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Haig and the Implementation of  
Tactical Doctrine on the Western  
Front

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## **SANDHURST OCCASIONAL PAPER NO 8**

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***‘Generals ... are always crazy on some point or other.’<sup>1</sup>***

This quote comes from C S Forester’s *The General*, which is one of my favourite novels of the First World War. It conveys the soldiers’ reaction to General Curzon’s arrival at his newly formed division in billets in Hampshire at the beginning of the war where he sets to inspecting every aspect of unit administration from the horse lines to the cookhouses, ‘and no one knew when the General’s big nose and moustache might not been coming round the cookhouse corner as he demanded to taste whatever indescribable mess was to be found in the dixies. It was a matter which the men in the ranks, after the food they had been enduring for the last two months, could thoroughly appreciate.’<sup>2</sup>

Curzon’s imaginary 91<sup>st</sup> Division is one that conformed in every way to Nicholson’s classic memoir of staff work at division and corps level in *Behind the Lines* being nothing ‘but a collection of stray units each with its individual traditions. The Cavalry, Artillery, Infantry and Engineers lived and trained apart. There were divisions; but as formations they had no real experience in field operations.’<sup>3</sup>

Effective performance on operations is based on sound planning and rehearsals that in turn is built on formations being trained for the job they have to do, but the bedrock on which this is based is built on a workable organization and administration that allows the structure to function and sustain itself. As Nicholson notes the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) that deployed to France in 1914 had to start from scratch,

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<sup>1</sup> . C S Forester, *The General*, Michael Joseph, London, (1936), 1958, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> . Colonel W N Nicholson, *Behind the Lines*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1939, p. 195.

and while one can argue with this, there is no doubt that the Territorial, New Army and Dominion divisions that reinforced them 'did not start from scratch; but from rock bottom. Their organization and administration did not mean a skilled workman applying oil as necessary to a machine in full running order; the machine had never been put together, every spring and pinion had to be tested and adjusted. The machine revolved; but with an inordinate quantity of grit in its innards. The skilled workman, who incidentally was none too skilled, since he had never had practice, spent the greater portion of his time on the sawdust and shingle.'<sup>4</sup>

*Field Service Regulations 1909* and the doctrinal manuals that flowed from it, underpinned by field training and formation manoeuvres, formed the basis of the effectiveness of the original BEF, but one has to look at the raising of the Confederate and Union forces in the American Civil War as the only comparable equivalent in raising mass armies as Britain did in 1914-1918. McClelland was the architect of the Army of the Potomac in the American Civil War, General Sir Douglas Haig, one of the architects of the BEF. McClelland was removed because in the end he would not fight the Army he forged, Haig is pilloried because he knew that the only way that Germany could be defeated was by fighting it with his armies and has been condemned for fighting too much. It was not an easy road. The words 'Haig', 'Somme' and 'Passchendaele' are linked in public imagination and so the victories of June and September 1917 and from August 1918 on, are ignored because the casualties in hindsight have been deemed unacceptable. In all of this the buck stops at Haig, as it should, so let me quote from Nicholson again.

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<sup>4</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp. 195-6.

‘The value of officers can never be rated too highly. From top to bottom they are the leaders on whom victory depends. The value of a formation, no matter what its size, depends on the character and personality of its commander, whether he be a colonel or a lieutenant. A company can be what its commander makes it; the men will catch his fire and enthusiasm.’<sup>5</sup>

The same applies to the Commander-in-Chief. It is not an easy process, but it is easier with a company of 220 men than with five armies totalling one million men that would grow to one and a half million in his first 12 months in command and reach a peak of 1.8 million. The challenge that Haig faced on assuming command of the BEF in December 1915 was to prepare armies that could defeat the German armies in the Field.

‘I have not got an Army in France, really, but a collection of divisions untrained for the field. The actual fighting Army will be evolved from them.’<sup>6</sup>

My interest is the evolution of tactical doctrine in the BEF and how important was Haig’s role. He has come in for particular interest in recent years with some valuable studies and a new edition of his diaries and letters, but such is the nature of the debate that he is always worth another look.<sup>7</sup> Was he like Curzon, always poking his nose into areas where

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<sup>5</sup> . Nicholson, *Behind The Lines*, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> . Douglas Haig, Diary entry, 29 March 1916, quoted in Justin Wintle (ed), *The Dictionary of War Quotations*, John Curtis and Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1989, p. 313.

<sup>7</sup> . Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army*, Aurum Press, London, 2011; J P Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008; Gary Mead, *The Good Soldier: The Biography of*

exalted Gods like Commander-in-Chiefs were not expected to sniff? Did he have that impact that Forester gives Curzon with those ‘Frightened cooking staffs stood shivering at attention while he blistered them with his tongue, and startled commanding officers, summoned by flying orderlies, stood scared at his shoulder while he peered into the dixies and cauldrons, and sampled the contents’?<sup>8</sup>

On assuming command in December 1915 Haig had a structure in embryo only. It had the appearance of a fighting force but was nothing of the sort. It was the junior partner faced with taking over an expanding front from the French. Haig’s BEF assuming an increased offensive role with units that were preoccupied in learning the realities and practicalities of trench warfare that consumed their attention for 95 percent of the time; demanding a routine that degraded the fitness of those holding the line, and which did little to assist the preparation needed to drive the Germans out of France and Belgium.

The Somme showed how blunt and inexperienced the BEF was at every level from Haig down. It demonstrated the difficulties of applying offensive doctrine that met that critical requirement for success laid down in *Field Service Regulations* namely: ‘The full power of an army can be exerted only when all its parts are in close combination.’<sup>9</sup> The magnitude of the task Haig faced in achieving this beggars the imagination because despite its professional core it was an amateur organisation at every level

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*Douglas Haig*, Atlantic, London, 2007, Walter Read, *Architect of Victory: Douglas Haig*, Berlinn Ltd, 2006. Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (eds), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> . Forester, *The General*, p.86.

<sup>9</sup> . General Staff, War Office, *Field Service Regulations, Part I Operations. 1909* (Reprinted with Amendments, 1914), HMSO, London, 1914, p.14.

from the Commander-in-Chief down, each part having to learn how to be effective within the machine that was being assembled.

Like Forester's fictional creation, Haig too replaced an unsatisfactory commander and had to forge an effective instrument that could function at a number of levels, as an army group, at army, at corps, and at divisional level and below. Each had to be tackled simultaneously as had the problems of logistics and supply. Every element had to learn on the job and pay the additional cost that such practice brings.

Haig had to raise and train armies under commanders that could work under him and achieve the results he wanted. Peter Simkins explores this relationship in his study of Haig and his Army Commanders and points out that only General Sir Hubert Plumer was commanding an army when Haig became Commander-in-Chief.<sup>10</sup> Haig appointed the men he wanted and his selection contained more successes than failures, but not all adapted easily to working with their Commander-in-Chief; Rawlinson, Plumer, Horne, Byng and finally Birdwood became Haig's generals who steered his armies to victory in 1918.<sup>11</sup> Allenby was one of Haig's selections that did not work, and Gough the other. Gough was Haig's particular blind spot, a favoured protégée who seemed to be Haig's beau idéal of a thrusting commander who demonstrated both his strengths and weaknesses before Pozieres in 1916, at Bullecourt in 1917, and in the opening battles of Third Ypres from 31 July to 16 August 1917. By then Haig was starting to appreciate what those who served in

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<sup>10</sup> . Peter Simkins, 'Haig and the Army Commanders' in Brian Bond and Nigel Cave, (eds), *Haig: A Reappraisal 70 Years On*, Leo Cooper, London, 1999, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp.78-106.

Gough's army already knew, that thrusting without planning and preparation cost lives, and that thinking corps and divisional commanders had no wish to serve in Fifth Army and were prepared to make that known.<sup>12</sup> Gough's strengths were indeed weaknesses and he paid for this after March 1918.

