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"They Were Only Playin' Leapfrog!": The Infantryman and the Staff Officer in the British Army in the Great War

Abstract

The British Infantryman of the First World War hated Staff Officers more than any other supporting or service branch in the BEF. This essay explores this attitude, its motivations, and the ways complaining helped British Infantrymen endure the Great War. It argues that the British Infantryman felt separate from the Staff Officers because of his intimate understanding of combat and killing and manifested his frustration with the helpless circumstances of war by hating Staff Officers, but ultimately understood the Staff Officer's role and the necessity of their service. By reconsidering the hackneyed views of the 'Poor Bloody Infantry' a new source of endurance is identified.

Keywords

First World War, Great War, World War One, Infantry, Staff Officers, British Army, BEF

Disciplines

European History | History | Military History

Comments

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'They Were Only Playin' Leap Frog!'

The Infantryman and the Staff Officer in the British Army During the Great War

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CWES 215

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The most common act of the British infantry soldier in the Great War was not fighting, not dying, or being wounded. It was not writing poems, not eating, not smoking, nor loafing or working. It was complaining. Front line Tommies complained about nearly everything, but they reserved a special venom for soldiers who were not infantrymen. Historian Paddy Griffith put it best, “The infantry’s grumbles and complaints were apparently endless, and the increasing sophistication and complexity of supporting arms as the war progressed only served to exacerbate them.”¹ As new services manifested to meet the needs of modern warfare, the mud besmirched infantryman, with a twittering fag on his lip, was ever ready with a wry comment for each of them.

Historians have generally ignored these complaints as irrelevant snowflakes in the avalanche of clichés and repetitions that haunt everyman’s memoir, letter collection, and diary. More discerning historians like Richard Holmes and Emily Mayhew have used these complaints as the premise for some of their scholarship, correcting the infantry’s nastier conceptions of secondary weapons groups, medical and administrative units, and staff officers.² But there is a basic assumption that underwrites both the work of scholars overturning common infantry assumptions and those who ignore them altogether: that the complaints of trench soldiers were ill-informed and false – meaningless clichés mouthed by masses of muddy infantrymen.

Devaluing the infantryman’s complaints ignores the most expressed emotions of the trenches. Who we hate, who we love, and who we treat with ambivalence, speaks volumes about who we are, what we believe, and what groups we belong to. This essay seeks to understand the British combat infantrymen in the First World War by understanding how he felt about other

¹ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916-18*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 25.

² Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier in the Western Front 1914-1915*. (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 169-175.

Emily Mayhew, *Wounded: A New History of the Western Front in World War I*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

branches of the military system. It is a cultural history of complaint, praise, and ambivalence in the trenches.

First, the mentality of the combat infantryman needs to be explained. Every soldier who had seen action believed that he belonged to a unique and exclusive community within the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The soldier who had fought up front with the infantry was different than every non-combatant in the British army. Frederic Manning, a veteran of the Western Front, wrote that “there is a gulf between men just returned from action, and those who have not been in the show as unbridgeable as that between the sober and the drunk.”³ The root of this mentality was based in the distinctive role of the combat infantryman – to kill. Killing was not the infantry’s whole purpose on the battlefield, in fact, artillery killed far more during the Great War.⁴ But nobody else killed how the infantry killed. They passed through the worst dangers of the Western Front and killed the enemy where they could see them. Psychologist-Soldier-Historian, David Grossman, has demonstrated how the powerful psychological effect of killing bonds groups of men together into supportive communities, possessed of great pride and developed opinions about related military and civilian groups.⁵ For British combat infantrymen, killing created a clannish mentality based around the experience of battle. This attitude was reinforced by the organizational structure of the British army. “There was an elitism about the infantry which was further compounded by the cap-badge loyalties of the British Regimental system, not to mention the informal pecking-order of the elite or ‘spearhead’ formations which grew up during the war” Paddy Griffith explained.⁶

³ Frederic Manning, *Her Privates We*. (London: Serpent’s Tale, 2013), 5.

