

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/102716/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Williams, Christopher 2017. A question of 'legitimate pride'? The 38th (Welsh) Division at the Battle of Mametz Wood, July 1916. *Welsh History Review* 28 (4) , pp. 723-752. 10.16922/whr.28.4.6

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.16922/whr.28.4.6>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



A Question of 'Legitimate Pride'?

The 38th (Welsh) Division at the Battle of Mametz Wood, July 1916

I do not think that there is any Division which fought under my command in France which cannot point to at least one occasion when its actions reached the highest level of soldierly achievement. Those who read ... this book may find several occasions, but two come immediately to my mind. The one is the attack north of Ypres on the 31st July, 1917, when the 38th (Welsh) division met and broke to pieces a German Guard Division.

The other is that of the operation against Pozieres on the 21st-24th August 1918 – a most brilliant operation alike in conception and execution ...

To both occasions, all who fought with the 38th Division can look back with legitimate pride.

Field Marshall Earl Haig, 'Introduction', to J. E. Munby (ed.), *A History of the 38th (Welsh) Division* (London, 1920)

By his failure to mention the performance of 38th (Welsh) Division at the battle of Mametz Wood (7-12 July 1916) Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force [henceforth BEF] (1915-18) signalled his negative assessment of the Division's contribution to his Somme offensive. Moreover, his opening sentence damned with faint praise the Division's entire wartime record. Alternative perspectives – from participants in the battle and

from later generations of scholars – have challenged Haig’s evaluation. Historians of Wales have championed the 38th’s cause, seeking to contradict its detractors at every turn. Yet troubling assessments by British military historians of the 38th’s record demand careful evaluation rather than impassioned dismissal.

This essay initially summarizes the battle of Mametz Wood, before outlining the historical debates that it has inspired. A wider body of Welsh cultural responses to Mametz has been influential in popular understandings of the action, intersecting with some dominant narratives in the Welsh historiography of the war in general. In order to contextualize both the failings and achievements of the Welsh Division at Mametz it is helpful to draw on recent work focusing on the British, French and German armies’ experiences on the Western Front, which enable a robust but fair assessment of the 38th’s combat performance. Such a re-evaluation of the battle of Mametz Wood may facilitate a more comprehensive appreciation of the Division’s wartime achievements, as well as opportunities for the record of other Welsh formations to receive appropriate attention and scrutiny.

The 38th (Welsh) Division sailed for France on 29 November 1915 and went into the trenches in January 1916.¹ It consisted of approximately 20,000 men

¹ This account of the history of 38th Division is based substantially on J. E. Munby (ed.), *A History of the 38th (Welsh) Division* (London, 1920) and Colin Hughes, *Mametz: Lloyd George’s ‘Welsh Army’ at the Battle of the Somme* (Guildford, 1990).

organized into three brigades (113, 114, 115), each of four infantry battalions. It was a 'New Army' division (in the Fifth New Army) comprised largely of volunteers with a sprinkling of regular and territorial army officers and non-commissioned-officers and some specialist units. Most of the battalions had, at least nominally, the kind of local attachments and identities that characterized the archetypal 'pals' battalions raised in response to Lord Kitchener's original call.² Initially the intention had been to form a Welsh Army Corps of two divisions, but owing to the facts that many Welsh volunteers had already found their way into other units and that the supply of recruits began to dry up early in 1915, it was decided to settle for a single division.³

113 Brigade was comprised of 13th (1st North Wales), 14th (Carnarvon and Anglesey), 15th (London Welsh) and 16th battalions of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers [henceforth RWF]. 114 Brigade included 10th (1st Rhondda), 13th (2nd Rhondda), 14th (Swansea) and 15th (Carmarthenshire) battalions of the Welsh Regiment, and 115 Brigade 10th (1st Gwent) and 11th (2nd Gwent) battalions of the South Wales Borderers [henceforth SWB], plus 16th (Cardiff City) Welsh and 17th (2nd North Wales) RWF. The Division was commanded by Major-General Sir Ivor Philipps, a regular soldier serving in Burma and India until his

² The composition of 'Welsh' battalions could vary considerably. See Chris Williams, 'Taffs in the trenches: Welsh national identity and military service, 1914-1918', in Matthew Cragoe and Chris Williams (eds), *Wales and War: Society, Politics and Religion in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cardiff, 2007), pp. 126-64.

³ Munby, *History of the 38th*, p. 2.

retirement in 1903, after which he joined the Pembroke Yeomanry, commanding it from 1908 until 1912.⁴ Liberal MP for Southampton from 1906 and a prominent company director, he was recalled to military duties in 1914 and given command of a brigade. In January 1915 he was promoted to his divisional command, largely at the behest of David Lloyd George, and as part of an arrangement that saw Lloyd George's second son Gwilym become Philipps's aide-de-camp. Philipps's promotion was not regarded favourably by many regular officers, who felt it unmerited, and neither Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Haking of XI Corps, nor Lieutenant-General Henry Horne of XV Corps had confidence in him.⁵ Such negative views were shared by some of those who served under Philipps.⁶ As for his division, the War Office's

⁴ See Colin Hughes, 'Philipps, Sir Ivor (1861-1940)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*) (Oxford, 2004) and George A. Jones, 'Sir Ivor Philipps', in *Dictionary of Business Biography*, Volume 4 (M-R) (London, 1985), pp. 659-62.

⁵ The 38th served with XI Corps from December 1915 until June 1916 and was transferred to XV Corps in July 1916. Andy Simpson, 'Haking, Sir Richard Cyril Burne (1862-1945)', *ODNB* (Oxford, 2004); F. B. Maurice, 'Horne, Henry Sinclair, Baron Horne (1861-1929)', rev. J. M. Bourne, *ODNB* (Oxford, 2004); Simon Robbins, *British Generalship during the Great War: The Military Career of Sir Henry Horne (1861-1929)* (Aldershot, 2010); Don Farr, *The Silent General: Horne of the First Army* (Solihull, 2009).

⁶ For the views of Brigadier-General Horatio Evans, see David H. Williams, 'Letters from the front: ninety years on', *Radnorshire Society Transactions* (2006), pp. 32-65.

judgement when the 38th was despatched to France was that it was 'a little behind other Divisions ... in the matter of efficiency', but that 'conditions at the front will admit of further training being given without inconvenience.'⁷

Until June 1916 the 38th was employed holding trenches near Neuve Chapelle, west of Lille. It suffered casualties from shelling, sniping and involvement in trench raids, but mostly this was a quiet time during which no major offensives were launched by either side. Ideally, such an inexperienced New Army division would not have been blooded in a major battle until 1917. This might have permitted the officers and other ranks of the Division to have matured as seasoned soldiers and for the British Army's offensive tactics (so badly exposed during the battle of Loos in 1915) to have developed greater sophistication and consistency. However, the German attack on the French at Verdun from February 1916 forced Haig to commit to his offensive at the Somme.

1 July 1916, the opening day of the Somme offensive, remains enormously controversial.⁸ Notwithstanding a prolonged artillery bombardment of German

⁷ London, The National Archives WO95/2540 – 38th (Welsh) Division War Diary, Precis Report No. 117: 'Training of 38th Division – December 1915 and September 1916', cited by Mark Nicholas Cook, 'Evaluating the learning curve: The 38th (Welsh) division on the Western Front, 1916-1918' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Birmingham, 2005), 212.