Haig demonstrated that he was prepared to hire and fire, and that even if he disliked someone, as he plainly did with Birdwood, it would not necessarily prevent his selection to army command if he was efficient. What does stand out is how effectively commanders and staff worked together; Rawlinson and Montgomery, Plumer and Harington, Birdwood and White, and it is interesting to assess Haig's role in this selection. Certainly it was his choice to retain Plumer and it was he that linked him with Harington as his Major-General General Staff (MGGS). His selection of Rawlinson and Byng; and his appreciation of the team that Birdwood and White made show him to be a good picker of subordinates, and someone who was not afraid of talent.

This was far more difficult at corps and divisional level because there was a limited pool of experience to draw on, but his diaries show that he keenly assessed the calibre of commanders at every level from brigade up and sort out opinions on who was effective and who was not. I

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<sup>12</sup> . See Lord Moyne's record of his divisional commanders comments on being posted to Fifth Army, Brian Bond and Simon Robbins, (eds), *Staff Officer: The Diaries of Walter Guinness (First Lord Moyne) 1914-1918*, Leo Cooper, London, 1987, p. 162. See Kiggell's comments to Haig, Haig's Diaries, 10 September 1917, Haig's assessment of Fifth Army staff work, 18 September 1917, WO 256/22; Kiggell's report on unwillingness of Canadian Corps to serve in Gough's Fifth Army, 5 October 1917, WO256/23.



have always been struck by the advice he gave Allenby on appointing him to command of Third Army.

‘I discussed the merits of the 18 Div[isio]ns and their respective commanders who will be under his orders so that the best commanders may be given the most difficult tasks.’<sup>13</sup>

To put this axiom into practice one has to know his men and from my research it is clear that Haig made it his business to know his subordinates. By 1917 he understood that the key to the effectiveness of his armies was at the divisional level, because it was at this level that training was conducted and changes implemented.

Paddy Griffith, Bidwell and Graham, Sheffield and Todman and others have explored aspects of the evolution of tactical doctrine.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that Haig was central to this process. Public opinion blames him for not being involved enough, for the ‘chateau mentality’ for not riding his army commanders or riding them too much; for not being explicit enough in his instructions, and for being too feared and too unapproachable, yet a study of his diaries and of those of his subordinates both confirms and questions these criticisms. Haig understood what was necessary to make an army work and fight, but on the Somme in October and November 1916, at Arras in May 1917 and before Passchendaele in October-November 1917 on and again at Cambrai in late November 1917 he

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<sup>13</sup>. Haig Papers, Diary, Volume XIII Jan-Feb 1917, 28 January 1917, discussions with Allenby newly appointed commander 3rd Army, National Library of Scotland. (NLS)

<sup>14</sup>. Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-1917*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994; Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1910-1945*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1982; Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities*, Headline, London, 2001; Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (ed), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-1919*, History Press, 2004.

demanded too much from the instrument he forged. In October 1916, May 1917 at Arras and again in October 1917 before Passchendaele and at Cambrai he did not recognise the point when the law of diminishing marginal returns had set in and that the battle being fought needed to be closed down.

Yet Haig had a vision of how the German armies were to be defeated which he pursued with unrelenting zeal. He determined that the German armies would be broken in battle which would culminate in a breakthrough and pursuit as described in the *Field Service Regulations 1909*, that he was instrumental in drafting.<sup>15</sup> His education was to realise that for massed infantry armies that dream of breakthrough and pursuit could only be achieved by a series of co-ordinated repetitive blows that were seen in the Second Army battles of September 1917 and finally achieved across the five armies of the BEF from August on, in 1918.

The Somme was the turning point in Haig's tactical thinking. He remained wedded to the concept of a breakthrough battle but he and his subordinate army commanders were learning how to achieve it with an infantry army. Artillery was central to success on the Western Front and the development of the use of the creeping barrage during the Somme heralded its importance, but it alone could not win battles; this was the infantry's role. Fire and movement at platoon level was the tactical revolution that led to the breaking of the trench deadlock. The skills of the BEF of 1914 and the lessons of the Boer War had to be relearned by amateur armies that were expanding on an unimaginable scale and although commanded by Regulars, they were but a handful in most

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<sup>15</sup> . General Staff, *Field Service Regulations, Part I Operations. 1909*, pp. 158-9.

divisions and were themselves men who had never had to think before at this level of warfare and so it was a learning process for all.<sup>16</sup>

The start point for most of the divisions of Haig's armies beggars belief. The 62<sup>nd</sup> (West Riding) Division was a second line Territorial division that was one of the last to arrive in France in 1917. It was formed in October 1914. On formation it lacked more than any other formation in a British Army that was short of everything. This is captured in the divisional history: 'It was found to consist of a mass of men, partly clothed in uniform, untrained, unarmed, having for instruction purposes a few d.p [drill purpose] rifles, without equipment, horses or wagons, with practically no officers or NCOs competent to train and discipline, and without one of the many small customs and traditions which influence the regular recruit from the moment of his enlistment.'<sup>17</sup> It was two years of second best before the 62<sup>nd</sup> (West Riding) Division reached France, but this description applied to all of the Kitchener New Army Divisions and most of the Territorial Divisions that were raised and trained in 1914-1916.

The problems at divisional level are self evident, the need for trained officers and NCOs in every unit both combat and service, the need for trained and competent staffs both operational and administrative, and the fact that the professional nucleus that should have supplied this

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<sup>16</sup> . Gary Sheffield, 'British High Command in the First World War: An Overview', Gary Sheffield and Geoffrey Till (eds), *The Challenges of High Command: The British Experience*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, pp. 15-25.

<sup>17</sup> . Everard Wyrall, *The History of the 62<sup>nd</sup> (West Riding) Division 1914-1919*, John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, London, nd, p.5.

disappeared in the battles to hold the Ypres salient in late 1914 and early 1915.

By the end of 1916 the British Armies in France numbered 60 infantry divisions.<sup>18</sup> At that time an infantry division, looking at infantry alone, numbered three infantry brigades of four battalions, each of four companies each of four platoons, requiring the divisional commander and his staff; three brigadier's-general and their staffs; 12 commanding officers and staffs, 48 company commanders, and 192 platoon commanders, without considering the needs of the division's two brigades of artillery, the engineer field companies, signals, medical, transport and supply units, together with the pioneer battalion.

In a corps of four divisions which had tended to become the standard by late 1917 we are talking about four divisional commanders and staffs, 12 brigadier's-general and staffs, 48 commanding officers and staffs, 192 company commanders, 768 platoon commanders in infantry alone. Sustaining this in the BEF required 10,000 officers a year, 50 a month for each division.<sup>19</sup>

In 1916 an infantry division numbered 585 officers and 17,488 other ranks, and if we take the losses from that year in one of Kitchener's New Army divisions, the 34<sup>th</sup> Division, drawn from the Tyneside with a

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<sup>18</sup> . 11 Regular Divisions (1-8, 28-29, Guards), 26 'K' (New Army: 9, 11-12, 14-21, 23-25, 30-41), 14 Territorial Divisions (46-51, 55-59, 61-62 and in Paddy Griffith's words, the 'unique' 63 (RN) Division), 9 Dominion Divisions (1-4 Canadians, 1-2, 4-5 Australian, New Zealand). Griffith omitted the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division from his table. Appendix 3, Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, p.218.

<sup>19</sup> . Nicholson, *Behind the Lines*, pp.223.

leavening of Scots, the figures are 733 officers and 15,235 other ranks, a total of 15,968.<sup>20</sup> In 29<sup>th</sup> Division, the last British Regular Division to be raised, the GOC, Major General de Lisle after the ‘more kicks than ha’pence’ experienced on the Somme, assessed that the wastage in his division was likely to be 100 percent every six months.<sup>21</sup> This rapidity of turnover needed to be reflected in the training of replacement officers, NCOs and men.

