

1918: DEFINING VICTORY

THE INDISPENSIBLE FACTOR: THE PERFORMANCE OF BRITISH TROOPS IN 1918 GD Sheffield

On 11 November 1918 Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig noted in his diary: 'The Armistice came into force at 11am'.¹ Haig's characteristic lack of emotion, which was not shared by all British senior commanders, belied the fact of a remarkable military victory over a formidable enemy, the Imperial German army.² This victory was won by a coalition, in which the forces of the British Empire played the leading role.³ Yet in Great Britain, the very fact of a military victory in 1918 has largely been forgotten. This summer, Professor Sir Michael Howard published a letter in *The Times* reminding people of the fact that we were approaching the 80th anniversary of the Hundred Days. Sir Michael suggested that the commemoration of this, the greatest series of victories in British military history, should match those for the 80th anniversary of the disastrous first day of the Somme.⁴ Needless to say, 8 August 1998 did not see a repetition of the wall-to wall media coverage that occurred on 1 July 1996.⁵ Moreover, those who have remembered the Hundred Days have tended to downplay the role of 'British' as opposed to 'Dominion' troops. Of the 60 active divisions in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) under the command of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig in November 1918, all but ten were British. Yet while the achievements of the Canadian and Australian Corps have been, rightly, celebrated, with a couple of exceptions the no less remarkable activities of many British troops have received scant attention. Rather, the alleged disgraceful defeat at the hands of German *Kaiserschlacht* has been highlighted by popular authors. One, the journalist William Moore, used the catchpenny title *See How They Ran* for his book.⁶ Martin Middlebrook's book on 21 March 1918, while well researched and objective, may give the unwary an unbalanced view by concentrating on one day of apparent defeat to the exclusion of later developments.⁷

Besides the volumes of British official history,⁸ there are some other books on 1918 that give a balanced account of the activities of British forces. In this category I would include Major-General H Essame's *The Battle for Europe 1918* (1972), Gregory Blaxland's *Amiens 1918* (1968) and John Terraine's *To Win a War: 1918, The Year of Victory* (1978).⁹ These books are still worth reading but they were largely based on published sources, and belong to an older historiographical tradition. Three more recent books have reinvigorated the debate on 1918. Tim Travers' *How the War Was Won* (1992) is a very well researched analysis of 1918, but his views on the British army troops have proved somewhat controversial in revisionist historical circles in the United Kingdom. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson's *Command on the Western Front*, also published in 1992, and Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* are among the most important books ever published on the Western Front.¹⁰ Both give a rather more positive view of the activities of British forces in 1918 than has been customary.

Unfortunately, books are still being published that contain unwarranted sideswipes at the performance of British troops in 1918, usually by means of unfavourable comparisons with Dominion troops.¹¹ This tendency has led to the revisionist school of British historians of the Western Front that is based around Sandhurst, the Imperial War Museum and the British Commission for Military History, to refer ironically to Dominion troops as 'colonial supermen'. Of course, this is quite unfair. Recently, historians from the Dominions have placed 'Colonial' military excellence into a proper perspective.¹² However, we still lack a fully-fledged comparative study of British and Dominion troops; although along with my British co-authors Peter Simkins and John Lee, I am writing a book—*Haig's Army*—which will have a strong comparative element.¹³ This essay can do no more than review the main issues, but hopefully it will provide a starting point for future research.

The British Army of January 1918 had little in common with its tiny, professional predecessor of August 1914.¹⁴ Equally, it was a very different creature from the mass volunteer army that made its debut on the Somme in July 1916,¹⁵ and it was to undergo further changes in character by the time of the armistice in November 1918. Just over half (50.3 per cent) of all enlistments into the wartime British army occurred after the introduction of conscription.¹⁶ By January 1918, although many wartime volunteers and even a few prewar Regulars and Territorials remained with the colours, the British army was a largely conscript force. It was an army that contained a disproportionately large number of men taken from white collar occupations. There were a number of reasons why this should be so. One was the simple fact that given the manpower problems being faced by a state fighting a total war, clerks could be more easily spared for the army than industrial workers. Nevertheless, as John Bourne has reminded us, wartime British casualties—and hence British soldiers—'were overwhelmingly working class'.¹⁷