⁸ The literature is extensive on 1 July and the following months. See especially A. H. Farrar-Hockley, *The Somme* (London, 1964), Martin Gilbert,

positions on an unprecedented scale, the much-anticipated British breakthrough failed to materialize. In many sectors of the front no ground was won at all, but casualties were staggering: over 57,000 including more than 19,000 dead. Only south of the Albert-Bapaume road were significant advances made with relatively low loss of life. [FIGURE ONE NEAR HERE]

Here, the villages of Mametz and Montauban were taken on 1 July and Fricourt was abandoned by the Germans the following day. The British line moved forward significantly, allowing High Command to contemplate possibly

Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War (London, 2006), Peter Hart, *The Somme* (London, 2005), Chris McCarthy, *The Somme: The Day-by-Day Account* (London, 1993), William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London, 2010), Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven and London, 2005) and Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London, 2003). First-hand testimonies from British and Dominion troops form the core of Malcolm Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme* (London, 1997), Lyn Macdonald, *Somme* (London, 1984) and Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London, 1984). Some German perspectives are found in Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London, 2007), Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on the Somme, 1914-1916* (Barnsley, 2006) and G. C. Wynne, *Landrecies to Cambrai: Case Studies of German Offensive and Defensive Operations on the Western Front, 1914-17* (Solihull, 2013). The relevant volume of official history is Wilfrid Miles, *History of the Great War based on official documents: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1916 – 2nd July 1916 to the end of the Battles of the Somme* (London, 1938).

piercing the German second line situated along the Bazentin ridge. Haig believed that, as a preliminary, British troops would need to secure most of the intervening territory, including German-held positions in Contalmaison, Trônes Wood and Mametz Wood. 38th Division, kept in reserve during the opening of the Somme offensive, was charged with taking Mametz Wood.

By the time the 38th was deployed British lines had moved north as far as Quadrangle Trench to the west of the wood, the ridge running immediately south and south-east of the wood, and Caterpillar Wood directly to the east.

[FIGURE TWO NEAR HERE] The 38th had responsibility for all areas to the east of the southernmost projection of Mametz Wood, with 17th (Northern) Division, commanded by Major-General Pilcher, holding the line to the west.⁹ The attack on Mametz Wood, designed for Friday 7 July, was to be two-pronged, with the 17th attempting to take Quadrangle Support Trench, Acid Drop Copse and other positions on the wood's west side, as well, possibly, as its south-western corner. The 38th would launch a brigade-strength attack on the prominent 'Hammerhead' feature on the eastern flank of the wood.

Repeated attacks by the 17th on Quadrangle Support Trench (eight between 7 and 10 July) failed with heavy losses. Troops were asked to make frontal assaults across open ground on an enemy trench both ends of which were secure and which offered the Germans the opportunity to lay down enfilading machine-gun and small arms fire on attackers. It was only once Mametz

⁹ A. Hilliard Atteridge, *History of the 17th (Northern) Division* (Glasgow, 1929).

Wood began to be taken on 10 July that German positions to its west were rendered untenable and abandoned.¹⁰

As for the 38th's assault on 7 July, this was allotted to 115 Brigade, and particularly to 16th Welsh and 11th SWB, with 10th SWB in support.¹¹ These battalions were ordered to emerge from Caterpillar Valley across open country to launch themselves at the Hammerhead. The assault took place in daylight (at 0830) showing little recognition that the Germans had machine guns both in the wood and in Flat Iron and Sabot copses to the north, as well as along the German second line further up the ridge. The attack was preceded by a forty-minute artillery bombardment but no smoke screen which might have offered the attackers some measure of invisibility was forthcoming.¹² Requests made by 115's Brigadier-General Horatio Evans to

¹⁰ The formidable challenge presented by Quadrangle Support Trench is recognised in Arthur Conan Doyle, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders: 1916* (London, 1918), pp. 118, 122-3.

¹¹ Munby, *History of the 38th*, incorrectly suggests (p. 17) that it was 10th SWB that participated in the first attack, an error which has been repeated elsewhere (such as Thomas O. Marden, *The History of the Welch Regiment: Part II – 1914-1918* (Cardiff, 1932).

¹² According to C. T. Atkinson, *The History of the South Wales Borderers 1914-1918* (London, 1931), p. 242, the artillery bombardment 'had been neither sufficiently accurate nor effective'.

attack at daybreak and take control of artillery support were dismissed.¹³ Consequently, as soon as the men of 16th Welsh and 11th SWB came within sight of German machine guns they were cut down. According to Marden, 'machine guns smote them hip and thigh ... the enemy concentrated their fire on the successive waves, as they came over the crest, and annihilated them in turn.'¹⁴ Although estimations of distance vary, the closest Welsh troops got was likely about 250 yards from the Hammerhead where they were pinned down in the open, sniped, mortared and shelled.¹⁵

Following another brief artillery bombardment a second attempt was made to renew the attack at 1015 but this was stopped in its tracks. 10th SWB was brought up and a third attempt made at 1515 but no improvement was forthcoming, and its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Wilkinson, killed. Orders to launch a fourth attack at 1700 were contested by Brigadier-General

¹³ Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up To Mametz* (London, 1931), p. 194; Marden, *Welch Regiment*, p. 382.

¹⁴ Marden, *Welch Regiment*, p. 383.

¹⁵ Munby's claim (*History of the 38th*, p. 17) that the battalions 'just failed to reach the wood' is over-generous. Sergeant Arthur Perriman of 11th SWB in a memoir written in 1976 suggested that troops got to within 50 yards of the wood before the Germans opened fire, but that is not supported by other accounts, such as that of Victor Lansdown of 16th Welsh, who estimated the distance as between 400 and 500 yards (London, Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM) IWM 4860, Private Papers of Arthur E. Perriman; IWM 10147, Interview with Victor George Lansdown).

Evans and the troops were instead permitted to withdraw. The first major attack of the war by the Welsh Division had ended in disappointment and slaughter.¹⁶

A further attack with 14th RWF in the van was ordered for the night of 8/9 July, but the difficulties of getting to the starting position through waterlogged, heavily congested trenches led to its cancellation.¹⁷ This was the final straw for Philipps's superiors, and he was sacked on 9 July. Replacing him on a temporary basis was Major-General Herbert Edward Watts, who had been commanding 7th Division and knew the area well. Watts had utilized the innovative tactic of a creeping artillery barrage to provide his troops with protection during earlier advances which had taken the villages of Mametz and Fricourt. Trusted sufficiently by XV Corps to be allowed to execute his own plan of attack, he arrived at divisional headquarters on 9 July and issued orders for an assault to take place at first light the following morning.¹⁸ Two

¹⁶ For Marden, *Welch Regiment*, p. 384, it had been a 'disastrous action'. For Farr, *Silent General*, p. 100, 7th July was 'a day of almost total failure for XV Corps'.

¹⁷ C. H. Dudley Ward, *Regimental Records of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, Volume III -1914-1918 – France and Flanders* (Uckfield, 2005), p. 204.

¹⁸ Robin Barlow's observation (*Wales and World War One* (Llandysul, 2014), p. 72) that Watts was 'a man with no knowledge or understanding of the Welsh men he was to lead' ignores the fact that his 7th Division included 1st RWF. Haig viewed Watts as 'a distinctly stupid man', but also 'a hard fighter, leader of men [who] inspires confidence in all above and below'. Andy

battalions each from both 113 and 114 Brigades were to advance against the south-eastern edge of the wood at 0415, the attack preceded by a lifting artillery barrage designed to catch the German defenders as they emerged from their underground defences and dug-outs to take their positions in forward trenches. A smoke-screen would give the Welsh troops some cover, partially negating the risk of enfilading fire from the Hammerhead. Once in the wood it was envisaged that they would advance steadily behind a rolling barrage timed to move forwards 50 yards per minute. If executed to the letter the plan would see the wood captured by 0815.

