



The Spire Sentinel



**The Newsletter
of The
Branch of The
Front**



**& Magazine
Chesterfield
Western
Association**

ISSUE 102 - August 2024

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the
Great War'.



Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2024

Meetings start at 7.30pm and take place at the Labour Club, Unity House, Saltergate, Chesterfield S40 1NF

January	9th	. AGM + `Finding My Roots` Jon-Paul Harding. ..tracing his Great Grandfathers in The Great War
February	6th	<i>Nobody Of Any Importance: A Foot Soldier's Memoir Of World War 1</i> by Phil Sutcliffe - "How his dad, Sam Sutcliffe, survived his frontline WW1 - in his own Memoir's words".
March	5th	<i>Murphy's Law on the Somme</i> by Andy Rawson. The talk covers the details of the learning process during the campaign and how what could go wrong, did go wrong. We look at the problems encountered and the solutions which were used to try and solve them.
April	2nd	'From Gaza to Jerusalem: the southern Palestine campaigns of 1917" by Stuart Haddaway
May	7th	"Audregnies Flank Guard Action 1914 " by Phil Watson
June	4th	1st Battalion the Wiltshire Regiment in WW1 by Edwin Astill
July	2nd	Legend of the Pilgrimages - Wilfred Pointon, Sherwood Foresters By Bill Bryan
August	6th	Roy Larkin - The Invisible Corps takes a brief look at the Army Service Corps during WW1 through the use of mechanical transport. A story of growth, evolution, inter-service rivalry and meddling civilians.
September	3rd	Kevin Jepson ' Project Fast Dog ' - from Mark IV to Whippet'
October	1st	Ross Beadle. ' <i>William Robertson: Architect of a Winning Strategy or merely Haig's "Man of Business in London"?</i>
November	5th	Peter Hart topic to be advised
December	3rd	Hedley Malloch <i>Left Behind</i> - the fate of British soldiers trapped behind German lines in Belgium and France after the Retreat of 191

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August Meeting. – Roy Larkin



Roy has a lifelong interest in road transport history with particular emphasis on the WW1 period. Author of two books - *Destination Western Front - London's Omnibuses Go to War* and *We Can Do It! - Fred Cooper Remembers Edward Box & Ernest Holmes* (the story of heavy haulage in the Great War) - on which the some of his talks are based following talks are based. He has his own website (worth a visit - www.historicroadways.co.uk)

Roy`s talk will be `The Invisible Corps`

The man in the trench cared not how his tin of Bully arrived any more than the gunner only cared his 6” gun received 6” shells and not 4” shells. They only cared that they got them. GHQ cared no more for the supply line than the Board of Directors of Tesco care for how the

shelves get filled, only that they get filled!

The story of the ASC Mechanical Transport told through the reorganisation following the Battle of the Somme, the difficulties of working within an invisible environment and the intense inter-service rivalries, and not forgetting the never failing ability of an army man to pass the buck. Despite being invisible, there are a surprising number of blank images to fully illustrate the waffle.

If you haven`t seen enough of Roy at our meeting he`s at East Midlands (Ruddington) Branch on Friday 9th

Secretary`s Scribbles



Dear Members and Friends,

Been a busy past few weeks. First there was Workop Armed Forces weekend, then a week later that of Chesterfield - both events attended by your Branch.

You will see elsewhere in this Newsletter / Magazine that your branch is organising another trip - this time to Cambridgeshire to view - up close - the new build full scale WW1 `Whippet`

tank. Details of how to join us for that trip - Saturday 12th October - are in the same article. This is a great opportunity to get really close to this project which has taken years to come to fruition. Kevin Jepson who is a key player in this project will be coming to tell us all about it at our September meeting.

Going forward the chap who was going to come and deliver a presentation at our October meeting can`t now make it - he`ll be with us in February next year. However we have a replacement in **Ross Beadle** who will come and talk about *'William Robertson: Architect of a Winning Strategy or merely Haig's "Man of Business in London"?*. A great presentation in prospect.

As many of you are aware, I`ve had published a series of articles on the Caledonian Railway in WW1 in the Caledonian Railway Association magazine `The True Line` - an excellent publication. Part 4 has just been published in the latest issue. I got a call from the association chairman a few days ago asking if I will be their keynote speaker at the Association`s AGM in Carlisle next March.

See you next Tuesday.

Best wishes, Grant

Grant Cullen WFA Chesterfield Branch Secretary 07824628638

Any opinions expressed in this Newsletter / Magazine are not necessarily those of the Western Front Association, Chesterfield Branch, in particular, or the Western Front Association in general.