⁴ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33.

⁵ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. (Boston: Back Bay, 1996), 268-9.

⁶ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, 198.

The infantryman's elite attitude informed his opinions of the non-combatant troops in his orbit. "The trench soldier" according to Robert Graves, maintained a "carefully graded caste system of honour," which ordered "the Staff, Army Service Corps, lines of communication troops, base units, and all civilians down to the detested grades of journalists, profiteers, 'starred' men exempted from enlistment, conscientious objectors, and members of the Government."⁷ The combat infantryman's hatred encompassed nearly all branches and services, but this study is only interested in one group: staff officers. They are the non-combatant group that the combat soldiers sampled in this study wrote the most about. What these soldiers had to say about staff officers gives insight into the mentality of the combat soldier, especially in relation to killing.

Thomas Atkins coped with the war by complaining, and this aspect of his character is best exhibited through the people he loved to hate the most: staff officers. Complaining about them was an act so inherent and natural to the 'Poor Bloody Infantryman' (PBI) that it became a part of his quintessential 'bloody mindedness.' Historian and British soldier, John Baynes, described bloody mindedness, "it has an element of rebellion in it, of course, but the rebelling is not so much against authority as against difficult circumstances."⁸ Staff officers controlled nearly every aspect of every Tommy's life on the Western Front, and it was a life notorious for difficult circumstances. Complaining about staff officers was a logical response to helplessness in difficult circumstances. Raging about red-tabs was more about releasing frustration than doubting the staff's competence. In fact, many infantrymen readily understood the role of the staff and were willing to acknowledge it as necessary.

⁷ Robert Graves, *Good-Bye To All That*. (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 188.

⁸ Holmes, *Tommy*, 98.

“Trench soldiers hate the staff and the staff know it. The principal disagreement seems to be about the extent to which trench conditions should modify discipline.”⁹ Robert Graves identified the heart of the antagonism – control over the infantryman and difference in combat experience. Infantrymen resented the small and large controls that staff officers exerted over their lives. Frederic Manning, a veteran of the King’s Own Shropshire Light Infantry, captured the frustration of the common PBI by quoting a fictional one in *Her Privates We*, “‘A lot o’ brass hats make the most elaborate plans, and they issue instructions to all concerned, and officers are taken to inspect a model of the position to be attacked, and then we’re buggered about, and taken over miles o’ ground,’” concluding “‘Seems to me all these practices are just so much eye-wash for the Staff.’”¹⁰ Orders meant to control men’s actions on the battlefield provoked special ire. When an order from headquarters commanded that the wounded should be left behind during an advance, Manning wrote that the character, Weeper Smart, snorted, “‘A don’t mind tellin’ thee, that if a see a chum o’ mine down, an’ a can do aught to ‘elp ‘im, all the brass-‘ats in the British Army, an’ there’s a bloody sight too many o’ ‘em, aren’t goin to stop me.’”¹¹

The cherished stories of staff officers flying in the face of shells, that can be found in every real infantryman’s account of the war, play on the gulf of experience between the fighting man and the non-combatant. The brass-hats could never understand the infantry because they had not seen battle. Even if staff officers had seen combat, they did not go over the top with the infantry – they were not with them when they killed. PBIs criticized the inexperience of staff officers to highlight their separation and superiority; it reinforced their pride in belonging to an exclusive brotherhood of combat. Manning quoted one of his characters as saying, “‘whether you’re talkin’

⁹ Graves, *Good-Bye To All That*, 107.