The attack went in more or less on time. Although 16th and 14th RWF on the left had a shorter distance to travel on the left than 14th Welsh in the centre and 13th Welsh on the right (who were most exposed to machine-guns in the Hammerhead as they crossed 750 yards of open field) the RWF battalions needed reinforcement by 15th RWF following some loss of momentum, and 10th Welsh was sent in between the RWF battalions and 14th Welsh. Entry to the wood was achieved in conditions of savage hand-to-hand ('tree-to-tree') fighting, although some German counter-attacks drove Welsh troops back into the open at least once before the Welsh reasserted themselves. Despite heavy loss of life among officers, often targets for German snipers, the first cross-ride was reached on schedule. But whatever the logic and precision of the original plan, the reality of the fighting was very different.

Simpson, 'British corps command on the Western Front, 1914-1918', in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience, 1918-1918* (Staplehurst, 2004), p. 109.

Mametz Wood was a cultivated wood of hornbeams, limes, willows, oaks and beeches, bramble and hazel bushes, with distinct cross-rides and paths. Two years of neglect had rendered it thick with dense undergrowth in parts. Artillery fire had brought down many trees - 'a formidable barrier' according to Wyn Griffith - making rapid progress impossible and the terrain a defender's dream.¹⁹ In such conditions it was extremely difficult to maintain control over troops. Visibility was very restricted, many officers (the only ones with compasses) had become casualties in the initial assault, and it was no easy matter for troops to work out in which direction they should be heading or where the enemy might be hiding.²⁰ Telephone lines were easily cut and communications became reliant on runners, themselves often caught in artillery barrages. Soldiers from different units became jumbled together, there were casualties from artillery and small-arms 'friendly fire' and a shortage of fresh water became critical during a day when the temperature reached 82 degrees Fahrenheit.²¹

¹⁹ Bangor, Bangor University, Archives and Special Collections, Papers of Major W. P. Wheldon, 1916-1919, BMSS/39617: 'Notes on Mametz Wood obtained by Patrol, 2nd Battn. Royal Irish Regiment, on night shift 3/4th July'; Griffith, *Up To Mametz*, p. 209.

²⁰ Marden, *Welch Regiment*, p. 389.

²¹ McCarthy, *Somme*, pp. 43-4. These difficulties were not confined to British troops: see Jonathan Hicks, *The Welsh at Mametz Wood: The Somme 1916* (Talybont, 2016), p. 303, citing Gefreiter Erich Berndt's testimony that 'next to

Nevertheless, more battalions were fed into the wood and the German defenders were steadily driven back. Batches of the enemy surrendered, others fought tenaciously.²² The wood was speckled with German entrenchments and dugouts and easily reinforced from the German second line to the north. By early evening some Welsh units were within grenade-throwing distance of the wood's northern edge, but the Germans were hanging on, still launching counter-attacks. The risk of Welsh troops being outflanked or surrounded as night fell prompted withdrawal to a perimeter straddling the second cross-ride. During the night 16th Welsh and 11th SWB, still licking their wounds from 7 July, came into the front line, and on 11 July efforts continued to clear the wood. By now the troops were increasingly exhausted, the confused dispositions in the wood made it very difficult to use artillery support, and further heavy casualties were suffered when British shells dropped short or, on a low trajectory, hit treetops and exploded. 11th SWB got to the north-eastern corner of the wood but were forced to retire

hunger, thirst tormented us the most. There was no drinking water in Mametz Wood.'

²² Press accounts are vivid: *Western Mail*, 15, 18 July 1916; *Cambria Daily Leader*, 11 October 1918; G. J., 'Some of the Royal Welsh', *Welsh Outlook*, April 1918. They may be supplemented by testimonies including those of Frank Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (Sleaford, 1994), p. 181; Robert Graves, *Good-Bye To All That: An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 187, 189; and Gerald Brenan, 'A Survivor's Story', in George A. Panichas (ed.), *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918* (London, 1968), p. 45.

owing to insufficient support on their flanks. Nonetheless, during the night of 11/12 July the Germans withdrew from their remaining positions. On Wednesday 12 July, with Mametz Wood in British hands, 38th (Welsh) Division was relieved by 7th and 21st Divisions. The battle was over, and, as far as the 38th was concerned, so was the Somme offensive. Transferred to VIII Corps, in August it moved to the Ypres salient, and would not take part in another large-scale assault for over a year.²³

Reactions to the 38th's experiences at Mametz were initially negative. Lieutenant Apps of 11th SWB, who had taken part in the attack on 7 July, wrote in his diary on 11th that '[t]hings are going badly in the battle for the wood', and on 12th, when the battalion emerged, he commented '[t]hey have had a very rough time.'²⁴ Captain Dunn of 2nd RWF on the same day passed 'the transport of the Welsh Division coming out after the mauling at Mametz Wood', and two days later 'went exploring in Mametz Wood, where the Welsh Division was so mishandled'.²⁵ Also on 14 July Lieutenant-Colonel Lloyd Williams of 9th RWF noted he learned of 'the disaster'.²⁶ Siegfried Sassoon (who served with both 1st and 2nd RWF) referred in his memoirs to the 'victimization' of the 38th, it being involved in 'massacre and confusion',

²³ Munby, *History of the 38th*, pp. 19-20.

²⁴ IWM, Private Papers of Lieutenant H. E. Apps – 7414/76/216/1.

²⁵ J. C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1919* (London, 1994), pp. 223, 226.

²⁶ IWM, Private Papers of Lt.-Col. H. Lloyd Williams DSO MC, 'Personal Experiences during the years of the European War (1914/1918)', p. 43.

'pandemonium' and 'a disastrous muddle, with troops stampeding under machine-gun fire'.²⁷ And divisional staff officer Colonel Drake-Brockman wrote in 1930 that it was 'common talk in the British Expeditionary Force that 38th Division had "bolted"'.²⁸

If reactions from those in or close to the Division were largely of horror, unambiguous disappointment was expressed by senior commanders. Haig, in his diary entry for 9 July reflecting on the first assault on 7th, stated that:

... although the wood had been most adequately bombarded the division never entered the wood, and in the whole division the total casualties for the 24 hours are under 150! A few bold men entered the wood and found little opposition. Deserters also stated Enemy was greatly demoralised and had very few troops on the ground.²⁹

²⁷ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London, 1965), pp. 61-3. Sassoon referred to the 14th RWF as 'unseasoned', 'mostly undersized men', 'a jostling company of exclamatory Welshmen', 'a forlorn crowd of khaki figures', 'doomed ... half trained civilians', whom another officer would have termed 'a panicky rabble'. The journal entry made at the time is non-pejorative – see Cambridge University, Cambridge Digital Archive, Siegfried Sassoon's Journal, folio 44, 6 July 1916.

²⁸ See Renshaw, *Mametz Wood*, p. 132. Drake-Brockman was neither an entirely reliable nor an objective witness.

²⁹ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters, 1914-1918*, ed. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (London, 2006), p. 201.

Haig was misinformed: no troops entered the wood, the Germans held it in strength, and deaths among the attacking battalions amounted to 182, total casualties to 511. But Somme mud stuck. Commanding Fourth Army, Rawlinson wrote on 14 July to Chief of the Imperial General Staff Lieutenant-General Sir William Robertson that 'only one Division, the 38th (Welshmen) turned out badly', adding 'if it had not been for their failure at Mametz Wood we would have brought off the action of today [the attack on Bazentin Ridge] at least 48 hours sooner.'³⁰ He reiterated this point to Lord Derby on 1 August, noting that 'it makes me very sick to think of the "might have beens"'.³¹

Such a 'for the want of a nail' argument was explicitly emphasized by Haig's private secretary Lieutenant-Colonel Boraston, who erected an elaborate superstructure shortly after the war on Rawlinson's and Haig's laments that their grand plans for the Somme offensive had not materialized, all attributable to the delay in taking Mametz Wood. He observed:

Our failure to secure Mametz Wood at an earlier date had an important influence on the course of the battle. The days lost here were of the greatest value to the enemy. They gave him the opportunity he needed

³⁰ Cited in Farr, *Silent General*, p. 106.