Trip to see The Whippet,

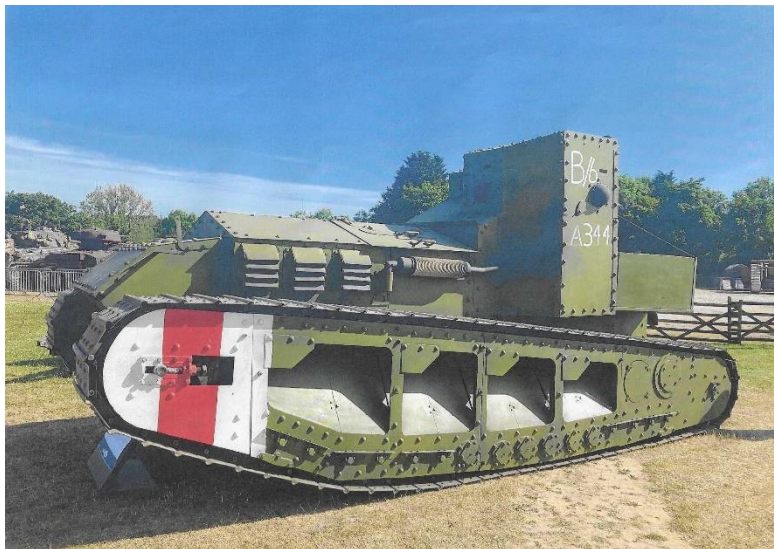
As mentioned in a recent e mail circulated to everyone, one of our members - Kevin Jepson - called in to speak to Jon-Paul, Jane and I before the last meeting. Kevin couldn't stay for the meeting but we will be seeing him again in September when he comes along to deliver his talk 'Project Fast Dog'.....the planning and construction of a full size working replica of a First World War tank...The Whippet` (see attached picture)

The Whippet is almost 100% complete and made its public `debut` recently at Tankfest at the Tank Museum at Bovington. It is now back at its `home` near Cambridge.

Kevin has suggested - and your committee agrees - that members would enjoy a trip out to Cambridge to view the Whippet - see it working...and who knows maybe even a short trip around the field in the tanks `citadel`...

We think from the original response we have enough support for your Committee organise an outing to view the tanking this visit, - again like the trip to Cannock, the Branch would arrange a minibus. This would be a full day out.

We would appreciate if members would register interest if they wish to go on the trip. Kevin has subsequently confirmed that the most suitable date for the trip will be Saturday 12th October. We know that some members would like to make their own way to the location – that's not a problem...let me know and nearer the time I'll send you the address and postcode.



July Meeting



The July meeting saw `one of our own` - Bill Bryan - a member who rarely misses a meeting

Branch Secretary, Grant Cullen, who arranges speakers (always willing to hear suggestions from members) asked Bill to come and give his talk after he presented an abbreviated version last year at his local Royal British Legion branch.

Bill was aware that his maternal grandfather Wilfrid Pointon , Service number 21001, Sherwood Foresters, had been killed in the First world War, leaving 6 children when he lost his life, with a

seventh being born 3 months after his death.

Up until he was 20 Bill had been told by his mother and other aunts and uncles that his granddad had been killed at the Battle of the Somme. That summer, aged 20 Bill, along with a cycling friend, went to France on their bicycles to find his Granddad`s grave.

With the help of the then Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission and escorted by the head gardener of the four cemeteries around the village of Fampoux,

Bill was directed to the grave. Bill asked the gardener if all 2000 buried in the cemetery were killed in the Somme battles - to which came the surprising reply - no - the burials there were killed, or died of wounds before, during, or after the Battle of Arras.

This started Bill thinking...what was the Battle of arras all about...how was his grandad involved...and where and how did he lose his life.

This was Bill`s talk and presentation.

Bill started by describing that as a small child in the 1940s seeing the glow in the sky from the German `blitz` on Sheffield and later watching from his bedroom winter as an RAF Beaufighter, on fire crashed, killing its crew, on the colliery site at Langwith, the spot now marked with a small memorial. At the age of 11 Bill joined the St John Ambulance Cadets and on Remembrance Sundays, joined the Division at the service organised by the British Legion. That was Bill`s introduction to the wars, to listen as the names of the fallen were read out. On leaving school Bill said his knowledge of military history was limited to the Battle of Trafalgar but at the age of 19 he decided that someone needed to visit the grave of grandad as no one in the family had ever shown interest in journeying to France...and now the myth and magic tour begins.

Peter Sutcliffe related his father`s capture near Fampoux - how lucky was he to have his father`s diary, Bill had no such luck - all he had was his grandfather`s

medals on display at his eldest uncle`s but Bill believes they are now in the possession of his second cousin Neil Pointon - who used to play for Everton - but sadly Bill hasn`t been able to see them or even have a photograph.

There were many letters from grandad, mostly asking how the children were doing and Bill has three packets of woodbine cigarettes - at least 110 years old .



Wilfred Pointon
Service Number 20101
Sherwood Foresters



Killed in Action
8th August 1917

Wilfred Pointon was killed on 8 the august 1917 and his family believed he was killed on the Somme. The family was Elizabeth, his wife and seven children, Emma, clara, Wilfrid Henry, Dorothy, Isaiah, Elizabeth and Wilfrid. Emma was the eldest and was 14 years of age when her father was killed. Emma was Bill`s mother.

Wilfrid knew his father had been killed in WW1 but up to Bill turning 20, no one from the now enlarged family had visited the grave.

