been proven useful in trench warfare, with the absence of mechanized formations and direct ground support from airplanes being the only characteristics in which it differs from a modern perspective of combined arms from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup>

Storm troopers often considered themselves to be a superior elite force in comparison to regular infantry. Especially former storm troopers like Ernst Jünger frequently described at length the reputedly extraordinary abilities of his platoon: “The only satisfaction I took from the whole event was from the way the storm troops comported themselves [...]. They were a

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp. 197.

<sup>54</sup> Fehrenbach, Oberleutnant Th., ‘Meine Eindrücke in der 2. württbg. Sturmkkp., Sturmbat. 16’ in *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitung*, Vol. 78, No. 5 (1932), pp. 302; See also: US War Department, *German Notes on Minor Tactics* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1918), pp. 38.

<sup>55</sup> House, Captain Jonathan, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization* (Washington, US Government Printing Office, 1984), pp. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. pp. 141-143.

new breed of fighter so far as I was concerned, the volunteers of 1918: still raw, but instinctively brave. Those young dashers with long hair and puttees would start quarrelling among themselves twenty yards in front of the enemy because one had called the other a scaredy-cat, and yet they all swore like troopers and threw their weight around no end. ‘Christ, we’re not all such funks as you are!’ yelled one, and rolled up another fifty yards of trench single-handed”<sup>57</sup> and “we might be crushed, but surely we could not be defeated. In such moments, the human spirit triumphs over the most powerful manifestations of matter. By steeled will alone the frail body withstands the most terrible storm”<sup>58</sup>. Although the objectivity of Jünger’s war memoir remains very questionable and is without any doubt colored by his political beliefs in its first editions, it still provides a distinctive account of a storm trooper’s sense of self.

Storm troopers however were most likely never intended to be an alleged elite force within the German Army like for example the German Imperial Guard. Since storm troop tactics became essentially a template for German infantry drills in the inter war period, their true purpose has therefore possibly always been to replace most non-storm trooper infantry formations in the long run. As outlined in the previous chapter, especially Jäger formations were to be dissolved and retrained to storm troopers. They were not only suitable for this job due to their previous training and configuration but they were also quite numerous within the Germany army.<sup>59</sup> This is also reflected in the choice of personnel for the deployment of a storm trooper battalion. Although the initial detachment of Wilhelm Rohr consisted of handpicked soldiers who had volunteered for the new assault detachment and had to fulfil a high criterion of physical robustness, recruitment standards on the other quickly dropped with the mass deployment storm battalions in the course of the year 1917 for the planned spring

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<sup>57</sup> Jünger, Ernst, *Storm of Steel* (London, Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 266-267.

<sup>58</sup> Jünger Ernst, *In Stahlgewittern* (Berlin, E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1922), pp. 146-147. Note: This paragraph was removed in subsequent editions of *Storm of Steel*.

<sup>59</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 78-79.

offensive in 1918.<sup>60</sup> Especially on the Western Front seasoned veterans with high physical fitness had become scarce after the Battle of Verdun and the Battle of the Somme, the so called “muddy grave of the German field army”<sup>61</sup>, had inflicted irreplaceable casualties to the German Army and had cost many of the best German soldiers their life.<sup>62</sup> The failure of the German spring offensive and the following armistice in late 1918 however ended the transformation process to reshape the German infantry in the image of the storm troopers.<sup>63</sup> It is perhaps one of the most astounding results of the war that its untimely end subsequently helped the storm troopers to retain their self image as an elite force. It remains debatable though whether storm troopers had knowledge of the planned transformation of the army as a whole. However even if they did, it did not prevent them from perceiving themselves as an elite.<sup>64</sup>

Thorough training still remained an essential part of a storm troopers life within a storm battalion, even if recruiting standards may have continuously lowered during the war.<sup>65</sup> Especially Ludwig Renn highlighted in his war memoirs that the storm battalions were consistently training different attack patterns in dummy entrenchments behind the frontline to thoroughly strengthen their abilities in assaulting enemy entrenchments and getting rid of obstacles in their way. “We had to carry machine guns and throw hand grenades, proceed in ditches and crawl silently. Initially, it strained me very much. I was sweating constantly and the environment faded away a few times before my eyes, but only for a short time. Then it was easier for me daily. The service went from morning to evening, with only

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. pp. 81.

<sup>61</sup> Captain von Hentig, German Guard Reserve Division, cited in Sheffield, Gary, *The Somme* (London, Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2003), pp. 155.

<sup>62</sup> Sheffield, Gary and Bourne, John, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 252; Harris, Paul, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 270-271; Philpott, William, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London, Brown Book Group, 2009), pp. 436-439.

<sup>63</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 86.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. pp. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Fehrenbach, Oberleutnant Th., ‘Meine Eindrücke in der 2. württbg. Sturmkp., Sturmbat. 16’, pp. 302-303.



two or three hours lunch break. I had no time to think and felt comfortable”<sup>66</sup>, he described his daily duties after he was ordered to join a storm battalion in 1917. Worth mentioning is also an immediate reaction from a soldier of his previous unit, who stated that Renn would have a better life in the storm battalion since those were spared from the usual trench duties.<sup>67</sup> Although Ludwig Renn never openly perceived himself as an elite soldiers in his war memoir, the regular infantrymen he encountered certainly looked up to the storm battalions in a mix of envy and awe.

Following Renn’s description this constant training did seem to somewhat mitigate the effects of the lowered recruiting standards. Furthermore, considering Jünger’s remarks on the performance of the new young storm troopers which were added to his platoon during the German spring offensive of 1918, the new recruits do not seem to be noticeably less skilful in his view than those storm troopers he fought alongside earlier. Although he detected their rather limited experience they seemed to make it up with a remarkable boldness against the odds they faced in combat.<sup>68</sup> However, as Jünger frequently boasted his own alleged outstanding performance in his war memoirs, the overly positive description of the young and inexperienced late war storm troopers could also easily be interpreted as a means to retain the supposed reputation as an elite force. The intention behind releasing his war memoirs to a broad audience was to gain recognition for his sake and his fellow storm troopers after all.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand the ratio of combat casualties inflicted and received during the last two year of the war was still very much in favour of the German Army.<sup>70</sup> The new storm battalions and their thorough training methods therefore may have had an impact on the overall fighting

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<sup>66</sup> Renn, Ludwig, *Krieg* (Frankfurt, Frankfurter Societäts-Druckerei, 1929), pp. 94.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. pp. 94.

<sup>68</sup> Jünger Ernst, *In Stahlgewittern*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>69</sup> Wachsmann, Nikolaus, 'Marching under the Swastika? Ernst Jünger and National Socialism, 1918-33' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33 (1998), pp. 575.

<sup>70</sup> McRandle, James and Quirk, James, 'The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I' in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (2006), pp. 680.

performance of the German Army and somewhat mitigated the effects of the lower recruitment standards.

It seems that there were no more recruitment criteria applied to the storm battalions apart from an at least higher than average physical fitness. There is no indication that social standing, nobility and religion of the recruits were put into consideration in the selection process. Although a fellow storm trooper in Ludwig Renn's battalion highlighted that his family was proud of him to have made officer rank in a storm battalion because he would have been not considered if the pre war peacetime recruitment standards would have been applied, it remains unclear which of the mentioned traits would have excluded him.<sup>71</sup> This one example is furthermore not enough to prove to substantiate the claim that always only physical fitness was considered. However it certainly can be seen as a case in which it was the only determining factor.

