

**The Evolution of Infantry Brigade Command in the British Army
on the Western Front, 1916-1918**

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Abstract

This thesis challenges the orthodox view that the role of the infantry brigade command of the British Army during the First World War was unduly narrow. Instead, it is argued that the response of the brigadiers and their staff to the challenges of the Western Front secured their role as agents of organisational and tactical change. A series of case studies over the period 1916-1918 serve to demonstrate the significant contribution of brigade staff to the Army's learning process. Much like that of the wider BEF however, this process was complex and uneven. As a consequence, the development and battlefield performance of the brigades varied in accordance with factors of an external and internal nature: of these, the influence of the corps or division under which a brigade served was fundamental.

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Dedication

The thesis is dedicated to my maternal grandfather Private G.C. Creasey, 10/Lincolnshire (1885-1979) and his brother Private E. Creasey, 1/4 Lincolnshire (1899-1916).

Abbreviations

ABHQ	Advanced Brigade Headquarters
ABFS	Advanced Brigade Forward Station
ABRC	Advanced Brigade Reporting Centre
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BHQ	Brigade Headquarters
BGGS	Brigadier-General General Staff
BGRA	Brigadier-General Royal Artillery
BIO	Brigade Intelligence Officer
BM	Brigade Major
BMRA	Brigade Major Royal Artillery
BSO	Brigade Signals Officer
CCC	Churchill College Cambridge
CO	Commanding Officer
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
DAHQ	Divisional Artillery Headquarters
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
FOO	Forward Observation Officers
FSR	Field Service Regulations
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GSO1	General Staff Officer (1 st Grade)
GSO2	General Staff Officer (2 nd Grade)
GSO3	General Staff Officer (3 rd Grade)
HA	Heavy Artillery
HQ	Headquarters
IWM	Imperial War Museum
KOSB	King's Own Scottish Borderers
KRRC	King's Royal Rifle Corps

LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
LO	Liaison Officer
MG	Machine Gun
MGC	Machine Gun Corps
MGGS	Major-General General Staff
MGRA	Major General Royal Artillery
NAM	National Army Museum
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
OC	Officer Commanding
OTC	Officer Training Corps
OR	Other Ranks
<i>p</i> sc	passed staff college
RAHQ	Royal Artillery Headquarters
RE	Royal Engineers
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RHA	Royal Heavy Artillery
RMC	Royal Military College
RND	Royal Naval Division
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SC	Staff Captain
TF	Territorial Force
TMB	Trench Mortar Battery
TNA	The National Archives
VC	Victoria Cross
WD	War Diary
WFA	Western Front Association

Introduction and Literature Review

The infantry brigade of the British Army comprised a key component in the chain of command on the Western Front during the First World War. This role was subject to a progressive, but irregular, transformation as the Army responded to the difficulties imposed by trench warfare. This thesis explores the evolution of the brigade as an effective battlefield formation and the influence exercised by the brigade staff in their multi-functional role. The introduction addresses five points: what the thesis sets out to demonstrate, how command and control is treated in the relevant literature, what factors defined the parameters in which brigade command operated, how the British Army's capacity for learning has been evaluated and the justification for the selected case studies.

Two primary research questions were posed. First, to what degree was brigade command's response to static warfare and the transition to mobile operations a reflection of the British army's flexible approach to learning and innovation? It will be argued that the contribution by brigade staff to this process has been underestimated by historians. Second, to what extent was the organisational and tactical development of brigade command shaped by the corps and division under which it served? It will be demonstrated that a brigade's battlefield performance was significantly influenced by this factor. Both questions were designed to challenge the orthodox interpretation of the brigadier's role as unduly narrow, a view expressed by Major-General Sir John Gellibrand in that 'the brigadier had little scope other beyond oiling the works and using

his eyes'.¹ Instead, it will be argued that the role of the brigadier was far broader and constituted a catalyst for organisational and tactical change.

Two avenues of research were adopted to reflect the many interrelated physical dimensions and conceptual planes upon which the conflict was fought. The first, at a macro level, included the geographical, economic and technological factors that shaped operations, those that continually evolved in 'new and often unexpected directions under the influence of the others'.² These broad factors comprised the parameters in which brigade operated. Second, at a micro level, the influence of the brigadier and his immediate staff was examined in relation to the challenges imposed by the irregularities and configuration of their brigade sectors. The thesis illustrates that by drawing upon their accumulated experience and knowledge, provided that specific operational pre-conditions were established, brigade staff could exercise a substantial degree of tactical influence at a pivotal level of learning. This focus upon the human factor serves to evaluate the multi-faceted role of the commander as a leader, administrator and facilitator of change, foreshadowing the establishment of a new generation of brigadiers.

The analysis of military history is based upon the distinction between strategy, operations and tactics. It is important to define these terms as used throughout this thesis. Whilst their meaning has altered through time and mask subtleties of interpretation, they provide a basis for identifying the respective roles of and responsibilities taken within the hierarchical structure of the British armies. The

¹ Australian War Memorial (AWM) 8040/1/(2) cited in P. Simkins, "' Building Blocks": Aspects of Command and Control at Brigade Level in the BEF's Offensive Operations, 1916-1918' in G.D. Sheffield and D. Todman (eds.) *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2007 [2004]), p.145.

² J. Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [2012]), p.249.

Commander-in-Chief of the BEF had prime responsibility for managing the political will of his governmental masters, directly or indirectly through his CIGS. On advice from the politicians an appropriate strategy was thus determined. Army commanders had responsibility for advising the C-in-C on questions of strategy. Corps commanders had responsibility for supervising plans for their subordinate commanders, marshalling appropriate resources and establishing a supportive infrastructure. Divisional commanders created the operational plans that gave effect to the agreed strategy. Brigade command devised and implemented the appropriate tactical measures to achieve the operational objectives set for their battalions. At all levels, commanders were assisted by their staffs who 'stood at the apex of the command team and had a significant influence over the success of a formation'.³ In the view of Brigadier-General Hubert Foster, a leading military writer of the period, it was the duty of the staff officer to work out the details of the dispositions and movements of troops and embody the commander's plans in concise orders to be transmitted with certainty and dispatch. Thus, as Foster contended, good staff officers 'are the eyes, ears and hands to their Chief'.⁴ In this respect divisional, brigade and subordinate levels of command constituted pivotal levels of organisational and tactical learning.

Issues concerning command and control during the First World War have comprised part of the debate over the battlefield performance of the British Army since the war ended. The early literature, laid down during the inter-war years and the 1960's, subscribed to the view that the war was little more than 'a murderous nightmare of misdirected heroism and pointless suffering' and placed the blame firmly

³ P. Harris, *The Men Who Planned the War: A study of the Staff of the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), p.2.

⁴ H. Foster, *Organisation: How Armies are Formed for War* (London: Hugh Rees, 1911), p.60.

on the shoulders of the military high command.⁵ This approach has now been largely discredited,⁶ although still retaining a small number of supporters.⁷ Since the 1980's, a 'new era of scholarship' has provided a more balanced approach to an assessment of the BEF.⁸ Building upon the work of historians such as John Terraine, Tim Travers, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, this scholarship has examined the BEF at operational and tactical levels.⁹ For example, the works of Simon Robbins, Gary Sheffield, Andy Simpson have demonstrated that by 1918 the BEF had developed into a sophisticated and formidable institution.¹⁰

The works that have emerged over the past two decades, in establishing the concept of a 'learning curve', have 'been very helpful in moving us away from old static perceptions of the British army and towards a more dynamic and progressive view of its development'.¹¹ However, while this concept has conveyed the belief that the British military command consistently analysed and acted upon its mistakes, most historians

⁵ J. Bourne, 'Goodbye to All That? Recent Writing on the Great War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), pp.87-8. See also B. Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially chapter 3, pp.51-73.

⁶ Notably, B. Liddell Hart, *The Real War, 1914-1918* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930); A. Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Hutchinson, 1961) and A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963).

⁷ See for example, J. Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War One* (London: Profile Books, 2001).

⁸ G.D. Sheffield and J. Bourne (eds.), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), p.1.

⁹ J. Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (London: Hutchinson, 1963); T. Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army on the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2003 [1987]); R. Price and T. Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004 [1992]).

¹⁰ S. Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005); G.D. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2002[2001]); A. Simpson, *Directing Operations: Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2015); B. Bond et al, *Look to Your Front: Studies in the First World War by The British Commission for Military History* (Stroud: Spellmount, 1999); P.E. Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015).