In 1956 along with his cycling friend, Barry Holmes, Bill set off for France to find his grandfather`s grave. His grave is in the British Military Cemetery called Brown`s Copse, close to the villages of Roux and Fampoux, just north of Arras.



Bill described asking two local girls who went off and brought a chap called Ernest Applegarth, a gardener employed at that time by the Imperial War Graves Commission, now of course The Commonwealth War Graves Commission..



Ernest (left) kindly escorted them to the cemetery and after examining the reference book kept at the entrance, he located and took Bill and Barry to the grave of William Pointon.

This was an emotional spectacle for Bill, discussing the cemetery with Ernest and Bill soon realised that graves in this cemetery were of men who died in the Battle of Arras...NOT the Battle of the Somme. The Somme battlefields lay some six miles south of Brown's Copse. Even his return, Bill explained the

family still didn't believe that Wilfrid Pointon wasn't killed at the Somme battles.

In 1959, Emma and Winifred along with their spouses and Bill, took a week's holiday in Paris with a tour operator named 'Blue Cars'.

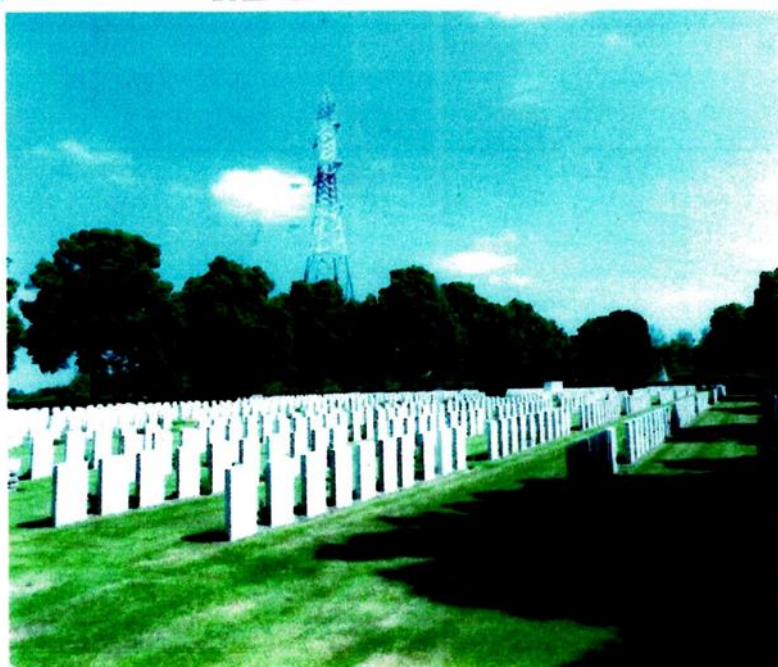


Whilst staying in Paris they journeyed by train north to Arras, Fampoux and visited Brown's Copse Cemetery...another very emotional scene at the graveside.



Bill then became interested as to how his grandfather was killed and his researches began...work that continues to the present day, a labour of love in Bill`s 87th year.

It proved necessary to visit the custodian of the Foresters and Lincolns records, but these were inconclusive. Bill then obtained a book on the 17th Northern Division and in it there was quoted from telegram sent by a Captain Meads which explained that a German trench mortar shell had hit another gun in the Lincolns trench, disintegrating the gun, with fragments being scattered everywhere. The Lincolns were to the left...the Sherwood Foresters on the right. At that moment in time, 4 am on the 8th August 1917, Wilfrid Pointon was in charge of D Company`s provisions and ammunition. Likewise at this time the Lincolns were being re-supplied. Five Sherwood Foresters were killed outright, with a further three dying from their wounds later that day. 10 Lincolns were killed.



BROWN'S COPSE CEMETERY

10th SHERWOODS

BAINES:- SUNKEN ROAD
 BELL:- SUNKEN ROAD
 DEVRILL:- BROWN'S COPSE
 FEARN:- BROWN'S COPSE
 HOPKIN:- FAUBOURG D'AMIENS
 POINTON:- BROWN'S COPSE
 SCRIVEN:- BROWN'S COPSE

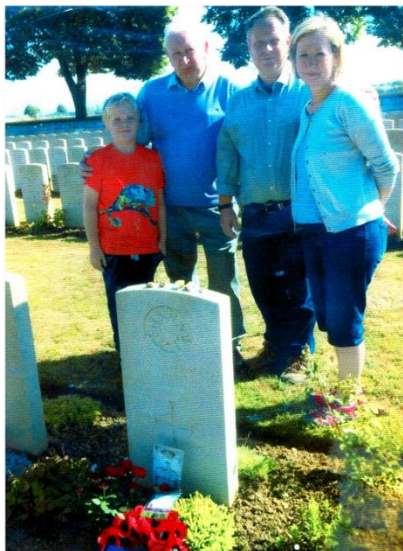
7TH LINCOLNSHIRE

BLISSETT:- BROWN'S COPSE
 BOULTON:- BROWN'S COPSE
 CROOKES:- BROWN'S COPSE
 FAIRHURST:- BROWN'S COPSE
 SARGEANT:- BROWN'S COPSE
 SMITH:- BROWN'S COPSE
 SUMMERSON:- BROWN'S COPSE
 TUFFNELL:- BROWN'S COPSE
 WHEAWALL:- BROWN'S COPSE

All the fatalities, except the three fatally wounded Sherwood`s are buried in a line in Brown`s Copse Cemetery. Trench maps from the Imperial War Museum confirms the positions of the companies from the two Regiments .