¹⁰ Manning, *Her Privates We*, 130, 131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

to a civvy or whether you're talkin to a brass-'at, an' some o' the officers aren't no better, if you tell the truth, they think you're a bloody coward. They've not got our experience, an' they don't face it as us'ns do."¹² One Leicestershire infantryman stated definitively, "I think then we hated our red-tabbed gentry, well behind the fighting, much more than we did the litter of dead, dying and wounded German soldiers, with our own lying among them."¹³ Enemy combat soldiers belonged to the same brotherhood of experience – the fraternity of killers. It was the one exclusive club that the staff officer could not get into, and the infantryman relished denying him.

But the root of all hatred for staff officers was bloody mindedness. Tommies could boil over with rage for all the staff officers who bossed them about, but they were no Bolsheviks. Cruel jeers and sarcastic comments were the deadliest missiles launched at brass-hats. When infantrymen thought deeply about their relationship to red-tabs, they comprehended their role and could even feel a degree of sympathy for them. Frederic Manning described a scene in *Her Privates We* when the protagonist, Bourne, concurs that the Staff are arrogant and stupid, but reasons,

‘what is a brass-hat’s job? He’s not thinking of you or of me or of any individual man, or of any particular battalion or division. Men, to him, are only part of the material he has got to work with; and if he felt as you or I feel, he couldn’t carry on with his job. it’s not fair to think he’s inhuman. He gets to draw up a plan, from rather scrappy information, and it is issued in the form of an order; but he knows very well something may happen at any moment to throw everything out of gear. The original plan is no more than a kind of map; you can’t see the country by looking at a map, you can’t see the fighting by looking at a plan of attack.’¹⁴

It is unlikely that every Tommy on the Western Front was as perceptive as Manning, but the rough idea was one many understood. Captain Tom Adlam of the 7th Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment probably spoke for most when he said, “We always felt that someone up above was ordering things, and that they probably knew more about it than we did. We just carried on. I mean,

¹² Manning, *Her Privates We*, 155.

¹³ I.L. ‘Dick’ Read, *Of Those We Loved: A Great War Narrative Remembered and Illustrated*. (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2013), 204.

¹⁴ Manning, *Her Privates We*, 155.

we used to criticize them, saying ‘What the hell are they doing this for?’ or something of that kind. But we always took it, it was being good soldiers, I suppose.”¹⁵ Others passively accepted the role of staff and quietly trusted their authority. Writing about Private Albert Alexandre of the Royal Jersey Light Infantry, biographer Phillip Ziegler wrote, “it never occurred to men like Alexandre to question the higher strategy. . . though some of his regimental officers may have joined Sassoon in cursing the General’s staff ‘for incompetent swine,’ he had no such feelings himself.” For Alexandre, “there were, of course, moments of apathy or despair, but the resilience of the British infantryman in intolerably hideous conditions was one of the miracles of the First World War.”¹⁶

That resilience generally goes by another name: bloody-mindedness. Complaining about staff officers was a coping mechanism for helplessness and frustration. Combat infantrymen understood the role of staff, and could even admit that they were important, because hating staff officers was not to hate the man, but to hate the war. The staff officer embodied the difficult circumstances and helplessness of life on the Western Front. The brass-hat was a strawman for tiresome training, failed operations, and abysmal conditions. Emphasizing the difference between themselves and the staff gave trench soldiers a sense of superiority, and through that, pride and confidence. Ragging on the staff was a part of the character of the British soldier on the Western Front, and in some strange way, the combat infantryman needed the staff officer. “Of course we know plenty of leisured gents in other branches of the Army are having the time of their lives”, wrote Private E. F. P. Lynch of the 45th Australian Battalion, “but it would be a poor sort of war if we didn’t have a few leisured gentlemen in it.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War: A New History of WWI in the Words of the Men and Women Who Were There*. (London: Ebury Press, 2002), 192.

¹⁶ Phillip Ziegler, *Soldiers: Fighting Men’s Lives, 1901-2001*. (New York: Knopf, 2002), 13, 15.

¹⁷ E. F. P. Lynch, *Somme Mud: The Experiences of an Infantryman in France, 1916-1919*. (London: Doubleday, 2006), 164.

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