The composition of troops in a trench raid conducted by Canadian forces on the other hand is difficult to outline. Raiding parties were deployed as ad hoc solutions with the beginning of trench warfare and remained as such during the entire course of the war. In this respect they were not deployed as a permanent special assault unit like storm troopers and separated from the regular infantry. A raiding party evolved entirely in respect to its objective in accordance to the perception of their respective commanders in regard to the enemy trenches and the expected resistance they assumed to face. As a result the composition of raiding parties was very diverse and could consist of a single platoon up to an assault of several companies at once. The Canadian historian Andrew Godefroy, who has up to this date provided one of the most insightful articles on Canadian trench raids, claims that a Canadian raiding party consisted of 5 officers accompanied by 85 men and supported by a reserve of another 23 soldiers.<sup>72</sup> However he fails to provide any sources for his statement. In fact it

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<sup>71</sup> Renn, Ludwig, *Krieg*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>72</sup> Godefroy, Andrew, 'Daring Innovation: The Canadian Corps and Trench Raiding on the Western Front', pp. 246.

remains entirely unclear where he found these numbers and which source made him conclude that a raiding party always had this strength in manpower. According to the information given in a published war memoir of an American volunteer who served in the Canadian Expedition Corps, a certain trench raid conducted in Belgium in which he participated in June 1916 consisted of only sixty soldiers.<sup>73</sup> Another trench raid which was conducted on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1917 prior to the Battle of Vimy Ridge consisted of 860 soldiers which were drawn from different battalions and put together for the operation.<sup>74</sup> Also there were some raids initiated during the war in the Canadian sector which had no more than ten participants.<sup>75</sup> In this regard the numbers Andrew Godefroy provided can not possibly be upheld. Furthermore, since numbers of participating soldiers in trench raids heavily fluctuated in accordance to the size of their chosen segment in the enemy trench system and its garrison, it is as a result impossible to attach a strict form of organisation to them like it can be done with the storm battalions.

Raiding parties usually consisted entirely of volunteers. However, as Sergeant McClintock of the 87<sup>th</sup> Canadian Grenadier Guard Battalion stated, it often occurred that an entire battalion volunteered for the mission and officers then handpicked the soldiers they wanted to participate: “After we had been on the front line fifteen days, we received orders to make a bombing raid. Sixty volunteers were asked for, and the whole battalion offered. I was lucky – or unlucky – enough to be among the sixty who were chosen.”<sup>76</sup> Following his statement volunteering for trench raids was probably expected from every soldier, even if they did not want to.<sup>77</sup> Selecting personnel by this method certainly had mixed results. Although officers most likely tried to pick soldiers which they considered to be the most skilled for the job, this required good knowledge of the talents of every soldier under their command which

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<sup>73</sup> McClintock, Sergeant Alexander, *Best O' Luck: How a fighting Kentuckian won the thanks of Britain's King* (New York, George H. Doran Company, 1917), pp. 63.

<sup>74</sup> Nicholson, G.W.L., *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, pp. 233.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 122.

<sup>76</sup> McClintock, Sergeant Alexander, *Best O' Luck*, pp. 63.

<sup>77</sup> Morton, Desmond, 'A Canadian Soldier in the Great War: The Experiences of Frank Maheux' in *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1992), pp. 85.

probably not all officers had. Also probably not all Battalion Commanders were thrilled to send their best men into these dangerous missions or were simply inclined to give new recruits a chance to prove themselves in an actual combat situation. Such considerations were certainly a factor which could influence the results of a trench raid, which occasionally ended in a disaster for the participants due to insufficient preparations and inexperienced soldiers like a raid which conducted on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1917 at Vimy Ridge in which 77 Canadian trench raiders and 6 of their accompanying officers of the 54<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion lost their life during the first five minutes of the operation.<sup>78</sup>

Extensive specialized training did also play a large role for trench raiders, although exercises were only issued temporarily and were mostly focused around the objective. The amount of preparation involved in a trench raid however significantly increased from the first raid in February 1915 until the ones which were conducted in the last year of the war. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Regiment, which claims to have conducted the first trench raid during the First World War in the night of February 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, had only two officers detached, the supposed raiding leaders themselves, to conduct some reconnaissance on the selected sector of the German trenches prior to the raid. One of these officers got taken prisoner by German soldiers which then subsequently left only one to instruct his raiding party for the task.<sup>79</sup> While this is a clear sign of the ad hoc nature of the first trench raid and the distinctive lower echelons adaptability of the Canadian army, preparation became more sophisticated in the years to come. Trench raiders would usually construct dummy trenches, shaped after the German sector which was to be targeted. Also all volunteers for the raid were

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<sup>78</sup> 54<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, War Diaries, 01.08.1916-30.04.1918, RG9-III-D-3, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), entry March 1<sup>st</sup> 1917.

<sup>79</sup> Hodder-Williams, Lieutenant Ralph, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919: Volume 1* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), pp. 31.

excluded from regular trench duties for the time of preparation and the conduction of the raid.<sup>80</sup>

Training methods were therefore one characteristic of trench raiding which arguably made the most progress during the war. However there is no evidence that the sophisticated techniques trench raiders developed had an impact on their self-perception or the way they were perceived by non-trench raiders. Raiding parties were also much in contrast to storm battalions only temporarily excluded from regular trench duties for the duration of their preparations and the completion of their intended trench raid.<sup>81</sup> Volunteering and getting picked for a trench raid was therefore also possibly considered a way by many Canadians to escape the monotony of trench duties and not necessarily an honour itself. When a trench raid was over raiders simply returned to their original units, which effectively barred them from developing a long lasting self-perception as a non-regular, specialized soldier or even as an elite soldier. Sentiment of the latter was only achieved on an individual basis when for example medals were awarded to raiders who showed distinctive talent during a trench raid.<sup>82</sup> A comparison of the two results reveal that the most striking difference here between both formations is the fact that the German storm troopers were deployed in their own battalion while Canadian trench raiders were essentially troops drafted from existing infantry formations and temporary put into the role of a trench raider. This can also be regarded as one of the main reason why storm troopers were able to create a sense of distinction between themselves and regular troops. As the Canadian trench raiders were never separated from their original units for long but only temporarily for the length of a mission they had a distinctive disadvantage in developing an esprit de corps. Canadian soldiers themselves made no difference between trench raiders and regular troops as they were not regarded as different

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<sup>80</sup> Rawling, Bill, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 48.

<sup>81</sup> Godefroy, Andrew, 'Daring Innovation: The Canadian Corps and Trench Raiding on the Western Front', pp. 246.

<sup>82</sup> Hodder-Williams, Lieutenant Ralph, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919*, pp. 45.

formations but just a short-term change in duty. This can be seen as another result of the non-professional nature of the Canadian forces: They would adapt to the requirements on the battlefield for a short time to achieve a certain goal rather than trying to introduce a persistent reshape their force structure. As a result, their non-permanent and unidentifiable and shifting nature of their force structure left trench raiders with a noticeable disadvantage in creating a sense of self as a raider and a distinction between themselves and regular Canadian soldiers. This strong contrast in comparison to storm troopers was also even further intensified by the fact that trench raiders were picked on a voluntary basis, whereas storm troopers were normally picked on basis of their physical fitness and the stress they could endure. Since everyone could be a trench raider in the Canadian Army purely by choice, it was near impossible for them to develop an esprit de corps as a whole on basis of their force structure and the characteristics of their personnel.

### **3. Tactics**

The art of attack from German storm troopers was embedded into larger operations and, as this chapter will outline, in contrast to the Canadian trench raiders usually not a task which was left exclusively to the storm trooper battalions. According to the Canadian Intelligence report on German storm troopers a “Storm battalion is directly under the Army and is employed for specially [sic] difficult operations. Infantry are led in attack by them. Storm battalions take positions but infantry must hold them.”<sup>83</sup> Since storm battalions were a new introduction to the German Army and their numbers limited, they were intended to be exclusively used for specialized assaults against heavily defended targets. As a result storm battalions never stayed on one location of the front for long but were sent to whatever sector their affiliated army deemed their presence necessary. This also meant that they were often

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<sup>83</sup> Canadian Corps General Staff, War Diaries, 01.06.1917-31.07.1917, R611-371-2-E, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), pp. 197.

spared from usual duties regular infantry encountered at the front line such as garrison duties, patrolling, and maintaining the trenches. As their embedment in combined arms warfare with other service branches implies, storm battalions were solely meant to be used as assault infantry. Much in contrast to the tactics of Canadian trench raiders which will be highlighted later in this chapter, storm troopers were not supposed to be sent into an engagement with the enemy all by themselves. Although, as outlined in the previous chapter, almost all of the German infantry was supposed to be reshaped and retrained in the image of the storm troopers, their late introduction to the war and the consequently low numbers of the storm battalions made them to valuable to be used under different circumstances.