Major-General C E Pereira, GOC 2<sup>nd</sup> Division is most probably the unnamed senior officer quoted in the divisional history, whose *cri de coeur* after the Arras offensive of April-May 1917 reflected the problem of absorbing and trainings reinforcements facing every division in the BEF.

“We recently got 700 reinforcements... most of them enlisted only seven to nine weeks ago.... Out of this short period one has to subtract the time taken for inoculation and leave, and it does not represent much time for turning the men into soldiers. At the training centre they get twenty-one days sound training; but it is obvious that a division composed of 50 or 60 per cent of such new and untrained material will not stand a very great chance in heavy uphill fighting, and chances of real, steady, and progressive training seldom occur. We have to fight, to provide whole brigades at a time for work, and at the same time instil the rudiments of soldiering into our drafts... Meanwhile, there is a shortage of

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<sup>20</sup> . General Staff, War Office, *Field Service Pocket Book 1914*, HMSO London (Reprinted with Amendments 1916), reprinted 1917, p.6; Lt Col J Shakespear, *The 34<sup>th</sup> Division 1915-1919: The Story of its Career from Ripon to the Rhine*, H F & G Witherby, London, 1921, p.87

<sup>21</sup> .Captain Stair Gillon, *The Story of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division: A Record of Gallant Deeds*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1925, pp.89, 99-101.

officers, N.C.O.s and good instructors. It was a most depressing sight to see the attempts to train that were being made, with very good will, but with an absolute lack of the power of instruction.’<sup>22</sup>

As Nicholson tells us the way the BEF armies grew, meant that there was no one corps doctrine or procedures each developed based on the personality and foibles of the commander and the relationship he had with his principal staff. Not only that but at the sharp end, officers, NCOs and men had to learn their responsibilities on the job in the most difficult of circumstances with no voice of experience as a guide.

‘Regimental soldiering is not the simple, common-sense affair that some think it. It becomes a matter of plain common sense, only when you know how; and when by constant training it has developed into a second nature.’<sup>23</sup>

This second nature had to be developed at every level starting from both ends and working towards the centre. A doctrinal formula had to be found that achieved the goal of allowing all parts of the BEF to work effectively in close combination to defeat the Imperial German armies in the field. Order had to be imposed on a system that had gone its own way, but yet the best of individual unit and formation practice had to be assessed, adopted army-wide and then throughout the five armies in France.

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<sup>22</sup> . Everard Wyrall, *The History of the Second Division 1914-1918, Vol.II: 1916-1918*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, nd, p.447.

<sup>23</sup> . Nicholson, *Behind the Lines*, p.46.

The history of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division is a gem for its detail and insights into the training conducted over the period of its existence in France. Before the Arras offensive of April 1917 the aim of training set out by its GOC, Major-General H T Lukin, was to overcome the ‘deadening effects of trench warfare’ and to break down the prevailing belief which ‘since the days of 1914 when everyone that could be spared was needed to man the trenches, it had been customary to regard trench warfare and training as incompatible.’<sup>24</sup>

The pre-war British Army had an effective continuous training system that was promulgated in *Training and Manoeuvre Regulations* which set out the rules for individual and collective training with particular emphasis on field craft and musketry. It established an annual training cycle that incorporated tactical exercises on the ground without troops (TEWT), war games, indoor exercises, rapid solution schemes, reconnaissance of ground, as well as the administrative and conference details for gaining the maximum benefit from field training.<sup>25</sup> The basis of training in the individual arms and corps manuals was sound. The need was to replicate this system in France. Training was one of the priorities for those formations taken out of the line before a major offensive, but whether this happened or not, varied from corps to corps, army to army depending on the competing needs for large-scale work parties to complete preparations for the offensive. The pattern of preparation was well established by pre-war training and in the words of the 29<sup>th</sup> Divisional history, all based on the: ‘four cardinal principles of

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<sup>24</sup> . John Ewing, *The History of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division 1914-1919*, John Murray, London, 1921, pp. 175-176.

<sup>25</sup> . General Staff, War Office, *Training and Manoeuvre Regulations*, 1913, HMSO, London, 1913.

instruction – explanation, demonstration, execution, and repetition.’<sup>26</sup> The detailed rehearsals and practices carried out before each trench raid, were models for what was then being increasingly done for large-scale operations and were evident in the build-up to the Battle of Loos in 1915 and in the preparations for the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

Haig’s GHQ took a leading role in the dissemination of lessons learnt and the publication of tactical doctrine. This was a G-Branch responsibility but was given special impetus with the appointment of Brigadier-General Arthur Solly-Flood to command the new Training Directorate at GHQ on 30 January 1917. This was a Haig initiative. Solly-Flood commanded 35<sup>th</sup> Brigade in 12<sup>th</sup> Division during the battle of the Somme.<sup>27</sup> He was tasked with establishing the Third Army training school programme and visited the French Fourth Army training school at Chalons in November 1916, in a party of British officers that included Major-General Arthur Currie, GOC 1st Canadian Division and later Corps Commander of the Canadian Corps. Solly-Flood’s appointment at GHQ gave further impetus to a process of dissemination of tactical doctrine that was already well established.<sup>28</sup> The system of training for the British Armies in France was consolidated with the publication of *SS 152 Instructions for the Training of the British Armies in France* in June 1917. Formation commanders were responsible for the efficiency of units

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<sup>26</sup> .Gillon, *The Story of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division*, pp.99-101.

<sup>27</sup> . Peter J Palmer, ‘Sir Arthur Solly-Flood and Tactical Training in the BEF,’ *The Western Front Association*, <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/britain-allies/1039-sir-arthur-solly-flood-tactical-training-bef.html> accessed 4 June 2011. The effectiveness of GHQ is examined in Dan Todman, ‘The Grand Lamasery revisited: General Headquarters 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 1914-1918*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2004, pp.39-70.

<sup>28</sup> . Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into victory*, Frank Cass, London and New York, 2005, pp. 83-97.



under their command, and Commanding Officers were responsible for the training of 'all Officers, N.C.O.s. and men in their units.'<sup>29</sup> It set out the structure, syllabus and responsibilities for Corps schools, staff training and unit collective training. It provided a framework that governed training within the BEF for the rest of the war.

Experience on the Somme in early July 1916 led to changes in the practise of those divisions drawn into the five month battle and were promulgated with the publication of *SS119 Preliminary Notes of the Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations* in July 1916. This was followed by the first of the tactical pamphlets that emphasised platoon and company-level with the publication of *The Offensive of Small Units*, which was a translation of the French organisation of a company in the attack and which foreshadowed many of the changes incorporated into British doctrine.<sup>30</sup> More important was the publication of *SS.135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* in December 1916.<sup>31</sup>

This seminal publication set out the parameters for training the infantry division. It consolidated what was already being practiced by some formations. It laid out a sequence of training to be followed from the divisional commander's initial assessment of the tasks given for the next operation. It set out recommended time frames and how training

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<sup>29</sup> . General Staff, *SS 152 Instructions for the Training of the British Armies in France* (Provisional), HMSO, London, June 1917, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> . General Staff, *The Offensive of Small Units by General Headquarters, Eastern Armies, 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1916* (Summarized from the French and issued by the General Staff, December, 1916) HMSO, London, 1916.

<sup>31</sup> . General Staff, *SS.135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, HMSO, London, December 1916.

should be carried out. It was built upon the principles of good instruction and covered best practice in the attack including formations and frontages, co-operation with artillery, employment of the various weapon systems including tanks, synchronization of timings, communications.

It is a mine of information and fascinating to read. It emphasized that troops must be practiced over model trenches laid out on the ground so that ‘each man knows exactly what he has to do.’ It lay down that training had to start with platoons and companies working independently and progress to brigades and if possible the division as a whole conducting a practice on the ground. It stressed that even if time was short, battalions needed to be thoroughly trained before attempting to carry out brigade-level exercises. This consolidated practice and ensured a template for training that was used throughout the BEF. A survey of the divisional histories for those divisions involved in the Arras and Vimy offensive of April 1917 shows that the procedures published in December were already standard in each of the divisions in Allenby’s Third and Horne’s First Army. It suggests that the published doctrine simply consolidated what was already best practice in many of the formations.