³¹ Cited in Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare* (Barnsley, 2003), p. 170.

to restore order among his defeated battalions, to bring up fresh troops and to reorganise his defences.³²

Later he returned to this theme: 'insistence upon the correct policy to pursue cannot wholly avoid mistakes in its application ... [such as] in the direction of a too ready discouragement, such as was responsible for hanging up the attack on Mametz Wood'³³

The official history echoed such criticism with its comment that 'the half-hearted British attacks from the 7th onwards induced the German to organize a strong resistance' (in Mametz Wood).³⁴ Although such negativity about the 38th's performance was not universal, it took more than six decades after July 1916 for the cloud cast over its reputation by what might be called the 'disgrace narrative' to begin to disperse.³⁵

³² Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Command* (London, 1922), pp. 113-14.

Boraston's focus was on 7 July.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

³⁴ Miles, *History of the Great War*, p. 51.

³⁵ Conan Doyle, *British Campaign*, pp. 130-1, wrote that the 38th's action had involved 'nothing but the most devoted valour upon the part of the assailants'. Eddie Williams, a Captain in 16th Welsh in 1916, argued in letters to the *Western Mail* (28 November 1942, 4 June 1943) that the 38th had not been given sufficient credit for its achievement in taking the wood.

The counter-argument has taken two forms. First, historians of the Somme offensive do not now support the suggestion that the 38th's failure to take Mametz Wood on 7 July was critical to the outcome of the overall battle. There were missed opportunities between 1 and 7 July, but these were spread across the southern battlefield.³⁶ Mametz Wood could potentially have been taken as early as 3 July, when there were relatively few Germans in the wood, well before the 38th was brought into the front line.³⁷ Apologists for British High Command, at least in this period, have been rebutted, Peter Hart writing of a 'collective failure of generalship within the Fourth Army [that] can never be adequately explained or excused', and blaming Rawlinson for 'an abrogation of clear responsibility to personally oversee the performance of command tasks.'³⁸ The 'want of a nail' argument is no longer seen as valid, even by those historians who might still find the 38th's performance at Mametz Wood deficient.

Second, a more thorough and sympathetic assessment of the 38th's 1916 history was made possible by the publication in 1982 of Colin Hughes's *Mametz: Lloyd George's 'Welsh Army' at the Battle of the Somme*. This was praised as 'a major step forward' which 'truly heralded the advent of a new, scholarly, archive-based approach to the study of the First World War', and

³⁶ Farrar-Hockley, *Somme*, p. 149; Sheffield, *Somme*, p. 78.

³⁷ Travers, *Killing Ground*, p. 170; Prior and Wilson, *Command and Control*, p. 184.

³⁸ Hart, *Somme*, p. 262. See also Prior and Wilson, *Command and Control*, pp. 188-9.

which remains the single most authoritative volume on the battle.³⁹ Hughes's achievement was to consider in detail the 38th's experiences alongside a critical assessment of the Division's handling by XV Corps, Fourth Army and by Haig himself. Hughes tackled directly the 'extreme arguments' levelled at the 38th by Boraston and others, which he judged 'a grave injustice' that could be 'easily demolished'.⁴⁰ And his overall verdict on the 38th's performance at Mametz Wood was clear: 'there can be no doubting now the magnitude of their achievement'.⁴¹

Hughes's revisionism has been followed by others who have not departed significantly from his findings. Michael Renshaw's *Mametz Wood* notes that the battle was 'not entirely a Welsh affair' given the involvement of both 7th and 17th Divisions, but concurs with Hughes in arguing that the 38th, in three days of fighting 'set the standard for this type of combat that was never to be surpassed on the Somme battlefields'.⁴² Jonathan Hicks gathered together information about many of those who died in the battle, adding a new level of detail in what is a sustained tribute to a 'citizen force, composed of miners from the Rhondda, farmers from Caernarvon and Anglesey, coal trimmers from ... Barry and Cardiff, bank workers from Swansea', who 'fought in

³⁹ Peter Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Barnsley, 2014), pp. 30, 33.

⁴⁰ Hughes, *Mametz*, p. 134.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴² Renshaw, *Mametz Wood* (Barnsley, 1999), pp. 14, 134. Republished as *Welsh on the Somme: Mametz Wood* (Barnsley, 2015).

savage hand-to-hand fighting with an enemy from the most effective army in Europe at that time and drove them out of Mametz Wood'.⁴³

Together, the scholarship of Hughes, Renshaw and Hicks has built on the proud if partisan and uneven accounts of regimental and divisional histories to provide a substantial 'redemption narrative' that has largely contradicted the hostile verdicts of the inter-war military establishment and restored a sense of Welsh national pride to the 38th's efforts. In recent years narrative military histories of the Somme have absorbed this scholarship sufficiently to revise the estimations of the 38th's performance at Mametz Wood, with (for example), William Philpott arguing that 'the Welsh New Army battalions had taken a formidable position in one of the most intense close-quarter fights of the war.'⁴⁴ Such revisionism represents a much fairer assessment of the 38th's experiences on the Somme than the earlier 'disgrace narrative'. Yet the history of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood continues to raise troubling issues, and the remainder of this essay examines three in particular. First, there will be a consideration of the extent to which the Mametz battle misleads in often appearing to stand proxy for the Welsh experience of the First World War. Second, it will be investigated whether comparative assessments of British divisions yield uncomfortable findings that cast doubt on the ability of the 'redemption narrative' to offer closure in respect of the 38th's performance in 1916. Finally, a re-evaluation of the 38th's Mametz battle draws on recent studies of French and German as well as British military history in attempting

⁴³ Hicks, *Welsh at Mametz Wood*, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁴ Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, p. 236.

to arrive at a more impartial appraisal than is currently offered by either the 'disgrace' or 'redemption' narratives.

It is arguable that in the public mind at least, works of cultural production have been as if not more powerful in constructing an understanding of the Welsh experience of the First World War with a Mametz Wood 'sacrifice narrative' at its heart. This is not the place to analyse the many and varied forms that cultural interpretation has taken, but it ranges from visual culture (Christopher Williams's 1917 painting 'The Charge of the Welsh Division at Mametz Wood', David Petersen's 1987 Mametz Wood memorial, Aled Rhys Hughes's twenty-first century photography and the 'War's Hell' exhibition at Amgueddfa Cymru: National Museum Wales in 2016), to performance (1946 and 1955 BBC Radio productions and the 2016 Welsh National Opera production of David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, the National Theatre Wales 2014 production *Mametz*), to literature of various kinds (the poetry of David Jones and Owen Sheers, the crime fiction of Jonathan Hicks, and impressive David Jones scholarship by Colin Hughes and Thomas Dilworth).⁴⁵ Television and radio responses have clustered around anniversaries, and the centenary of the battle was the

⁴⁵ Aled Rhys Hughes, *Mametz* (Bridgend, 2016); Owen Sheers, *Mametz* (London, 2017); David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London, 1963: original edition 1937); Owen Sheers, 'Mametz Wood', in *Skirrid Hill* (Bridgend, 2005); Jonathan Hicks, *The Dead of Mametz* (Talybont, 2011); Colin Hughes, *David Jones: The Man Who Was On The Field: In Parenthesis as Straight Reporting* (Manchester, 1979); Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones in the Great War* (London, 2012).

occasion for programmes in English and Welsh presented by former Welsh rugby international Gareth Thomas, weather forecaster Derek Brockway and Welsh national poet Ifor ap Glyn.⁴⁶

This one battle, such is the iconic cultural position it enjoys, sometimes appears to stand proxy for the Welsh experience of the entire conflict, echoed in Wyn Griffith's suggestion that this was a 'high point of the war where for me and so many other Welshmen the tragedy reached its culmination'.⁴⁷ That this remains the case is assisted by the close identification of the battle with 38th Division's efforts alone, and by the fact that the site remains easily identifiable and relatively unchanged. It is possible for visitors to imagine Mametz Wood in a more coherent and easily translatable manner than, for instance, is the case with Pilkem Ridge, the opening day of the Third Battle of Ypres, in which the 38th again went 'over the top', partly because that was a much larger scale offensive and partly because the intervening century has rendered much of the Belgian battlefield more resistant to identification and interpretation.

