



2014-037

Sanders Marble, *British Artillery on the Western Front in the First World War: "The Infantry Cannot Do with a Gun Less."* Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. xvii, 285. ISBN 978-1-4094-1110-9.

Review by Ken Reynolds, Ottawa, ON (militaryhistorian@gmail.com).

"Artillery dominated the First World War" (1), writes historian Sanders Marble (US Army Office of Medical History) in the introduction to his study of the role of the British artillery on the Western Front.<sup>1</sup> That statement is corroborated by the large percentage of casualties suffered on all sides during the war as a result of enemy (and sometimes friendly) shellfire. Marble, after noting the significance of artillery in the war, asks a series of questions about its use, effectiveness, command control, and integration within the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), and how these factors changed during the war. He notes that many critics of British generalship believe "more materiel and technology" (1)—especially artillery—should have been used in place of manpower, that is, infantry.

Before World War I, technological advances had increased the firepower of Europe's military forces, but at the expense of tactical mobility. British cavalry and infantry had problems outflanking an enemy because

the attackers were vulnerable to defensive firepower and movement. Defensive firepower could nullify either offensive fire or movement, or the defenders could disrupt the attackers' plans with two mobility options of their own—either through a counter-attack, or by posing obstacles to the attacker's movement (typically barbed wire). This was not the end of the chess match, and the attacker had three options to preempt these defensive plans: apply overwhelming firepower to cancel defensive mobility, firepower, and obstacles; give the attacking infantry more firepower[;] or find some way of improving communications. All these factors went into the analysis of moves, counter-moves, and anticipated moves, but in war, unlike chess, lives are lost instead of pieces. (3-4)

Within this context, Marble aims "to see how tactical and operational changes [to the artillery] did or did not affect strategy" (5).

The book is organized chronologically: chapter 1, on the Boer War's legacy, is followed by chapters on each year of the First World War. Marble takes up a wide array of subjects in these, including offensive and defensive use of artillery, types of fire support (bombardments, barrages, and counter-battery fire), command arrangements, the roles of higher artillery staff, and training. An extremely useful five-page glossary gives definitions of artillery terminology for non-specialist readers.

Fully conversant with the published primary and secondary literature of his subject, the author has also conducted in-depth research in primary sources at the National Archives (formerly Public Record Office) at Kew, the Imperial War Museum, the Liddell Hart Centre, the Royal Artillery Institution, and other British repositories. These archives have extensive holdings of War Office papers, unit and formation war diaries, individual papers for British artillery officers and other commanders, official histories, and wartime pamphlets, instructions, and lessons-learned bulletins.

A particular concern of the book is reconstructing precisely what role the artillery played at any given point during the war, as seen by BEF gunners themselves. Marble asks whether the artillery was a combat arm, like the infantry and cavalry, or performed combat support functions, like the pay corps and the ordnance department. Certainly artillerists (and engineers as well) were more directly involved in the fighting than pay and ordnance staff, but, like airmen and armor personnel, not so directly as infantry and cavalry.

---

1. The book originated in a University of London doctoral dissertation and was published in 2003 as an open access e-book in Columbia University's Gutenberg-e program – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1408.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1408.htm). The printed version reviewed here is a "reorganization and expansion" (14) thereof.

The gunners themselves, Marble argues, did not on the whole question their support role or subscribe to the dictum of “artillery conquering, infantry occupying” (261). “Most gunners were pragmatic, not revolutionaries or reactionaries. They accepted their subordinate role, and most rejected the ideas expounded by so many historians that artillery (and technology) should have been the centerpiece of operations. The gunners quietly and constantly improved so that they could help the combat arms in more and better ways. And by the end of the war the incremental, evolutionary steps they had encouraged and embraced added up to a revolution” (6).