The best of the divisional and corps commanders evaluated the Somme experience and profited from it. This was certainly true of Lieutenant-General the Honourable Sir Julian Byng’s Canadian Corps. Bill Rawling’s detailed study in *Surviving Trench Warfare* shows the growth in tactical development between the Somme and the Canadian attack on Vimy Ridge in April 1917. His careful evaluation is a record of outstanding Canadian achievement placing it at the forefront in the

tactical revolution that was occurring in the British armies on the Western front.<sup>32</sup>

Byng recognised that a citizen army had to be treated and trained differently from Regulars, noting that it was important for senior officers to become involved at levels that would not be contemplated in a Regular formation but ‘when so many Senior Officers in Battalions are still inexperienced, the interference even of Corps and Divisional Commanders in the training of the Platoon was beneficial.’<sup>33</sup> Directives from above were not enough when inexperience at every level of command down to private soldier meant that the few professionals who knew what to do had to get involved and by hand’s on involvement and advice teach staffs and units the business of both how to manage fighting and the business of fighting itself.

Byng was prepared to do this and stuck his nose in at every level it was needed. He also recognised that the key to success was to evolve a tactical doctrine based on an infantry battalion whose organisational structure had only been in place since 1913 and one where the critical component, the platoon, had not existed before this date. Byng summarised it as follows.

The largest unit that, under modern conditions can be directly controlled and manoeuvred under fire by one man is the Platoon. The Platoon Commander is therefore in most cases, the only man who can personally influence the local situation. In fact, it is not

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<sup>32</sup> . Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1992.

<sup>33</sup> . Canadian Corps G530. S109/1 dated 13 May 1917, Battalion Organization (Army and Corps Scheme) RG 9, III, C1, Vol 3864, Folder 99, File 3.

too much to say that this is the Platoon Commander's war. Realizing this, it becomes the duty of the Company Commander to see that each Platoon is trained by its leader to act either with independence or as a component of the Company.<sup>34</sup>

The problem was that the existing four platoon structure in a rifle company based on 50-strong platoons was too inflexible and with the rapid expansion of the BEF it became a means of administration rather than an effective command, giving the platoon commander 'no command worthy of the name and little or no opportunity of training either his men or himself to realize their capabilities.' Changes were needed to the platoon organisation, making it smaller and more adaptable but yet still giving it both the numbers and the specialist skills needed for it to make best use of the weapons' technology available.<sup>35</sup>

Evolving doctrine within an army must be based on a procedure that is able to recognise the best practice that is happening at the sharp end. Throughout the BEF commanders at all levels groped towards tactical solutions on how to cross the deadly ground and close with the enemy once the artillery barrage had lifted from the enemy's front-line trenches. It was at formation-level, primarily division and corps, that effective doctrinal practice was evolved and put into effect. The following stand out but one has to be careful in naming these few as it is increasingly evident from research into formation histories that there were many effective trainers at divisional level, Major-General C E Pereira in 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, Major-General W T Furse and his successor

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Major-General H T Lukin in 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division, Major-General R P Lee, successor to the noted tactical innovator Ivor Maxse in 18<sup>th</sup> Division, who like his predecessor, also ‘had a settled distaste for frontal attacks’ and always sort to manoeuvre; Major-General B De Lisle, 29<sup>th</sup> Division, and Major-General C M Harper, 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division.

Griffith mentions the following divisions as having claim to elite status in terms of combat performance and in each case, the quality of the divisional commander is the key component of that ability: 11<sup>th</sup> (Northern), 14<sup>th</sup> (Light), 15<sup>th</sup> (‘Thistle’ Scottish), 18<sup>th</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> (Western), 21<sup>st</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> (Lancashire), 33<sup>rd</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster), 47<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland), 55<sup>th</sup> (Lancashire), 56<sup>th</sup> (London).<sup>36</sup> Add to this the Canadian divisional commanders, Major-General A C Macdonell, 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, Major-General H E Burstall, 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, and Major-General L J Lipsett, 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, in Lieutenant-General A W Currie’s Canadian Corps; Major-General H B Walker, 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division, Major-General John Monash, 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division and later Australian Corps commander, Major-General E G Sinclair-MacLagan, 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, and Major-General Sir Andrew Russell, New Zealand Division.

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<sup>36</sup> . Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>37</sup> . There are a wealth of sources for this, and those who have seen John Bourne’s material know that his forthcoming publication on officers of general’s rank in the BEF will be a seminal moment in the writing and research of the British Army history of the First World War, see Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918*, pp. 66-67. the various chapters in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control on the Western Front*. Patrick H Brennan, ‘Byng and Currie’s Commanders: A still untold story of the Canadian Corps,’ *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 11, no. 2, Spring 2002, pp.5-16. Ian McCulloch, ‘“Batty Mac,” Portrait of a Brigade Commander of the Great War, 1915-1917,’ *Canadian Military History*, Vol 7, No. 4, Autumn 1998, pp. 11-28.

Divisional commanders lose their edge with too much war, as do all soldiers, but this is a healthy list. What it shows is that throughout the BEF most of Haig's divisions evolved training procedures that absorbed relatively untrained reinforcements into a system that provided a sound basis for tactical training with emphasis at the platoon-level that was standardised throughout the BEF. This was the foundation for formation tactics that were also standardised. Circumstance and the nature of their commitment to battle favoured some divisions over others, but all had to cope with rebuilding after heavy losses and in doing so accommodate changes to tactical doctrine incorporating the lessons learnt from recent experience. It was a constantly evolving dynamic that had to also incorporate the need to man the trenches while in the line, ongoing work on developing and improving the trench systems while often being involved in intensive preparations for the next offensive. It demanded dedication and drive at every level of command and what is remarkable are the standards that were achieved in the circumstances.

Commanders, like Major-General B De Lisle of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, constantly strove to improve the standards of junior leadership within their divisions. This training incorporated how best to use the rolling or creeping barrage, introduced on the Somme, and also how to integrate the technology of war with the greater use of Lewis guns, trench mortars, Stokes mortars and the return to emphasising rifle fire rather than bombing as the primary weapon of the infantryman.

In the words of the divisional history, De Lisle 'personally lectured company and platoon commanders with the aid of the blackboard and many ingenious *memoria technical*. The principles enunciated were then

put into practice under his own supervision. Nothing was left to chance. Before every operation situations similar to those likely to occur were described in detail, and then a manoeuvre was executed as like that of the impending operation as he and his staff could devise. After this manoeuvre was carried out satisfactorily, the officers of each unit were summoned to a conference and personally catechized by their general.’<sup>38</sup>

Major-General C M Harper was similarly insistent in training the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division. Despite a year’s hard fighting, heavy losses and a miserable “nightmare” winter on the Somme, Harper, who, was always thinking about the ‘application of tactical principles to the condition of modern warfare’ applied them to reinvigorating his division. The divisional history records that: ‘What the General thought today the Division thought and practised the following week.’ Harper preached three key principles:

1. That the objective of all offensive operations must be to envelop the enemy – i.e., hold him in front and attack him in flank.
2. That the fullest use must at all times be made of mechanical weapons – i.e., guns, machine-guns, trench mortars, etc. The minimum use of infantry; to rely for success on the weight of infantry, either in attack or defence, was to ensure unnecessary casualties.
3. That troops must always be in depth; they must neither attack nor defend in one or two dense lines of men, but in a succession of well-extended lines.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> .Captain Stair Gillon, *The Story of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division: A Record of Gallant Deeds*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1925, pp.99-101.

<sup>39</sup> . Major F W Bewsher, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division 1914-1918*, William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh, 1921, pp.142-143.