¹¹ Boff, *Winning and Losing*, p.248. Early advocates of the 'learning curve' include S. Bidwell and D. Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004 [1982]); P. Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-1918* (London: Yale University Press, 2000 [1994]).

would now accept that there were in fact multiple learning curves being climbed simultaneously. Although, through a combination of its pre-war ethos and a pragmatic approach to problem solving, the British army has been shown to have been 'institutionally capable of learning and adapting both on and beyond the Western Front' this process was complex and uneven.¹² Different levels of command experienced variable rates of development. This thesis focuses upon the pace of development experienced by brigade command, the extent to which brigade staffs were able to capitalise upon the organisational and cultural flexibility of the British army and their contribution to the learning process.

The broad parameters in which the BEF operated were defined by three universal criteria: an obligation to the Anglo-French coalition, the British government's unpreparedness for a large-scale continental conflict and the rate of technological innovation spurred by the need to address the challenges of static warfare. First, throughout the winter of 1914-1915, as a junior member of the coalition and despite Sir John French's desire as Commander-in-Chief to pursue an independent strategy, there had been little choice other than to 'comply with a strategy formulated in Joffre's headquarters'.¹³ In pursuing this strategy, the British sector on the Western Front was extended northwards during January 1915 relieving the French IX Corps in the vicinity of Ypres. The localities of the BEF operations then became defined by the German occupation of the high ground and the predominance of their defensive systems. Thus, the position occupied by the British First Army, based upon the contention 'that we cannot separate history from geography', set the pattern for subsequent operations;

¹² A. Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.240.

¹³ J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.111. For British-French strategy, see for example R.A. Prete, *Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2009).

the dominance of the defence over the assault.¹⁴ The basic elements of geography constitute fundamental factors in the conduct of battle, the physical advantage for one side imposing some degree of misfortune for the others. This factor cannot be underestimated in evaluating brigade command's responses to the environment in which they operated.

The British government's failure to prepare for a continental conflict was a second factor influencing the shape and direction of the war. This was initially reflected in manpower shortages. Shaped by financial expediency rather than strategical or operational factors, the British army's regular establishment of six infantry and one cavalry division was rapidly eroded by the huge losses sustained during 1914.¹⁵ Equally, Britain was slow to arm itself, exposing all the government's pre-war plans. Whilst shell deliveries were enough to keep the BEF supplied with ammunition at the expected pre-war rate, the battlefield expenditure had been grossly underestimated. Industry 'could not supply Sir John French *and* the New Armies [original emphasis]' indefinitely.¹⁶ This shortfall determined the scale of the offensives conducted during 1915-1916 and consequently the shape and course of brigade operations.

A third parameter governing the BEF's operational capacity was the impact of artillery support in the achievement of tempo, or the ability of a force 'to transition from

¹⁴ R. J. Wilson, 'Geography and Military History' in *Army Quarterly* Vol. XII, No.2, January 1927, pp.394-397. For recent research on this theme, see for example P. Doyle, *Disputed Earth: Geology and Trench Warfare on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Uniform Publishing, 2017).

¹⁵ *Statistics of the Military of the British Empire During the Great War, 1914-1918* (London: HMSO, 1922), p.364 for recruiting figures September 1914-February 1915. For the British government's response to this shortfall, see for example P. Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2007 [1988]).

¹⁶ D. French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905-1915* (London: Allan and Unwin, 1982), p.155. See also D.G. Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics and Strategic Planning, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially chapter 4.

one operational posture to another'.¹⁷ To counter the effect of superior firepower and promote a tactical rate of advance, the artillery required not only an unprecedented quantity of munitions but the skills to ensure accurate delivery. As Spencer Jones has demonstrated 'of all the combat arms in the British Army, the Royal Artillery faced the greatest challenge in the pre-First World War period, being forced to adapt to both new equipment and new tactics in a short space of time'. In effect however, in 1914 'it was a lack of numbers and an absence of uniform doctrine that hampered the gunners... rather than inherent tactical flaws'.¹⁸ On the one hand, commanders favoured rapid direct fire in close support of the infantry. For example, in chairing a debate on the infantry perspective of artillery support, Brigadier-General L.E. Kiggell Director of Staff Duties at the War Office, concluded that the infantry would accept friendly-fire casualties from direct fire, but not indirect, as the sight of the guns on the battlefield boosted their self-belief.¹⁹ Conversely, other commanders prioritised indirect fire, precise ranging and concealment as their experiences in South Africa and the Russo-Japanese War had demonstrated.²⁰ Such diversity of practice 'implied a failure to imprint a common understanding of the basic tactical principles on the core operational units of the army'.²¹ By the middle of the decade, a greater number of artillerymen favoured a shift towards indirect fire and by 1914 the recommendation of pushing batteries up to a decisive range in close support during an attack had been

¹⁷ *Army Doctrine Publication Vol.1. (Operations Army Code 71565)*, prepared under the Direction of the Chief of the General Staff (1994), pp.3-19, quoted in Boff, *Winning and Losing*, p.6.

¹⁸ S. Jones. *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman, Oklahoma University Press, 2013), pp.157-8.

¹⁹ *Proceedings of the Royal Artillery Institution*, Vol. XXXV, 1908-1909, No.2, (Woolwich, Royal Artillery Institution), pp.49-56. Remarks made by the Chair, p.53.

²⁰ See for example, Brigadier-General J.P. Du Cane, 'The Co-Operation of Field Artillery with Infantry in Attack' in *Army Review* 1, (1911), pp.97-113; Major E.M. Molyneaux, 'Artillery Support for Infantry' in *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 53, No.2 (1909), pp.1454-70, 1607-71; Lieutenant- Colonel C.N.F. Broad, 'The Development of Artillery Tactics 1914-1918' in *The Journal of the Royal Artillery*, Vol. XLIX, 1922-23, pp.62-81.

²¹ T. Bowman and M. Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.88.

removed from the *Field Service Regulations 1909*.²² However, *Field Artillery Training 1914* offered a somewhat contradictory approach suggesting that ‘to support infantry and to enable it to effect its purpose the artillery must willingly sacrifice itself’ [original emphasis].²³ In the absence of uniform fire plans, the success of the infantry during 1914-1916 was often dependent upon the individual experience and perception of the officers in charge. This variable approach could create serious flaws when used across a wide battlefield.

As Griffith has argued ‘the most effective set of new technologies in the Great War lay in the development of artillery’.²⁴ A number of highly significant innovations were introduced building upon the pre-war developments in locating devices and surveying techniques.²⁵ The greatly improved accuracy of the guns ‘matched by a corresponding increase in the complexity of the shells themselves’ gradually enhanced the effectiveness of combined artillery-infantry operations.²⁶ Jonathan Bailey elevated Griffith’s research to another stage, by arguing for the arrival of a three-dimensional battlefield in 1916 where the quantity of ammunition available determined the scope of operations. This model allowed for effective indirect artillery fire in support of combined artillery-infantry tactics. Based upon the adoption of novel gunnery techniques and tactics ‘aircraft [were] increasingly used to inspect the effects of artillery fire’.²⁷ Two criteria related to artillery support shaped the close cooperation

²² *Field Service Regulations Part 1, Operations, 1909, (Reprinted with Amendments 1914)* (London: HMSO), chapter VII, 106, p.143. [henceforth FSR1]

²³ *Field Artillery Training 1914*, p.232.

²⁴ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.65.

²⁵ See P. Chasseaud, *Artillery’s Astrologers: A History of British Survey and Mapping on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Lewes, Mapbooks, 1999), especially pp.3-12 for the historical background of surveying and pp.13-16 for indirect fire and artillery surveying in 1914.

²⁶ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.135 -138.

²⁷ J. Bailey, *The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare*, Occasional Paper No.22, (Camberley, 1996). See also J. Bailey ‘British Artillery in the Great War’ in P. Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1998 [1996]), pp.23-49.

between the infantry and artillery arms which perhaps, as Griffith maintained was 'the most difficult [lesson] to put into practice'.²⁸ First, the necessity 'for artillery commanders 'to help the infantry to maintain its mobility and offensive power' as laid down in *FSR1*, was subject to individual interpretation.²⁹ Second, the development of sophisticated combined operations, enhanced by the gradual refinement of predicted fire, provided a greater degree of flexibility for infantry attacks.

Whilst it would have been preferable for the British army to have perfected combined tactics on manoeuvres rather than on the Western Front, such was the state of communications on the battlefield it is not surprising that it struggled with close cooperation between arms. Attacks were dependent upon the establishment of a reliant system of communication: the failure to establish such a system looming large over the development of brigade operations. With an onus upon forward commanders to direct the tactical flow of the battle, any failure in communication deprived them of the means of gaining assistance or capitalising upon opportunities. Given the gravity of this subject, the literature on communication within the British army had until recently attracted little research. For example, whilst Terraine had observed, that once the troops had passed out of their control, the generals 'became quite impotent at the very moment when they would expect and be expected to display their greatest proficiency', he did not develop his line of argument in depth.³⁰ Prior and Wilson's *Command on the Western Front* provided only a superficial reference to the limitations exerted by inadequate communications, while Bidwell and Graham's *Fire-Power* devoted only three pages to the subject. Tim Travers, whilst dealing with tactical and

²⁸ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.65.