As artillery only had the role to suppress the enemy positions and pave a corridor through natural obstacles, wires and defences for the advance of the infantry, storm trooper on the other hand were the first in these missions to make actual first contact with the enemy while regular infantry had only the task to mop up the last existing pockets of resistance which the storm troopers had not dealt with during their assault and hold the ground which was taken by the storm battalions.<sup>84</sup> Artillery fire during the assault was less a preliminary bombardment but composed as a rolling barrage to which the assaulting infantry closely followed in its footsteps. “In the attack, the hostile artillery was to be held down effectively, while the infantry was to work its way up close to the place where our artillery projectiles fell”<sup>85</sup>, as the German Lieutenant General Wilhelm Balck briefly summarized this approach shortly after the war.

A strategy like this demanded a high level of resistance to stress from the storm troopers, since the bombardment of their near vicinity could be equally dangerous for themselves as it was for the enemy if they did not pay enough attention. A storm trooper had essentially to be able to suppress the impulse to take cover when artillery grenades exploded in front of him and press on with the attack: “Our infantry must absolutely rid itself of all

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<sup>84</sup> Fehrenbach, Oberleutnant Th., ‘Meine Eindrücke in der 2. württbg. Sturmkp., Sturmbat. 16’, pp. 303-306.

<sup>85</sup> Balck, Leutnant General William, *Development of Tactics*, pp. 70.

nervousness when our own artillery fire strikes close to them. Co-operation between heavy and field artillery should be improved. Our artillery fire should be supplemented by minenwerfer fire.”<sup>86</sup> As outlined in the previous chapter storm battalions had their own light artillery like minenwerfer to call upon within their ranks in case they needed additional fire support against an obstacle in their way or suppress machinegun nests which survived the rolling barrage of the heavy artillery: “[...] light trench mortars are placed under the orders of each battalion, which thereby becomes a mixed body of infantry, artillery, trench mortars and machine guns. This permits the battalion commander to fulfil the duties which fall to his lot without outside aid.”<sup>87</sup> This was most likely a result of the fact that communication between assault infantry and heavy artillery to direct the bombardment on certain spots of the battlefield again could not be guaranteed during an offensive and would due to the delay only hinder the advance.<sup>88</sup> It essentially gave storm battalions all necessary equipment and also consequently all independence during their assault to deal with anything they could encounter during the offensive which combined with the stress they had to endure from the German artillery’s rolling barrage likely further promoted their self-perception as a dynamic and outstanding fighting force. Regular infantry on the other hand, usually called “Sicherungstrupps”<sup>89</sup> (‘covering troops’) by storm troopers, which followed in their footsteps, was in this respect less a support unit to the storm battalions and only a means to secure the ground storm troopers had gathered and take over and guard prisoners.

The embedment of storm troopers in the German art of attack after the deployments of storm battalions had begun most likely had a good share of influence in developing their esprit de corps and their self of sense as an elite force. Their prominent role in the attack as

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. pp. 70.

<sup>87</sup> US War Department, *A Survey of German Tactics, 1918* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1918), pp. 20.

<sup>88</sup> US War Department, *German and Austrian Tactical Studies: Translations of captured German and Austrian Documents and Information gained from German and Austrian Prisoners – From the British, French and Italian Staffs* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1918), pp. 150-152.

<sup>89</sup> Fehrenbach, Oberleutnant Th., ‘Meine Eindrücke in der 2. württbg. Sturmkp., Sturmbat. 16’, pp. 305.



the spearhead of the German Army saw them integrated in the arguably most dangerous part during an offensive. In the foreword to the published memoirs of a former storm trooper the war volunteer and writer Franz Schauwecker gave a brief description of how storm troopers were perceived at the frontlines by regular infantry: “Where the soldiers of the storm battalions appeared, fate planted its black flag. Their appearance was always a clear sign that a critical decision was made here. The other soldiers [...] watched them silently. Everyone knew what was going on when they appeared. [...] it was their duty to confront the greatest danger.”<sup>90</sup> It should be noted however, that overly heroic tone of Schauwecker’s description is certainly much a result of his openly militaristic and nationalistic views he developed in the inter war period.<sup>91</sup> The author of the memoirs Hoepfener-Flatow himself on the other hand used a much less heroic tone and bravado to describe his self-perception as a storm trooper and his role on the field, though he never actually dismissed the alleged importance of storm battalions as the perceived elite force of the German Army.<sup>92</sup>

Trench raids on the other hand were usually not embedded in a combined arms strategy, but remained an infiltration tactic which was solely to be executed by infantry. Trench raids were an almost exclusive means of attrition, whose only secondary objective was to gather intelligence, either in the form of prisoners or documents, in the enemy sector which was to be raided.<sup>93</sup> “Trench raids are used to cause the enemy casualties, to destroy his trench fortifications, and to decrease his morale”<sup>94</sup>, as the handbook on trench fighting summarized the task. One striking element of the summary Captain Haws Elliot provided in his handbook of 1917 is that it also mentions the secondary objective of trench raiders to find out if

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<sup>90</sup> Hoepfener-Flatow, W., *Stoßtrupp Markmann greift ein! Der Kampf eines Frontsoldaten* (Berlin, Ernst Steiner Verlag, 1939), pp. 22-23.

<sup>91</sup> Woods, Roger, ‘The Conservative Revolution and the First World War: Literature as Evidence in Historical Explanation’ in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (1990), pp. 80-83.

<sup>92</sup> Hoepfener-Flatow, W., *Stoßtrupp Markmann greift ein!*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>93</sup> Boraston, Lieutenant Colonel J. H., *Sir Douglas Haig’s Despatches: December 1915 – April 1919* (London, Denton & Sons Ltd., 1919), pp. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Elliot, Captain Haws, *Trench Fighting*, pp. 48.

“German shock or attack troops”<sup>95</sup> were in the sector, which is considering the year of publication most likely a reference to storm troopers. Although they had not been deployed in full force in 1917, it appears that storm troopers were already considered a significant threat from Canadian and British perspective which needed to be watched closely. Since raids were generally conducted at night, raiders often blackened their faces to camouflage themselves and wore soft caps for the duration of the operation instead of steel helmets which were introduced later in the war, all means to lower the likelihood of getting discovered by enemy sentries when raiders approached their target.<sup>96</sup> As such trench raids can also be regarded as a sort of psychological warfare since German soldiers always had to expect a sudden assault during the night, resulting in a state of constant distress which grinded their fatigue as a result.<sup>97</sup>

Although the Canadian Expedition Corps made attempts to continuously increase the size of trench raiding parties as the war progressed and support their efforts by other service branches like artillery as a means to achieve a higher amount of attrition on the German Army in less time, the experiments in embedding trench raiders in a combined arms approach ultimately failed. Success of a trench raid more than often relied on its surprise effect on the enemy troops and its quick execution before the enemy could deploy a counterattack to repel the raiding party.<sup>98</sup> Artillery, especially used as a means to provide a preliminary bombardment, remained therefore an unsuitable weapon for the task as it alerted the enemy. Although the Canadian artillery sometimes gave covering fire for returning raiding parties who were threatened by an assembling German counterattack, these implementations were not an essential part of the raid itself, but more an opportunity which in some cases arose from

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid. pp. 48.

<sup>96</sup> Sassoon, Siegfried, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London, Faber and Faber, 1930), pp. 19; See also the report of a British Field Psychiatrist who had treated a trench raider: Dillon, Frederick, ‘Treatment of Neuroses in the Field: The Advanced Psychiatric Centre’ in *The Neuroses in War*, ed. Emanuel Miller (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1945), pp. 122.

