The Empire on the Western Front
The British 62nd and
Canadian 4th Divisions in Battle

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Contents

List of Illustrations / viii
Acknowledgments / ix
Introduction / 3

1 Raising and Training the Divisions / 13

Part 1: Forging Fighting Forces

2 The 4th and the 62nd Divisions: First Months in Line / 31
3 The 62nd Division: Second Bullecourt and Aftermath / 57
4 The 4th Division: Road to Vimy / 79
5 The 4th Division: Lens and Passchendaele / 105
6 The 62nd Division: Road to Bourlon / 134

Part 2: The Final Year

7 The 62nd Division: Training and Fighting / 157
8 The 62nd Division: The Hundred Days / 186
9 The 4th Division in 1918: Towards the Hundred Days / 211

Conclusion: Producing Combat-Capable BEF Divisions in Wartime / 245

Appendix: Orders of Battle for 62nd and 4th Divisions / 255
Notes / 258
Bibliography / 299
Index / 310
Illustrations

1 Major Operations that the 62nd West Riding and 4th Canadian Division took part in, Western Front, 1916–18 / 2
2 Maj. David Watson and his staff, 1916 / 15
3 Maj.-Gen. Walter Braithwaite with his charger / 23
4 4th Division at the Battle of the Somme / 36
5 Second Battle of Bullecourt / 63
6 Battle of Vimy Ridge / 91
7 Lt.-Col. R.H. Webb and Maj. A.S. English outside remains of the brewery at La Coulotte, August, 1917 / 106
8 4th Division at Lens / 109
9 The drummers of the Canadian 50th Battalion returning to camp after playing to the Battalion in the trenches / 120
10 4th Division at Ypres / 123
11 62nd Division at Cambrai / 140
12 A general scene showing men of the York and Lancaster Regiment using a machine gun mounted for anti-aircraft use / 159
13 62nd Division during the March Offensive / 162
14 Battle of Tardenois: Sentry of the 2/4th Battalion looking out for the enemy in the Bois de Reims / 174
15 62nd Division at the Second Battle of Marne / 176
16 Battle of Tardenois: Soldiers of the 5th Battalion advancing through the Bois du Petit Champ / 178
17 Battle of Tardenois: Men of the 1/5th Battalion taking captive a German prisoner in the Bois de Reims / 183
18 62nd Division at the Battle of Havrincourt / 195
19 4th Division attack on Amiens / 218
20 Canadians and prisoners take cover in a trench / 230
21 Canal du Nord, September 27 to October 11, 1918 / 233
22 Battle of the Canal du Nord / 235
23 Trench Mortar Brigade / 243
The First World War, by 1916, had been fought for over three years; professional soldiers were no longer available, and the British Expeditionary Force was desperate for more recruits. An army of volunteers was the only option by this time. Raw recruits from all across the Empire were being flung into the BEF to carry on the war. British and dominion – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa – forces of citizen soldiers would fill the ranks. Most of the British divisions by the end of the war consisted of masses of citizen soldiers. The recruits were enthusiastic, but the great majority lacked military training of any sort.

How did the British Empire create competent fighting divisions quickly during the First World War? Professional leadership came from a small cadre of reasonably experienced officers generally of senior rank. In contrast, vast numbers of trained reservists dominated the armies of France and Germany. This book looks at the development of two Empire units – Britain’s 62nd (2nd West Riding) Division and the 4th Canadian Division. In it, I follow these formations from their genesis through to the end of the war, examining how they were raised, trained, and how they fought, assessing this division-building process in terms of the ultimate determinant of success – operational effectiveness in battle.

There are a variety of approaches to assessing a division’s performance during the First World War. In 1915–16, the British army (and, by extension, the Canadian Expeditionary Force) underwent an unprecedented expansion, and its core activity, aside from fighting, was preparing combat-effective divisions for France and Flanders as speedily as possible. Unit élan, discipline, leadership, morale, and training (specifically the suitability of combat tactics and the systemization of training) were factors in this process. There was, however, only one true test: Could these units fight successfully?

This volume is predominantly an operational study of how the two divisions were raised and how they fought during the First World War. This study seeks to determine how the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), including the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), was able to raise effective divisions (4th and 62nd), how their constituent units learned what they needed to know, whether each division played similar roles in the BEF including relationships with the
Introduction

corps and armies that they fought under, and, if not, why not. This book also examines how they operated in France, how the two divisions carried out training, and whether their operations on the Western Front differed significantly.