²⁹ *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 105 (3), pp.140-141.

³⁰ J. Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War, 1861-1945* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1992 [1980]), p.118.

operational decision making in *The Killing Ground*, contributed little towards understanding the practicalities of communication within the BEF. Similarly, the complementary works of Martin van Creveld and Martin Samuels failed to provide a systematic analysis of communications.³¹

Whilst both Niall Barr and John Lee provided an insight into the role of communications within the BEF, Brian Hall's analysis is the most significant work on the subject.³² Hall's work examines the BEF's capability for change and the enduring debate concerning the relationship between the British military command and the adoption of new technology. Through analysing the organisational, doctrinal and technical innovations adopted by the BEF, he demonstrates how communication helped shape the static nature of fighting between 1915 and 1917 and contributed towards overcoming the stalemate of trench warfare.³³ Hall demonstrates that the evolution of brigade command is unequivocally aligned to the development of communications on the Western Front. These three factors defined the broad parameters in which the BEF operated. Thus, operational success was dictated by the terrain, the material weakness of the British armies and the progress of technological innovation. Having established this, some clarification of the British army's command philosophy is required.

Recent historians have contended that the British army did not necessarily need a formal doctrine designed to 'provide a simple, coherent, standardised structure both

³¹ M. van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); M. Samuels, *Command or Control? : Command, Training and Tactics in the British Armies 1888-1918* (London: Cass, 2003 [1995]).

³² N. Barr, 'Command in Transition from Mobile to Static Warfare', pp.13-38; J. Lee 'Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917', pp.119-139; both in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*.

³³ B.N. Hall, *Communications and British Operations on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

for strategic thought and for military institutions'.³⁴ As Stephen Badsey has argued, in accordance with its role as a colonial police force 'the definition and expectations of the British pre-war British army were contextually different during the Edwardian period'.³⁵ This view was echoed by Jones who considered that 'standardised practices were never likely to be present in a regular army constrained by the need to remain flexible in order to engage with a large variety of potential foes'.³⁶ Averse therefore to adopting a formal doctrine, *FSR1* constituted the British army's statement of principles. Whether in fact this composed a formal doctrine, or a loose, adaptable conceptual framework, has proved contentious within the relevant historiography. Christopher Pugsley, for example, maintained that *FSR1* effectively turned the British army into a 'doctrinally based organisation with centralised intent and the means for decentralised execution'.³⁷ In reality, he argued, the pre-war British army's traditional concepts of manoeuvre and offensive action provided a basis for a semi-official doctrine. In a similar vein, Gary Sheffield argued that 'in the absence of a formal doctrine in the modern sense' the British army did incorporate a body of semi-formal doctrine in the form of *FSR1* where Regular officers could bring their experience to bear.³⁸ This thesis will demonstrate that the interpretation of the principles laid down in *FSR1* remained central to tactical decision making at brigade level throughout 1916 -1918.

In theory, whilst not clearly defined, *FSR1* stressed the concept of 'the man on the spot' in determining how orders were to be interpreted or amended '[based] upon

³⁴ J. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989 [1984], p.27.

³⁵ S. Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry, 1880-1918* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 2-3.

³⁶ Jones, *From Boer War*, p.59.

³⁷ C. Pugsley, 'We Have Been Here Before: The Evolution of Doctrine and of Decentralised Command in the British Army, 1905-1989' (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Occasional Paper, No.9, 2011), p.5.

³⁸ www.defencesynergia.co.uk. *Army Doctrine Publication*, G.D. Sheffield, 'Doctrine and Command in the British Army: An Historical Overview', retrieved 10 October 2017.

some fact which could not be known to the officer who issued the order'.³⁹ This principle, promoting the values of initiative and flexibility, was endorsed by the General Staff Officers' conference of 1913. Here it was considered that

there is no doubt as to the danger which, I think, all admit, of laying down too much detail in regulations... the problem of war cannot be solved by rules, but by judgement based upon a knowledge of general principles. To lay down rules would tend to cramp judgement but not to educate and strengthen it. For that reason, our manuals aim at giving principles but avoid laying down method'.⁴⁰

However, whilst these principles were designed to encourage initiative, the level at which subordinates could safely exercise command was left unclear, the difficulties of balancing independent action and control remaining unresolved. In effect, for subordinate commanders exposed to the intractable problems of communication, *FSR1* proved a double-edged sword: whilst encouraging initiative, its vagueness resulted in a proliferation of different interpretations and tactical methods. As Simpson has demonstrated, whilst used in conjunction with the *SS* series of training pamphlets, *FSR1* remained legitimately usable, it did not satisfactorily cater for the tactical problems of lower command.⁴¹ For example, it was laid down that 'time [was] an essential consideration in deciding whether an opportunity [was] favourable or not for decisive action'. Thus 'each commander may employ defensive or offensive action to suit his requirements'.⁴² This thesis demonstrates that the application of *FSR1* at brigade level was subject to the broad preconditions for operational success and the

³⁹ *FSRI*, Chapter 2, 12, (13ii), p.32. The phrase 'man on the spot' or 'Senior Infantry Officer on the spot' was later embodied in *SS135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (General Staff: Army Printing and Stationery Services) December 1916. For a complete list of *SS* pamphlets issued from GHQ between 1915-1918 see P. Hodgkinson, S. Justice and T. Ball at www.birmingham.ac.uk/war/List-of-SS-pamphlets.doc

⁴⁰ TNA, WO 279/48, 'Report on a Conference of General Staff Officers at the Royal Military College, 13-16 January 1913, p.17.

⁴¹ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p.20.

⁴² *FSRI*, Chapter VII, 99 (3), p.131 and 100 (1), p.132.

value accorded to the brigadier's interpretation of local circumstances. Given this onus of responsibility, it was incumbent upon the brigade staff to gather 'timely information regarding the enemy's dispositions and the topographical features of the theatre of operations'.⁴³ By then having 'acquainted [himself] with all ground over which they might have to act' the brigadier was free to deploy his reserves as and when required.⁴⁴ Given the multi-faceted role of the brigade staff, this thesis highlights the fundamental importance of the capture and interpretation of vital intelligence to assist in this procedure.

To evaluate the tactical influence of brigade command it is necessary to establish a definition of command and control. Gary Sheffield contends that 'commanders at all levels should operate within an unambiguous concept of operations' supported by a smooth flow of communications and with an adequate degree of flexibility.⁴⁵ The extent to which these pre-conditions were realised shaped the direction of brigade operations and the brigadier's capacity to sustain effective control. The degree of decentralisation experienced by brigadiers on the Western Front was influenced by the style of command practiced by the higher formation in which they served. The issue of command styles in the BEF is contentious. For example, Samuels argued that British command was driven by a traditional, hierarchical system of 'restrictive control', where orders prescribed to subordinates at a tactical level allowed little room for manoeuvre or flexibility. If an amendment to the plan was required, the subordinate commander had no recourse but to consult with

⁴³ *Ibid*, Chapter VI, 90, (1), p.119.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 108 (7), p.148.

⁴⁵ G.D. Sheffield, 'Introduction', in G.D. Sheffield, (ed.) *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Experience Since 1861* (London: Brassey's, 2002 [1997]), p.3.

his superior.⁴⁶ Millett and Murray concluded that 'any tactical system that stressed set-piece battles, rigid schedules for reaching objectives and tight control do not create the conditions necessary for timely exploitation'.⁴⁷

In contrast, other scholars have argued that the BEF embraced a flexible style of command that promoted initiative, independent action and rapid movement at a tactical level, which was able to exploit fleeting advantages into battlefield success. This style reflects that adopted by the modern British Army, one of 'mission command'. Based upon a philosophy of centralised intent and decentralised execution, its basic tenets encompass 'timely decision making, the importance of understanding a superior commander's intention and by applying this to one's own actions, a clear responsibility to fulfil that intention'.⁴⁸ In relation to this approach, Richard Bryson has argued that British commanders undoubtedly understood the central elements of this command philosophy 'but would take time to bring the wartime volunteers and conscripts up to the level of ability required to implement it on the battlefield'.⁴⁹

The consensus amongst historians has been that the BEF favoured a restrictive style of command characterised by inflexibility, conformity and a reliance upon exact orders.⁵⁰ Recent research, however, has challenged these views. Simpson, for example, has analysed the different command styles that existed at army level in relation to their influence upon corps command, comparing for example the relatively hands-off approach promoted by Rawlinson's Fourth Army and the more assertive style exercised within Gough's Fifth Army. Simpson concluded that 'as

⁴⁶ Samuels, *Command or Control*, see especially, pp.124-157, 'X Corps during the Battle of Thiepval, 1 July 1916'.

