Summary

This thesis wants to research to what extent the Belgian Army went through a learning curve during the Great War: did it evolve, like the French, British and German armed forces, towards a modern army where all arms (infantry, artillery, engineers, aviation, …) work well together? Belgian historiography seems to confirm this thesis. On the one hand the Belgian Army lost nearly every battle against its German opponent in 1914. On the other hand it took successfully part in the final offensive that brought the Belgian soldiers to Ghent in 1918. This doctoral dissertation investigates whether the theory of the learning curve was applicable to the Belgian Army during the First World War. It therefore takes one of the six army divisions as subject while it gives preference to the fighting in the trenches. The main sources were the archives from the divisional headquarters.

The campaign of 1914 was very demanding on the 1st Army Division. She fought at the river Gete (August), near Antwerp (August-October) and at the Yser river (October-November). The mobile campaign revealed some serious shortcomings. The division was badly armed with her 18 heavy machine guns and 48 75mm field guns. After mobilisation she counted 18,200 badly trained and poorly equipped men among her ranks. In three months she lost 8,000 men (dead, wounded, missing and prisoners). She got back to full strength during the trench war thanks to recovered wounded, returned soldiers that had fled the battlefield, new servicemen and war volunteers. In 1918 she counted more than 22,000 men in her ranks. Meanwhile military losses during the trench war (November 1914-September 1918) were limited. Less than one soldier per day died because of the war violence, most often by accidents (e.g. with ammunition), bad luck (e.g. a lost bullet) or by being not careful enough (e.g. by revealing himself unconsciously). In comparison there were only few casualties due to combat operations such as patrols or raids. Moreover the officers tried to limit the number of losses. Daily violence on the Belgian front was limited in time and space. Battlefield violence respected a certain logic. The Belgians for instance usually only opened fire after the Germans had broken the status quo. The aim of Belgian violence was generally to silence the Germans. Sometimes the Belgians initiated new hostilities but this happened mainly in support of allied offensives elsewhere on the Western Front.

The evolution of the 1st Army Division started during the mobile campaign of 1914 and continued for four years long. Her weapons’ arsenal mounted drastically. The number of machine guns increased to 144 while the artillery pieces grew to 160. The infantry got more firepower thanks to the 540 light machineguns (Chauchat) and rifle- and handgrenades. The introduction of new weapons didn’t go smoothly: a lack of training areas and training ammunition, insufficient time to exercise, weapons arriving piecemeal, shooters being afraid of their own weapon, … The organisation of the 1st Army Division was adapted according to the available soldiers and weapons. By the summer of 1918 the army divisions had been transformed into army corps with each two infantrydivisions that were fully autonomous on
the battlefield. Camouflage and dissimulation became standard practices. The defensive concepts evolved during 1915 and 1917 from a rigid linear defense on the first line of trenches towards a more elastic and flexible defense in depth. This defense in depth was originally a German concept that the Belgian Army adopted through French army regulations in the first months of 1918 when a German attack seemed imminent. The 1st Army Division’s offensive experience was based on patrolling, raiding and ambushes in no man’s land. Year by year the raids became more elaborate, more numerous and more successful, although raids sometimes still failed terribly in 1918.

There was a clear learning curve characterised by an increased collaboration between infantry and artillery (the key players on the battlefield), but also with engineering troops, airplanes, ... More and more soldiers became specialists (signal troops, trench artillery, searchlights, observers, sharpshooters, grenadiers, rifle grenadeshooters, Chauchatteams, ...). This specialisation led to a democratisation and individualisation of tactics. A soldier had to think along in 1918, he had to ‘read’ the terrain and understand what was going on around him. The first high tech equipment was introduced such as wireless telegraphy and listening devices to capture German communications. The evolution was furthermore characterised by an arms race between attackers and defenders that forced both Germans and Belgians to innovate. The 1st Army Division also learned from its own operational history. Mainly negative experiences gave birth to adaptations and innovations. The aim was to keep up with the Germans on the other side of no man’s land and who also inspired the 1st Army Division.

Through the Army Command the divisional command received many British and mostly French documents. Especially with the latter there were numerous military exchanges. The Belgian Army Command could be very directive in some matters (e.g. the defensive lines) but sometimes gave the army divisions a large degree of freedom. Sometimes innovation came from the trenches. Soldiers, NCO’s and officers for instance suggested and executed the first patrols in no man’s land in 1915. For more simple innovations the divisional commander turned out to be crucial. During the war general Louis Bernheim didn’t reveal himself to be a great renewer. General Jules Jacques, who replaced Bernheim for a few months after the latter got injured by the end of 1915, showed more enthusiasm, openness and innovation although it would be unfair to depict Bernheim as an ultraconservative commander. The transformation of the 1st Army Division was an evolution, not a revolution. The restricted financial possibilities were a burden to the Belgian army. There was a structural shortage in artillery ammunitions and construction materials. Therefore there were not many options for expensive technical or tactical innovations. Moreover the King stubbornly held on to a defensive military strategy. A fast and thorough make-over of the Belgian Army didn’t suit this point of view. On the contrary, the King tried at all cost to keep the Belgian Army out of the allied offensives around Ypres and in France. Eventually the Belgians were generally one year behind the others when it came to innovations. This allowed them to profit from the learning curves (or bleeding curves) of the other armies. Because of all this the learning process was slow. There was no masterplan in 1914 that showed how the army of 1915, 1916,
1917 or 1918 should look like. The learning curve went up and down, was unpredictable and all but straightforward. Therefore the evolution of the 1st Army Division was a matter of trial and error.