In January 1918 the BEF contained a mixture of experienced and inexperienced soldiers. The heavy losses at Passchendaele (some 250,000) were replaced to some extent by recruits, and the tactical experience and wisdom passed on by the hard core of survivors of Third Ypres compensated to some extent for the casualties—at least in a military sense. The manpower crisis at the beginning of 1918 led to the drastic step of reducing the number of battalions in British brigades from four to three, thus reducing 12 battalion divisions to nine battalions. Battalions were disbanded, amalgamated and shuffled from division to division: thus 31st Division, a Kitchener division of pals battalions, unkindly known to some historians as the 'Thirty-Worst', received three battalions of Foot Guards. This was a traumatic process. It involved the destruction of communities, of soldiers' emotional 'homes', and led in some cases to bitterness and depressed morale. It also meant that some tactical practices, based on the four battalion brigade, had to be rethought. This was far from the end of the trauma. At the end of the German offensives, some divisions underwent further radical restructuring; thus the infantry of the 34th being reduced to cadre before being reconstituted. Moreover, most of the replacements that arrived at the front during the latter part of 1918 were extremely youthful and lacking in military experience.

The case of 19th (Western) Division, a Kitchener formation, illustrates this point. Making its debut on the Somme in 1916, it earned a reputation as a good fighting division. Committed to battle on the afternoon of 21 March 1918, it incurred 3800 casualties by the 26th. A large number of 'boys' arrived as replacements but there was no time to 'absorb' them properly into the Division before it was sent north to Messines. There on 10 April 19th Division was thrown into the battle of the Lys, suffering 4346 casualties. By May, the division 'was now composed almost entirely of new drafts, many of whom were not fully trained'. Sent to the south, 19th Division became involved in the latter stages of IX Corps' defensive battle on the Aisne. Between 21 March and 19 June, the Division suffered 13,000 casualties 'or about 90 per cent of the strength of the Division'.¹⁸

In July 1918 the Division received more drafts, but still the 'majority of the men were young soldiers with no experience' and only partially trained. However, 'Good progress was made and ... [by 7 August when 19th Division returned to the front line] the men had been through a course of short but fairly intensive training'. 19th Division then experienced a spell of active trench warfare, including a successful divisional-sized operation in the Neuve Chapelle area on 3 September. Its next major offensive action came during the successful battle of the Selle in October. The losses incurred during these actions were replaced by 'considerable number of young soldiers with no previous experience of the war and very little time in which to train them'.¹⁹ The Division's final action was an attack on 6th November 1918. In the last week of the war it advanced 18 miles. 19th Division's total casualties since 21 March 1918 amounted to about 16,000. Its record of achievement, in its 12 opposed assaults during the Hundred Days, was an impressive 100 per cent.

The net result of the organisational changes and heavy casualties of 1918 were that for many if not most British divisions, the continuity of command and personnel of their constituent units was severely disrupted. Moreover, compared to the Canadian Corps and the New Zealand Division (the latter was the strongest division in the BEF), British divisions were weak.²⁰

Indeed, as Shane Schreiber has recently pointed out, in terms of manpower and firepower a Canadian division 'resembled a British Corps'.²¹ As has often been noted, the Australian and Canadian Corps had the great advantage over British corps of being permanent organisations, with all that implies for common doctrine, with staffs and commanders of various constituent parts becoming used to working together. Compare this with the complaint of a British divisional staff officer on hearing his division was about to come under the command of a different corps: each corps has its own methods 'and one has to get into new ways'.²² The wonder is, given these problems, that so many British formations performed as well as they did.

And, as Peter Simkins' research demonstrates, British divisions *did* fight well. Simkins analysed British and Dominion divisions' offensive operations and concluded that while Dominion formations indeed performed well, the success rate of many British divisions was equally impressive. His statistical evidence, which he places into context by discussing factors such as divisional freshness and numbers of days in battle, offers compelling evidence that 'the British divisions in the "Hundred Days", in spite of the crises they had experienced earlier in the year ... made a very weighty contribution to the Allied victory'. He identifies the Guards, 9th, 16th, 18th, 19th, 24th, 25th, 34th, 38th, and 66th as statistically the ten most successful British divisions. From these figures 'one could infer ... that, in general, ten British divisions performed at least as well as—and in a few cases possibly better than—the leading six or seven Dominion divisions'.²³