⁴⁷ A.R. Millett and W. Murray, *Military Effectiveness: The First World War* Vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010[1988]), p.22.

⁴⁸ *Army Doctrine Publications*, Vol.2, *Command* (Shrivenham, 1995), paragraph 0210.

⁴⁹ R. Bryson, 'The Once and Future Army' in Bond *et al*, *Look To Your Front*, p.34.

⁵⁰ See for example, Samuels, *Command*, pp.94-123,284.

resources and especially artillery became more plentiful, so it was possible for corps, when appropriate, to decentralise back down to divisions as the principles of *FSR1* required'.⁵¹

Peter Simkins has similar views on evaluating the battlefield performance on the Somme. At least in some divisions, he argues, 'the trend towards a more devolved command style gathered pace in 1917 as brigadier-generals were allowed and seized increasing opportunities to exercise a greater degree of control of operations at a local level'.⁵² Whilst he acknowledged that the parameters of brigade command were comparatively narrow, he considered that 'a more flexible and innovative command system came to determine planning and the conduct of operations' at brigade level.⁵³ Simpson's and Simkins' respective work upon corps and brigade command have provided a platform for this thesis. A similar 'top down' approach has been applied in this thesis in order to evaluate battlefield performance relative to the command style adopted by the Army, Corps and Divisional commanders under which a brigade served.

The thesis will argue that the role of the brigadier was multi-faceted. It is therefore necessary to clarify the distinction between interrelated concepts of command and leadership: whilst command is a managerial function; leadership is principally concerned with inspiration and motivation. Thus, leadership is designed to 'create and sustain unit cohesion and to ensure that the goals of the group are congruent with those of the larger organisation'.⁵⁴ The literature appertaining to the theory of leadership is extensive, Bernard Bass for example suggesting that efficient

⁵¹ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p.226.

⁵² Simkins, "' Building Blocks'", in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, pp.160-1.

⁵³ P. Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014), p.53.

⁵⁴ G.D. Sheffield, 'Introduction' in Sheffield, *The Anglo-American Experience*, p.10.

leaders employed different methods at different times in accordance with circumstances.⁵⁵ James MacGregor Burns, in a later study, proposed that two forms of leadership exist; the transformational and the transactional. The first relies upon a force of personality and intellectual inspiration in shaping organisational structures, whilst the latter prospers through inducing cooperation.⁵⁶ More recently, Keith Grint has suggested that four criteria contribute towards effective leadership; identity, strategic vision, organisational tactics and personal communication.⁵⁷ Of these four criteria, where an inability to influence operational and tactical planning was limited, it was in the areas of administration, unit cohesion and the maintenance of morale that commanders could make a difference. In accordance with Grint's argument, this thesis demonstrates the crucial influence of the brigadier in unit administration, training and the reconstitution of units. As Millett and Murray contended 'a tactical system that does not deliberately consider these and other important military variables will cause serious problems.'⁵⁸

In respect of the brigadier's responsibilities, John Bourne considered that the role equated to that of a battalion commander but on a larger scale: that of leader, co-ordinator and supervisor.⁵⁹ Upon leaving 36th (Ulster) Division to assume command of 40th Division's 119 Brigade, Brigadier-General F.C. Crozier was advised by Major-General O.S.W. Nugent 'to treat [his] new brigade like a big battalion'.⁶⁰ Trevor Harvey, in his study of a cohort of brigadiers from Third Army and the Canadian Corps, has demonstrated the 'scale and complexity of the role' in adjusting to the various

⁵⁵ B. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectation* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

⁵⁶ J. MacGregor Burns, *Transforming Leadership* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003)

⁵⁷ K. Grint, *The Arts of Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.27.

⁵⁸ Millett and Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, p.21.

⁵⁹ J.M. Bourne 'British Generals in the First World War' in Sheffield, *The Anglo-American Experience*, p.101.

⁶⁰ F.P. Crozier, *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937[1930]), p.135.

demands of the battlefield.⁶¹ Essentially, the role of the CO in providing leadership and maintaining the morale and fighting capability of his battalion was not dissimilar. Both brigadier and battalion commanders were expected to set an example through confidence and courage. Where the responsibilities differed was that those of the brigadier were far more extensive. Harvey's work has also provided a foundation for research, but this thesis examines operations over a broader time span and across three armies to allow for an exploration of the variable degrees of consistency that shaped brigade development. This approach serves to supplement and enhance the literature on brigade command in the British armies on the Western Front. Furthermore, it will be argued that the influence of the brigadier and his staff stretched far beyond the roles of administration and organisation. As a prolific advocate for its contribution to the BEF's success, Simkins considered the brigade as 'the building blocks' of the command structure.⁶² Whilst this analogy suggests stability and inflexibility, it will be demonstrated that brigade command was also a dynamic and receptive force that contributed to the BEF's process of learning and adaptation.

A whole series of factors produced a style of leadership and officer-man relationships in the divisions of the New Army and the Territorial Force (henceforth TF) which were different from those of the Regular army. Leadership and command relationships ultimately rested upon the nature of the pre-war Regular army and the singular expectations of the civilian soldier. Gary Sheffield has written at length on this theme focusing upon a series of factors that produced a style of officer-man relations 'in the vast majority of officers, Regular, Territorial or temporary [who] shared a

⁶¹ T. Harvey, *An Army of Brigadiers: British Brigade Commanders at the Battle of Arras 1917* (Solihull, Helion, 2017), p.332.

⁶² Simkins, "'Building Blocks'" in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, pp.160-1.

common belief in the need for paternal care of their men'.⁶³ These relationships, encountered in moulding civilian soldiers into regular-style brigades, were explored by Helen McCartney in relation to 1/6 King's (Liverpool) 55th (West Lancashire) Division and highlight the mechanics of command and consent at brigade level.⁶⁴

The focus of this thesis is on the extent to which brigade command was able to learn from and adapt to the rigours of trench warfare. Contrary to the views of Travers *et al*, some scholars have argued that the enduring ethos of the pre-war officer corps was fundamental to the British army's capability for learning and adaptation. Albert Palazzo contended that in the absence of a formal doctrine, it was the traditional values of the Regular army, codified in the principles of *FSR1*, that provided the means to 'interpret the problems of combat and [test] the feasibility of solutions'.⁶⁵ Aimee Fox's analysis of the British armies responses to the changing conduct of the war expanded this argument. Her research demonstrates how the social and intellectual influence of the pre-war army provided flexibility and a conducive environment for learning. Consisting of institutional and individual practices, systematic and incidental, disseminated in different ways and at different times, the British army was 'able to recalibrate its approach to learning and its response to its increasingly civilian composition'.⁶⁶

As Fox has demonstrated, one of the clearest shortcomings of the learning process has been the simplistic linkage between the army's ability to learn and battlefield performance. This binary approach has consequently masked the reality of

⁶³ G.D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the Era of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.102.

⁶⁴ H.B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [2005]).

⁶⁵ A. Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: the British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War 1* (Lincoln: University of Oklahoma Press), p.9.

⁶⁶ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p.241.

how the army learned. As seductive as the notion that learning improves combat power is, 'it must be acknowledged that myriad other concerns - terrain, weather, supply, morale, the enemy - all complicate the association between the two'.⁶⁷ The effect of these factors upon the development of brigade command will become evident as this thesis evolves.

Where and how innovation takes place can be broken down into three approaches. The first, a top-down approach, generally focuses upon innovation in peacetime, arguing that only civilians or senior military leaders can implement innovation. This thesis however concentrates upon the bottom-up and horizontal approaches. Of these two measures, the less formal bottom-up process focuses upon the role of the practitioner in change and adaptation. This approach, as the thesis demonstrates, was evident at brigade level. The second approach, that of horizontal learning, was defined by E.A. Cohen as the rapid exchange of ideas and experiences at an informal level.⁶⁸ In identifying the extent to which these methods were nurtured and practiced at brigade level, their success was dependent upon the adoption of a consultative approach of command at divisional level and above which encouraged an environment of learning at subordinate levels.⁶⁹

This thesis will demonstrate the level of tacit learning, often opportunistic, which emerged from activities at brigade level. It will be argued that whilst formal or institutionalised learning lent itself to the hierarchical nature of the British army, a process of robust analysis and adaptation was present at brigade level. Although far from uniform, a net-worked model of learning and beneficial command relationships

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.9.