Bill told of finding further information on what had happened on August the 8th 1917 in the war diaries of 10th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, 7th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment and that of the 17th Northern division, and quoted from these in his presentation.

It was another 10 years before the grave of Wilfrid Pointon was visited again and this time Bill told it was he and his soon to be wife Pauline. Sixteen years later Bill and his wife , accompanied by their children Andrew and Julie, returned to Fampoux and Brown`s Copse Cemetery. Both children made exchange visits to France while attending Meden School in Warsop and in 1984 the Bryan family were invited to stay with one of the French families their children had met and on their return journey Bill told of them visiting Brown`s Copse Cemetery where Andrew and Julie saw where their great-granddad was buried.



Sebastian William Andrew Julie

By the early 1990s Bill had completed his researches into the circumstances of Wilfred Pointon`s death, the first clue was a copy on mauve silk of the telegram sent to Elizabeth, Wilfred Pointon`s widow.....Bill showed this to members...a moving moment in the meeting. This was one of seven silks produced, one for each of Wilfred`s children. The one that Bill showed was his mother`s copy.

Bill went on to relate to further visits to Fampoux and the cemeteries and of remembering the men who lie beside Wilfrid Pointon in Brown`s Copse Cemetery. Bill returns regularly and emotionally told the story of spreading some of his son Andrew`s ashes on Wilfrid Pointon`s grave in 2022, Andrew having passed away on 6th April 2021.

An emotional presentation by Bill Bryan....interspersed with anecdotes from his visits and humorous asides.

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Chesterfield Armed Forces Weekend

Chesterfield Armed Forces Weekend was at the SMH football stadium on the weekend of the 6th and 7th of July. The weekend was opened by a march past to the memorial garden at the club a service was held, in attendance was the mayor of chesterfield and the Lord lieutenant of Derbyshire she gave an opening reading, and prayers were read by the vicar also the poem In Flanders Fields was read and the weekend began. There were stalls of different descriptions. On display was a chieftain tank and an armored personnel carrier, there was a display by the Mercian regiment, sea cadets there was also a display of weapons from WW2. The branch stall was set up and over the two days drew some interest and some interesting conversations were had about what the branch did and what the Western Front Association was all about. Chats were also had about people`s relatives and what they knew about the First World War . There was also interest in the display of battlefield finds and medals. The branch was also approached to ask if anyone could give a talk about WW1 for the Veterans buddy system at the football club and if they held any further events would like to attend i.e. on the home match day nearest to Remembrance Day. The weekend appeared a success and the possibility of new attendees and new connections.





I Have a Rendezvous With Death, by Alan Seeger



I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air —
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.
It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath —
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.
God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear...
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

Alan Seeger was perhaps America's greatest war poet. Harvard Educated. When war broke out, Seeger, who was living in Paris as a writer, became an ardent supporter of the French cause, joining the French Foreign Legion just weeks after war broke out. During the next two years he would write countless poems and dispatches to American newspapers, urging the United States to enter the war on the side of the Allies. I Have a Rendezvous With Death is probably his best-known poem.

Seeger's "rendezvous" came on 4 July 1916--the fourth day of the Battle of the Somme. His unit would attack Belloy-en-Santerre and he would be killed in the advance on the town, never reaching the village church, pictured below. After the war, his parents would donate bells to the church. (Perhaps the Germans removed the original ones for armament production?) His name was also listed on the town's war memorial. Alan Seeger is buried in the Necropole nationale de Lihones, several kilometers from Belloy. His poem remains as powerful as ever.

Workshop Armed Forces Weekend was held on 29th and 30th June at the grounds of Worksoy Rugby Club.

Our Branch was represented and in this picture we see Branch Secretary Grant`s wife Jean (right) and her friend manning the stand in the Rugby Club bar.



One of our Branch members - and regular attendee at meetings in Peter Bentham-Hill. What most don`t know is that Peter is the organiser for a re-enactment group - The 16th Lancers. They attended the Worksoy event and gave two dazzling displays of fast horsemanship - first with the lance, then the sabre and lastly the carbine. ...all the while resplendent in their Victorian scarlet uniforms .



Chivalry...Last Farewell¹

Mission Tactics and the British & German Army's 1914-15

"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."