This is not to claim that all British divisions fought brilliantly on all occasions. Clearly, some divisions did not perform well during the German offensives of March to July 1918. On 8 August 1918 a British gunner officer complained that III Corps 'made a hopeless mess of their part' in the battle of Amiens,²⁴ although we should note that they attacked under peculiarly difficult circumstances not of their own making. However, successful operations by British units greatly outnumbered failures, a fact that attests to the high level of competence to be found throughout the BEF. The example of 46th (North Midland) Division, a Territorial formation that performed spectacularly badly at Gommecourt on 1 July 1916 but carried out one of the outstanding feats of the war in storming Riqueval bridge and thus breaking the Hindenburg Line on 29 September 1918, is relevant here. Simon People, who is working on this division, argues that by autumn 1918 the level of competence in the BEF was such that even an unexceptional formation like the 46th could display considerable competence, both in gunnery and infantry fighting.²⁵ 'Peaceful Penetration' was not solely an Anzac activity. 19th Division, which called it 'nibbling', was not committed to a major action from July to mid-October 1918. During this time the division carried out a programme of bombardments, patrols, raids, and small attacks (up to and including brigade and divisional strength) that took ground from the enemy and wore down his strength and morale.²⁶ Simkins has referred to the importance of the "relentless pressure"²⁷ brought to bear on the Germans during the Hundred Days. The effect of this pressure on the Germans was intensified because Foch and Haig began to put into practice the rudiments of what we would today call 'operational art': treating the entire Western Front as a single battlefield, and switching the point of main effort from one sector to another, to keep the enemy 'on the back foot'. The closing down of the Amiens offensive on 11 August and switching the main attack north to Third Army's front sector is an obvious example. Constant attrition, as well the more obviously spectacular advances, played a major part in bringing about the Allied victory in 1918.

There are some other aspects of British military performance in 1918 that were vital to the Allied cause. First is the performance of British troops during the German offensives. As Simkins has demonstrated, the harsh criticism levied by Monash and others of British efforts during Villers-Bretonneux in April was undeserved.²⁸ More generally, British troops deserve credit for their dogged performance during the spring offensives. German 'stormtroop' tactics did not come as a complete surprise to the British high command²⁹ and in the first three months of the year divisions undertook considerable training in defensive measures, albeit under less than perfect conditions.³⁰ In spite of the tactical reverse suffered on 21 March, the German offensives in Picardy in March and on the Lys in April ended as British strategic victories, albeit defensive ones, that prevented the Germans from reaching their operational goals and eroded German manpower and morale.

Second, we should not forget the vast number of British troops who were not organised into divisions. The British army had to spread its resources quite thinly. It could not concentrate its resources in 'teeth arm' units, nor could it focus on one main theatre of operations. Britain had to provide a full range of troops, all over the globe, from infantrymen and field gunners to the man who was described in his confidential report for 1918 as 'A good hardworking officer very well up in his special subject—boots'.³¹ On 1 August 1918, for instance, some 548,780 men were serving in the Royal Artillery. On the Western Front the gunners had 19 Royal Horse Artillery, 415 Royal Field Artillery, 148 anti-aircraft, 77 Trench Mortar, 58 Royal Garrison Artillery Heavy and 331 Siege batteries.³² A British RGA siege battery might just as well be used to support a Dominion as an English or Scottish division. The artillery support for the Australian Corps at Amiens on 8 August 1918 consisted of divisional batteries of the five Australian divisions: III (Aus), VI (Aus), XII (Aus), XIV, XXIII, 189, 298 Brigades RFA, XVI (Army) Brigade RHA; and no less than nine RGA brigades.³³ Thus the majority of the artillery that played such a crucial role in the Australian success was British: the credit for the Australian victory belongs to the British gunners as well as Antipodean infantry. The same basic point applies to British logistic and combat support units. 216 Army Troops Company Royal Engineers, a specialist bridging unit raised in the English midland town of Nuneaton, served for some time in 1918 in support of the Australian Corps.³⁴