This monograph studies two of the ten “green” (untested) British and Canadian divisions of the BEF that entered combat on the Western Front from 1916 on. This sample is large enough to allow us to determine whether such elements as appropriate tactical doctrine and extensive training could ensure effective combat on the Western Front. What the British high command wanted was a mass army of interchangeable parts so it could fight sustained campaigns.

I make several assumptions to overcome the inherent subjectivity in the concept of operational effectiveness. As the war continued, commanders and staff officers matured and chose more modest, more realistic, and hence more achievable battlefield goals, although a range of intangibles, such as weather, unit exhaustion, or operational crisis, could affect the outcome. This monograph will examine ten engagements, five for each division, during which units and commanders could mature, so this seems a plausible way to measure battlefield effectiveness. For the 4th the engagements are the Somme (October 1916), Vimy (April 1917), Lens (August 1917), Passchendaele (October–November 1917), and the Hundred Days (August–November 1918). For the 62nd they are Second Bullecourt (May 1917), Cambrai (November 1917), March Offensive (March–April 1918), Second Battle of the Marne (July 1918), and the Hundred Days (August–November 1918).

How effective were the two divisions’ operational performances? How did they achieve those levels of performance? And how, if at all, did they differ? This book ultimately makes judgments about the quality – reasonableness and plausibility – of plans and whether these plans reflected an objective appraisal of various factors of the situation. The goal is to show primarily how the BEF raised (these two) divisions and how they fought and secondarily to show the impact of any differences between these two units. The book shows how the divisions operated within themselves but also how they operated within the larger corps and armies, and it considers whether these larger units affected their development and success in fighting on the Western Front. Obviously not all plans were effective (Mont Dury and Second Bullecourt were two notable failures in the divisions’ stories). We must recognize and evaluate this changing context to explain fully the evolving effectiveness of a divisional commander and his formation.

Historian Roger Lee has written about five factors in military planning that led to successful British operations at Fromelles, near Lille, in July 1916. The present study follows a similar trajectory to consider how the BEF was able to
raise, train, and fight divisions on the Western Front, and how effective those units proved to be. It looks beyond Lee’s single battle but isolates six factors – several of them the same as Lee’s – as necessary for success on the Western Front: what the BEF expected of the division (and of its commander and other senior leaders), including timing and clear objectives; who was to undertake the operation and their command relationship; what support would be provided to those undertaking the operation, when it would be available, and from where it would come; what detail was available about the physical aspects of the battle space, including the nature of ground, weather issues, and notable geophysical features; what information was known about the nature of the enemy, including likely strength, known defences, morale, weapons, and leadership; and how the division responded after an operation – how it rebuilt the division and trained it. These six factors will serve as benchmarks to demonstrate what role these two divisions played on the Western Front and how effective they were.

The “British World”
The BEF on the Western Front, with its sizable representation from the dominions, was a single army, sharing command, doctrine, and weapons, with most of its officers and men hailing from a common culture, the “British world.” Indeed, nearly half of the ordinary soldiers and one-third of the senior officers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) were British-born. Yet historians have traditionally studied components of this imperial force, specifically dominion units, in isolation from British forces. Historians in the United Kingdom have, at times, ignored colonial forces and assumed certain differences, while their Commonwealth counterparts have downplayed British forces to focus on their national stories. An exception is the latter group’s tendency to compare the successes of the rapidly maturing Australian, Canadian, or New Zealand troops with the more organized and professional British army, which they were outfighting by 1918.

This narrative tradition underpins many Canadian histories of the First World War, which use the CEF’s wartime transformation as a prime example of the emergence of a national identity and the corresponding decline of the colonial mindset. At the same time, the story goes, independent thinking replaced a suffocating class-consciousness and deference to authority among soldiers and officers alike, and this led to the clear superiority of Canadian troops on the battlefield.

Fortunately, Canadian military historians have begun to examine other (and more substantive) factors that shaped the CEF’s development. Their British
peers, in focusing on the BEF, have largely either acknowledged the self-evident superiority of the dominion contingents or dismissed it as posturing, though in both cases without offering substantive evidence. Yet some works, such as Peter Simpkins’ “Co-stars or Supporting Cast? British Divisions in the ‘Hundred Days,’” have begun to challenge this paradigm.