<sup>97</sup> Holmes, Richard, *Acts of War: The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (London, Cassell, 1985), pp. 266-267; Rawling, Bill, *Surviving Trench Warfare*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>98</sup> Brown, Ian, ‘Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-Piece Attack, 1917-1918’ in *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (1994), pp. 425-426.

them.<sup>99</sup> On some occasions daytime raids were still accompanied by a preliminary bombardment on the enemy sector, but these instances remained very rare and can therefore hardly be called an implementation of combined arms warfare.<sup>100</sup>

Naturally newly introduced weapons like the tank also were incompatible to trench raids due to their loudness, their low speed and their tendency to often get stuck in the muddy terrain and craters in no-mans-land due to mechanical difficulties.<sup>101</sup> In this regard trench raiders were at a clear disadvantage compared to storm troopers in showing their skills to other service branches to promote a clear distinction between them and simultaneously help the trench raiders to develop their own sense of self as a unique fighting force. If any competition in terms of gaining recognition as skilful soldiers occurred, it remained among the raiding parties and did usually not involve other service branches, although competition would sometimes spread from trench raiders of the Canadian Expedition Corps to the ones deployed by the British Expedition Force: “Battalion competed with battalion, brigade with brigade, division with division, in accomplishing the biggest raid. Soon, too, competition came from outside. When we had reached the figure of one hundred prisoners and one machine-gun in a raid, news came from the Ypres salient that the British regiments there had succeeded in taking one hundred and twenty prisoners and two machine-guns. There was no envy, but there was very general determination to beat that figure.”<sup>102</sup> Trench raiders kept very close to themselves and their essentially non-existing embedment into a larger combined arms tactic can be only one explanation for this conspicuous outcome.

Canadian trench raiders used distinctive methods in their operations to achieve their goal. Since trench raids were a means of attritional warfare and therefore first and foremost

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<sup>99</sup> Holmes, Richard, *Acts of War*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>100</sup> For an example of a Canadian daytime raid which was supported by artillery see: Morton, Desmond, *When your Number's up*, pp. 167.

<sup>101</sup> Nicholson, Colonel G.W.L., *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, pp. 149-150; Prior, Robin and Wilson, Trevor, *The Somme* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 234; Gilbert, Martin, *Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War* (London, John Murray, 2007), pp. 190.

<sup>102</sup> McKenzie, F.A., *Through the Hindenburg Line: Crowning Days on the Western Front* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), pp.28-29.

meant to frequently cause considerable losses to the enemy and reduce their overall moral, the very nature of their task likely influenced their self-perception and the way trench raiders were perceived by others.<sup>103</sup> Taking prisoners however was only one way to reduce the numbers of the enemy. Letters and war memoirs of former trench raiders in the Canadian army regularly describe episodes during raids in which the raiders showed absolutely no mercy to the garrison they found, including German soldiers who actively tried to surrender. “A Canadian private, having penetrated a German trench with an attacking party, encountered a German who threw up his hands and said: “Mercy, Kamerade [sic]. I have a wife and five children at home.” “You're mistaken,” replied the Canadian. “You have a widow and five orphans at home.” And, very shortly, he had”<sup>104</sup>, as Sergeant McClintock of the 87<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Canadian Grenadier Guards described his first trench raid in his memoirs. In another raid in the Somme area near the town Courcelette a Canadian participant expressed in a letter to his wife that he and his soldiers gave no quarter to the German defenders: “I went true all the fights the same as if I was making logs I baynetted [sic] some killed others. [...] when they [the Germans] saw they were beaten they put up their hands up but dear wife it was to [sic] late as long as I leave I'll remember it.”<sup>105</sup> The underaged Canadian Private James Hector Owen, who lied about his age to military authorities to get enlisted and embarked to France, had similar experiences in combat when it came to the treatment of surrendering Germans. In a letter addressed to his mother he described the behaviour of one of his own brothers who both fought alongside him in the 15<sup>th</sup> battalion: “A German [...] had chickened out and tried to surrender. Our boy would have none of it. He lunged at the German again and

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<sup>103</sup> French, David, ‘The Meaning of Attrition, 1914-1916’ in *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 407 (1988), pp. 385-386.

<sup>104</sup> McClintock, Sergeant Alexander, *Best O' Luck*, pp. 45.

<sup>105</sup> Francis-Xavier Maheux fonds, Maheux to Angeline, September 20th 1916, R5156-0-4-E, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

again, who each time lowered his arms and stopped the point of the bayonet with his bare hands. The German was screaming for mercy. Oh God, it was brutal!”<sup>106</sup>

Some of these accounts read like they were just a result of enraged soldiers in the heat of battle who sought revenge for their fallen comrades.<sup>107</sup> However these are just a few examples for these brutal incidents which are featured in many letters, war memoirs and post-war interviews of Canadian soldiers.<sup>108</sup> Other accounts of these incidents show that they were not always included in fierce battle but happened when they already had ended. “I had them [the German prisoners] covered with the officer’s revolver and made ‘em open their pockets without turning round. Then I dropped a Mills bomb in each, with the pin out, and ducked behind a traverse. Bang, bang, bang! No more bloody prisoners. No good Fritzes but dead ‘uns”<sup>109</sup>, a former Canadian trench raider reported after the war how he killed three German prisoners. In the published letters of Lieutenant Colonel Agar Adamson of the Princess Patricia’s Light Infantry there is one incident being described where a German officer who had previously surrendered was shot because he had demanded to be guarded by a Canadian officer of his rank. The raiders decided this would be too bothersome and killed him where he stood.<sup>110</sup> Another incident in June 1916 featured a Canadian machine gunner who killed off a group of unarmed and surrendering German soldiers who had slowly approached the position the Canadians held.<sup>111</sup>

Official documents and war diaries of the different battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force on the other hand remain silent on this subject. This is not exactly surprising considering that these acts were condemned by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and

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<sup>106</sup> Letters of Private James Hector Owen, 1915-1916, Canadian Expeditionary Force 15<sup>th</sup> battalion, 20030308-002, Canadian War Museum Archives (CWM).

<sup>107</sup> Dancocks, Daniel, *Spearhead to Victory: Canada and the Great War* (Edmonton, Hurtig Pub., 1987), pp. 113.

<sup>108</sup> Cook, Tim, ‘Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War’ in *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (2006), pp. 639.

<sup>109</sup> Graves, Robert, *Goodbye to all that* (London, Penguin Books, 1929), pp. 154.

<sup>110</sup> Christie, Norm, *Letters of Agar Adamson: 1914-1919* (Nepean, CEF Books, 1997), pp. 274.

<sup>111</sup> Shackleton, Kevin, *Second to None: The Fighting 58<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Toronto, Dundurn, 2002), 62.

1907.<sup>112</sup> Although Canada did not sign the convention by herself with a delegation of her own, the United Kingdom however did so on behalf of the British Empire.<sup>113</sup> Canada as a Dominion within the British Empire could as a result still be arguably held accountable for these acts as a subordinate state of one of the major signing members of the Hague Conventions. It could be argued that the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 were possibly redundant anyway due to the widespread usage of gas from all nations, including from the Canadian artillery, which was also officially condemned by the agreement. However these incidents precede in some cases the introduction of gas warfare on the Western Front on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1915.<sup>114</sup>

As the Canadian historian Tim Cook points out, who has so far written the most detailed account on this subject in regard to the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the killing of prisoners was not an entirely uncommon sight on the Western Front and occurred among soldiers of all participating nations.<sup>115</sup> The vast number of evidence from letters and memoirs however suggests that these brutal deeds were much more frequent among Canadians, especially during trench raids.<sup>116</sup> Due to the distinctively high regularity of these occurrences in trench raids they can not be simply disposed as random acts of cruelty on behalf of the trench raiders. Prisoners were in many cases regarded as the primary measurement of success for a trench raid, since they represented an ample and visible figure of the reduction of the

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<sup>112</sup> *Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907, Regulations respecting the laws and customs of war on land Section I : On belligerents Chapter II : Prisoners of war - Art. 4* [Online]. Available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/195-200014?OpenDocument>

<sup>113</sup> *State Parties in the Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907* [Online]. Available: [http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/States.xsp?xp\\_viewStates=XPages\\_NORMStatesParties&xp\\_treatySelecte d=195](http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/States.xsp?xp_viewStates=XPages_NORMStatesParties&xp_treatySelecte d=195)

<sup>114</sup> Trumpener, Ulrich, 'The Road to Ypres: The Beginnings of Gas Warfare in World War I' in *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1975), pp. 460-461; Hanslian, Rudolf, *Der deutsche Gasangriff bei Ypern am 22. April 1915: Eine Kriegsgeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin, Gasschutz und Luftschutz GmbH, 1934), pp. 60.