Let us now turn to look at various aspects of the performance of British troops in 1918. I will confine my comments to the following areas: morale; logistics; tactics and training; and leadership, command and control. I have recently written elsewhere on the subject of morale, so here I will limit myself to a few general points.³⁵ British military morale—in the sense of soldiers' willingness to fight—remained sound throughout the First World War. It certainly was in a trough in spring 1918, but had the morale of Gough's Fifth Army really collapsed, as some have claimed,³⁶ the Germans would have won the First World War. Surrenders of British soldiers and losses of guns notwithstanding, vastly more soldiers remained with their units and fought on than capitulated. Many of those who did surrender only did so after they had resisted for some time and the situation was clearly hopeless. Such a soldier was Pte OG Billingham of 2/6 Manchester (66th Division). He endured four and a half days of fighting, suffering a 'most awful time', resisting until the enemy had almost encircled his small party before he surrendered.³⁷ Official reports, based on the censorship of soldiers' letters, confirm that British morale remained basically sound during the spring offensives.³⁸

Military victory brought with it higher morale. Apparently in response to a 'gloomy' letter from his father, in early June 1918 an officer of 9/East Surreys (12th Division) reported that soldiers at the front were rather more optimistic.³⁹ When the Allies finally seized the initiative, and the Germans were being pushed back, soldiers of all ranks began to sense that victory was near:

These are great days for all of us and I pity anyone who isn't on the spot, and who has been through all the labour and heat of the day only to miss the reward at the end. Everyone is in fine form and confident to a degree not known hitherto.⁴⁰

A number of soldiers are credited with the aphorism 'amateurs talk tactics, professionals talk logistics'. Effective logistics is certainly the hallmark of a professional army. In its handling of supply and administration, as in so many other things, by January 1918 the BEF had come a long way from July 1916, let alone August 1914. This is clear from Ian Brown's 1998 monograph on the subject.⁴¹ The *ad hoc* approach of the early war years was replaced by a much larger and more soundly based system by the time of the March Retreat. The Army Service Corps (ASC) grew from 498 officers and 5933 other ranks in August 1914 to 10,477 officers and 314,693 men four years later.⁴² Turning from transport to ordnance, by late 1917 the Armourers' Shop at the major base at Calais could repair 1000 rifles per day, and the Bootmakers' Shop, claimed to be the biggest in the world, employed 500 soldiers and 100 French civilians who could repair 30,000 pairs a week.⁴³ The preparations for the Somme offensive included putting the supply of water to the front line on a firm footing, and planning to get water forward quickly if a rapid advance should ensue.⁴⁴ Light tramways were constructed in forward areas to ease transportation problems.⁴⁵

But in the spring of 1918 to some individuals it must have seemed as if the logistic system that had served the needs of trench warfare so well had broken down. A member of the Frolics concert party wrote that on 23 March:

we had to make a hasty retreat with all our worldly possessions—every road out of the village was crowded with rushing traffic—lorries, limbers, GS waggons, great caterpillar-tractors with immense guns behind them, all were dashing along in an uninterrupted stream—and men, half-running, with portions of their kit dropping from them as they ran—for it was said that the enemy cavalry were through and were nearly in the village ... 'I never thought in the days when we looked with disdain on "bully" and biscuits I should ever long for them and cherish a bit of hard, dry biscuit as a hungry tramp cherishes a crust of bread.'⁴⁶

Seen in a wider perspective, the British logistic system proved remarkably resilient under the enormous strain of the German offensives. British logisticians certainly made mistakes. The history of the Army Ordnance Services, published in 1929, candidly admits that in the build up to the German offensive more should have been done to 'reduce or render more mobile' the various logistic workshops, dumps and the like. In the event, among other logistic catastrophes, 'A great part' of Fifth Army's 'central workshop was ... lost'.⁴⁷ However, the triumphs of the British logisticians far outweighed the disasters. Between 20 March and 30 April 1918 the British lost 816 18-pdrs and 280 4.5 inch howitzers. Yet during the period 26 March-9 May, Fifth Army's artillery park alone, despite the need to move location several times as the enemy advanced, issued 585 guns and 2941 machine guns.⁴⁸ A combination of the effectiveness of the BEF's logistics, and the inability of the Germans to advance further than they did to cut the British lines of communication (which was in part a product of German logistic problems), gave the fighting troops of the BEF a firm based upon which to fall back, regroup, and prepare to take the offensive.