⁶⁸ E.A. Cohen, 'Change and Transformation in Military Affairs', in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27 (3) 2004, pp.395-407.

⁶⁹ See for example, R.T. Foley, 'Dumb Donkeys or Cunning Foxes? Learning in the British and German Armies during the Great War', *International Affairs* 90 (2) 2014, pp.279-298.

facilitated the capture and codification of knowledge and its assimilation at lower levels. In this respect, the level of learning and adaptation experienced at brigade level reflects the meritocratic rise of a new generation of staff and their status as facilitators of change.

In adopting a qualitative approach to the thesis, the bulk of the research was taken from brigade diaries held within the WO 95 series at the National Archives, Kew. These were supplemented by GHQ, army, corps, division, battalion and support papers to corroborate the brigade records and to add greater detail. The post-war official history correspondence, incorporated within the CAB series, provided the personal accounts of former officers. Although the brigade diaries proved generally more reliable than the correspondence, they varied significantly in clarity and quality. At one extreme, some were meticulously written with full copies of orders received and sent, maps, details of training and coherent after-action reports. At the other extreme, the diaries were clearly composed under adverse conditions and lacked detail or operational analysis. This introduced a systematic bias towards the more-self analytic, and arguably more progressive, formations which could not be avoided. Overall, however they provided ample evidence to demonstrate that robust analysis and observation was taking place at all levels of command. Further personal papers were consulted at the Imperial War Museum, the Liddell Hart Military Archives, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, the Liddle Collection, and the British Library. Overall, the primary reference material available at regimental museums proved disappointing in content. However, the private papers of Brigadier-General P.V.P. Stone, held at the Norfolk Regimental Museum, Norwich, proved worthy of reference. I was also fortunate in being given personal access to the papers of Brigadier-General H. Pelham Burn and Brigadier-General A.B.E. Cator held in private ownership. In addition to

FSR1, reference to the series of training manuals issued by GHQ and printed by the Army Printing and Stationary Service of the BEF proved invaluable. For the purpose of the case studies, the nomenclature and chronology for operations were as defined by E.A. James.⁷⁰ Some quantitative research was entailed in creating a profile of brigadiers and tracing the evolution of a new generation of commanders. The reference works consulted included, A.F. Becke's *Order of Battle of Divisions, The Quarterly Army Lists, 1914-1919* and the *Monthly Army List for August 1914*.⁷¹

Of the few memoirs written by brigadiers, that of Brigadier-General F.P. Crozier reflects his reputation as an aggressive, courageous, if irascible, leader. There are few references to the broader mechanics of command and control, or criticism of higher authority and Crozier's sanguine style should be treated with caution.⁷² Brigadier-General H.R. Cumming's memoirs, in contrast, were critical of the circumstances of 91 Brigade's experiences prior to the Battle of Arras.⁷³ The few brigade histories proved more useful, particularly those of 89 and 54 Brigades, which provided a more personal perspective.⁷⁴ The memoirs of Earl Stanhope was useful in providing information upon the staff arrangements of Fifth Army's II and V Corps' and John Terraine's edited diary of Brigadier-General J.L. Jack for the experiences of a brigadier during the Hundred Days.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ A. James, *A Record of Battles and Engagements of the British Armies in France and Flanders, 1914-1918* (London: London Stamp Exchange, 1990 [1924]).

⁷¹ For example, A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle of Division, Part 3A, New Army Division (9-26) and Part 3B (30-41) and 63rd (R.N.) Division* (Newport: Westlake, nd [1938 and 1945]).

⁷² F.P. Crozier, *A Brasshat in No Man's Land* (London: Cape, 1937 [1930]).

⁷³ H.R. Cummings, *A Brigadier in France* (London: Cape, 1922).

⁷⁴ F.C. Stanley, *The History of the 89th Brigade* (Liverpool: Daily Post, 1919); *54th Infantry Brigade 1914-1918: Some Records of Battle and Laughter in France* (Aldershot: 1919), attributed to Brigadier-General T.H. Shoubridge.

⁷⁵ B. Bond (ed.), *War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope 1914-1918* (Brighton: Tom Donovan, 2006); J. Terraine (ed.), *General Jack's Diary 1914-1918* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964).

The scope of the thesis restricted the selection of case studies to brigade operations conducted by Second, Fourth and Fifth Armies. This choice reflected Second Army's reputation for meticulous preparation and the contrast in command styles exercised by Fourth and Fifth Armies. To compare the degrees of consistency in the organisational and tactical development of brigade command, the case studies were drawn from various corps from all three armies and across a broad time span. The case studies were selected to evaluate whether brigade operational performance was influenced by the style of command exercised by the corps under which it served. Consideration was given to various factors, including the number of attacks undertaken by the relative corps. The focus of the research remained upon offensive operations and although reference is made to brigade defensive arrangements, the scope of the thesis precludes the analysis of defensive operations. The operations chosen offer a meaningful and broadly representative cross-section of Regular, TF and New Army brigades serving on the Western Front.

The thesis takes a qualitative approach and is structured chronologically in line with the radical improvements in the doctrinal, tactical and technological best practice within the BEF. The aim of Chapter 1 is threefold. First, to establish the foundation for the succeeding chapters by outlining the identity, structure and principal roles of brigade staff. Second, to examine the process of renewal which addressed the increased demand for experienced and tactically proficient brigadiers. It will be shown that the reasons behind this were varied, deliberate and otherwise. Third, to identify the universal and internal factors that influenced the shape of operations during 1915 in order to establish the basis for evaluating the development of brigade command during 1916-1918.

Four chapters focus upon brigade operations conducted in 1916-1917 during a period of robust, analytical debate upon the nature of modern warfare. Chapter 2 examines Fourth Army's operations on the Somme during 1916. First, the brigade operations of XIII Corps were chosen to illustrate the dramatic difference in the attack delivered on 1 July and of those undertaken between 15 July-3 September. Having held the line since March 1916, providing a continuity of command in the same sector, from a total of 29 attacks the corps achieved a success rate of 44.82%: 30th Division alone suffered more casualties than any other division on the Somme. The second case study focuses upon Lieutenant-General Earl of Cavan's XIV Corps and operations conducted at Flers-Courcelette in September. This offensive, in relation to brigade operations, highlights the difficulties imposed by irregular brigade frontages and the implementation of coordinated infantry-artillery tactics. From a total of 26 attacks on the Somme, XIV Corps achieved a 61.53% success rate.

Chapter 3 compares the operations of Fifth Army's II and V Corps during the Battle of the Ancre. Whilst II Corps experienced a success rate of 68.25% from 63 attacks, that of V Corps was significantly lower.⁷⁶ The reasons behind this disparity highlight the benefits conducive to brigade success and the impact of inadequate preparation and micro-management that deprived brigades of sufficient tactical influence. The second case study evaluated the extent to which the lessons of the Somme were embraced during the minor brigade actions undertaken by the corps' during the spring of 1917. Chapter 4 examines the brigade operations conducted by X and IX Corps at Messines under the less authoritative style of command of General Herbert Plumer's Second Army. The corps' operations conducted at the Menin Road

⁷⁶ Reserve Army was renamed Fifth Army in October 1916.

and Polygon Wood, which reflected 'the growing experience of staff officers at all levels of command', provides a basis for the second case study.⁷⁷

Chapter 5 compares the operations of Fifth Army's II and XIV Corps on 31 July 1917 and those of II and XIV Corps on 16 August 1917, during Third Ypres. These two phases of the offensive differed significantly in their operational and logistical arrangements. An analysis of these operations was aimed at establishing the degree of influence imposed upon brigade operations by this variable approach. Chapter 6 evaluates the extent to which the lessons of 1916-1917 were applied in brigade operations conducted during the semi-open and open warfare of the Hundred Days (August-November 1918). The first case study focused on Fourth Army's II and IX Corps at Amiens, Albert and the advance upon the Hindenburg Line, and the second on the final advance of Second Army's II, X and XIX Corps.

Chapter 1

Brigade Command: Identity, Structure and Function, and Brigade Operations in 1915

1.1: Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for examining the development of infantry brigade command on the Western Front during 1916-1918. Its aim is three-fold. First, to determine the identity, structure and function of the pre-war brigade command.

⁷⁷ TNA, WO 95/853, X Corps Instructions G.X.7, 10 September 1917.

Second, to explore the profile of a new generation of brigade staff that reflected the changes wrought by retirement, promotion, exhaustion or death and the onset of merit-based promotion. Third, to examine the universal factors that shaped brigade operations during 1915 as the BEF adjusted to the challenges of static warfare.