<sup>115</sup> Cook, Tim, 'Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War', pp. 638, van Crefeld, Martin, 'The Clausewitzian Universe and the Law of War' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 26, No. 3/4 (1991), pp. 413; Spoerer, Mark, 'The Mortality of Allied Prisoners of War and Belgian Civilian Deportees in German Custody during the First World War: A Reappraisal of the Effects of Forced Labour' in *Population Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2006), pp. 124-125.

<sup>116</sup> Cook, Tim, 'Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War', pp. 642-643.

enemy fighting force.<sup>117</sup> It therefore appears to be illogical that trench raiders would often actively dispose prisoners instead of using them as a means for gaining recognition of their success. Tim Cook stresses the possibility that these atrocious acts of Canadian trench raiders were essentially operations driven by vengeance which was stirred by Canadian propaganda and simply aimed to make German soldiers at least pay equally in human lives for all the dead a Canadian formation had suffered in its sector.<sup>118</sup>

This however does not explain why these acts were so prominent with the Canadian trench raiders and a lot less frequent within other nations although those also regularly suffered heavy casualties. It could be argued that the comparatively less thorough pre war drill of Canadian soldiers was responsible that they were more likely to give in to such violent actions. Since drill played a large part on a soldier's discipline and how soldiers performed in battle, this could have also had an effect on the way they treated surrendering enemy soldiers.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand this can be only partly responsible as there is no evidence that Canadian soldiers kept their lower pre war standards in training during the war. At least some Canadian trench raiders seemed to feel that they had to expect an equal violent treatment if they would fall into the hands of German soldiers. "Lots of our poor chaps were wounded in the trench, and had to be left behind in the retreat. We know what they got"<sup>120</sup> a Canadian soldier shared in his memoirs, strongly implying that the German soldiers killed off all the wounded men the Canadians left behind during an unsuccessful attack on a German trench on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1915. However this was just an assumption on his behalf. He could not possibly know what happened to his comrades. It therefore remains unclear where this general sentiment originated from. Influence from propaganda and rumours among soldiers could be a

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<sup>117</sup> Davis, Gerald, 'Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1977), pp. 624.

<sup>118</sup> Cook, Tim, 'Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War', pp. 650-654.

<sup>119</sup> Morrow, James, 'The Institutional Features of the Prisoner of War Treaties' in *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2001), pp. 976.

<sup>120</sup> Plummer, Lieutenant Mary, *With the First Canadian Contingent: Published on Behalf of the Canadian Fields Comfort Commission* (Toronto, Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), pp. 88.

possibility. There are no existing sources to be found though which could give a definite answer to this question.

A more suitable answer for these reoccurring incidents during trench raids lies arguably in the tactics of trench raiders and the way they were deployed. As outlined in a previous paragraph trench raids heavily relied on a stealthy approach of the raiding party and quick execution before German forces in the area could deploy a counterattack. Raids would also often be launched at night or during the first hours of the day. Naturally the surprise effect on the German garrisons in the front trenches would often leave them unable to stage an effective defence against the sudden Canadian assault and would as a result make many German soldiers prone to surrender immediately rather than fighting against an enemy who clearly had the initiative. In letters Canadian trench raiders often mention that especially during night raids they regularly encountered German soldiers who were not even fully dressed, yet alone armed. "We took the Hun so much by surprise that some of them had no trousers on"<sup>121</sup>, Lieutenant C.B.F. Jones stated in one of his letters in which he described his first trench raid on April 9<sup>th</sup> 1917.

A raiding party presumably often had a distinctive chance to quickly overwhelm any resistance and subsequently create a large number of German prisoners of war in very short time. Due to the fact that the number of prisoners was often equal to the number of Canadian soldiers in the raiding party or even surpassed them, a high proportion of raiders had to be deployed as guards of the prisoners and had to accompany them through no-man's-land back to the Canadian trenches.<sup>122</sup> This would as a result diminish the fighting power of the remaining raiding party and severely hinder them to continue with their mission to destroy the enemy fortifications. Furthermore it was often a dangerous and lengthy process to lead the captured prisoners back, especially during raids at night. Raiders themselves had to find or

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<sup>121</sup> Foster, Charles Lyons, *Letters from the Front: Being a Record of the Part played by Officers of the Bank in the Great War, Vol. 1* (Toronto, Southam Press, 1920), pp. 203.

<sup>122</sup> Ferguson, Niall, 'Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat' in *War in History*, Vol. 11 (2004), pp. 154.



create small openings in the barbed wire defences set up in front of the German trenches.<sup>123</sup> Leading prisoners through these small gaps, especially larger numbers, naturally resulted in a long trail of German soldiers wandering through no-man's-land under custody of Canadian raiders, something the raiding party could not always afford to do. "The number of men required to herd them back to the P.O.W. cages could not be spared"<sup>124</sup>, Victor Wheeler noted in his memoirs when he described a raid at Vimy Ridge in which the raiding party he was part of made so many prisoners that they decided to kill most of them instead of sending them back under guard.

Disposing prisoners was therefore possibly a safer route for trench raiders since they could then keep their mobility.<sup>125</sup> Leaving German soldiers behind in their own trenches was not an option as they could have picked up weapons again and started shooting at the retreating raiders when they had finished their work. Furthermore the process of taking prisoners was often dangerous itself due to common misunderstandings between the individuals involved or simply because of feigned surrenders in which the captors would be captured themselves.<sup>126</sup> Also this option would have entirely contradicted the essence of attritional warfare due to the fact it was aimed to reduce the enemy fighting power by all means. The existing evidence strongly implies that many trench raiders took this literally and essentially did not care as much for the regulations on the treatment of prisoners of war as they did with their task and of course their own safety. "The purpose of war is to exterminate the enemy"<sup>127</sup> as one Canadian soldier put it in a letter to his father. This general mindset is even mentioned in the personal handbook on offensive actions in trench warfare of the Canadian Major Donald McRae in which he stated that "a raiding party shows no mercy and

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<sup>123</sup> Doyle, Peter, 'Military Geography: Terrain Evaluation and the British Western Front 1914-1918' in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 163, No. 1 (1997), pp. 6-9.

<sup>124</sup> Wheeler, Victor, *The 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion in No Man's Land* (Nepean, CEF Books, 2000), pp. 100.

<sup>125</sup> Jones, Edgar, 'The Psychology of Killing: The Combat Experience of British Soldiers during the First World War' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2006), pp. 238.

<sup>126</sup> Allen, E.P.S., *The 116<sup>th</sup> Battalion in France* (Toronto, Press of the Hunter-Rose Co., 1921), pp. 60.