Unfortunately, neither Ian Brown's new monograph nor the volume of the British Official History that deals with transportation goes into very much detail about the logistics of the Hundred Days.⁴⁹ The evidence suggests that the logistic system came under severe strain but was as flexible in the advance as it had been resilient in the retreat. The demands on combat support and logistic units were very different from those of trench warfare. Assault river crossings, in which bridge building engineers played a vital role, were a feature of operations such as the battle of the Selle and the crossing of the River Lys (both in October 1918). For instance, the Royal Engineers between the beginning of the war and August 1918 had constructed 180 steel bridges; in the three months after 8 August 1918, they built 330.⁵⁰ Success brought its own problems. Most fundamental of all, the logisticians had to struggle to keep advancing troops in supply. One of the most perceptive historians of the war, Cyril Falls, who served with 36th (Ulster) Division, discussed the logistic problems faced II Corps when it broke out of the Ypres Salient at the end of September:

Batteries in an advance go forward only. The limbers which feed them, the lorries which feed the limbers from the train, must go forward and backward. Therein lay the real trouble. The roads were choked.

The next phase of the offensive, on 14 October, was delayed until sufficient artillery was amassed for the assault. The attack was successful: Courtrai fell, and 36th Division continued to advance. By this stage, Falls judged, the chief obstacle to final victory was not the Germans but logistic problems. Wagons and lorries had to make their way across 'the terrible roads of the devastated area'. By 'good organisation and industry' and, not least, sheer hard work and dedication, the Army Service Corps 'scored a triumph'⁵¹ as did the rest of the support services, including the provost branch who wrestled with the problems of traffic control. The Ulster Division's experiences were far from untypical.⁵² By improvisation and strenuous exertion the BEF's logisticians kept the advance going, but it was a near run thing. One can scarcely fault the performance of these British troops.

Nowhere was the British army's learning curve more apparent than in the field of tactics. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the implementation of tactical 'good practice' in the BEF between mid-1916 and the end of 1917.⁵³ Suffice it to say that the BEF took advantage of new technology as it became available—Lewis Guns, gas, trench mortars, the 106 fuse, tanks, wireless, aircraft and the like—and by trial and error developed effective tactics to harness it. The British battalion of August 1918 had far fewer men than its counterpart of two years earlier: about 500, compared to 1000. However, its firepower was much more formidable. The four Lewis Guns per battalion of 1916 had grown to 30, plus eight light trench mortars and 16 rifle-bombers.⁵⁴ As early as the spring of 1917, the lessons of the Somme had been absorbed, resulting in the platoon organisation being changed from four rifle sections to one rifle section plus a section each of Lewis Gunners, bombers, and rifle grenadiers.⁵⁵ Moreover, the division now included a Machine Gun battalion as a tactical unit, with the battalion commander in a position 'analogous' to that of the 'C[ommander] R[oyal] A[rtillery]' of a division concerning the artillery.⁵⁶ Although Tim Travers has argued for the essential conservatism of officers who relied on infantry and artillery centred methods (as opposed to tanks), by 1918 the BEF was at the forefront of military technology.⁵⁷ Put in simple terms, the 106 artillery fuse probably made a greater contribution to the Allied victory than the tank.⁵⁸

Tactical good practice could only be implemented by successful training. As we have seen, during 1918 time for training was at a premium, to be fitted in when operations permitted.⁵⁹ Yet the comments of the historian of the Welsh Guards were as applicable to 1918 as to earlier years: 'Training never ceased during the war. The hardened veteran, out of the line for a rest, joined the young recruit, who had just arrived in France for the first time, and trained'.⁶⁰

The learning process continued while operations were in progress in 1918. As early as 5 April during the first phase of the German offensive, GHQ issued the first of a long series of *Notes on Recent Fighting* in which an analysis of the lessons 21-22 March were 'issued down to brigades'.⁶¹ *Notes* No 7, issued two weeks after the opening of the battles of the Lys, stressed the importance of holding the flanks of an enemy breakthrough and thus enfilading the enemy and helping to contain his advance, a lesson drawn from the dogged actions of 55th and 40th Divisions on the flanks of the German breakthrough on 9 April.⁶² When the Allies seized the initiative from the Germans, official publications disseminated the lessons of offensive war.⁶³ Other higher formations issued their own documents. In late August, Horne's First Army issued a document that recognised that some divisions had greater expertise at fire and movement tactics in open warfare than others. It stressed the need for better training of troops acting as advance guards when not actually in contact with the enemy, who had a tendency to move 'in general lines' rather than concentrate in small bodies.⁶⁴ Such 'high level' tactical advice was in addition to the numerous studies produced by divisions or even lower level formations for use by units under their command. An important step was the appointment of Ivor Maxse, by reputation one of the finest trainers in the British Army, as Inspector General of Training in 1918.⁶⁵ His inspectorate produced a large number of 'Training Leaflets' which covered topics such as 'Sample of a Day's Training for a Company' and 'Attack Formation for Small Units' in a straightforward, accessible fashion. These leaflets were issued in vast numbers. Of the two mentioned above, by February 1919 39,426 were issued of the first, and 41,496 of the second.⁶⁶