Divisions published their own training notes and pamphlets which were full of pithy sayings that soldiers and junior leaders were likely to remember. De Lisle's 29<sup>th</sup> Division's pamphlet included the following:

“A creeping barrage doesn't creep; it jumps.”

“When you are held up by a strong post, and you are uncertain which flank is best to turn, put your hand in your pocket and pull out a coin. If it shows heads, go to the right; if tails, to the left. It is better to go to the wrong flank without hesitation than keep your men under fire at close range.”

“Turning a flank is not being able to fire through the side windows, but into the back door.”<sup>40</sup>

This growing platoon-level revolution was driven from perceptive commanders from the top down at corps and division. They recognised the importance of the platoon organisation to tactical doctrine and like their Commander-in-Chief made this a focus of training. Developments in infantry tactics were prescribed in a series of pamphlets. These were to be as important as *SS.135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* in providing drills and procedures for junior officers and NCOs as the practical basis for platoon attack doctrine. *SS.143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917*, the first to be issued by Solly-Flood, set out the new platoon organisations and drills for tactical training and was the first pamphlet published by the British Army that clearly set out the role of the platoon in the attack. It established doctrinal procedures that remain current to the present day. It is the most important pamphlet published in the British Army during the

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<sup>40</sup> . Gillon, *The Story of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division*, pp.99-101.



First World War.<sup>41</sup> This was complemented by *The Organization of an Infantry Battalion and The Normal Formation for the Attack* issued in February 1917, that set out the battalion organisation and suggested platoon, company and battalion formations in ‘order to ensure the necessary degree of uniformity of training and tactical method throughout the Army.’<sup>42</sup>

Platoon organisation and tactics continued to evolve throughout the war. In February 1918, infantry battalion organisation and tactics was absorbed into the new edition of SS.143 *The Training and Employment of Platoons 1918* that was revised and issued again in August 1918.<sup>43</sup> In each case the revisions took into account changes in German tactical doctrine.

This was complemented at the individual soldier level with the publications of SS 185 *Assault Training* in September 1917 and SS 195 *Scouting and Patrolling* issued in December 1917. In each case the publications consolidated what was already best practice. Read the detail and examine the diagrams and suggested attack options in each and one can recognise the basis of platoon tactical drills that are still in use today.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> . General Staff, BEF, SS 143, *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, 1917, February 1917;

<sup>42</sup> . General Staff, War Office, *The Organization of an Infantry Battalion and The Normal Formation for the Attack*, April 1917, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> . General Staff, BEF, SS143, *The Training and Employment of Platoons 1918*, February 1918, republished in August 1918.

<sup>44</sup> . General Staff, War Office, SS 185 *Assault Training*, HMSO, London, September 1917; General Staff, War Office, SS 195 *Scouting and Patrolling*, HMSO London, December 1917.

Throughout the BEF in 1917 the ‘necessity for an even, uniform, and all-pervading standard was paramount.’<sup>45</sup> The lack of experience at commanding officer level led to the growth of divisional and corps schools to train instructors and also train officers and NCOs in the skills that were required. Corps schools were initially established and when divisions grew in skill they were supplemented and then replaced by divisional schools. The multitude of schools, courses and their ceaseless demand for students would be criticised by commanders in 1918, but this is a reflection of the growth of skills and competence at unit level. In early 1917 corps schools were essential elements in improving tactical and command skills. By late 1917 this training responsibility was increasingly devolved down to divisions.

It was a concurrent revolution that evolved from the bottom at platoon-level and from the top at divisional-level but subject from the beginning to centralised direction from Haig’s headquarters who under Solly-Flood and his successors produced the doctrinal pamphlets and amplified them with regular publication of lessons learnt from operations, amplifying in practical terms the principles laid down in *Field Service Regulations*.

Ewing’s marvellous 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division history records that in preparation for the Arras offensive in April 1917, training was provided ‘on a more thorough scale than had been possible before any previous battle.’ The three brigades were rotated through a cycle of manning the front line, working parties, and training.

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<sup>45</sup> . Gillon, *The Story of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division*, pp.99-101.

‘This arrangement allowed eight days’ training for each brigade in turn. From the photographs taken by the Royal Flying Corps, the enemy’s system was marked out accurately on the training area by tapes and shallow trenches made by ploughs, and the frequent practice that the men had over this course gave them a very fair idea of what they were expected to do on the 9<sup>th</sup> April. Exact models of the ground to be attacked were moulded in clay and the men thus learned not merely the character of the country, but also the names of the German trenches.’<sup>46</sup>

Each of the attack brigades in the division adopted similar tactical formations.

‘The men were to advance in a series of waves, a wave consisted of two lines, and each wave was to be followed by a line of “moppers-up,” who were to clear captured trenches and dug-outs of skulking foes, so that no damage might be done after the leading troops had gone on’.<sup>47</sup>

This was the pattern of preparation throughout Horne’s First and Allenby’s Third Army in the lead-up to the attack onto Vimy Ridge and from the Arras salient. Similar accounts can be found in the histories of the divisions of the three corps in Plumer’s Second Army involved in the preparations for the Messines. This photo shows an infantry brigade training in France in May 1917 under the new platoon organisations for the night attack on the Messines Ridge conducted by Plumer’s Second Army on 7 June 1917. These rehearsals were the culmination of a

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<sup>46</sup> . Ewing, *The History of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division 1914-1919*, p.189.

<sup>47</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.191.

programme of platoon, company and battalion training. To ensure control by night over ground broken by shell-holes and wire the platoons, organised by sections, are in file with commanders leading. You can see the 3-inch Stokes Mortar barrel being carried in the near file so that once artillery fire lifts, companies within the battalion have intimate indirect fire support.



**Figure 1: A New Zealand Infantry Brigade training for night attack at Messines in Lumbres training area, May 1917. H Series New Zealand Official Photograph**

The training incorporates lessons learned from the April 1917 offensive at Arras and Vimy. This brigade conducted three separate brigade rehearsals on ground selected for its similarity to the objective to be attacked with German defensive positions marked out on the ground. After each rehearsal the divisional commander discussed formations and rates of advance with the brigade commander, commanding officers, company commanders and supporting arms commanders. The divisional

fire plan timings were adjusted accordingly, the fire plan becoming the servant of the advancing soldier and not a rigid strait-jacket into which the infantry attack was squashed, regardless of whether it fitted or not.

What is important to note about this photograph is that every assault brigade in Plumer's Second Army conducted similar rehearsals on chosen ground related to their particular objectives, where timings and fire plans were adjusted to the needs of the attack formations within the divisional plan. This involved 20 infantry brigades over a period of six weeks, each practising and adjusting their individual attack plans as a result of two or three rehearsals for 10 assault divisions in the three corps that were part of the Second Army plan.<sup>48</sup>

Major-General Tim Harington, Plumer's MGGS, catchphrase of 'Trust, Training and Thoroughness' ensured that each formation was trained and practised.<sup>49</sup> It ensured sections and platoons attacked with common drills with platoon commanders having taken their NCOs forward to observe the ground from observation posts. Each section being issued with maps (with a message template on the back so as to report objective taken), giving localised objectives, with junior commanders knowing their part in the divisional plan.

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<sup>48</sup> . Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, pp.84-100; Bewsher, *The History of 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland) Division 1914-1918*, pp.196-197; Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division*, McCaw, Stevenson and Orr Ltd, The Linenhall Press, Belfast and London, 1922, pp. 83-84; Christopher Pugsley, *The Anzac Experience: New Zealand, Australia and Empire in the First World War*, Reed, Auckland, 2004, pp.165-203.

<sup>49</sup> . Pugsley, *The Anzac Experience*, p.216.

Major Walter Guinness, Brigade Major, 74<sup>th</sup> Brigade in 25<sup>th</sup> Division describes setting up an ‘exact model of the trenches’ that they were to attack during the Messines offensive. ‘This was a very big job as there were eight different trench lines of enemy to be marked on a width of 700 to 800 yards and to a depth of over a mile, beside our own front line and support system which were to be used as Assembly trenches.’ This was then followed by rehearsal.