In addition, Mametz Wood can function as a Welsh version of the first day of the Somme offensive – as an exemplary tragic narrative which captures the attention at the expense, potentially, of a more grounded understanding of the

⁴⁶ BBC Wales, 'Wales at the Somme: Gareth Thomas and the battle of Mametz Wood', 2016; BBC Wales, 'Weatherman Walking: Mametz Wood', 2016; BBC Radio Cymru, 'Y Lôn i Mametz', 2016.

⁴⁷ Griffith, 'The pattern of one man's remembering', in Panichas (ed.), *Promise of Greatness*, p. 289.

campaign of which it formed a part. For an audience whose grasp of the First World War remains profoundly influenced by the tropes of 'Lions led by Donkeys', 'Oh! What a Lovely War!' and *Blackadder Goes Forth*, it fits neatly as an example of the courage of ordinary soldiers, the stupidity of generals, and the futility of the war as a whole.⁴⁸ It does not take much for the ordinary soldiers to be primarily identified as Welsh and the stupid generals to be primarily identified as English and a nationalist twist is added to an analysis already heavily loaded by considerations of social class. Mametz Wood is thus freighted with anachronistic meaning: the senseless sacrifice of Welsh youth at the hands of the imperial power, careless about squandering the lives of a subject people. Such characterisations risk reducing our understanding of the war to crude stereotypes, and distorting an historical evaluation of the battle on its own terms. More critically, there are fundamental problems with privileging Mametz Wood over all other actions in which Welsh troops were involved. For the performance of that one division should not act as a surrogate for the war-time efforts of all Welsh soldiers. Mametz was not an unique test case for Welsh martial valour.

First, the deeds of Welsh soldiers on the Somme or in other theatres of war were not confined to the ordeal of the 38th. Twenty-one Welsh infantry and seven pioneer battalions saw action on the Somme, and only thirteen of these twenty-eight units were in the Welsh Division. The Welsh Guards were in the Guards Division, 1st Division contained 1st SWB and 2nd Welsh, 7th Division 1st RWF, 19th Division 9th RWF and 9th Welsh and 33rd Division 2nd RWF. Some

⁴⁸ Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2012).

of these divisions enjoyed recognisably more successful campaigns than 38th. 2nd RWF in particular had a reputation for aggression, good discipline and cohesion.⁴⁹ Evaluating the wartime record of Welsh soldiers needs to go beyond the 38th to include all Welsh units, regular, territorial and New Army, and not to forget the contribution of 53rd (Welsh) Division which fought in Palestine as well as in France and Flanders. Many Welsh soldiers were found in 'non-Welsh' units, a point recently reinforced by Ritchie Wood's micro-historical analysis of those South Wales miners who served in the Royal Engineers, digging tunnels for offensive mining operations, as well as repairing roads and bridges.⁵⁰

Second, the wartime record of the 38th itself did not begin and end at Mametz, it going on to enjoy greater success in 1917 and 1918. Peter Simkins identifies the 38th as a division which employed 'skilful small-unit tactics most frequently during the "Hundred Days"', while Gary Sheffield has gone further in arguing that, based on its 1918 record, 'the 38th Welsh Division was in a select band of elite divisions'.⁵¹ A cautionary note is sounded by Jonathan

⁴⁹ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven and London, 1994), p. 79.

⁵⁰ Ritchie Wood, *Miners at War: South Wales Miners in the Tunnelling Companies on the Western Front* (Solihull, 2017).

⁵¹ Simkins, 'Co-stars or supporting cast? British divisions in "The Hundred Days", 1918', in Paddy Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London, 1996), p. 69; Sheffield, 'Finest hour? British forces on the Western Front in 1918: An overview', in Ashley Ekins (ed.), *1918: Year of Victory: The*

Boff's revelation that German intelligence reports as late as October 1918 viewed the 38th as 'average'.⁵² In the most sustained evaluation Mark Cook argues that the 38th 'significantly improved in its fighting ability, performance, and efficiency' from 1916 to 1918.⁵³ Cook's statistical distillation of the 38th's record in four battles revealed in Table One indicates that of these Mametz was clearly the least successful. [TABLE ONE NEAR HERE]

TABLE ONE: 38TH (WELSH) DIVISION CASUALTIES AND GROUND GAINED, SELECTED BATTLES, 1914-18

	CASUALTIES (per cent)	Average Rate of Capture of Ground (square yards per day)
Mametz Wood 1916	17.2	625,000
Pilckem Ridge 1917	1.9	17,000,000
Albert 1918	11.3	8,400,000
Cambrai 1918	17.2	16,500,000

Source: Cook, 'Evaluating the learning curve', 229-30.

End of the Great War and the Shaping of History (Auckland, 2010), Kindle edition: not paginated.

⁵² Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 160.

⁵³ Cook, 'Evaluating the learning curve', 233.

Any bruised Welsh national pride caused by slurs on the determination or courage of the 38th at Mametz may also be eased by the unarguable observation that the Division (like all Welsh units) was far from being ethnically homogeneous. It is true that the New Army battalions of the Welsh regiments contained a higher percentage of Welsh-born soldiers (50.4 per cent) than regular army units (44.7 per cent), but 47.4 per cent of those in the 'Kitchener battalions' were English-born nonetheless.⁵⁴ As for the 38th, calculations by the present author as well as by Cook (see Table Two) allow us to compare the ethnic composition of its composite units both in 1916 and across the war as a whole. The figures suggest that a substantial majority of troops were Welsh in 1916 - Cook calculates that 68 per cent of the 38th's infantry dead at Mametz were Welsh-born – but that in the course of the entire conflict there was significant dilution. [TABLE TWO NEAR HERE].⁵⁵ Overall, the 'Welsh' experience of the war clearly neither began nor ended at Mametz Wood.

⁵⁴ The figures and methodology are from Williams, 'Taffs in the trenches'.

⁵⁵ Cook, 'Evaluating the learning curve', 215.

TABLE TWO: PERCENTAGE OF DEAD WITH BIRTHPLACES IN WALES,
INFANTRY BATTALIONS, 38TH (WELSH) DIVISION

BATTALION	MAMETZ	WAR
13 th RWF	68.8	48.5
14 th RWF	71.1	51.8
15 th RWF	31.4	31.1
16 th RWF	64.8	52.2
17 th RWF	61.4	54.4
10 th Welsh	65.0	64.9
13 th Welsh	79.4	61.9
14 th Welsh	85.7	62.2
15 th Welsh	55.2	51.5
16 th Welsh	71.9	63.9
10 th SWB	60.6	45.2
11 th SWB	61.1	46.9

Sources: Column on 'Mametz': Cook, 'Evaluating the learning curve', 215.

Column on 'War': Williams, 'Taffs in the trenches', pp. 143-4. The total dead for whom birthplace data is given is 680 for Mametz and 5283 for the entire war.

It has already been demonstrated that the 'redemption narrative' has refuted some of the more partisan slanders aimed by inter-war writers at the Welsh Division. However, it is the case that the scholarship associated particularly with the military historian Peter Simkins and his colleagues has generated additional data of an uncomfortable nature for those concerned to set the 38th's achievements in the best possible light. Simkins, along with Bryn Hammond, John Lee and Chris McCarthy, initiated the 'SHLM Battle Assessment Study' in the early 1990s, and although the project was never completed, its guiding principles have underpinned some of the most innovative scholarship generated on the British Army during the war.⁵⁶ Simkins et al. found their interest piqued by the impressionistic evaluations by contemporaries of the relative worth and effectiveness of particular divisions or of the comparative merits of Dominion or Scottish troops in contrast to those in English county regiments.⁵⁷ They wished to develop a more robust

⁵⁶ John Lee, 'The SHLM project – assessing the battle performance of British divisions', in Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods*, pp. 175-81.

