A Lesson in Success: The Calonne Trench Raid, 17 January 1917

Andrew B. Godefroy, Royal Military College of Canada

Abstract
The Allied armies slugged it out on the Western front for nearly four years before finally achieving the breakout sought since November 1914. The four-division strong Canadian Corps led this “spearhead to victory.” Its commander was Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, and his corps was commonly referred to as the “shock troops” of the British Expeditionary Force and as “the enemy’s elite soldiers” by the German high command. This reputation stemmed from the Canadians’ impressive record of success in raiding the German lines throughout the war. The Canadian Corps’ flexibility, and initiative, the aggressiveness of its soldiers, and their ever improving skills of fire and movement continually added to the growing legend of Canadians being masters of the art of the trench raid. One operation in particular, a raid against the German lines along the Lens-Bethune railway northeast of Cite Calonne on 17 January 1917, was almost flawless in its planning and preparation, and near text-book in its execution and resulting effect.

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In January 1917, three Canadian Corps officers accompanied other British and Dominion officers attending a series of lectures hosted by the French Army regarding their experiences during the Battle of Verdun.[15] The French counter offensive devised by General Robert Nivelle had been one of a number of Allied successes of 1916. Trench raiding involved making small-scale surprise attacks on enemy positions, often in the middle of the night for reasons of stealth.