<sup>127</sup> Grescoe, Audrey, *The Book of War Letters: 100 Years of Private Canadian Correspondence* (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2003), pp. 112.

after taking one or two prisoners kills all other enemy it can”<sup>128</sup> and “a raid is supposed to be a merciless affair, and all enemy encountered after two or three prisoners are taken should be killed. One of the main reasons Canadian raids are so successful is that Germans know that they get no mercy and often lose their nerve and try to get away.”<sup>129</sup> In conclusion the executions of prisoners were no accidents by enraged soldiers who were under influence by their countries war propaganda, like Tim Cook argues, but an essential part of trench raiding. Propaganda was in this regard only a supplement which made these deeds more bearably and sustainable for the soldiers due to their depersonalising depiction of the enemy.<sup>130</sup>

As these acts were essentially war crimes it is not surprising that trench raiders would feel the need to seclude themselves from other service branches and compete and distinguish successes only among their own kind instead of seeking recognition as an effective fighting force in attritional warfare. This also includes direct acknowledgement from home. Although the reactions of their relatives to which their personal letters were directed are not entirely clear, it is safe to assume that they must have been appalled by the brutality included in these raids their sons, fathers or husbands told them about and in many cases participated in. Due to the high number of evidence on these acts they can hardly be called a secret. They certainly influenced the way trench raiders were perceived both within their army structures and at home. Although their respective families and superiors in the army shied away to condemn these acts publicly, they still remained silent on the matter and did not try to stop them, which as a result also effectively made these violent actions also more likely to reoccur.<sup>131</sup> That these acts were widely known but were kept under a strict silence can also be proven by an entry from November 1918 in the diary of the Commander in Chief of the Canadian Expeditionary Force General Arthur Currie who stated that “it was not the intention of our

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<sup>128</sup> McRae, Major Donald, *Offensive Fighting* (Philadelphia, Lippincott Company, 1918), pp. 32.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 50.

<sup>130</sup> Holmes, Richard, *Firing Line* (London, Pimlico, 1994), pp. 361.

<sup>131</sup> Morrow, James, ‘The Institutional Features of the Prisoner of War Treaties’, pp. 977-978.

fellows to take many German prisoners”<sup>132</sup>, by which he essentially confirmed that he knew of these acts all along.

The strict silence is also reflected in the fact that post war published collections of letters from Canadian trench raiders usually do not contain any remarks in regard to mistreatment or killings of prisoners, while unpublished letters in contrast often do. In ‘Letters from the Front’ for example prisoners are always treated in accordance to the Hague Conventions, except in one occasion in which the author of the letter mentions as a side note that almost no prisoners were taken in one raid he participated in. However this incident is embedded in fierce fighting: “The wood seemed to be literally lined with machine guns, and they played these guns on us with terrible effect. Our men were dropping thick and fast. However, those remaining sailed right ahead and cleared the wood with a vengeance. A few ‘Huns’ were taken prisoners, but damned few. We had enough to do to take care of ourselves and our own wounded to bother about prisoners.”<sup>133</sup> The reason this letter was chosen for publication was most likely the fact that the incident seems harmless as it looks like a somewhat fair reaction in the sense of biblical ‘an eye for an eye’ justice.

Although the Canadian society largely followed the silence of the army officials on the subject of killing prisoners, one prominent account of criticism does exist. The English poet Robert Graves, who served as an officer in the British Expeditionary Force in France, heavily condemned the acts of Canadian trench raiders in his book ‘Goodbye to all that’ which was published a decade after the First World War had ended: “The troops with the worst reputation for acts of violence against prisoners were the Canadians. [...] The Canadians’ motive was said to be revenge for a Canadian found crucified with bayonets through his hands and feet in a German trench. [...] At all events, most overseas men, and some British troops,

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<sup>132</sup> General Arthur Currie, cited in: Nicholson, Colonel G.W.L., *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, pp. 448.

<sup>133</sup> Foster, Charles Lyons, *Letters from the Front*, pp. 10.

made atrocities against prisoners a boast, not a confession.”<sup>134</sup> Like Tim Cook Robert Graves stresses the influence of propaganda and the unpredictable behaviour of soldiers in battle as the source of these acts, but as pointed out earlier this is hardly a convincing explanation of why especially Canadians would be so highly susceptible to both.<sup>135</sup> With the last sentence Graves presumably refers to the habit of trench raiders to compete among themselves for the most outstanding successes in attritional warfare. Since everyone could be a trench raider by just volunteering for the task, this habit was probably very widespread in the front lines and could be encountered almost everywhere in the sectors held by Canadian troops.

Since the frequent killings of unarmed and surrendering Germans however hardly fit into the picture of outstanding and exemplary soldiers, this sentiment most likely also had its share in the outcome of their perception. Killing prisoners is naturally unsuitable to have a positive impact on perception and most trench raiders most likely knew that due to the fact that they felt the need to isolate themselves and sought recognition only among their own kind. Only to them they would feel to share their successes on the field. Canadian trench raiders were in this regard again struck with a definite disadvantage in gaining acceptance as an exemplary elite force in comparison to storm troopers. Their tactics often brought them into a position in which they had to decide against taking prisoners because it could bring their own safety at risk in some situations. Although storm troopers also had individuals in their ranks who frequently killed surrendering enemy soldiers, as Ernst Jünger points out in his memoirs, these acts never developed into a necessity within their tactics as it did with for the trench raiders.<sup>136</sup> Overall only few cases are known in which German soldiers actively executed surrendering enemy troops during the First World War.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Graves, Robert, *Goodbye to all that*, pp. 154.

<sup>135</sup> For Tim Cook's interpretation of the influence of propaganda on Canadian soldiers see: Cook, Tim, 'Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War', pp. 652.

<sup>136</sup> For Jünger's comment on the subject of killing prisoners see: Jünger Ernst, *In Stahlgewittern*, 388. Interestingly the sentences in which he condemned these incidents were removed in the last edition of his book. See: Jünger, Ernst, *Storm of Steel*, pp. 239.

<sup>137</sup> Holmes, Richard, *Firing Line*, pp. 382.

Storm battalions had the advantage that their role was embedded in a combat of movement while trench raiders were exclusively fighting a war of attrition on their own. Successfully fighting for territory in a stalemate however is generally a more accepted method of gaining a good reputation as a soldier than by just creating a large number of enemy casualties.

#### **4. Institutional Support and Equipment**

The institutional support storm troopers received is heavily reflected in their equipment. As outlined in their force structure in the second chapter of this research storm battalions featured companies within their ranks for specialized tasks. Light infantry guns to suppress enemies in their trenches as well as flamethrower teams to effectively destroy enemy resistance at short range had their place in a storm battalion. Furthermore storm troopers were allowed to wear the guard insignias of the Imperial Guard, the former alleged elite force of the German army, which most likely further boosted the confidence of the personnel of storm battalions in perceiving themselves as the new elite of the German army.<sup>138</sup> The reason for this fine equipment of storm troopers lies within the fact that they had convinced higher levels in the German army of their effectiveness in combat during their testing phase in 1916, including Quartermaster General Erich von Ludendorff who was the main supporter behind the idea to make storm battalions the role model of future German infantry.<sup>139</sup> Considering this plan it seems illogical that higher echelons had allowed storm troopers to wear guard insignias, since they were not supposed to be a special force for long.

On the other hand this action was presumably a temporary solution until the rest of the German infantry had been retrained and redeployment as storm troopers. This is also true in

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<sup>138</sup> Gudmundsson, Bruce, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 87.

<sup>139</sup> Goodspeed, Donald James, *Ludendorff: Genius of World War I* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), pp. 194.

other regards. The German army and the German War Ministry followed a distinct campaign to promote storm troopers as the new role model of the German infantry and embedded them in propaganda even before the process of the deployment of storm battalions was completed. The German War Bonds campaign in 1917 for example was advertised with a propaganda poster which showed a storm trooper in his full gear, complete with steel helmet, a gasmask, a sack filled with stick hand grenades and the insignia of the Imperial Guard on his collar.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore the text on the poster says ‘Help us triumph!’ which could be both interpreted as a line for the German army as a whole or, considering the picture exclusively features a storm trooper, a distinct promotion of Germany’s new alleged war winning formation on the battlefield.