Introduction

26th August 1914 - General Smith-Dorrien was in an impossible position. Field Marshal French had made it clear that the retreat would continue but, in the II Corps commander's view, such a retreat might well end in disaster. Visions of German artillery tearing holes through retreating infantry columns, with regiments of uhlans charging survivors, may well have raced through Smith-Dorrien mind.² He took comfort in the Field Service Regulations that not only permitted a subordinate commander to depart 'from the letter of his [superiors] order' in changed circumstances, but demanded that he do so.³ Probably the closes the British Army came to applying its own doctrine with regards mission command in practice for hundred years. Smith-Dorrien hoped to force the German 1st Army to deploy for battle, deliver a blow harsh enough to give him the opportunity to retire his Corps under the cover of darkness. The decision to fight at Le Cateau has been a matter of fierce debate ever since. Even with the benefit of hindsight conclusive decision either way is just as elusive.

The British Way of War

What is clear that from that day onwards the carefully laid plans of the pre-war hierarchy would never again be relevant and a new way forward would have to be found. Once consequence of Smith-Dorrien's last minute decision to halt the retreat and prepare for battle was to further confuse an already confused situation. How did the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) come to fight at Le Cateau at all? Having crossed the Channel in early August 1914, the BEF had moved north to Mons after a brief encounter along its frontage in line with their French allies a general withdrawal started which did not stop, less the action at Le Cateau, until well into September. The BEF introduction to war on mainland Europe was one of numerous hasty defence actions followed by retreat, this was repeated for nearly two months, by the end of which the British regular army was exhausted, decimated and shocked by what it had experienced. Its doctrine had been found to be at best lacking at worst irrelevant, its commander's hopelessly ill prepared for modern war. Smith-Dorrien like his counterparts, Haig and Field Marshal French (commander of the BEF) were products of British Imperial policing, the Boer War had led to some exposure to modern fighting techniques but by and large, defending Britain's Imperial interests throughout the globe had been poor preparation for the excesses of modern state on state conflict.

¹ Junger, E (1929) Storm of Steel, Mottram, R, H, London, p 110

² Gilbert, A (2014) Challenge of Battle, Osprey, Oxford, p 114

³ FSR (Pt 1, Sec 12, Para 13, sub-para. lii)

Meanwhile back at Le Cateau, the ground that the battle would be fought over was the rolling downland of northern France, similar in appearance to Salisbury Plain, a far cry from the mining villages and slag heaps of the BEF's most recent battle, Mons. The friendly forces situation saw three divisions (3rd, 4th, & 5th) of Smith-Dorrien's corps deployed in a slightly convex line through Belgium, with the towns of Esnes on his right and Le Cateau on the left, with his center based around Caudry. For the infantry in forward positions, the news that they would soon be in combat produced a last-minute round of digging to construct some sort of defensive line to face the Germans. When Smith-Dorrien had issued his stand-and-fight order he intended it as part of a delaying action, a means to gain time and distance his pursuers, his ambiguous 'no-retirement' order had effectively been transformed into 'no retirement whatsoever' by the time it reach its tactical application.

Smith-Dorrien application of FSR did not spark a cascade of likewise innovate thinking with regards the deployment of II Corps. By now all senior officers had been under enormous stress, since the outbreak of the campaign with no end in sight. This stress led them to fall back on old ways where courage was believed to count for more than tactical acumen. Quaint as it may seem now, many officers considered it to be ignoble to flinch from fire, however deadly, or seek safety behind cover.⁴ Unsurprisingly there was a great deal of muddling through as battalions of various divisions moved into position.

The enemy was made up of the German 1st Army at its fore was the II Cavalry Corps under Lieutenant-General von der Marwitz. II Corps was evenly match to its German counterpart but the German Cavalry Corps had one advantage in the attachment of five 'over-sized' Jager light infantry battalions, each fielding a company of six machine guns. These Jager Bn's machine guns had direct effect on the 12 Brigade (Bde) in the 4th Division which held the left of the line around Esnes, which led to 12 Bde withdrawal. It was then 11 Bde turn (to the right of 12 Bde) to feel the heat of battle as the Jager switch their attack. In the center around Caudry held by the 3rd Div, 7 Bde comfortable held the line. It was on the right that the battle would be decided with the 5th Div at La Cateau itself.

More and more German troops, machine guns and batteries came into action along the Le Cateau-Cambrai road. The British Army losses especially in artillery and a shortage of ammunition led to their own rate of supporting fire slackening. The brunt of the initial attack at Le Cateau was borne by the 14th Bde, and most notably the 2nd Bn Suffolk Regiment. Understandably the Suffolk's began to waver. The 2nd Manchester and 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were rushed forward to reinforce the Suffolk's. The results were predictable, once forward of their hasty defensive positions with little artillery support they were easy meat for the German machine guns and batteries. Few if any reached the Suffolk's, this like so many actions throughout the battle showed how ill prepared the BEF was for modern war and was to be repeated far too often. The notion of élan could carry the day as if the BEF was engaged in a rerun of Waterloo persisted to long into the war.