⁵⁷ See, for example, C. E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (London, 1922), p. 152, contrasting 'battalions of colourless, stunted, half-toothless lads from hot, humid Lancashire mills' with 'Dominion battalions of men startlingly taller, stronger, handsomer, prouder, firmer in nerve, better schooled, more boldly interested in life'. Graves, *Good-Bye To All That*, pp. 166-7, provides an assessment of the 'dependability' of individual divisions. See also Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System*

evidential base by which to track what they considered to be improved performance by the British on the Western Front over the course of the war, improvement that enabled the often-maligned BEF ultimately to triumph over their enemies. The argument was that, notwithstanding horrendous failings and catastrophic disasters, poor generalship and shoddy staff work, in time the British benefited from a 'learning curve'.⁵⁸ The strategy, tactics and, ultimately, execution of more sophisticated military planning by the BEF reached its culmination in the successes of the battle of Amiens in 1918 and in the 'Hundred Days' offensive that led to the Armistice.

One way of evidencing progress along the 'learning curve' was to find ways of measuring the 'battle performance' or 'combat effectiveness' of British troops, assessed optimally at divisional level. Simkins carried out a pioneering study of British divisions in the 'Hundred Days', systematically surveying 966 attacking operations launched by 60 British and Dominion infantry divisions

(Basingstoke, 1980), p. 173, Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 80-2 and Duffy, *Through German Eyes*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ For a statement of the argument, see John Lee, 'Some lessons of the Somme: the British infantry in 1917', in Brian Bond et al. (eds), *Look to Your Front: Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History* (Staplehurst, 1999), pp. 79-88. Elaboration may be found in Griffith, *Battle Tactics* and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-1918* (Barnsley, 2004).

between 8 August and 11 November 1918.⁵⁹ He found considerable variation in the performance of different divisions, but overall little to sustain the claim that Dominion troops were more effective than British units: ‘far from being the “bluntest of swords” or a mere supporting cast, the British divisions ... actually made a very weighty contribution to the Allied victory.’⁶⁰ Simkins supplemented this overall survey of the closing campaign of the war with a longitudinal study of one New Army formation, 18th (Eastern) Division.⁶¹ Characterized as ‘ordinary’ (defined as ‘without the elitist selection processes of some Territorial units, without the distinct social cohesion of the northern Pals formations, and without the sectarian and political binding of the 36th (Ulster) Division’), the 18th was sufficiently successful during the Somme offensive to be part of the BEF’s ‘assault elite’.⁶²

Although the overly ambitious nature of the SHLM project meant that it failed to deliver on its original promises, Simkins’s modified methodology for assessing the combat effectiveness of British divisions has continued to generate intriguing results. Most relevant for a study of the 38th at Mametz, he

⁵⁹ Simkins, ‘Co-stars or supporting cast? British divisions in “The Hundred Days”, 1918’, in Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods*, pp. 50-69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶¹ Simkins, ‘The war experience of a typical Kitchener division: The 18th Division, 1914-1918’, in Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London, 1996), pp. 297-313.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 298, 301.

assessed the overall performance of New Army divisions on the Somme in 1916.⁶³

The soldierly achievements of the New Army had been largely downgraded by the official historians of the inter-war years, who were primarily concerned to uphold the reputation of the original, professional BEF.⁶⁴ Later scholars have occasionally echoed their negative, sometimes patronising judgements.⁶⁵ Simkins's work on 18th Division suggested the picture was more complex, and prompted him to undertake a fuller analysis of all 25 New Army divisions on the Somme. He considered 281 separate attacks, categorising them on a scale from 'successful' (sub-divided into five grades, depending on the extent to which the assigned objectives were achieved), through 'limited success verging on failure' to 'outright failures'.⁶⁶ Overall, the success rate was 57 per cent, 'limited successes verging on failure' accounted for 7 per cent and the proportion of 'outright failures' was 36 per cent, results which confound 'the widely held negative view of the tactical performance of the New Army divisions', which 'performed at least as well as, and in some cases even better than, their Regular counterparts'.⁶⁷ Table Three summarizes Simkins's results

⁶³ Simkins, *From the Somme*, especially Chapter 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-1, 60-1.

⁶⁵ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (Harmondsworth, 1976), writes of 'the promise of tragedy which loomed about these bands of uniformed innocents' (p. 226).

⁶⁶ Simkins, *From the Somme*, p. 62.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 70.

on a divisional basis: [TABLE THREE NEAR HERE] and aligns them with overall casualties for the New Army divisions on the Somme. The latter data set shows that only 37th Division suffered fewer casualties than the 38th during the entire offensive, so the notion that Welsh troops were in any way 'sacrificed' is clearly unsustainable.⁶⁸ Furthermore, whatever the problems with using statistical measurements of battlefield performance (discussed below), the record of the 38th on the Somme, according to Simkins's assessment, was clearly unimpressive, with some success in only two of a total of seven offensive operations.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ The only division of any kind with fewer casualties (2648) was the 46th (North Midland) Territorial Division, which took part only in the catastrophic 1 July assault on Gommecourt.

⁶⁹ Simkins, *From the Somme*, p. 64.

TABLE THREE: SUCCESS RATES AND TOTAL CASUALTIES OF NEW
ARMY DIVISIONS, SOMME, 1916

DIVISION	SUCCESS RATE (%)	CASUALTIES
41 st	100	5928
11 th (Northern)	85.71	8954
20 th (Light)	85.71	6854
21 st	80	13044
18 th (Eastern)	76.92	13323
19 th (Western)	73.33	9830
39 th	71.42	7215
14 th (Light)	70	7643
16 th (Irish)	66.66	4330
9 th (Scottish)	64.28	10538
12 th (Eastern)	63.63	11089
25 th	62.49	11239
37 th	56	2000
15 th (Scottish)	54.54	4877
23 rd	54.16	6282
32 nd	50	5272
30 th	46.15	17374
34 th	45.45	12036
33 rd	41.66	10787
17 th (Northern)	40.9	12613
24 th	38.46	6119
38 th (Welsh)	28.57	3876
31 st	0	5902
35 th (Bantam)	0	4663
36 th (Ulster)	0	5482

Sources: Success Rates: Simkins, *From the Somme*, pp. 63-5. Casualties:

Prior and Wilson, *Somme*, pp. 300-1.

The approach adopted by Simkins to measuring the efficiency of British army divisions on the Western Front has much to commend it. It brings a consistency and an objectivity to an assessment that was previously, as Paddy Griffith noted, 'based upon little more than prejudice, hearsay, and the cut of the division commander's jaw when he turned up at GHQ'.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the flaws in the method are also readily apparent. For 'success' is measured against the objectives set for the operation, objectives not necessarily determined at divisional level. If army or corps command directed division to attempt what was an impossible task, then an inability to achieve such a task counts, under the Simkins method, as 'failure', just as much as an inability by division to accomplish what might be considered an attainable objective. In the former, no amount of *élan* would make any difference to the eventual outcome, whereas in the latter case it might be a lack of resolve by the troops, or competence by their officers, that could be considered responsible for their failure. In such cases the 'combat efficiency' formula is, inevitably, something of a blunt tool, and more fine-grained analyses of individual operations are needed in order to assess the 'performance' of the formations involved.