There is still much work to be done on this topic; the role of role of Maxse would repay further investigation, for instance. But clearly in 1918 as in previous years, the British high command was making strenuous efforts to analyse and disseminate tactical lessons of recent actions, and as a result commanders were receiving a great deal of useful tactical advice and information, which was integrated into training.⁶⁷

The reality of the tactical learning curve was made explicit in an account of the attack on Beaulencourt carried out by 21st Division on 1 September 1918. This account was written in 1919 by Captain DV Kelly of 6/Leicesters. Kelly was a Somme veteran, and it is worth quoting his account at some length:

[This attack] gave a striking proof of the enormous advance made by the new British Army in the technique of warfare, for it was a small masterpiece achieved with one tenth of the casualties it would assuredly have cost us in 1916. The long western-front of the village, which appeared the main line of approach, was defended by numerous well-concealed pits for riflemen and machine guns, and had we been attacking in the 1916 method the course of events would probably have been as follows. A tremendous artillery bombardment, perhaps for two days, would have annihilated the village and churned up the ground, and at zero hour our troops would have advanced in waves across the belt of land commanded by the various posts, who, as our barrage passed on behind them, would have opened a murderous direct fire on them and taken an enormous toll of casualties. Very possibly we should never have reached the village, but consolidated a line of shellholes a few hundred yards beyond the starting-point, from which a fresh attack would have been delivered perhaps several days later. By September, 1918, however we had acquired an improved technique. The Western side of the village was left severely alone, and the attack was arranged for the northern end of the village, a procedure which involved in itself a movement and assembly by night that would have been difficult for inexperienced officers. The artillery fired numerous periodic 'crashes', and their support at zero was arranged to appear merely a repetition of one of these and did not specially indicate the time or direction of the attack. Under cover of complete darkness the village was rushed and the defences taken in the rear, the whole affair being a complete surprise ... It is very important to remember that the artillery had improved their technique just as had the staffs and the infantry: in 1916 one could hardly have relied on the accuracy and exact synchronization, which one had now learned to expect, required for such an operation.⁶⁸

About 130 Germans were captured, in addition to a number of weapons. The two assaulting battalions, 1/Wiltshires and 6/Leicesters, suffered only five killed and 50 wounded.⁶⁹

Among the reasons for success mentioned by Kelly are sophisticated artillery techniques and good co-ordination between the gunners and the infantry, good staff work, and good regimental leadership: these factors made it possible to achieve surprise. While his description of the '1916 methods' was perhaps a little harsh, in broad terms it was correct. Kelly's description of the tactics of 1918 was applicable to many other formations: 21st Division was a very competent division but it was far from unique. The tactical expertise of 1918 was, I would suggest, the product of hard won experience gained on the Somme in 1916, at Arras and Third Battle of Ypres in 1917; and good training.

British junior leadership in 1918 has had a bad press. The roots of the belief that that British regimental officers behaved poorly in 1918 can perhaps be traced back to Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds' comments in the British official history.⁷⁰ However, it was also held during the war by some British Regular officers,⁷¹ and it seemed to be an article of faith with many Australians.⁷² I take issue with these views in my forthcoming monograph⁷³ and here it will suffice to say that by 1918 the selection process for British officers was very similar to that for Australians. By the last year of the war the British officer corps was a broadly meritocratic body in which leadership ability counted for vastly more and social status for much less than before the war. Most officers were by 1918 commissioned from the ranks, and something like 40 per cent of officers mobilised at the end of the war came from lower middle-class and working-class backgrounds.