‘Our Brigade arrived early on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>. The weather was broiling hot. We practised on the training grounds the whole evening until 9 p.m. and then began again at 3 a.m. the following morning (27 May). There was no sleep in between as we were working out details and I had to be up on the ground at 1 a.m. to supervise the practice of marching up in dead silence to the Assembly trenches. We got a couple of hours, however, in the morning before doing another practice that afternoon.’<sup>50</sup>

Extrapolate this activity to every assault brigade in each of the 10 divisions taking part. To anyone acquainted with the conduct of brigade exercises, the scale and detail of this preparation is impressive. The fact that it was being conducted army wide is more impressive still, and through all of this Haig was a constant presence.

Lessons learnt in the form of *Notes on Recent Fighting* were disseminated downwards from Haig’s GHQ to divisional level. In the same manner Haig’s armies, such as Plumer’s Second Army distributed its own *Further Notes on Operations* which show the evolving tactical

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<sup>50</sup> . Bond and Robbins, (eds), *Staff Officer*, p. 153.

patterns in the battles at Messines and in the Ypres Salient in 1917. Corps and divisions were equally active in distributing notes for training. The tactical training file of the 1<sup>st</sup> New Zealand Infantry Brigade makes fascinating reading as it covers the evolution of tactical doctrine within the BEF from the arrival of the New Zealand Division in France in 1916 until the end of the war.<sup>51</sup> It is likely that similar files could once be found in every brigade throughout the BEF. What is impressive from the study of this file is the detail and the accompanying comments from the various headquarters in the chain of distribution. It is more than simply passing it on, commanders at each level are reflecting from their own formation's experience and offering comment.

A study of Haig's diaries shows that like Forester's General Curzon, he poked his nose in at every level within his command. In 1917 Haig became his own inspector general and personally assessed what worked and what did not? It is not difficult to see the impact this would have, if the Commander-in-Chief's interest was cookhouses then that interest would become those of his subordinates, but in Haig's case it is tactical doctrine and that became the preoccupation of his armies.<sup>52</sup>

His diaries demonstrate that he wanted proof that the changes were happening on the ground. On 15 July 1917 he 'motored to the high ground north-east of Lumbres and saw a demonstration by a platoon in an exercise in "fire and movement," with ball cartridge. Its main object was

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<sup>51</sup> . WA-70, 3/9A, 1917-1918, Two Parts, Operations and Training, HQ 1 NZ Infantry Brigade, Archive New Zealand.

<sup>52</sup> . See the series of chapters relating to Corps, Division and Brigade command in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-1918*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2004.

to show all ranks the importance of good covering fire in order to help forward an advance. The exercises were carried out by the XIX Corps and the platoon from K.O.S.B. under Lieut. Weir who had only a year's service.'<sup>53</sup> This visit is part of the pattern for the next two years with visits to training at every level conducted by units and formations and schools to both assess and encourage the spread of tactical doctrine.

This was interspersed with his visits to each Army and Corps involved with each major offensive where he would assess attack plans then discuss them at every level of command from Army down to division. In each case his artillery adviser accompanied him, and plans were assessed in detail, criticized and changes suggested where Haig thought necessary. He wanted to be convinced that the planning had been done, was sound and the men trained and ready to carry it out. Any doubts Haig had were expressed. However where divisional commanders advanced solid argument to retain their plans, as Russell of the New Zealand Division did before Messines in June 1917 and Currie did before resuming the Passchendaele offensive then Haig inevitably acquiesced.<sup>54</sup>

He closely monitored the preparations for the Third Battle of Ypres and Fifth Army's divisional training reflected the lessons learned from Arras and Messines. On 17 July 1917 Haig viewed an attack practise by 73<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> Division and on the following day saw Major-General Heneker's 8<sup>th</sup> Division, both divisions being in Lieutenant-General C W Jacob's II Corps, Fifth Army, conduct a divisional attack practise with

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<sup>53</sup> . Haig Diaries, 15 July 1917, WO 256/20.

<sup>54</sup> . Haig Diaries 24 May 1917, WO 256/18; Pugsley, *The Anzac Experience*, pp. 194-195 and 224.



two brigades: the men being in ‘great spirit and all ranks looking fit and healthy.’<sup>55</sup>

He and his commanders were conscious of the constant turnover in officers and other ranks and the impact this had on the combat effectiveness of the division. Even during major offensive operations, Haig determined to see that training continued. On 17 August 1918 he visited the brigades of Major-General Ramsay’s 58<sup>th</sup> Division where ‘Platoon, company and battalion training was going on.’ Haig spoke to each group of officers and ‘I impressed on all the need for training platoon commanders, Battalion commanders must be able to teach their company C.Os and the latter their platoon commanders. Platoon commanders must devote much time to their N.C.Os and patrol commanders. We are coming back to the same essential points on which I used to insist so strongly when I was C-in-C at Aldershot before the war’.<sup>56</sup>

It was basic training to sound effect instilling in the citizen battalions the second nature necessary for sound tactical practice. By 1918 this was standard procedure throughout the BEF. Maintaining standards across five armies was always difficult and in 1917 Plumer’s Second Army was the pace setter. The directives and conference notes signed by Plumer’s MGGS, Major-General Tim Harington, who had formerly been Byng’s BGGS in the Canadian Corps, are a model of their kind. The Second Army preparations before Messines in May-June 1917

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<sup>55</sup> . Haig Diaries, 15 and 16 July 1917, WO 256/20. Lt Colonel J H Boraston and Captain Cyril E O Bax, *The Eighth Division in War 1914-1918*, The Medici Society, London, 1926, p.125.

<sup>56</sup> . Haig Diaries, 17 August 1918, WO256/35.

and then in the build-up to Passchendaele in August-September 1917 show how important an army headquarters was in setting the stage for the combined arms battle to work in supporting the infantry attack<sup>57</sup> However the paper and discussions simply set the stage for the rehearsals on the ground.

Once again it is easy to direct from above, but achieving it across five armies involved in trench warfare is a different matter. How difficult this was for a British division in the line is recorded by Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Allanson, GSO 1 of the 57<sup>th</sup> Division that arrived in France early in 1917 to be informed on arrival of the changes to the platoon organisation. Allanson was very critical that this instruction had not reached the Division in England ‘so that our final training could have been carried out under these conditions. With a division spread out along miles of trenches, reorganisation is difficult, and will receive but scanty attention – from force of circumstance – by experienced officers.’<sup>58</sup>

The changes to training and the emphasis on preparation and planning at corps and army to reflect detailed divisional planning were also reflected in performance on the first day of battle. Vimy and Arras on 9 April 1917 were impressive successes. This was also true of the attack on the Messines-Wytschate Ridge on 7 June 1917. What each battle also revealed was the difficulties armies had in following up the initial successes on subsequent days and it is here that we see a tendency

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<sup>57</sup> . 2<sup>nd</sup> Army G.140, ‘General Principles on which the Artillery Plan will be Drawn,’ included with 2<sup>nd</sup> Army G.140 to GHQ dated 29 August 1917, Second Army War Diary, August 1917, Vol. XXXII, WO 95/275.

<sup>58</sup> . Harry Davies, *Allanson of the 6<sup>th</sup>*, Square One Publications, Worcester, 1990, p. 131.

for hastily mounted attacks without sufficient preparation where army and corps demanded unrealistic, ill-thought through attacks by divisions on ground where similar attacks had just failed. Follow-up divisions that had trained just as carefully as those in the initial assault found that the skills and training counted for little if the objectives given to them had not been thought through by higher command. Messines worked because of its limited scope. Arras descended into a nightmare of attrition, culminating in the disastrous attack on 3 May 1917 because operations at Army-level had not been thought through in depth. This is reflected in 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division's assessment for the failure of its attack on 12 April 1917.