The depiction of storm troopers in German propaganda also followed the general outlet of other late war propaganda posters, which frequently stressed the resemblance of storm troopers with medieval knights thanks to their steel helmet.<sup>141</sup> This sentiment was also picked up by field newspapers like the ‘Die Wacht im Westen’ of the German 1<sup>st</sup> Army: “The knights of the middle ages had very similar helmets, and are they not looking defiant, strong and powerful to us?”<sup>142</sup> Although all German soldiers received a steel helmet during the last two years of the war, storm battalions were among the first to be fully outfitted with them.<sup>143</sup> The embedment of German soldiers in propaganda as some sort of reborn chivalry was therefore, at least for a while, entirely directed at storm troopers.

Although not always combined with propaganda posters, other field newspapers also highlighted the importance of the new storm battalions. In their descriptions storm troopers are usually depicted as determined and stoic, but also very godly soldiers who recite psalms

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<sup>140</sup> German War Bonds propaganda poster, 1917. [Online] Available: [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1727](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1727)

<sup>141</sup> Reimann, Aribert, *Der Große Krieg der Sprachen: Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen, Klartext Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), pp. 48-56.

<sup>142</sup> *Die Wacht im Westen: Kriegszeitung der 1. Armee*, No. 83, September 2nd 1917, pp. 6.

<sup>143</sup> Gruss, Hellmuth, *Aufbau und Verwendung der Deutschen Sturmabteilung im Weltkrieg* (Berlin, Junker und Dunhaupt Verlag, 1938), pp. 21.

when they march into battle and do not care about women if they happen to meet one behind the front lines.<sup>144</sup> Combined with their depiction as knights in propaganda posters, their propagandistic description very much gives storm troopers a loose similarity to the medieval military orders of the Knights Templar or the Teutonic Knights since these were essentially warrior monks and had their members swear vows of chastity.

However this very propagandistic depiction of storm troopers was not always kept in field newspapers. Usually the texts of German field newspapers of 1917 and 1918 rather stayed true to a more modest description of storm troopers, although they still frequently praised their combat abilities. Furthermore they sometimes featured noteworthy combat situations of storm battalions in exclusive articles. The field newspaper of the army group B for example highlighted remarkable deeds of her storm troopers under the heading 'Ehrentafel' ('roll of honour').<sup>145</sup> This practice however is can not be always found in all field newspapers. Other field newspapers often rather included such events in their columns on current war events, although they still usually made sure to highlight the presence of storm battalions in a battle to underline their alleged significance.<sup>146</sup> The more descriptive and modest nature of the majority of articles was most likely influenced by the fact that this method was approachable to the audience. Since the readers were soldiers themselves it was probably more sensible to feature somewhat realistic events instead of exaggerated propaganda.

Official photographs of Canadian soldiers at the front lines and propaganda posters of all sorts on the other hand, be it for recruiting, war bonds or donations, never exclusively depicted soldiers which could be identified as trench raiders but normally showed Canadian

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<sup>144</sup> *Aus Sundgau und Wasgenwald: Feldzeitung der Armeeabteilung B*, No. 1, December 19<sup>th</sup> 1917, pp. 4-5.

<sup>145</sup> *Aus Sundgau und Wasgenwald: Feldzeitung der Armeeabteilung B*, No. 42, May 12<sup>th</sup> 1918, pp. 5; *Ibid.*, No. 57, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1918, pp. 6; *Ibid.*, No. 63, July 52<sup>th</sup> 1918, pp. 5; *Ibid.*, No. 76, September 8<sup>th</sup> 1918, pp. 5; *Ibid.*, No. 82, September 29<sup>th</sup> 1918, pp. 5.

<sup>146</sup> *Zeit-Schau: 3. Beilage zum Champagne-Kamerad, Feldzeitung der 3. Armee*, No. 117, March 10<sup>th</sup> 1918, pp. 15.

soldiers in their regular uniforms and standardized equipment.<sup>147</sup> In Canadian propaganda and trench newspapers individual successes were praised instead of whole formations.<sup>148</sup> This is most likely a result of the nature of the force structure of trench raiders since they effectively remained regular infantry in their organisation and were only deployed temporarily for the length of a mission, very much in contrast to storm battalions which formed a constant formation on their own. In comparison to each other storm troopers were much better embedded in propaganda. Furthermore field newspapers regularly informed all service branches of German army of their engagements with the enemy, even when just a small number of soldiers were involved. Canadian trench newspapers on the other hand had a stronger emphasis to provide entertainment to their readership instead of promoting role models for the army like their German counterparts.

Another huge discrepancy between the two formations existed in the matter of specialized equipment. Canadian trench raiders were not given any special equipment like Germans storm troopers but had to make due with the gear regular infantry received in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. To prepare themselves for their task they had even more than storm troopers to rely on self made weapons. Trench raider often shortened the barrel of their rifles by simply sawing it off to turn it into a shorter, almost pistol like weapon, since real pistols were not as widespread among the lower ranks that made up the majority of trench raiders.<sup>149</sup> “If possible, ‘sawed off’ rifles, with bayonet studs, are used, as they make a very

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<sup>147</sup> Variety of 106 Canadian propaganda posters. [Online] Available: <http://www.wwlpropaganda.com/world-war-1-posters/canadian-ww1-propaganda-posters> ; Cook, Tim, ‘Immortalizing the Canadian Soldier: Lord Beaverbrook and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War’ in *Canada and the Great War: Western Front Association Papers*, ed. Briton Busch (Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), pp. 56-58; Cook, Tim, ‘Documenting War and Forging Reputations: Sir Max Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War’ in *War in History*, Vol. 10 (2003), pp. 291-292.

<sup>148</sup> The Canadian trench newspaper ‘The Listening Post’ highlighted noteworthy deeds among the Canadian Expeditionary Force frequently under the heading ‘Mentioned in Despatches’, for example in: *The Listening Post*, No. 19, August 10<sup>th</sup> 1916, pp. 118; *The Listening Post*, No. 2, August 30<sup>th</sup> 1915, pp. 6.

<sup>149</sup> Example of a ‘sawed off’ Enfield rifle, with a makeshift pistol grip attached and its wooden barrel removed. [Online] Available: <http://www.militaryantiquesmuseum.com/img/Product46102.jpg> ; See also: Smith, Second Lieutenant J. S., *Trench Warfare: A Manual for Officers and Men* (New York, Dutton & Co., 1917), pp. 133.



handy trench weapon and fire accurately enough for the close-range shooting in a bay”<sup>150</sup>, the Canadian Major Donald McRae noted in his handbook when he addressed usual equipment in trench raids. Makeshift trench clubs, a mace-like weapon which generally consisted of a stick with a metal head, often made from an outer hull of an egg grenade or other scrap metal, were another weapon commonly found in the front lines and used by trench raiders.<sup>151</sup> Trench clubs quickly became a common sight among raiders since their rifles, especially with a bayonet attached to them, were often considered an unreliable weapon for hand to hand combat in the rather enclosed environment of entrenchments.<sup>152</sup> Considering that trench raiders often followed the practice to kill German prisoners when they considered them to be too cumbersome, these trench clubs presumably made the deed particularly gruesome. These often rather uncivilised and crude looking weapons possibly had their share of influence in the trench raiders attitude to seclude themselves and in formulating their reputation and perception from others.

The fact that trench raiders had to produce much of their own weaponry out of common infantry equipment, wooden sticks and scrap metal speaks for itself how much they were neglected in regard to institutional support from home. Although storm troopers too had to overcome shortages in their equipment, especially in regard to larger explosives, the German War ministry at least supported their efforts in publishing a manual for producing a variety of explosives with the standard German stick hand grenade and basic tools commonly found at the front line.<sup>153</sup>

Although especially the first trench raid in February 1915 generated much acknowledgement and praise from higher levels of both the Canadian and British army for the

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<sup>150</sup> McRae, Major Donald, *Offensive Fighting*, pp. 54.

<sup>151</sup> McClintock, Sergeant Alexander, *Best O' Luck*, pp. 78, 89; Canadian trench clubs: See homepage of the Canadian War Museum for a number of examples. [Online] Available: <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/gerre/photo-e.aspx?PageId=3.B.3&photo=3.B.3.b&f=%2fcwm%2fexhibitions%2fgerre%2fclubs-blades-e.aspx>

<sup>152</sup> Todd, Frederick, 'The Knife and Club in Trench Warfare' in *The Journal of American Military History Foundation*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1938), pp. 147.