A Comparative Study

A comparative analysis can allow us to evaluate this accepted paradigm and figure out how the Empire forged effective divisions without trained cadres or existing infrastructure. Such an analysis needs to recognize the two armies’ broad commonalities in both prewar backgrounds and shared wartime experiences and to be open to the possibility that similarities in vital matters such as leadership, officer-soldier relations, tactical innovation, and unit élan balanced or even outweighed the differences. This method would extend the British world concept that has recently illuminated other aspects of British and dominion history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most appropriate comparison would focus on infantry divisions, which, with between fifteen and twenty thousand men each, were the smallest self-contained fighting formations on the battlefield and the cornerstone of the BEF. The 62nd British and 4th Canadian Divisions were typical of BEF divisions, formed after the war was well underway from masses of untrained volunteers, and supplemented by a small cadre of professionals. The British 62nd Division formed in February 1915, and the 4th Canadian Division in April 1916, and they were both very active in 1917 and 1918 on the Western Front.

Historians have applied the comparative approach successfully in the past. Jonathan Boff’s Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) compares how the British and German armies fought during the Hundred Days, as does Simkins’ “Co-stars or Supporting Cast? British Divisions in ‘the Hundred Days,’” who examined BEF divisions during the same period.

Both of these studies, however, looked at units in a limited time frame. Divisions have not received monograph studies to the same extent as armies, corps, and battalions have in the literature of the Western Front. This lacuna is unfortunate, as divisions formed the backbone and building blocks for planning and launching operations. This study will add a new layer of focus to the idea of the learning curve and how the BEF fought. It is unique in following two divisions from their raising to the end of the war. It examines factors such as recruitment, training, leadership, and combat performance, thereby offering a new perspective on the ongoing military debate about learning curves.
How did divisions become effective on the Western Front in the latter half of the war?

As a prelude to examining the 62nd and 4th’s combat readiness and performance in battle, this book compares in detail how Britain and Canada forged civilians into professional combat forces – an essential element underlying the BEF’s (including the CEF’s) extraordinary effectiveness by 1918. In the process, it looks at whether the British world of the trenches was much more homogeneous than much of the existing scholarship suggests, with commonalities at least as notable as differences.

This study does not examine in detail the social and cultural differences that may have affected the two divisions’ fighting abilities. The British world paradigm suggests rather more modest differences than is commonly thought. Fifty percent of the fighting men in the four-division Canadian Corps were recent British immigrants. Almost one soldier and junior officer in two and almost one in three among more senior officers from Lieutenant-Colonel up was either raised in or emigrated from the United Kingdom.15 Canadian-born soldiers of Anglo Celtic heritage, the vast majority of the recruits who were not British immigrants, were themselves products of a very British cultural environment.16 Thus this study downplays cultural differences in favour of other factors – leadership, training practices, and, above all else, performance in combat – to understand the development of the two divisions.

Morale, especially among the junior officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and ordinary soldiers who bore the brunt of the fighting, contributed significantly to battlefield effectiveness. Only extensive research into records of discipline and a survey of soldiers’ letters and diaries would do the topic justice. Historians Gary Sheffield’s Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War (London, Macmillan, 2000) and Alex Watson’s Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) have expertly done this for the BEF and German side as a whole, and Desmond Morton’s When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War (Toronto: Random House, 1993) has done this for the CEF.17 To compare the morale of the 62nd and 4th Divisions would be an immense research task in itself, and doing it justice would require a separate monograph. It would need a different set of resources, some not available for both units. Smaller units are much more prone to wide variations in morale. Nonetheless, both the 62nd and 4th Divisions seem to have experienced high morale at the operational level that was researched. As Watson argued, human robustness was the key to how the British coped with such a
long, drawn-out war. Accordingly, this study assumes high (or at least adequate) morale in both the divisions that I explore.

**A Wealth of Material: Primary Sources**

I selected the Canadian 4th and British 62nd Divisions for this analysis for a number of reasons. Of the Canadian divisions, the 4th was formed last and has therefore attracted the least study. Like Canada’s other three divisions, the 4th was primarily a volunteer force (as the 62nd was at its start) and was active on the Western Front throughout 1917 and 1918. The 62nd was a Territorial unit (similar to Canada’s militia-based divisions) and also fought throughout 1917–18, being one of only eight British units that would reach France after 1915. A popular history from the 1920s is the most recent study of the 62nd.

The two units arrived on the Western Front about five months apart: the 4th in August 1916 and the 62nd in January 1917. Leading up to the Armistice, each of these two largely green volunteer forces took part in five major operations, culminating in the climactic Hundred Days. Both divisions generated first-hand accounts and operational war diaries covering the formations’ movements and actions, as well as internal documents such as intelligence, lesson-learned reports, and thorough analysis and comparisons, which created a framework within which I could begin to assess how the BEF created competent divisions.