1.2: Social status

With few exceptions the pre-war British Army's officer corps shared the conventional upbringing and education of the privileged Victorian gentleman.⁷⁸ Officers were expected to abide by a code of behaviour based upon 'morality, manners and honesty'.⁷⁹ Characterised by social and financial exclusiveness, the possession of a 'gentlemanly ethos' was a prerequisite for membership into the military hierarchy.⁸⁰ The parentage of cadets entering the Royal Military College (RMC) in April 1891 show that out of 378 entrants, 45% were from a military background, 13.4% from a professional background and only 6% the sons of merchants and manufactures.⁸¹ Figures for 1910 indicate that whilst entrants from a military background remained consistent, an increase to 33% from commercial backgrounds reflected the rise of cadets from the middle classes.⁸² The family origins of brigadiers from eight infantry divisions serving in 1914 reinforces the existence of a social elite. From a sample of 27 brigadiers, 12 (44%) followed in the family tradition of pursuing a military career. Of

⁷⁸ Senior officers who had served in the ranks were rare, the most notable being Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the General Staff, 1915-1918.

⁷⁹ IWM, Major-General G.P. Dawnay Papers, 1043, 69/21/3, General Sir Kenneth Wigram to Dawnay, 8 December 1946.

⁸⁰ K. Simpson, 'The Officers' in I.F.W. Beckett and K. Simpson (eds.) *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985); see also Bowman and Connelly, *The Edwardian Army*, especially chapter 1.

⁸¹ J. Smyth, *Sandhurst: The History of the Royal Military Academy Woolwich, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the Royal Military Academy, 1741-1961*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), appendix 4, p.262.

⁸² C.B. Otley, 'The Social Origins of the British Army Officer' in the *Sociological Review*, July 1970, pp.225-6.

the remainder, two were drawn from a titled family, three from wealthy landowner families and four from a clerical background with a leavening from political, medical and legal origins.⁸³

To sustain social and financial exclusiveness regiments restricted their areas of recruitment to a narrow band of elite public schools whose syllabi embraced a range of militaristic and imperialist ideas. Of 36 brigadiers serving on the Western Front in 1914, 41% attended one of the nine Clarendon schools, with nine from Eton, two from Harrow and one each from Wellington College, Marlborough, Winchester and Rugby.⁸⁴ From 20 officers assuming the post of brigadier in 1915, 14 (70%) attended the same six educational establishments. Of these officers, four (20%) were promoted to divisional command within twelve months.⁸⁵ Despite the heavy losses of officers during 1914, the rapid promotion of these commanders ensured that the traditional values of a public-school education were sustained. The power and influence of this phenomena was stressed by Brigadier-General R.J. Kentish who claimed that

those who have been fortunate enough to have received a public-school education received our first lesson in *esprit de corps* in our public school and passing to one or other of the universities and afterwards to various professions we learned more of its magic meaning.⁸⁶

The institutionalisation of the ethos was strengthened by the creation of the Officers Training Corps (OTC) in 1908, under the direct control of the War Office. By 1914,

⁸³ *Burke's Landed Gentry of Great Britain* (London: Burke's Peerage Ltd.); *Who Was Who 1916-1918* (London: A. and C. Black, 1929); *Debrett's Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage and Companionage* (London: Dean, 1907).

⁸⁴ *Eton School Register 1893-1899*; *Burke's Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry* (London: Burke's Peerage, 1906 and 1914); E.W. Moss-Blundell (ed.), *House of Commons Book of Remembrance 1914-18* (London: Mathews and Marriot, 1931); *Who Was Who 1916-1928* (London: A. and C. Black, 1929). The Clarendon Commission was established in 1861 to investigate nine leading schools in England. Because of its publication, the Public Schools Act was passed in 1868.

⁸⁵ Brigadier-Generals R. Wanless O'Gowan, 13 Brigade to 31st Division, G.H. Thesiger, 2 Brigade to 9th (Scottish) Division, G.P.T. Feilding 1 (Guards) Brigade to Guards Division and C.J. Deverell 20 Brigade to 3rd Division.

⁸⁶ IWM, Brigadier-General R.J. Kentish Papers, 7806, 'Army Association Football: Its Past and Future' in *BEF Sports Journal*, 8 February 1919.

80% of public schools had an OTC ensuring, as Gary Sheffield has demonstrated, that the average Edwardian public schoolboy 'would have been strong willed indeed to resist the range of militaristic cultural influences that existed around him'.⁸⁷ As Brigadier-General F.P. Crozier commented when assessing the qualities of the officers of 119 Brigade 'they were of good blood... not only of good families [but] well-schooled'.⁸⁸ The moral benefits of this education and training were summarised by Major-General T.D. Pilcher in advice to his newly commissioned son, in that 'you who have been to Public School, the ordeal ought not to be so trying as to another who has not had this advantage... [providing] that you are modest in your behaviour and err on the side of diffidence rather than self-assertion'.⁸⁹

1.3: The Royal Military College, Sandhurst

Most brigadiers serving on the Western Front attended the RMC which trained officers for all branches of the army, except the Royal Engineers and Royal Artillery who attended the RMC Woolwich. Prior to the South African War of 1899, the college had been found wanting in its academic provision and military instruction. During this period, the syllabus consisted of drill, gymnastics, equitation and an admixture of engineering, topography and tactical exercises, although cadets were found to have had 'absolutely no inducement to work'.⁹⁰ Lieutenant-Colonel T. Montgomery-Cuninghame, as a former cadet, considered that he had been taught little that would

⁸⁷ Sheffield, *Leadership*, p.53.

⁸⁸ IWM, Starrett Papers, 6659, 'War Memoirs 1914-1918'.

⁸⁹ [Anon] but attributed to Major-General T.D. Pilcher, *A General's Letters to His Son on Obtaining His Commission* (London: Cassell, 1917), p.9.

⁹⁰ *Report of the Committee appointed to consider the Education and Training of Officers of the Army, 1902* (Akers-Douglas Report) cited in Bowman and Connelly, *The Edwardian Army*, pp.18-19.

prepare him for 'the far-reaching changes just ahead of us which had revolutionised soldiering'.⁹¹

In response and drawing upon the British army's conduct during the South African War, the Elgin Commission of 1903 served to address the institutional failings of Sandhurst.⁹² Amongst the measures recommended, it was suggested that 'all officers and men [should] be trained to accept greater responsibility and demonstrate more initiative'.⁹³ This goal was reinforced at the 1906 General Staff Conference where it was stated that the aim of training was to develop the individual initiative of every officer, non-commissioned officer and man.⁹⁴ Brigadier-General H.H. Wilson, lecturing in 1911, echoed these sentiments in that the fostering of initiative was 'essential to the efficiency of the modern army [provided] it was tempered by a spirit of self-subordination... and playing the game for the side'.⁹⁵ As Spencer Jones has demonstrated with reference to Brigadier-General C. Fitzclarence V.C., 'reformers of the era had often spoken of their desire to create a spirit of initiative within the British Army', a quality demonstrated during the Battle of Ypres, 1914.⁹⁶ The rapid promotion of brigadiers during 1914-1915 meant that those imbued with initiative and courage were able to perpetuate those values at divisional and brigade levels accordingly

⁹¹ Sir T. Montgomery-Cuninghame, *Dusty Measures: A Record of Troubled Times* (London: John Murray, 1939), p.12 (DAQG 5th Division, Irish Command, 1912-1914, GOC 10/Rifle Brigade 1914-1915).

⁹² The *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa*, commonly known as the Elgin Commission after its chairman, the Earl of Elgin and Kincardine, was set up in 1902 to investigate the conduct of the Boer War.

⁹³ Jones, *From Boer War*, p.43.

⁹⁴ TNA, WO 279/22, Report on a Conference of General Staff Officers at the Staff College, 2-12 January 1906, p.32.

⁹⁵ Brigadier-General H.H. Wilson 'Initiative and the Power of Manoeuvre', cited in Lieutenant-Colonel F.B. Maurice, lecture delivered at London University, 'The Use and Abuse of Initiative', *Army Review* Vol. VII, No.1, July 1914, p.12.

⁹⁶ S. Jones "'The Demon": Brigadier-General Charles Fitzclarence V.C.', in S. Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull: Helion, 2013), p.261.