These considerations are borne in mind when re-evaluating the failed assault of 7 July. There is little doubt that any assault on the German position in Mametz Wood was considered to be very difficult, even before 115 Brigade's travails. Sassoon, on 3 July, had worried that if ordered to attack the wood the

⁷⁰ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 82.

following day his battalion would 'probably get cut up'.⁷¹ The official account of the attack by 12th Manchesters and 9th Duke of Wellington's of 17th Division on Quadrangle Support Trench on 7 July argued that 'in broad daylight the two battalions had no chance of reaching Quadrangle Support over bare and open ground,' and 17th's own history made similar criticisms, explicitly stating that no blame could be attached to the 38th for its failure to take the wood on 7 July.⁷²

In order better to understand the failure of the attack on 7 July it is instructive to consider some recent military history writing on the British, French and German armies during the First World War. In an original and sophisticated work Leonard V. Smith uses Foucauldian theory to study the history of French 5e Division d'Infanterie.⁷³ Smith argues that 'battlefield soldiers determined how they would and would not fight the war, and hence altered the parameters of command authority in accordance with their own perceived interests.'⁷⁴ Rather than accept obedience to orders as a given, Smith contends that soldiers' investment in attacks was calibrated, not every attack being pressed home with 'equal vigour' – 'a gray area existed between command expectations and what soldiers in the trenches determined was

⁷¹ Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918* (ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1983), p. 86.

⁷² Miles, *History of the Great War*, p. 30; Atteridge, *History of the 17th*, pp. 128, 130-1.

⁷³ Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, 1994).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

possible', a 'negotiated balance-of-power equation'.⁷⁵ Smith introduces the concept of 'proportionality' – soldiers did not necessarily reject 'the levels of offensive violence expected of them', but they interpreted them according to their relevance to the ultimate goal of winning the war.⁷⁶ This involved 'soldierly discretion', and 'calculations as to the utility of aggression'.⁷⁷ Obeying orders could have military utility, or it could lead to massacre – and soldiers made decisions as to how much they risked in any given situation.⁷⁸ Smith's primary focus is on soldiers' resistance, the ultimate expression of which was the 1917 mutinies, but his methodology is equally applicable to the 'live and let live' system of trench warfare, and to any combat situation. His longitudinal study includes the offensives of autumn 1915, in which, he argues, soldiers of 5e Division attacked as planned, only to stop pushing forward once they felt nothing more could be gained. Their commanding officers had no alternative but to accept this as a sufficient effort.⁷⁹

Alexander Watson's comparative study of morale in the British and German armies effectively adds to Smith's insights with the argument that soldiers negotiated the horrendous danger of the front-line experience by developing appropriate risk-assessment strategies. These involved optimizing one's estimation of danger so as to be able to recognize mortal threat, while at the

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 13-14, 16.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 50, 64.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 99-100.

same time not allowing such assessments to result in panic, paralysis or mental collapse.⁸⁰ This suggests that soldiers do not behave like automatons, slavishly following the orders issued by their superior officers, no matter the risk to themselves, but neither do they behave solely according to the imperatives of self-protection. Instead they do their best to behave according to their understanding of their role as combat fighters, without deliberately putting themselves in situations in which survival is highly unlikely.

Understanding the assault of 7 July from the perspective of individual soldiers, what they were being asked to achieve was a physical and mental impossibility. Corps Commander Horne might state that 'machine guns will not stop fresh troops if they mean to get in', but that was nonsense given the hundreds of rounds per minute a single machine-gun could pour into attacking troop formations in broad daylight.⁸¹ And, as previously noted, the Germans had machine-guns not only in the Hammerhead but in Sabot and Flat Iron copses as well as in their second line on the Bazentin ridge. As Colin Hughes observes, 'it would be difficult to imagine a more suicidal direction of attack than that chosen by XV Corps for the 115th Brigade'.⁸²

⁸⁰ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2008).

⁸¹ Cited in Renshaw, *Mametz Wood*, p. 83.

⁸² Hughes, *Mametz*, p. 92.

Consequently some troops simply stopped when machine-gunned, and others turned back.⁸³ 'We just wilted' wrote one survivor, when confronted by 'devastating' MG fire.⁸⁴ German artillery also proved to be accurate and horrifyingly effective. After the initial attack was halted Sergeant Perriman of 11th SWB was detailed to lead his platoon back to Caterpillar Wood and thence to launch an attack on the German machine-gun posts that were causing so much havoc. 'The German shelling on our position had intensified as to become a living hell', wrote Perriman, and although the platoon moved off to attack both the officer commanding and then Perriman were hit by shrapnel, effectively decapitating the attack before it had an opportunity to be launched.⁸⁵ Elsewhere, enemy snipers picked off Welsh officers, ensuring that on the ground leadership faltered, but even without this handicap it is difficult to imagine that any subsequent attack made under the same conditions could have stood a better chance.⁸⁶ To have continued to attempt to advance would have been to throw one's life away for no purpose – an action which would (in Smith's and Watson's terms) neither have been 'proportional' nor 'risk-optimized'. As it was, a consequence of 115 Brigade's failure to press home against impossible odds was that, though mauled, its battalions were still in a fit enough state to support 113 and 114 Brigades on 10 and 11 July (when

⁸³ SCOLAR, Hughes papers 461/1/1: letters from Sergeant T. J. Price, 15, 16 January 1974.

⁸⁴ SCOLAR, Hughes papers 461/1/6: letters from Ronald N. Morgan, 17 January, 21 March, 4 April 1974.

⁸⁵ IWM, Perriman papers.

⁸⁶ IWM, Apps papers: Diary Entry, 7 July.

11th SWB performed very creditably in reaching the north-east corner of the wood).

What were the circumstances in which the assault of 7 July might have been successful? First, much better coordination of the attacks by proximate divisions would have been sensible. Instead isolated offensives went in, allowing the Germans the opportunity to concentrate artillery (and machine-gun) fire and available reserves in one sector.⁸⁷ Second, the plan of attack on 7 July was unimaginative. To attack in daylight across open ground without any attempt to draw the fire from German machine-guns was to invite disaster. This was compounded by failure to provide adequate artillery support, both of any bombardment of German positions and of a smokescreen which might have given the advancing troops cover as they crossed open ground. The contrast with the employment of the creeping barrage on 10 July is noteworthy. For the artillery failure corps command must take the blame.⁸⁸ Even had the two battalions in the front line managed to reach the Hammerhead it is still difficult to imagine that they would have succeeded in dislodging the German defenders. The attack needed to be made in much greater force by more than one brigade.

The foregoing argument suggests that culpability for the failure of the 38th's first offensive is to be found at a level no lower than that of the brigade: that

⁸⁷ Prior and Wilson, *Command and Control*, pp. 189-90, and *idem*, *Somme*, pp. 124, 127.

⁸⁸ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 66.

Brigadier-General Evans, his battalion commanders, and the officers and men of 115 Brigade did their best in extremely unpropitious conditions, suffering badly from others' lack of planning, coordination, or appropriate provision of artillery support. However, in assessing the Mametz Wood action as a whole, there is no escaping the fact that the 38th did not perform optimally in July 1916, and its failings may be categorised as those of leadership, and of the troops' self-control.