This study draws on records from Canadian, British, German, and Australian archives. War diaries of the divisions, headquarters, brigades, and battalions proved invaluable, as did intelligence summaries, operational materials, and cabinet papers from Whitehall, Ottawa, and Canberra. For both the BEF and the CEF, my main sources are these war diaries and a variety of related division and lower-level reports. My close reading of the war diaries has encouraged me to reject the standard dismissal of them as too official. Their general purpose, certainly from the start of the Somme (July 1916) on, was to help the unit learn from its experiences, and they display disarming candour. My examining the war diaries of all levels of units increased the accuracy of my account, I believe, as many different pairs of eyes observed the same events.

This book highlights the day-to-day issues that both the 4th and the 62nd divisions confronted in becoming effective. One of the main problems with the war diaries is the inconsistency in record keeping – some units kept excellent records; others are thin on detail or lacking in useful description for this study. The war diaries were often the product of one specific individual writing with a clear didactic purpose. Some authors may well have steered the history with that in mind. I therefore needed to compare their accounts carefully with other primary sources, which in many instances were abundant, even prolific.
Officers in both divisions have left invaluable personal papers. The diary of Major-General David Watson, commander of the 4th Division, was substantial and revealing about the making of day-to-day decisions and about his relations with colleagues. The extensive papers of Victor Odlum, commander of the 4th Division’s 11th Brigade, and of A.T. Anderson, commander of the 62nd Division’s artillery, described their decision-making processes and their views of brigades’ effectiveness. Corps commanders Arthur Currie of Canada and Aylmer Haldane of Britain left very useful and detailed papers about what they thought of the divisions and their leadership and how they used the divisions.

The War Office in Whitehall published highly influential training manuals, which help us understand developments in these units in 1917 and 1918. Experience at and lessons from the bloody Battle of the Somme informed the War Office’s Stationery Service (SS) manuals 135 and 144, which revolutionized instruction for the divisions and transformed battlefield practice.23

**Rethinking the Great War: Secondary Sources**

This is an exciting time to be writing on the First World War, as a wealth of new monographs and collections on every aspect of this conflict are appearing, to coincide with its various centenaries. Britain’s comprehensive, official History of the Great War – 109 volumes by many authors, which appeared over many years – must be the starting point for any operational study of the conflict, but it sidesteps any real focus on senior commanders, plumbing for a straightforward narrative of events drawn heavily from war diaries and correctives drawn from correspondence now collected with the CAB 45 series at the National Archives, at Kew. One crucial book for this study was Simkins’ well-researched – and well-written – Kitchener’s Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914–1916 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), about the raising of the “New Armies,” including the 62nd Division. More recent research has modified the picture, however, and Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman, and Mark Connelly’s edited collection The British Army and the First World War (Armies of the Great War) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017) offers an innovative analysis of the British Army’s role in the Great War. Boff’s insightful study of the Third Army, Winning and Losing on the Western Front, highlights the complexity of the war and the organizational behaviour of the BEF.

Historians such as Boff, Paddy Griffith, Sheffield, Simkins, and Andy Simpson have all explored the operational learning process that the British Army underwent on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. Recent principal advocates of the operational/tactical learning process are Boff as well as Griffith, whose BEF-wide Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916–18 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) demonstrated the army’s
successful adaptation of more traditional technology (artillery, automatic weapons, and infantry). Simon Robbins’s operations-level *British Generalship on the Western Front, 1914–1918: Defeat into Victory* (London: Routledge, 2005) examined senior leaders, especially corps commanders, but mostly in terms of collective developments. Simpson’s more recent *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914–18* (Stonehouse: Spellmount, 2006) analyzed the development of British corps commanders on the battlefield. *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914–18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), edited by Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman, offered revealing “snapshots” of many senior commanders. The aforementioned Boff’s *Winning and Losing on the Western Front* investigated the learning process for senior officers of the Third Army during the Hundred Days and German reaction to the third Armies operations. Lee’s analysis from the top down of the battle of Fromelles provided a unique insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the British command system. Finally, *The Men Who Planned the War: A Study of the Western Front, 1914–1918* (London: Routledge, 2016), by Paul Harris, offered a superb study of the critical role of staff officers in the BEF.