‘The preparations and arrangements were hurried to a culpable degree, and though the basis of the action was understood to be the bombardment of hostile machine-gun emplacements by the Corps’ heavy artillery, the heavies might as well have remained silent for all the assistance they gave. Apart from the fact that the time for reconnoitring the enemy’s position, particularly by the artillery, was miserably inadequate, defeat was practically inevitable when the 27<sup>th</sup> Brigade had to be formed up in full view of the enemy and at a distance of more than 1000 yards from the barrage line.’<sup>59</sup>

Getting it right at divisional-level was more difficult at Corps and Army. The first day success at the battles of Messines, Arras and Vimy was rarely achieved in the days that followed, control and communications and supply though anticipated and planned for, was very difficult to achieve and the tendency was for rushed minor actions at

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<sup>59</sup> . Ewing, *The History of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division 1914-1919*, p.205

divisional-level to straighten the line or exploit previous success that simply cost lives to little effect .

Haig tended to press his commanders too hard in wanting to follow-up initial success. It shows that having a workable training template does not guarantee success if higher preparation and planning is faulty. This was evident in General Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army offensive at the opening of the Third Battle of Ypres on 31 July 1917. It is rare to find criticism of superior headquarters in the divisional histories, yet Cyril Falls in his history of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division damns the work of Gough and his staff with the quote: "“We felt,” said a distinguished officer after the action, “that the Battle of Messines was won at Zero, and that the Battle of Ypres was lost long before it.”"<sup>60</sup> This was also the view of Major Walter Guinness, Brigade Major in 25<sup>th</sup> Division when transferred from II ANZAC in Plumer's Second Army to II Corps in Gough's Fifth Army. 'After the wonderful organization and devotion to detail which one found in 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, the 5<sup>th</sup> Army struck one as very haphazard in its methods... None of the lessons taught by Plumer's success seemed to have been learnt'<sup>61</sup>

This too was the experience of divisions drawn into Fifth Army to reinforce the assault. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Division transferred from Egypt to France in March 1917. From 9 July to 22 August 1917 it carried out intensive training at battalion, brigade and divisional-level in preparation for the Ypres offensive. 'special attention being paid to training in attacks on

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<sup>60</sup> . Falls, *The History of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division*, p. 122.

<sup>61</sup> . Bond, (ed) *Staff Officer*, p.162

fortified posts and strong points'.<sup>62</sup> Prepared for battle, the division was committed to the Ypres offensive on 16 August as part of V Corps of Gough's Fifth Army and in the words of the divisional history committed to a series of 'unproductive local assaults.' The division was relieved by 9<sup>th</sup> Division on 18 September and transferred to the Nieuport sector.

'The men were glad to quit the Ypres salient, but they did not leave it in a happy frame of mind. Every one felt that the Division was not at its best; that it was capable of better things had opportunity been given.'<sup>63</sup>

It is more than coincidental that divisions had to leave Fifth Army to realise their potential. It was not until Birdwood's I ANZAC Corps was posted to Plumer's Second Army in August 1917 that his Australian divisions were able to absorb the organisational changes within infantry battalions and train on the tactical doctrine increasingly the standard in all armies and more importantly match it with performance in battle.<sup>64</sup>

Haig is a constant presence and his monitoring of Gough's progress in early August led him to place a brake on Gough's willingness to rush and instead press for limited objectives until the German defences have been weakened. Instinctively Haig would have agreed with Gough's desire to achieve a breakthrough, that is why he chose him as Army Commander, but the realities of the lessons learnt at Arras and Messines tempered his immediate ambitions

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<sup>62</sup> . Frederick P Gibbon, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> (East Lancashire) Division 1914-1918*, "Country Life" and George Newnes, London, 1920, p.102

<sup>63</sup> . Gibbon, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> (East Lancashire) Division 1914-1918*, p.105

<sup>64</sup> . Pugsley, *The Anzac Experience*, pp. 190-191, 259-261.

‘We must exhaust the enemy as much as possible and ourselves as little as possible in the early stages of the fight... our furthest objective must be not only within the power of our artillery, but within the power of our infantry (having regard to the state of the ground existing at the time of the attack, and the discipline and the state of training of the divisions), so that we may gain great advantage of beating off the enemy’s counter-attacks. The next blow should then follow as quickly as possible, and this object is assisted by not pushing our infantry to exhaustion in the first instance, so that, without relief, they may be capable of advancing again after three or four days, or if possible even less.’<sup>65</sup>.

German defensive doctrine before Passchendaele presented a different problem from that faced at Messines and Haig’s armies adapted accordingly.<sup>66</sup> Let me quote from a Brigade Major’s perspective.

‘We went several times up to the Bony training area to rehearse our part of the scheme. It was a very different task to what we had had at Messines, being practically open warfare with no trench lines to capture and only sufficient artillery to deal with strongpoints and to fire at fleeting targets over open sights. We found the Brigade very ignorant as to the conditions of open warfare. Though they had reached a great pitch of efficient organization in set-piece trench attacks, all ranks showed great ignorance as to the use of ground

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<sup>65</sup> . Haig to his Army Commanders ‘Tactical Notes’ for criticism of Army Commanders dated 7 August, WO256/21

<sup>66</sup> . ‘The Enemy’s Defensive Policy: Translation of captured order by German Fourth Army dated July 1917’, Appendix to 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Intelligence Summary, 18 August 1917,

and little of the initiative that is imperative in this kind of warfare.’<sup>67</sup>

Tactical improvements were constantly in flux and needed to respond to German defensive doctrine. Changes in German defensive practice were the subject of discussion and directives from GHQ which was consolidated at Army level. Plumer and his staff recognized that ‘we have as a rule troops who have had only limited training and officers and non-commissioned officers who have not had much experience and who are therefore slow to appreciate the local tactical situation and consequently uncertain as to how it should be dealt with.’ Because of this ‘such operations require even more attention to details than those usually described as trench warfare.’<sup>68</sup>

Once again these changes saw the issue of directives and training notes which were then systematically put into practice by divisions as they came out of the line or by reserve units and brigades while still in the line.

On 24 September 1917 Haig ‘watched the 7<sup>th</sup> Division carrying out an attack practice on the ground between Zudausques and the high ground west of Wisques. The latter represented the Passchendaele ridge... The enemy’s defensive system was a copy made from photos of actual ground near the Passchendaele ridge. A considerable number of “pill boxes” were represented by square enclosures formed of canvas

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<sup>67</sup> . Bond and Robbins, (eds), *Staff Officer*, p. 161.

<sup>68</sup> . General Sir Hubert Plumer to Second ANZAC Corps dated 1st August 1917. Second Army War Diary, August 1917, Vol. XXXII, WO 95/275.

walls and garrisoned by three or four men with blank ammunition. All this arrangement gave our troops good practice. I spoke to many platoon and section leaders, and was much struck by their intelligence and knowledge.’ Haig discussed the tactics and procedures with the divisional commander and his brigadiers, and ‘thought the system of training good. All ranks seemed to be very keen and greatly interested in the scheme. There is no doubt but that the training has a direct effect on reducing the number of casualties suffered in a battle.’<sup>69</sup>

It is important to stress the degree by which all of the corps attached to Second Army benefited from the way the planning and preparation evolved during the Passchendaele Campaign. Under Plumer’s careful direction and with the detailed and explicitly clear outlines and directives of his MGGS, Major-General Tim Harington, an army plan evolved that ensured that each corps and its component divisions had time to assess, plan, and train for the battles to come.

This series of interchanges between army, corps and division, and then within each division itself gave each level of command ownership of the process. It was this that allowed divisional commanders to give it their personal touch and in turn their refinements were fed back into the corps and army plan.