Under constant pressure the line became undone and many unauthorized withdrawals took place. As officer and NCO casualties increased many soldiers took it upon themselves to avoid the maelstrom of modern warfare. The Suffolk's along with their counterparts the KOYLI succumbed to the inevitable and were overrun by the Germans, the battle was slowing slipping from Smith-Dorrien's hands. The casualties reflected the intense nature of modern

⁴ Gilbert, A (2014) *Challenge of Battle*, Osprey, Oxford, p 121

battle, the Suffolk's in their valiant rearguard action lost over 700 men, the KOYLI over 600, the flower of the pre-war regular army was going the way of the Dodo. The BEF did not break and run but it was a damn *close-run-thing*, the withdraw came in fits and starts as the line crumbled under the German onslaught. The 10th Bde was allotted the pleasure of fighting the rear-guard, the withdraw became a retreat, the retreat, was translated to the ordinary 'Tommy', as '*get away as best you could*'. The Germans also had their own problems, the BEF had inflicted a terrible price on their opponents and the German follow up was weak and incoherent.

By the early hours of 27 August, the Germans had taken control of Le Cateau battlefield, but lacked the resources to follow up their victory during the hours of darkness. In a scenes of confusion the main bulk of the British force continued to march away during the night and next day. The prime cause of the British defeat at Le Cateau was poor leadership. These failings occurred at all levels, but were most significant at the top.⁵

As is the British way of war,⁶ after action reports gave prominence to the description of isolated heroic acts by regiments, battalions and officers the irony was obviously lost that these acts were only required because of the failure of leadership. The great mass of British troops heading away from Le Cateau battlefield experienced all the wretched emotions of defeat. The stress and strain of marching, counter-marching retreat, casualties out of all pre-war experience and eventual stalemate had an effect on the BEF far beyond the expectation of the British Army. Senior officers and some staffs of brigades and division simply broke down. Some officers went mad with the exhaustion and had to be relieved others sort comfort elsewhere as officer casualties increased NCO's felt the strain of command, ill-prepared for the weight of responsibility they buckled under the strain, indicative of the pre-war army's failure to encourage NCO development. Casualties' weather due to combat or stress led to repeated turnover of senior officers, albeit often necessary, did nothing to maintain continuity and stability of command.⁷

The British Army officer corps was also trapped in a doctrine of command ethos which greatness virtue was to display the classical interpretation of leadership. The virtue of displaying Achilles like stoic attributes had limited utility in the combined arms battle, since once they had exposed themselves on the modern battlefield they encountered the full hurricane of shrapnel, machine-gun fire and high explosive. As the classical view of leadership in the British sense meant exposure yourself to fire the toll of officer casualties was excessive a more prudent, managerial style of leadership was now forced on the front-line officer. No longer exposing himself and set forward sword in hand displaying all the attributes of the stiff upper-lip, a change of stance was required to preserve what was left of the pre-war officer corps. The rifle was now in his hand, rank was subdued, and an attempt to blend in and not make one's self a target of the snipers, all these changes still resonates to this day.

The German Way of War

But what of the Germans, the much vaunted enemy. The German army of 1914 was probably better prepared for war than its earnest while distant cousin of 1939, well equipped, well trained and without doubt the most effective general staff in the whole world. Even the most effective

⁵ Gilbert, A (2014) *Challenge of Battle*, Osprey, Oxford, p 133-53

⁶ From Rorkes Drift, to Dunkirk & the Platoon House battles of Helmand

⁷ Gilbert, A (2014) *Challenge of Battle*, Osprey, Oxford, p 240

army of the day was beginning to show the strain by late 1914. Casualties had been high, the need to fight a war on two fronts sapped at its ability to maneuver with style it had adopted on pre-war exercises, stretched to the limit. Time was already running out, what was to be done to make the brake through?

A solution of sorts lay on the large pool of serviceable manpower that had been left behind when the German Army first marched to war. Comparing of reservists, volunteers, and other non-front-line troops, six reserve corps were hastily assembled during August and four were ordered to Flanders. The gamble was to use the mass of these poorly prepared and equipped troops relying on enthusiasm and bravery to make up for any deficiencies in capability to break through the BEF. Some of the German units still wore the old blue uniforms, rifles only arrived late in their training, and drills were centered on the parade square rather than the field. Officers were of what the British would call the dug-out variety. Lacking in modern tactical acumen, and often unfit for the rigors of modern campaigning, this was a risk. Already with the plan behind schedule a certain drive of a decisive brake though gathered traction, an attitude of one more push and we will get through persisted.

On October 23rd the German reserve formations launched a mass infantry attack. Subtle it was not having more in common with Rossbach than 1914, the assault on Langemarck was to become the stuff of myth and legend, neither of which could hide the folly. The tactical ineptitude was on a par with the British Army 1st day of the Somme, the fact that the Germans had already showed the folly of such tactics eighteen months before does the British Army abilities to learn from others mistakes little credit. Over two days Haig's 1 Corps weathered repeated attacks by the enthusiastic amateurs of the reserve corps, the casualties were obscene. These casualties were later cynically manipulated as the '*Kindermond*' ('the Death of Innocents'), a German nationalist myth that envisioned idealistic students marching towards the Allied lines, singing martial songs with arms linked and flags unfurled. The '*Langemarck Myth*' was subsequently taken on by the Nazis to display the virtues of German militaristic spirit, but it could not conceal the shortcomings of the German Supreme Command in sending such poorly trained soldiers under such tactically barren leadership into battle. For an army that prided its self on its professional attributes and education of its leadership since 1806 on Mission Command it was probably its profession lowest ebb. The fact it came only three months into the war showed the much vaunted German Army had in fact a very shallow doctrinal understanding of modern war.