1.4: Staff College

The 1914 *Army List* registered a total of 447 graduates designated *psc* (passed staff college), a sufficient number of trained staff officers to fill the posts available.⁹⁷ However, the expansion of the British army exposed a shortage of qualified staff through the army's 'neglect of the operational aspects of modern war'.⁹⁸ This shortfall was exemplified 'by Kitchener's bold stroke in snatching the 500 officers on leave from India'.⁹⁹ In procuring brigade majors and staff captains from the Meerut Division it was noted however that 'psc officers were getting short', the dearth of qualified officers being acutely felt at brigade level.¹⁰⁰ Of 21 brigadiers from eight divisions on active service on 1 January 1915, only 19% were designated *psc*. In November 1915, only 27 (26%) brigade majors from 105 brigades were designated *psc* and by July 1916, this number had fallen to seven (4%) out of 133 brigade majors. Subject also to a steep attrition rate, 51 brigade staff were killed in 1914 and a further 34 in 1915.¹⁰¹ Consequently a shortage of qualified brigade staff, in relation to the scale of the conflict, proved 'a situation for which no precedent existed'.¹⁰² To stem the loss, officers were discouraged from seeking promotion, a measure Colonel Charles Bonham-Carter, GSO1, 7th Division, considered as GHQ becoming 'afraid of coming to the end of the trained Staff Officers'.¹⁰³ Inevitably, as staff were moved between

⁹⁷ B. Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854-1914* (London: Methuen, 1972), p.324.

⁹⁸ Robbins, *British Generalship*, p.35.

⁹⁹ University of Leeds, Liddle Collection, Charles Carrington, Miscellaneous File, lecture notes 8 October 1977 'Kitchener's Army: the Somme and after'.

¹⁰⁰ IWM, Lieutenant-Colonel K. Henderson Papers, 10942, p.119, January 1915.

¹⁰¹ J. Hussey, 'The Death of Qualified Staff Officers in the Great War: A Generation Missing?' *Journal of the Society of Historical Research*, 75 (1997); *SS407, Composition of the Forces of the Field* (London: Harrison, 1915).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ CCC, General Sir Charles Bonham-Carter Papers, BHCT, 2/1, Bonham-Carter to mother, January 1916.

formations, command relationships between staff were compromised through a lack of mutual trust and inconsistent procedure.

Initially, the vacuum of trained staff also placed a disproportionate burden of responsibility upon divisional command in fulfilling the role of brigade staff. Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds noted that 'several divisional commanders told [him] that they had to do their own staff work and then go round the infantry brigades to tell them what to do'.¹⁰⁴ Inevitably, this led to less decentralisation as divisional commanders 'often thought it less trouble to do the work themselves'.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Brigadier-General R.G. Jelf, GOC 73 Brigade, 24th Division found that 'all Brigade Staff were ignorant of the rudiments of what to do... or how communications etc. were established'.¹⁰⁶ By the spring of 1915, the effects of promotion and attrition having dramatically reduced the number of *psc* officers available, the army was forced to train new staff whilst simultaneously fighting the war. The progress of the conflict would thus demonstrate the capability of brigade staff in adapting to the enormous changes in organisation and personnel for which 'the Staff College had provided scarcely any preparation'.¹⁰⁷

1.5: Regimental origin

The social exclusiveness of the officer corps was also sustained by a strict allegiance to regimental tradition. The sentiments of patriotism, loyalty and determination nurtured at school and at Sandhurst and Woolwich translated seamlessly into a devotion to one's regiment. Drawing upon Field-Marshal Lord Wolseley's doctrine promoting the virtues of an inherited sense of duty, Kentish

¹⁰⁴ LHCMA, Brigadier-General Sir J.E. Edmonds Papers, File 2B, Edmonds to Barclay, 7 April 1950.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, WO 32/5153, Report of Committee under General Sir W. Braithwaite on Staff Organisation, 6 March 1919, clause 59, p.10.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, WO 95/2216, 73 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations, 26-27 September 1915'.

¹⁰⁷ Bond, *Victorian Army*, p.305.

attributed the successful implementation of mutual trust at brigade level to three factors: the degree of confidence invested in the brigadier, the stability of the brigade staff and the extent to which battalions fought side-by-side. These preconditions ensured that regimental ethos and the promotion of *esprit de brigade* were sustained.¹⁰⁸

The British Army's regimental system was also subject to its own social hierarchy. The notion that some regiments were of a higher status than others and that officers of elite regiments were more likely to gain promotion was, as David French has argued, commonplace. To establish a regiment's status, French calculated the number of officers serving with each regiment at a given time (1890, 1910, 1930 and 1951) and whether it attracted a royal patron as Colonel-in-Chief. This method was based upon the assumption that the more titled officers and the higher the willingness of royalty to patronise a regiment, the higher was its status. The results of this analysis placed the Household Brigade, King's Royal Rifle Corps and Rifle Brigade at the apex of the regimental tree (classified as A), followed in rank by eight line regiments, five of them Highland units (B). The next group consisted of one Highland, three Scottish Lowland, five English county regiments and the Royal Irish Fusiliers (C). A fourth classification comprised eight English regiments, two Welsh, two Irish and the Royal Scots (D). The final groups consisted of the remaining 35 English and Irish county regiments (E).¹⁰⁹

Applying the same hierarchical grouping to 113 infantry brigadiers serving on the Western Front between 4 August 1914 and 1 July 1916, the evidence indicates

¹⁰⁸ RUSI, Kentish Papers, 98/12/1, Gold Medal Essay 1913, 'How in peace training can we best train our troops so as to develop the moral [sic] of the army'. For Wolseley's influence on the development of military doctrine see Bond, *The Victorian Army*, especially pp.20-1.

¹⁰⁹ D. French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System and the British Army and the British People c.1870-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.166-7.

that the heavy losses sustained by the officers of the elite regiments during 1914-15 accounted for a significant change in the regimental origin of brigadiers, 60 members of the peerage alone being lost in 1914 from the top six elite infantry regiments and the Royal Artillery.¹¹⁰ Equally, the rapid turnover amongst the original 21 brigadiers of seven Regular divisions dented the dominance of the elite regiments. While the 'middle ranking' regiments (B,C and D) remained well represented, the number of brigadiers from the elite regiments (A) fell by 22.7% between 1914 and 1916 and those from the least fashionable regiments (E) rose by 44.4%. The numbers of Lowland and Highland officers remained relatively static reflecting the high prestige of their regiments. The process of renewal was accelerated by a significant loss of brigade staff, which combined with the growth of the New Armies accelerated the promotion of experienced and tactically proficient battalion commanders from less fashionable regiments. By the summer of 1916, 51.6% of brigade commanders originated from the least socially elite regiments.

¹¹⁰ *Monthly Army List for August 1914* (London: War Office, 1914) and *The Quarterly Army Lists 1914-1919* (British Army); G. Gliddon, *The Aristocracy in the Great War* (Norwich: Gliddon Books, 2002), especially, pp. xviii-xx.

Classification	A	B	C	D	E
4 August 1914	8	2	3	2	5
	36.6%	9.0%	13.6%	9.0%	22.7%
Loos 1915	12	4	5	4	12
	30.7%	10.2%	12.8%	10.2%	30.7%
Somme 1916	4	8	6	7	16
	12.9%	25.8%	19.3%	22.5%	51.6%

Table 1.1: Regimental origins

1.6: Pre-war colonial experience

The profile of the pre-war army officer corps was also defined by their extensive colonial warfare experience. Commenting upon the British Army exercise of 1914, the Military Correspondent of the *Journal des Debates* wrote that the British Army officer ‘displayed a maturity of intellect which is acquired by long voyages and campaigns in the Colonies and a general culture far above that of many continental officers’.¹¹¹ For example, Brigadier-General C.R. Ballard’s rich war experience from 1891 to 1904

¹¹¹ Commandant De Thomason, ‘The British Army Exercise 1914’, *Army Review*, Vol. VI, 1914, p.150.

included service in Burma, the North-West Frontier, South Africa and East Africa. His service as DAGQ and DAAQG in Ceylon from 1905-1906 then culminated in his command of the 1/Norfolks. In November 1914 he assumed command of 7 Brigade, 3rd Division, this coming as no surprise as 'Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien had told [him] that he intended to give him a brigade'.¹¹² Ballard subsequently commanded 95 Brigade, 32nd Division and 14 Brigade, 5th Division between 1915 and 1917. The true value of the military experience gathered from counterinsurgency campaigns has nevertheless been a matter of debate. John Bourne has suggested that the conflicts provided few opportunities in large-scale operations and 'did little to prepare officers for high command'.¹¹³ However, as Spencer Jones has argued, the influence of the Boer War was 'felt more keenly at brigade level and below' where tactical experiences of combat were put into practice.¹¹⁴ Similarly, in relation to battalion commanders, Peter Hodgkinson has contended that the experiences gained by junior officers during the Boer War benefited those destined to be 'highly successful corps and divisional commanders'.¹¹⁵

¹¹² IWM, Brigadier-General C.R. Ballard Papers, IV/5, Ballard to wife, 24 November 1914.