In terms of leadership, Major-General Philipps was clearly out of his depth as a divisional commander. He did not enjoy the confidence of XV Corps, nor did he do anything to justify such confidence.⁸⁹ While he was at the helm divisional headquarters was little more than a staging post for messages passing between XV Corps and the three brigades under Philipps's command. Philipps did not devise the plan for the first, disastrous attack on the wood on 7 July (that responsibility lies with Horne and XV Corps), but a more dynamic and professional divisional commander might have adjusted the plans in agreement with his superior. It is instructive to compare Philipps's passivity with the approach of Major-General Pilcher of 17th Division, who repeatedly challenged what he regarded as futile orders that would result in slaughter for no appreciable gain. Although Pilcher, like Philipps, was to be sacked from his post before the end of July, he argued that more literal obedience on his part to XV Corps' orders would have cost the lives of an

⁸⁹ Simkins, *From the Somme*, pp. 73-4; Renshaw, *Mametz Wood*, p. 137, Travers, *Killing Ground*, pp. 21, 169-70.

additional two to three thousand men.⁹⁰ Pilcher was the longest serving divisional commander on the Somme at the beginning of the offensive, and the 17th had seen serious action at Hooge in August 1915 and near Ypres in February 1916, so he perhaps had a much firmer grasp of the situation and of what was possible in the circumstances.⁹¹ Philipps compounded his passivity on 7 July, and sealed his fate, by bungling the proposed night operation on 8/9 July, Simkins terming the decision to entrust the task of securing the southern salient of the wood at night to a single platoon 'extraordinary'.⁹² It is impossible to mount any convincing defence of his record, or of Lloyd George's role in facilitating his appointment.

The lower tiers of divisional command were not entirely unproblematic, although the general standard of leadership at brigade and battalion level was good, with Price-Davies, Marden and Evans deserving credit for crucial interventions and sensible decisions.⁹³ At battalion level, Lieutenant-Colonel Carden of 16th RWF is praised by Hicks for his 'suicidal bravery', but it was not wise for him as commanding officer to advertize his presence to the enemy by tying a coloured handkerchief to his walking stick and waving it in an attempt to encourage his own men.⁹⁴ The regimental historian chose his

⁹⁰ Renshaw, *Mametz Wood*, pp. 135-6; Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, p. 233.

⁹¹ Simkins, *From the Somme*, pp. 66, 72.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹⁴ Hicks, *Welsh at Mametz Wood*, p. 84.

words carefully in terming Carden 'a gifted leader with a touch of fanaticism.'⁹⁵ Even before the attack was underway Carden caused confusion by failing to return to his battalion in time for the scheduled start-time, and eventually they left without him, eighteen minutes late. This delay ensured that 16th RWF did not benefit from any artillery barrage cover, and although Carden rejoined them shortly afterwards and played a part in stiffening their resolve to continue their advance, he was killed before he could lead his battalion into the wood.⁹⁶ But Carden apart, and there is no doubting his personal courage, other battalion commanders performed staunchly in very difficult conditions. Junior officers frequently acquitted themselves well, although many became casualties in the initial assault on 10 July, which meant that some men were relatively leaderless once in the wood.⁹⁷ And inevitably, the quality of officers varied, Hughes noting that 14th RWF 'suffered more than any other battalion from lack of firm leadership.'⁹⁸ Overall, a better divisional commander and officers who had had more time to become experienced in front-line combat would have made a positive difference to 38th's performance in July 1916.

The second major failing was that some of the troops evinced occasional erratic and panicky behaviour on 10 and 11 July. During the initial assault there is evidence that, in places, the attackers hesitated and retired. Some

⁹⁵ Dudley Ward, *Regimental Records*, p. 205.

⁹⁶ Renshaw, *Mametz Wood*, pp. 93-4.

⁹⁷ Marden, *Welch Regiment*, p. 398, commends 'the stubbornness and sense of duty of the rank and file, who would not admit defeat.'

⁹⁸ Hughes, *Mametz*, pp. 139-40.

'thoroughly demoralised' men of 14th RWF encountered before the wood was entered had to be threatened by revolver-wielding officers who ensured they regrouped and returned to the fray.⁹⁹ Once in the wood conditions were so confused and resistance encountered so fierce that soldiers were sometimes panicked into momentary withdrawals. Captain Jones wrote of 'perfect pandemonium' in the wood on the evening of 10 July as 'scores of men, from every battalion in the division' exited the wood 'all making headlong from the rear' under 'terrible enemy shelling'.¹⁰⁰ Marden, in command of 114 Brigade in July 1916, refers to 'a few men' who 'panicked down the central drive carrying with them at the southern outskirts of the wood several score of others who, officerless, had lost their way.'¹⁰¹ Such testimony is echoed by Emlyn Davies of 17th RWF who witnessed 'numbers of our own men ... trampling to the rear' when caught by a short-falling British artillery barrage during the fighting sometime on 10 and 11 July, although an NCO rallied the troops with a stentorian 'Stick It, Welsh!'¹⁰² Brigadier-General Price-Davies, writing immediately after the battle, noted that 'a certain degree of demoralisation set in' once the wood was reached, and 'it was only by the utmost strenuous

⁹⁹ Dudley Ward, *Regimental Records*, pp. 206-7; Renshaw, *Mametz Wood*, pp. 94-5.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Ward, *Regimental Records*, p. 210.

¹⁰¹ Marden, *Welch Regiment*, p. 388.

¹⁰² Emlyn Davies, *Taffy Went To War* (Knutsford, 1975), p. 140; Peter Robinson (ed.), *The Letters of Major-General Price-Davies VC, CB, CMG, DSO: From Captain to Major-General, 1914-18* (Stroud, 2013).

efforts on the part of a few officers that it was possible to make progress.'

Most forcibly, he noted that:

The demoralisation increased towards evening on the 10th and culminated in a disgraceful panic during which many left the wood whilst others seemed quite incapable of understanding, or unwilling to carry out the simplest order. A few stout-hearted German would have stampeded the whole of the troops in the wood.¹⁰³

Price-Davies later believed that, in general terms, he 'may not have given my brigade full credit for what they did in Mametz Wood', having been overly influenced 'by the discreditable behaviour of the men of the division who fled in panic at about 8.45 pm on 10 July.'¹⁰⁴ The key point here, however, is that there are multiple witnesses to what appears to have been an episode of large-scale collective flight late on 10 July.

Putting this in context, it is worth noting that the 38th had been given no training in wood fighting, which was notoriously difficult, and should be excused some measure of blame for its failure to cope well with its exigencies at all times.¹⁰⁵ The landscape was devastated, the trees often set alight, navigation and communication was very problematic, and disorientated troops

¹⁰³ Cited in Hughes, *Mametz*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ Marden, *Welch Regiment*, pp. 389-90.

could find themselves isolated, surrounded, and sometimes captured.¹⁰⁶ The Somme woods were 'fearsome killing grounds' which all presented British troops with major challenges.¹⁰⁷ Seven attacks on Trônes Wood from 8 July failed and the wood did not fall until after the assault on the German second line, which left the Germans in the wood at risk of being isolated.¹⁰⁸ Delville Wood held out for six weeks and High Wood for two months. In the circumstances the fact that the 38th took two days to take the largest wood on the Somme can hardly be taken seriously as a criticism. As Price-Davies noted, 'well-trained fresh regulars would have found it hard on manoeuvres even!'¹⁰⁹

This essay has argued that we should disconnect the evaluation of the 38th's record at Mametz Wood from any responsibility for proving the martial valour of the Welsh nation, and at the same time consider the strengths and weaknesses of statistical measurements of battlefield performance. Drawing on the insights of a range of military histories, it has been suggested that the men and officers of the 38th (with some exceptions) performed as well as could have been expected in conditions of extreme stress and great danger, took a difficult objective following a sustained attack made in force by 113 and 114 Brigades on 10 July, and were substantially reinforced by the men of 115

¹⁰⁶ See testimony of Private G. C. Longworth, SCOLAR, Colin Hughes Papers, 461/2/6.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *Imperial War Museum*, p. 130.

¹⁰⁸ Prior and Wilson, *Somme*, pp. 126-7.

¹⁰⁹ Robinson, *Letters*, p. 108.

Brigade who had themselves been asked to attempt an impossible task on 7 July. In different conditions, under different leaders, and with the experience of Mametz Wood behind it, the 38th (Welsh) Division was to go on to enjoy greater recognized success on the Western Front.