The Germans plough on but to no avail there would be no brake through in 1914. What was bad for the Germans was obviously good for the British, stalemate bought time for the BEF, time it needed to adapt and overcome the shortfalls in its doctrinal DNA. Haig the ultimate product of the Victorian regular army became the standard bearer for the new model army. Although no Wellington or Marlborough, Haig held his nerve, when many around him did not. Haig was the best British general in 1914-15 but that is not much to shout about considering the dearth of talent at the higher echelons of the British Army.

The German failure to brake the allied line in 1914 would be the nemesis that would haunt the German army for the whole war. Whatever anxiety that British senior officers experienced about the strength of their defenses was more than countered by the rising sense of frustration amongst their German counterpart. Each much vaunted next offensive brake through on either side provided illusory.

The British Army soon came to rely on its soldiers to maintain the line often in spite of their senior command. Fighting more often than not became a 'soldiers battle' with leadership, once battle was joined due to the lack of communications, devolved to the commanders of battalions, who in turn, were able to rely on a core of field officers, NCOs and privates who simply refused to give way.

The Reckoning

As always good leadership was the precursor to battlefield success.⁸ The lack of grip shown by some brigade commanders was shocking, however whatever the shortcomings of the BEF they held the line. Their steely determination against the odds won the respect of friend and foe alike. The survivors of 1914 campaign who were still with their units at the end of the year felt a profound sense of loss. The officers, NCO and regular other ranks had developed a close *esprit de corps* in the years leading up to 1914 (this was mirrored in the Regular German units, such as the Prussian Guards), which in many units had been brutally and irrevocably destroyed.

After the Great War, the notion passed into history that the BEF was the best prepared army ever sent forth from these shores. The truth is a little different, it was as prepared for the coming war as any of its allies or for that matter its opponents. That is to say along with the rest of the European military elite, it was not prepared at all. The regular regiments of the BEF suffered the same fate as the French, German, Austrian and Russian pre-war regular infantry it was mostly wasted on poorly coordinated frontal attacks, and duly annihilated with the first twelve months of the war. It in turn was then replaced by a largely new armies that carried on the fight.

Whatever the facts of the Great War, they were rapidly submerged in the legends and myths of the national struggle to put meaning to the sacrifice and come up with a meaningful means of remembering such sacrifice. There is nothing particularly unusual in this, the British and German Army's both came to build their own legends and myths around their collective failure. As the brilliant, but sarcastic French writer observed, "While our soil was being littered with statues of dying soldiers in cheap stone, Gallic cocks of brass, and weeping angels cast in concrete, the war veterans were reducing their epic to the level of street corner gossip".⁹

The story of the development of infantry tactics post 1914 is really the story of what the Germans called the 'storm trooper'. He was to be a foot soldier of a new type, adapted for the conditions the modern battlefield and employing a range of new weapons to the full. He would be given more flexibility and independence than ever, and would fight in particularly small groups. In the attack he would skirmish forward cautiously and attempt to infiltrate through an enemy position, rather than tackle it heads-on. In defense he would act as an immediate counter-attack element in support of a dispersed 'web' of small strongpoints. The enemy would be enmeshed in the web and then struck with violent blows at the moment when he was least prepared to receive them.¹⁰

In 1914 the infantry had been armed with three different weapons-rifle and bayonet, pistol for officers, and perhaps the occasional machine gun. By the end of 1915 in contrast the infantry

⁸ Gilbert, A (2014) *Challenge of Battle*, Osprey, Oxford, p 298

⁹ Dutourd, J (1957) *The Taxis of the Marne* Simon & Schuster, New York, p 195

¹⁰ Griffith, P (1990) *Presidio*, p96

could draw on up to dozen different types of weapon system, these included, the light mortar, light machine gun, flamethrower, a host of grenades, mines and assorted explosive devices. It was the Great War that the grenade displaced the bayonet as the arm par excellence of the close quarter fighter. It was the principal weapon of the storm trooper. This change in tactics, tended to isolate the front line soldier and throw him back on his own resources, or at best, those of his NCOs.