Canadian historians have focused on the CEF’s experience, and some popular accounts have almost ignored the British role. G.W.L. Nicholson’s official *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1919* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1965) – largely a narrative history – briefly described all the units involved. In contrast, Bill Rawling’s *Surviving Trench Warfare: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), the first serious re-examination of the Canadian Corps, presented an evolving blending of tactics and technology as the key to the corps’ battlefield success in the last two years of the war. Building on Rawling, Ian Brown’s article “Not Glamorous, but Effective” described the evolution of the Canadian Corps’ bite-and-hold tactics in 1917–18. Shane Schreiber’s *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2004) analyzed all four Canadian divisions in equal measure during the Hundred Days. Like Brown, he concluded that the Canadians perfected the bite-and-hold attack. Andrew Iarocci gives a compelling account of the raising of the Canadian 1st Division and its experience on the Western Front until the second half of 1915 in *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914–1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Tim Cook’s gripping books on the Canadian Corps in the Great War – *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1914–1916* (Toronto: Penguin, 2007) and *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting The Great War 1917–1918* (Toronto: Penguin, 2008) – provided a comprehensive overview of its operations, training, and social history but said little about the nuts and bolts of specific operations and developments. Cook’s earlier *No Place

Patrick Brennan’s chapters, including “Major-General David Watson” and, with Thomas Leppard, “How the Lessons Were Learned,” showed how various Canadian senior officers became effective leaders in battle. Kenneth Radley dealt at length with the role of staff officers in We Lead, Others Follow: First Canadian Division, 1914–1918 (St. Catherine’s, ON: Vanwell, 2005), a history of the 1st Canadian Division.27 Doug Delaney’s article “Mentoring the Canadian Corps: Imperial Officers and the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918,”28 dealt with the role of British senior staff officers in the Canadian Corps as a whole, and both the 4th Canadian and the 62nd British Divisions would have operated within the same culture.

Chapter 1 examines the raising of the British 62nd and Canadian 4th divisions, their training, and the officers who led the effort to make their units combat-ready before they headed for France.

The chapters in Part 1 of this book show how the divisions’ transformation from raw to polished performance flowed from a combination of factors, but most of all from the systematization and content of the infantry tactics and training regime that the BEF adopted during winter 1916–17. In essence, the BEF embraced the training techniques, and the tactical insights underpinning them, that emerged in the aftermath of the Battle of the Somme. After the 62nd’s initial failures at Bullecourt (May 1917), Major-General Braithwaite and his officers concentrated on training the troops, using and adapting new manuals from the War Office. Senior officers took a leading role in this process, and the 62nd’s infantry benefited greatly. The division’s leaders continued to absorb the lessons from the Somme (and subsequent actions). The resulting training strategies, which they paired with effective, dedicated officers, built a formidable fighting organization within the BEF ably demonstrated by the 62nd Division at the Battle of Cambrai.

In the case of the 4th Division, Canada faced many of the same problems as Britain in building a modern army in wartime, but on a smaller scale – if a much larger backdrop. The Canadians, however, lacked the small cadre of prewar regular professional officers on which the British could draw. Apart from the invaluable contributions of some excellent British staff officers whom their commanders seconded to Canadian service in England and France, almost all the senior positions in the 4th Division went to men who lacked
extensive, up-to-date military training. The 4th Division saw fighting at the Somme in autumn 1916 and in battle three more times in 1917 (Vimy Ridge, Lens, and Passchendaele). Analysis is then carried out on what was similar and different about these divisions and the vital role their corps played in the development of them.

The last year of the war was the defining period for this study. The final three chapters of the book are dedicated to this year and truly demonstrate how these divisions had progressed and matured, but also substantial is the different roles these two units would play in finishing the war. The imperial military coalition required interchangeable parts to ensure the necessary efficiency on the battlefield (true from the beginning) – though the Germans may have been “tired,” they definitely were not beaten. The Canadian 4th would have the time and resources to fight major set-piece battles. The 62nd Division had a very different role, thrown into battles with much less preparation time and fewer resources. It needed to be more adaptable and nimble than a Canadian division. By 1918, both divisions had integrated fully into the British system, with similarly experienced officers and virtually the same training regimen and doctrine, and both achieved the results their superiors asked of them. As this study will show, both became very competent fighting formations in time to make significant contributions to the war effort.

Conclusion

In summary, this study examines the Great War experiences of two divisions formed during the mid-war years – one British and one Canadian – in an attempt to understand how they were raised and trained, their learning curve on the battlefield, and the impact of both on their combat performance. It concentrates on the influence of senior leadership and on the fighting doctrine that shaped training – both factors central to effectiveness in battle. The two formations constitute a small but representative sampling of the ten divisions that emerged in the British Empire’s forces after 1916 and allow us to draw some conclusions about the forces collectively, as well as to compare the British and dominion approaches to war on the Western Front. In short, this study assesses how the BEF was able to create battle-ready divisions during the war.