Marble elucidates the development of the British artillery before and during the war. Prewar doctrine clearly placed the field artillery in a support role, but lessons learned during the Boer War (1899–1902) revealed that newer technologies posed problems for this way of fighting. For example, improved rifles and marksmanship gravely endangered gunners positioned up front and lacking any particular protection. This in turn led to an emphasis on indirect fire, centralized control of guns to concentrate fire on a given point, and superior counter-battery fire. However, following the war, it was felt that armored gun shields would adequately protect gunners from enemy rifle fire; this ignored the lessons of foreign conflicts like the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5).

When the First World War began, the Royal Artillery was placed up front as “another kind of bullet-deliverer” (48) to boost the infantry’s firepower. But direct fire largely disappeared in the face of enemy rifle and machine gun fire, as mobile warfare soon gave way to trenches and a form of siege warfare. The Royal Field Artillery would have to change its tactics.

The year 1915 brought innovation in the form of artillery barrages to suppress the enemy’s infantry while British foot soldiers moved forward to the attack. Gunners also concentrated on counter-battery fire as well as traditional bombardments of enemy targets. But both old and new tactics were undermined by British shell shortages and the insufficient training given most new gunners in Kitchener’s Army. By 1916, however, the British artillery enjoyed better centralized control, more dedicated staff at higher command levels, and, most importantly, far more plentiful supplies of guns and ammunition. This enabled it to protect infantry attacks by “creeping” barrages and ramp up counter-battery bombardments.

The following year witnessed further evolutionary changes. Although support continued to be the primary purpose of artillery, more gunfire was directed beyond the enemy’s front line. For the artillery’s ability to destroy the German front lines, as proven in 1916, led the enemy to adopt new defensive tactics, specifically, reducing the numbers of personnel in the front line and focusing on a defense in depth. The British artillery countered by firing at enemy targets beyond their trench lines. While the infantry continued to expect barrages up to and beyond the front lines during their attacks on enemy positions, “The circumstances of each British attack differed, and the artillerymen did their best to juggle bombardment, barrages, and counter-battery fire to fit changing circumstances, such as the duration of the preliminary bombardment, depth of objectives, density of guns and troops, ground conditions, and a host of other considerations. It was truly a matter of orchestration by men who have earned their subsequent appellation of ‘master gunners’” (205).

By the time of the German offensive of early 1918, the British were able to readily transition to a defensive mode of fighting, featuring excellent centralized staff control of big guns, howitzers, trench mortars, and machine guns—something that could not have been achieved in 1914. By August 1918, when the enemy push had failed and preparations for the next British offensive were under way, the artillery shifted to mobile warfare in pursuit of the enemy, in Marble’s words, combining power and finesse. Bombardments and barrages were less structured than previously, speed of movement took precedence over detailed planning, and gunners learned to carry out complex shoots more effectively than ever before. This was the closest the British artillery came to leading, as opposed to supporting, the infantry, which followed the artillery barrages instead of the barrages being coordinated to the infantry’s plan of attack. However, when an offensive was in the planning stage, the artillery still “fell in line with the wishes of the troops who would ultimately be doing the fighting” (256).

The book does have its shortcomings.<sup>2</sup> Readers may doubt the wisdom of the author's confining his subject to the Western Front because, in his view, "that was where the war would be won or lost, that was where tactical developments were most marked, and that was where artillery made the most difference" (4). Still more problematic is his restriction of the primary archival research exclusively to British holdings even though his subject matter concerns both British and Dominion forces. Some research in major Australian and Canadian archives could have strengthened his argument.

These are minor issues, however, in a very accurate and informative book-length treatment of the Royal Artillery as a supporting arm within the BEF. The artillery's conduct and progress at the individual, unit, and institutional levels, together with its willingness to support rather than lead the infantry and cavalry explain why the argument for "more materiel and technology" did not apply in this case. Readers with some general knowledge of the First World War will value Sanders Marble's book for its meticulous and balanced explanation of the role of the British artillery on the Western Front.

---

<sup>2</sup> Including this factual error: Marble refers to Brig. Gen. E.W.B. Morrison as the "(British) BGRA" of the Canadian Corps (197). Although many British officers served on the staff of the Canadian Corps, Morrison was actually Canadian born and raised.