Haig to Montgomery

If we look to 1915 the British Army fought a number of significant battles – Neuve Chapelle in March, Second Ypres in April and May, and Loos in September and October. At the time Loos was the largest battle in British military history. It was the first British use of chlorine gas, it was the first engagement by Kitchener's citizen army, and it was terribly expensive – with some 60,000 casualties in just three weeks. In terms of tactical development it was a remarkable year that saw the introduction of the wireless, the beginning of air-land integration and combined arms artillery fire, early experimentation with tanks, advances in trench warfare and infiltration tactics.¹¹ As a result the British Army was forced to fight at a distinct disadvantage against its German foes. Indeed, the battlefield reality of 1915 was inexperienced ill-equipped and engaged against a foe of considerable fighting power in exceptionally difficult conditions. The result was in James Edmonds words, that 'the enemy undoubtedly had the best of the fighting' and that 'too many of our bravest and best perished, seeking to compensate by valor for the lack of experience and shortage of munitions'. British strategy and BEF operations were shaped by the realities outlined above. British lacked military resources to make a decisive contribution on the Western Front and its leaders were cognizant of the need for more time to train and equip her fledgling forcers. Yet the country could not afford to stand by whilst its alliance partners battled for national survival. Trapped by this strategic paradox, the BEF was forced to fight battles for which it was ill-prepared and which proved, in Edmonds' phase, '*tactically disappointing and strategically disastrous*'.¹²

It easy to forget that until the end of 1915 that the Great War would fore fill its creator's vision of a mobile campaign. There seemed to be no reason to doubt in the spring of 1915 the deadlock would be broken and the offensive would again be set in motion. If there was now a momentary 'siege' phase in operations, it was presumably the result of a temporary exhaustion of both logistic and moral assets. As soon as these had been made good the armies would surely be free to return to '*a good fight in the open*', subsequent battles obviously discredited this assumption but all this lay in the future.

In that future effective performance on operations was to be 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... 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

¹¹ Address by CGS Gen Sir N Carter - Guards Chapel 9 Nov 15

¹² Jones, S (2015) Western Front Assoc. Buletin No 103, p 16

fighting it with his armies and has been condemned for fighting too much. 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 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. 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...Evolving doctrine within an army must be based on a procedure that is able to recognize 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.

Haig's strengths and weaknesses encapsulated in his 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. 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... 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 caliber of the opposition this was inevitable.¹³

The battles of 1914 – 15 threw up an overwhelming rhetoric of modernity and futurism, which led to some grave consequences when it came to preparing for the next war. As the baton pass from Haig, through a host of underachievers it was finally to come to rest with Montgomery. Montgomery would fashion the army not only of the later stages of the Second World War but to this day. For the British Army it was the characteristically 'infantry' style of warfare which emerged and it was to be Montgomery that most methodical infantrymen who would become its greatest captain.

Whatever else 1914-15 was for the BEF As a whole, it was surely a triumph of morale, training and cold steel over numerical superiority hardware and munitions. In 1990 Paddy Griffith wrote that the British Army was finally starting to shake free from some of the more debilitating rigidities of Haig and Montgomery. When viewing the performance of the British Army through the lens of Le Cateau, its best to remember the battle was a symptom not the disease. The British Army of 1914 is much like it is today, perhaps too much, small professional but ultimately linked to much to tradition than innovation, to inward looking than open to new ideas. It talks the talk of mission command but is much more comfortable with

¹³ Pugsley, C, Dr (2011) Haig and the Implementation of Tactical Doctrine on the Western Front, RMAS Occasional Papers, http://www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/rmas_occ_paper_08.pdf

micromanagement, it still has a long way to brake free of the shackles of Haig and Montgomery.

Schlieffen to Seeckt

As for the German Army Langemarck vividly showed that the apostles of mission command could be as doctrinal bankrupt as the allies. The fact that the Germans suffered such a climatic failure of its own tactical ability eighteen months before the British Army's 'First Day of the Somme' does little to admonish the British tactical gurus from copying such ineptitude. Langemarck is the real signpost to the failure of the German Army to win the Great War. From October 1914 Germany was never going to win the war. It would seem come close on many occasions, but all the mission command and storm troopers, could not make up for the strategic vacuum at the heart of the German war machine.

Langemarck created not only the conditions for ultimate failure in one war, but also laid the conditions for failure in the next. The myth of the brightest and best linking arms singing martial songs as they marched under the colors of the ancient regime was exploited by the coming new order as a cause celeb. Of cause the storm troopers and mission command doctrine would flow like an expanding torrent in the years to come. But the Langemarck myth would always drag its creators back to noble but ultimately pointless communal sacrifice. The link between the Langemarck myth and the rebirth of the German soldier as the new industrial man, of the Junger 'Storm of Steel' portrayal of him, led ultimately only in one direction, failure. In failure the 'storm trooper' morphed into the Freikrops of the civil war, which in turn led to its logically conclusion under Ernst Rohm as the myth of the '*front-line-soldier*' and its national socialists fulcrum the SA-storm trooper. In time the SA storm trooper would become redundant to its master and was cast aside, showing as with all things, even myths have a shelf life of utility.¹⁴

A thousand von Seeckts' with all the mission command in the world linked to the most progressive of military doctrines could not have saved the German Army in the final contest, since it had already mortgaged it soul to its greatest of military 'sins' its own vanity.

G Long 2015

¹⁴ See Ben Scotts excellent The Origins of the Freikorps: A Reevaluation for full analysis of this development, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=1-scott-the-origins-of-the-freikorps&site=15>