There is much to be said that for the view that by the summer of 1917 'war was becoming more than ever a platoon commanders' war, for it would be on their initiative and determination that success would depend'.⁷⁴ The Hundred Days was probably the finest hour of these meritocratic temporary officers. The quality of their leadership was a vital component of British military success in 1918. On 30 March 1918, on the sixth day of 20th (Light) Division's retreat, Major RS Cockburn came across some exhausted stragglers, lacking training and discipline, who seemed to have given up all thought of soldiering. However their officers, who were themselves inexperienced, showed good leadership in halting the retreat

by explaining to them why no further retreat was possible.⁷⁵ Leaders did not have to be officers. The minor counterattack by Lewis gunners of 24/Royal Fusiliers (2nd Division) led by CSM 'Rosy' Read and Sgt Roland Whipp during the March Retreat are typical of the countless number of similar operations instigated by NCOs.⁷⁶

Good junior leadership was just as vital during the advance; low level initiative and improvisation became increasingly important as the Allies pushed forward. Long periods for the preparation of assaults were not always available or even necessary.⁷⁷ This new tactical situation demanded excellence from staff officers and junior commanders. A gunner subaltern noted in his diary that orders for an assault to be made at 0130 on 23 October only arrived 'soon after 9 pm. Meant an unholy rush and consequently no sleep during the night'. However, the attack was a great success.⁷⁸ This can profitably be compared both to the rushed and frequently unsuccessful attacks on the Somme in 1916, and also to the 'minute preparations' and extensive practice carried out before many 1917 operations.⁷⁹ According to the commander of British 5th Division's artillery, the 'outstanding feature' of operations in the Hundred Days:

was the way in which batteries pushed on and took advantage of the tactical situations as they developed. On many occasions batteries were commanded by quite junior subalterns with remarkable success, in spite of the fact that they were entirely new to open warfare conditions.⁸⁰

In late September, the high command stressed that, while the barrage remained vital, it was also important to use 18-pdrs as 'weapons of opportunity' in direct support of the 'leading infantry', which required the closest liaison between the infantry and the guns. Guns were also to be used to engage enemy guns holding up the advance of tanks.⁸¹ Not just field artillery, but guns as big as 60-pdrs, were to be 'push[ed] up ... boldly'.⁸²

While the importance of the creeping barrage and counterbattery work has been well covered in recent years,⁸³ the role of the infantry has perhaps received less attention than it deserves. The advice issued by Brigadier-General James Jack to 'All Ranks 28th Infantry Brigade' of 9th (Scottish) Division on 27 September 1918 concisely encapsulates much of the tactical wisdom of the Hundred Days, which was based on the experience of 1916 and 1917:

Brigadier has heard of your gallantry, has seen your smartness, and prays you use your wits.

Keep as close as you can to 18pdrs (pipsqueak) barrage. Its their, [sic] so don't go into it. Never mind your dressing.

Reply at once to any enemy small arm [sic] fire. Fire at once at any enemy you see in range—slowly and accurately from the quickest position, lying, standing, or kneeling.

Don't crowd, the loose order will save you casualties if you use your wits.

Watch your flanks and draw them back if necessary.

If held up reply steadily to the fire whilst your comrades get round.

If necessary help your comrades on flank by cross fire.

Surround pill-boxes and Machine Guns. They can only fire one or two ways.

Don't have more than about 100x [yards] between sections. Don't scatter from your sections, file is best for advancing, a few paces interval for firing.

Push steadily forward in your little groups, using slow covering fire where necessary, and stick roughly to your own line of ADVANCE.

Good luck.⁸⁴

Such tactics were simple enough to be taught quickly and effectively to the vast numbers of inexperienced 18-year-olds arriving as reinforcements for the BEF in 1918.⁸⁵ Combined with effective support from the guns and sometimes tanks and aircraft, such tactics were good enough to inflict defeat after defeat on the Germans.

In the last few weeks of the war, as the fighting moved into untouched countryside and into intact villages, towns and cities, on some occasions the importance of the artillery diminished: on 5 November, a gunner officer noted that the enemy were retreating 'at such a rate as to render the H[eavy] A[rtillery] useless'.⁸⁶ Under such conditions the fighting abilities of the infantry made the difference between success and failure, victory and defeat.