<sup>153</sup> *Anleitung zur Ausbildung von Stoßtrupps* (Berlin, Reichsdruckerei, 1917). [Online] Available: <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/>

adaptability of the Canadian infantry at the front line, this did not made way for a specialized program to support them.<sup>154</sup> The reason for this was that these congratulations were more an expression of the higher echelons to admire the fact that Canadian soldiers were actively trying to break the 'live and let live' system of trench warfare which often came outside of planned offensives and sometimes even resulted in attempts of fraternisation from soldiers of both sides in some sectors of the front.<sup>155</sup> Such events were deeply despised by higher ranks and trench raids were therefore seen as an adequate and effective method to keep troops at the front lines busy.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore the British Commander in Chief General Haig officially rejected the idea of winning through attrition in January 1916, which was presumably part of the reason why the idea of trench raiding lost significance in the view of higher echelons in both the Canadian and British Expeditionary Forces.<sup>157</sup>

Only one attempt was made by Canadian General David Watson to permanently implement another service branch into trench raiding tactics. Since regular artillery grenades proved to be unsuitable in regard to preliminary bombardments since they alerted the sector which was to be raided, the use of poison gas was considered as a short term means to suppress and inflict heavy casualties on the enemy right before the assault of the raiders.<sup>158</sup> The initial test of this idea on March 1st 1917 however resulted in a huge failure with lots of Canadian casualties.<sup>159</sup> The idea of supporting trench raids by any means was then immediately cancelled and trench raids remained continued to be an all infantry operation for

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<sup>154</sup> Hodder-Williams, Lieutenant Ralph, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919*, pp. 35.

<sup>155</sup> Holmes, Richard, *Firing Line*, pp. 369.

<sup>156</sup> Madigan, Edward, 'Sticking to a Hateful Task: Resilience, Humour, and British Understandings of Combatant Courage, 1914-1918' in *War in History*, Vol. 20 (2013), pp. 88-89.

<sup>157</sup> Sanders, Marble, 'Document of Note: General Haig Dismisses Attritional Warfare, January 1916' in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2001), pp. 3-6; Harris, Paul and Sanders, Marble, 'The Step-by-Step Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915-1917' in *War in History*, Vol. 15 (2008), pp. 41.

<sup>158</sup> Cook, Tim, 'A proper slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge' in *Canadian Military History*, No. 2 (1999), pp. 9-14.

<sup>159</sup> 54<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, War Diaries, 01.08.1916-30.04.1918, RG9-III-D-3, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), entry March 1<sup>st</sup> 1917.

the remainder of the war.<sup>160</sup> If this particular raid would have been successful a continued more streamlined effort from higher echelons of the Canadian Expeditionary Force would have been very likely. Since the raid however ended in a disaster it also ultimately ended the process of institutionalized support before it had barely begun.

## **5. Conclusion**

This dissertation has investigated how the geographical and military cultural origin, the force structure, tactics on the battlefield as well as the degree of received institutional support influenced the perception and self-perception of trench raiders and storm troopers, the specialized assault units of Canada and Germany in the First World War. The hypothesis posed at the beginning of this study stated that storm troopers perceived themselves as an elite unit in the German army while Canadian trench raiders did not, although they were similar in the way of a small unit assault force. This study set out to determine how differences of both formations in the categories stated above influenced the way their members perceived themselves and how they were viewed by other service branches and their respective people in their home countries.

The results of this investigation show that the emergence of storm battalions in the German Army was a systematic process which was initiated by officers within the army with direct support by both their superiors and the German War Ministry, while trench raiding was arguably a result of the adaptability of Canadian soldiers and their lower standards in pre war drills and training methods, which subsequently introduced a lose sense of decentralised command in lower echelons in the way of having troops at the front lines looking for own solutions when faced with a challenge. As a result Canadian soldiers frequently turned situations in their favour where more thoroughly trained troops from other nations had failed

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<sup>160</sup> Cook, Tim, 'A proper slaughter', pp. 19.

due to outdated tactics. Since the Canadian adaptability and the subsequent emergence of trench raiders however were a result of their lower ranks which often went barely noticed by the high echelons of the Canadian Expedition Force and the Canadian War Ministry, the methods of conducting trench raids barely changed throughout the war due to the lack of support. Trench raiding remained an ad hoc operation which was usually launched to keep the enemy busy and to force a constant war of attrition upon him outside of large allied offensives.

Due to the nature of trench raiding Canadian raiders never had the chance to develop a distinctive sense of self as an elite force within the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The frequent incidents in trench raids in which the attacking raiding party killed German prisoners certainly had a major share in this outcome. Since the essence of trench raid tactics was a quickly executed assault on an unwary enemy trench sector and the fact that raiders often captured during this process more prisoners than they could effectively guard and accompany back to their own trenches, they often had no choice but to dispose the majority of the prisoners they had taken. Although these acts can be essentially seen as war crimes, they were in fact normally not more than a necessity to guarantee the raiding party's own safety. Leaving the German prisoners behind was not an option because they could easily pick up weapons again when the raiding party left their sector. Also this would have contradicted the essence of attritional warfare and since all nations involved in the war essentially broke the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 at least occasionally on certain occasions, the trench raiders habit to dispose prisoners was presumably not seen as such a huge issue.

Still, these acts had of course backlashes on the raiders own self-perception and the way they were perceived by others. Trench raiders usually kept to themselves and highlighted their successes on the field only to other raiders, presumably because they believed only other raiders could understand what they went through. High echelons of the Canadian Expeditionary Force however remained largely silent on the matter of trench raids. They were

either not large enough in scale to be of significant notice to them or they simply did not want to shed too much light on the essence of how trench raids were conducted. This peculiar silence was also largely kept in Canadian society after the First World War had ended. Since Canada was on the victorious side of the war the likelihood of criticizing the behaviour of her returning soldiers was absent and naturally more effort was put into celebrating the victory. It is therefore not surprising that criticism on trench raiders was launched from an Englishman after the war and did not have its origin in Canadian society. The account of Robert Graves however remained the only distinctive condemnation of the tactics of Canadian trench raiders in the inter war period. Furthermore this particular silence in Canada on this subject was most likely also further influenced by the particular non-military minded Canadian culture which largely ignored military affairs in peacetime.

The early and consistent support storm troopers received from higher echelons on the other hand definitely helped them to a great extent in formulating their reputation as the new elite force of the German Army, since so many resources were directed to them for the training and deployment of the new storm battalions. Furthermore their embedment into German tactics on the Western Front, particularly in the German spring offensive, promoted storm battalions into the prominent role of the German spearhead in a combined arms assault. Their thorough training methods, their relief of regular trench duties as well as the comparatively high standards in recruiting personnel for the storm battalions further encouraged storm troopers to develop a self-perception of alleged superiority in comparison to other service branches of the German Army. Since storm trooper tactics were not exclusively meant as a means of attrition the members of storm battalions had a definite advantage in gaining their alleged elite status in comparison to trench raiders. Due to their role on the battlefield storm troopers could be reassured that they were following the usual tasks of a soldier in battle. Although killings of prisoners were not entirely absent in storm

battalions, as Ernst Jünger noted in his memoirs, there is no evidence that these acts ever became a frequent necessity like in the conduct of trench raids.

The strong embedment of the army in German culture and society in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century furthermore provided former storm troopers like Ernst Jünger and Ludwig Renn with a large audience who showed interest in reading their war memoirs. As a result storm troopers had a chance of further promoting themselves or at least inform a large readership of their war experiences, while there is no evidence that Canadian trench raiders ever incited such an interest in Canada. The fact that it took almost one century until Canadian historians started to shed some light on the subject of their specialized assault unit in the First World War speaks for itself.

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