This reflected the climate engendered by Plumer and Harington within Second Army and we see its fruits in the successful battles of 20 and 26 September. It is achieved again on 4 October 1917 and Haig,

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69 . Haig Diaries, 24 September 1917, WO256/22.



despite the onset of rain, once again aspires to achieving a breakout against what he believes is as a weakened enemy. Both Plumer and Gough had reservations but as the October discussions with their Commander-in-Chief show, Haig's army commanders knew when it was politic to hold their tongues and acquiesce.<sup>70</sup> Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Godley's keenness to impress his Commander-in-Chief in his preparations for the attack on 9 October 1917 was given impetus by Haig's similar desire to exploit success. This both coloured and degraded Godley's preparations for what was already a difficult corps attack. This in turn led to the equally hurried and disastrous attacks on 12 October 1917.<sup>71</sup>

It needed strong men who knew what they were doing to argue their case. Godley was not of this calibre and indeed did not understand the conditions facing his divisions in front of Passchendaele. Lieutenant-General Currie of the Canadian Corps was of sterner will and of greater intelligence, and would not attack before he believed his corps was ready and the preparations in place. He was Haig's choice to succeed Byng and proved to be the outstanding corps commander on the Western Front, even if at times he and Haig clashed, but Haig recognised Currie's talent and could work with him.<sup>72</sup> The successes of 20 and 26 September and 4 October 1917 blinded Haig to the impossible conditions that the rains

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<sup>70</sup> . Haig Diaries, 1-31 October 1917, WO 252/23

<sup>71</sup> . Pugsley, *The Anzac Experience*, pp. 233-242; Christopher Pugsley, 'The New Zealand Division at Passchendaele,' Peter H Liddle (ed) *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*, Leo Cooper, London 1997, pp.272-291.

<sup>72</sup> . Dean Oliver, 'The Canadians at Passchendaele,' Peter H Liddle (ed) *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*, Leo Cooper, London 1997, pp.255-271.

imposed on Second Army.<sup>73</sup> It was impossible to get guns forward, but believing one more blow would achieve collapse Haig determined to attack again and again until an untenable salient on the site of Passchendaele village was secured by the Canadians and the battle finally closed down on 10 November 1917.

The Battle of Cambrai 20 November -5 December 1917 strongly influenced British infantry-tank tactical doctrine. The reports of the divisions taking part highlighted the value of the preparatory training before the offensive. Major-General C E Pereira, GOC 2<sup>nd</sup> Division noted that:

‘The value of at least a month’s time for consecutive training a year is one of the most marked lessons learnt...During this period especial attention was paid to the training of platoons as units and to insisting on the Platoon Commander commanding his own platoon and acting on his own initiative. Opportunity for movement above ground, open order formations, individuality and responsibility were available which in trench warfare are impossible. As the training progressed Bde-Days on a large scale were undertaken in which many mistakes were made and from which many lessons were learnt.’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> . See Major Alan Brooke’s assessment of Haig unshaken belief in the prospects of a breakthrough before Passchendaele, when Brooke was Staff Officer RA to the Canadian Corps, ‘I am certain he was misinformed and had never seen the ground for himself,’ David Fraser, *Alanbrooke*, Collins, London, 1982, p. 78.

<sup>74</sup> . Lessons Learned 2<sup>nd</sup> Division CAMBRAI Operations, distributed by XXII Corps 25 January 1918, WA-70, 3/9A, 1917-1918, Two Parts, Operations and Training, HQ 1 NZ Infantry Brigade, Archive New Zealand.

Cambrai encapsulated Haig's strengths and weaknesses: the willingness to support an innovative plan, an insistence on training and rehearsals, countered by a determination to demand more than what was possible, and once committed, unwilling to give this up, resulting in an unnecessarily prolonged battle.

Let me jump ahead to 1918 to stress the constant evolution of doctrine and procedure. The reduction of divisional strengths from 12 to nine battalions impacted on a division's ability to provide its own coherent depth in both attack and defence. It demanded tactical coordination at Corps to achieve objectives that would once have been the focus of a single division. Balanced against this was the decline in tactical effectiveness of German divisions after the failure of the March offensive of 1918. The continual training that was now a feature of the divisional cycle in and out of the line in the BEF continued. It allowed for drafts to be assimilated into the badly depleted ranks of Haig's divisions and also allowed divisions to absorb the lessons gained from the German attacks.

On 31 July 1918 Haig viewed a combined infantry tank attack practice. He noted the 'remarkable progress [that] has been made since Cambrai, not only in the pattern of our Tank, but also in the method of using them. Tanks now go first, covered by shrapnel barrage, and break down all opposition. Enemy in strong points and machine-gun nests are then flattened out by the Tanks. The latter then signal to infantry to "come on," and these then advance in open order and mop up remaining defenders, and collect the prisoners. During the consolidation Tanks zig-zag in front to cover the operation.' The demonstration was carried out by

an Australian infantry battalion and then a viewing battalion was ‘put through similar exercises on the same course.’ As Haig noted, ‘The result of these methodical exercises has been to render a Tank attack more effective and much less costly to us’.<sup>75</sup>

There is a curious paradox about Haig’s approach to command. On one hand he would detach himself from the tasks he delegated to his Army commanders and act almost in the role of Directing Staff in querying their plans, and yet, in every other respect, he was a constant presence who ensured that GHQ directives were put into practice across his armies. As the glimpses I have given you show, this was an evolving dynamic that kept abreast of technological change and German tactics. Central to this was Haig himself.

In 1918 during the 100 Day Offensive he coordinated the advance of five armies. Within those armies the rapid decline of German resistance meant that divisions could advance within a corps framework with initiative being passed down to division and then in turn to the leading infantry brigades grouped with their own tank and artillery support. Haig’s role became one of spurring on his army commanders and determining where to next switch the emphasis with each army attack. Concurrent with this were his visits to corps and divisions in and out of the line to assess performance. Now for the first time we see sustained army and corps-level offensive operations that grew in fluidity and skill

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<sup>75</sup> . Haig Diaries, 31 July 1918, WO 256/33.

as the Imperial German Army in the words of the Official Dispatches increasingly ‘was capable neither of accepting nor refusing battle.’<sup>76</sup>

Forester’s *The General* has a scene where, after a failed battle, the Corps Commander Wayland-Leigh ‘sat in his chair and writhed his bulk about, grinning like an ogre as the suggestions assumed more and more concrete form, while Norton beside him took industrious notes to form the skeleton of the long reports he would have to send in to Army Headquarters and to G.H.Q. In some ways it was like the debate of a group of savages as to how to extract a screw from a piece of wood. Accustomed only to nails, they had made one effort to pull the screw by main force, and now that it had failed they were devising methods of applying more force still.’<sup>77</sup>

This is not a sympathetic picture and it reflected a growing public belief that in the 1930s that Haig and his generals substituted brute strength for tactical nuance, but it does captures the determination within the BEF to learn from mistakes and to counter improvements in German tactical doctrine. The reality of success in war on the scale of the Western Front demands a sustained effort by professionals with the skills to coordinate, administer, train and employ on operations vast armies. To achieve that in wartime with a citizen force is an expensive journey of trial and error involving enormous sacrifice. It was only possible by recreating a planning and preparation process, allied to a repetitive cycle of training that made the tactical drills and skills second nature at all

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<sup>76</sup> . Lieut-Colonel J H Boraston, (ed), *Sir Douglas Haig’s Despatches (December 1915-April 1919)*, J M Dent & Sons, London, 1920, p.298.

<sup>77</sup> . Forester, *The General*, pp. 159-162.

levels of command. This allowed commanders at every level to assess the needs of the particular situation, knowing that subordinates and men had the skills necessary to do whatever the proposed tactical solution entailed. This achievement was central to British success in 1918.

The evolution of Haig as Commander-in-Chief, and the evolving professionalism of his armies which he oversaw, is one of enormous achievement against the finest army in the world within a comparatively short timeframe of just over four years of warfare. Mistakes were many and costly but given the start point and the calibre of the opposition this was inevitable. It is important to recognise Haig's dominant role in this process which is integral to an understanding of the British Army experience on the Western Front.