The open warfare conditions of 1918 called for the learning of new skills. As an officer of 20th Division commented, with a slight degree of exaggeration, the British citizen army had trained for offensive action, but not how to withdraw under attack.⁸⁷ In fact, British divisions learned how to conduct a fighting retreat remarkably quickly and effectively. When the tide turned in favour of the Allies, they developed yet another approach to warfare. Pace those who believe that cavalry was completely redundant on the Western Front,⁸⁸ the mobility of mounted troops, which had been a useful asset in the days of trench warfare, now became a priceless one. During the Hundred Days, there was a shortage of horsemen, and, tactically, 'the absence of mounted troops was severely felt'.⁸⁹ In September, 19th Division formed a 'Divisional Mounted Detachment' that in October had a skirmish with German cavalry.⁹⁰ In early October, the infantry divisions of I Corps were reorganised to facilitate rapid pursuit of the enemy. Infantry brigades were divided into an advanced guard and a main body. Each brigade commander was allotted an all arms mobile body (one section of cavalry, one section RE, one 18-pdr battery, one section each of 4.5in howitzers and Medium Trench Mortars, one company of machine gunners, part of a Field Ambulance, and an 'Investigation Party' of men from a Tunnelling Company). This reorganisation 'proved very suitable to the circumstances'.⁹¹

The command and control (C2) of the BEF has been something of a blind spot for historians. Two of the most influential studies, by Martin Samuels and Martin van Creveld, concentrate on the beginning of the Somme campaign and do not analyse the situation in 1918, giving a one-sided view.⁹² Samuels compares the situation at Thiepval on 1 July 1916 with German C2 on 21 March 1918, a case of comparing apples with bananas rather than apples with apples if there ever was one. Tim Travers in two very influential books painted a bleak picture of the BEF's C2 system.⁹³ John Bourne has summarised Travers's view of it as:

rigid, hierarchical and inflexible ... reactionary, hostile to technology, preferring a costly 'human solution' to the problems of the battlefield and fatuously determined to overcome the of chaos war by highly detailed and structured planning from above ... The most that can be said in favour of the British system is that it broke down under the impact of the German offensives and the semi-open warfare which followed, to be replaced by 'useful anarchy'.⁹⁴

Bourne takes issue with Travers' views, as do I. The German offensives of March to July 1918 certainly placed the BEF's command and control system under severe strain. The points made about logistics above are also applicable to command and control: the British C2 system proved resilient and flexible enough to absorb and cope with the limited damage inflicted by the German advance. The sudden reemergence of open warfare left the BEF no choice but to shake off some of their trench-bound habits. Overblown divisional headquarters had to be slimmed down to cope with the new circumstances, the ideal being 'to work as far as possible with a message book only'. Some commanders of divisions 'establish[ed] advanced HQ motor cars', linked by telephone line to the divisional signal office.⁹⁵ This is not to underestimate the real C2 problems experienced during the German offensives. Nevertheless, the BEF's C2 system survived, battered but sufficiently intact to allow the BEF to pass onto the offensive. One reason for this was that command at various levels was much less rigid and hidebound than the traditional version would have us believe. The Somme, Arras, Passchendaele and Cambrai battles bred a group of commanders at battalion, brigade and divisional level—perhaps even at corps and army level—able to cope with the changing

demands of the battlefield. At even lower levels, subalterns, NCOs and even privates became increasingly accustomed to taking initiative and responsibility.⁹⁶ In Bourne's words, 'The SHLM Project on British divisional performance during the war suggests that "useful anarchy" began much before 1918'.⁹⁷

As noted above, the increase in the tempo of offensive operations in the autumn of 1918 placed considerable strain on staff officers. However, in general, operations and logistic staffs coped well with the mobile warfare of the Hundred Days. To take just one example from many, the historian of 5/Leicesters (46th Division) recorded his appreciation of the staff work (and the 'skill and pluck' of the ASC) that enabled the infantry to attack on 29 September carrying only one day's rations.⁹⁸ The 1919 Braithwaite Report on Staff Organisation believed that the open warfare phase vindicated 'the soundness of the general principles on which the Staff is organized and was trained before the war'.⁹⁹ Although apparently smacking of self-congratulation and even complacency, the historian can accept this conclusion, with reservations, as sound.

The performance of British troops was, then, a vital factor in the Allied victory of 1918. It was not a 'British' victory or even a British Empire victory. British and Dominion forces fought as part of a multinational coalition, and to think in such terms would be to do a disservice to the considerable French, United States and Belgian contributions. But it was undoubtedly a triumph for the forces of the British Empire. It does not diminish the achievements of the Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and South African forces in any way to recognise that the performance of troops from the British Isles was an indispensable factor in the final victory.

Endnotes

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