¹¹³ J.M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994 [1989]), p.154.

¹¹⁴ Jones, *From Boer War*, p. 213.

¹¹⁵ Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders*, pp.14-15.

Campaign	Duration	Officers
Afghan War	1879	2
Burma	1891-1897	3
Crete	1897-1899	1
Egypt	1882	4
Nile Expedition	1898	4
North West Frontier	1894-1898	4
South Africa	1899-1902	14
Sudan	1894-87 and 1898	5
Tirah	1897-1898	3

Table 1.2: The pre-war campaign experiences of 21 brigadiers of the Regular Divisions serving on the Western Front, 1 January 1915

1.7: Military ethos

Officers within the British Army were expected to conduct themselves in accordance with an implicit code of conduct based upon ‘morality, manners and honesty, qualities we have been taught to regard as sacrosanct’.¹¹⁶ These qualities, considered by Albert Palazzo as ‘a viable, sustainable and dynamic ethos’, provided

¹¹⁶ IWM, Dawnay Papers 69/21/3, General Sir Kenneth Wigram to Major-General G.P. Dawnay, 8 December 1946.

an intellectual framework for interpreting, developing and modifying the method of waging war.¹¹⁷ This ethos was underpinned by several factors. First, despite a broadening of the demographic basis of the officer corps, the domination of Regular officers ensured that the army's ethos was disseminated within and below their level of command. As Fox has argued 'in this respect ethos remained the golden thread running through the entire organisation'.¹¹⁸ Second, the ethos was sustained through *FSRI 1909* which, instead of promoting an authoritative doctrine, stressed that 'skill cannot compensate for courage, energy and determination', the very qualities of the gentleman-officer.¹¹⁹ In accordance with the British Army's traditional role in varied theatres of war, the principles of *FSR1* remained flexible and applicable to the scale of the engagement. As the General Staff Officers's Conference concluded in 1913 'the problems of war [could not] be solved by rules, but by judgement based on a knowledge of general principles'.¹²⁰ These principles provided a bedrock for tactical decision making and were later supplemented by other publications in the form of SS pamphlets. However, as Brigadier-General H.C. Rees considered

although *FSR Part 1* [was] a brilliant work on war... never [laying] down the law but often advice... there remained no military book from which an answer may be obtained as to what to do under any given circumstances. It is your common sense aided by your consideration of the various factors of the ground, forces, weapons, light, weather which must solve the problem. Applied common sense in fact.¹²¹

This perspective constituted the essential nature of the brigadier's tactical role based upon the value given to the initiative of 'the man on the spot': thus, a capability to

¹¹⁷ Palazzo, *Seeking Victory*, pp.10-11.

¹¹⁸ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p. 48.

¹¹⁹ *FSR1*, Chapter 1, 1, (1), p.13.

¹²⁰ TNA, WO 279/48, 'Report on a Conference of General Staff Officers at the Royal Military College, 13-16 January 1913, (17).

¹²¹ IWM, Brigadier-General H. C. Rees Papers, 77/179/1, Notes.

interpret the factors influencing the shape of operations at a local level and where opportunities were favourable to respond accordingly.

In summary, the profiles of the infantry brigadiers serving in the six Regular divisions were defined by the beneficial qualities distilled from the ethos of the pre-war Edwardian army. These qualities of loyalty, self-confidence, courage and moral virtue were nurtured within and below brigade level. Combined with the guidance laid down in *FSRI* they provided the framework for decision making and the exercise of initiative. Flexible and dynamic in equal measure, the ethos provided the means to re-evaluate the operational and tactical challenges of the Western Front. The evolution of brigade command was orientated to the direction of this process and the capability of its staff to adapt to the challenges of modern warfare.

1.8: Brigade staff roles

Infantry brigade command was the lowest formation level within the British army with its own formal staff structure. From 1914 the war establishment of the standard British infantry division was comprised of three brigades. Each brigade comprised four battalions totalling an establishment of 4,416, of whom 125 were officers and 3,391 other ranks (OR).¹²² From February 1918, through the cumulative effect of heavy casualties and shortage of manpower, the infantry divisions were reduced to nine battalions, with brigade strength cut to three. Between 1915 and 1917 the total of brigade personnel increased by 200 with the formation of a Machine Gun Company (MGC) and a Trench Mortar Battery (TLM). Normally, during an attack a proportion of each battalion would be left behind to form the reconstitution of the brigade in the event of large casualties. Thus, in most large attacks the fighting strength of a brigade would

¹²² TNA, WO/2425, *War Establishment of the New Armies 1915* (War Office: 1915).

total some 3,000 officers and men, a number 'substantial enough to test the mettle of any officer charged with the command and control of the formation in question'.¹²³

Defining the brigade commander's role is difficult as no specific job description existed. His responsibilities were identified in *King's Regulations* as 'Officer Commanding a Brigade: A colonel, graded as a brigadier-general, is appointed to command a brigade of cavalry or infantry and will perform duties analogous to those laid down for a divisional commander'.¹²⁴ Upon this basis, an inter-changeability of roles between major-generals and brigadier-generals is suggested, with the former expected to pass on their knowledge and skills to their brigadiers. This, as Harvey contended, made clarity elusive 'as the effect of *King's Regulations* in making clear who was intended to be responsible for what, is diminished by the evidence that they were the product of pre-war thinking'.¹²⁵ The principles laid down in *FSR Part II 1909* provided some semblance of clarity, laying down that 'subject to such instructions as he may receive from a superior officer, a subordinate commander is responsible for the efficiency of his command and for the control and direction of the duties allotted to him'.¹²⁶

Despite the value placed upon devolved command by the British army, a brigadier's sphere of responsibility was strictly defined: where their influence in areas of unit administration was unrestricted, their tactical influence was modest. For example, Brigadier-General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, 11 Brigade, 4th Division perceived

¹²³ P. Simkins, "' Building Blocks", in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, p.142.

¹²⁴ *The King's Regulations and Orders for the Army 1912* (London; HMSO,1914), p.15, paragraph 69. The status of brigadier-general was an appointment not a rank. Before 1914 this was usually a brevet rank of full colonel and during the war often an acting rank of full colonel. In 1921, the appointment of brigadier-general was abolished and replaced by the, usually temporary, rank of colonel commandant which was retitled brigadier in 1928.

¹²⁵ Harvey, *An Army of Brigadiers*, p.30.

¹²⁶ *Field Service Regulations, Part II: Organisation and Administration, 1909 (Reprinted with Amendments 1913)* (London: HMSO, 1913), p.29.

his principal role as one of administration and training based upon the principles laid down in *FSR1 Part II*.¹²⁷ With regard to tactical influence, he drew upon the pre-war principles embodied in *FSR1* which stressed the importance of ensuring that brigade sectors remained defensively sound and that battalions were deployed at the correct time and location to intervene with 'an immediate counter-attack' when opportunities arose.¹²⁸

Throughout the Victorian era, training in the British Army lacked uniformity with 'training at brigade level and above [being] a rare occurrence'.¹²⁹ In the aftermath of the Boer War, evidence presented before the Elgin Commission called for a change in the ethos of the army to encourage high levels of initiative. In this process of reform, manoeuvres, exercises, war games and staff rides played their part alongside combat experience drawn from imperial conflicts. Brigadiers were increasingly tasked with providing a systematic approach to instructional procedure and encouraging initiative amongst their subordinate officers. However, a report on army manoeuvres in 1908 noted that 'there is not yet sufficient uniformity of system either in adherence to authorised principles or in the methods by which the principles are put into practice'.¹³⁰ For example, failures were identified in exercises undertaken by 3 Brigade, 1st Division and 4 (Guards) and 5 Brigades of 2nd Division where there was considered to be 'a systematic failure of preparation... and disparity in brigade command instructions'. Ignorance as to the roles of neighbouring units and a lack of clarity in the transmission of orders was identified as significant operational failings, with '3 Brigade separated

¹²⁷ British Library, Brigadier-General Aylmer Hunter-Weston Papers, MS48368, 11 Infantry Brigade WD, August 1914- February 1915, appendix 1, 'Notes on some of the duties of the Brigadier when his troops are in the trenches', pp.93-94 and appendix 3, 'Notes by a General Officer at the Front', p.96.

¹²⁸ TNA, WO 95/1486, 11 Brigade WD, September 1914, appendix 1, Note 3.

¹²⁹ Jones, *From Boer War*, p.37.

¹³⁰ TNA, WO 279/31 'Report on Army Manoeuvres 1909', p.27. For the British Army's pre-war manoeuvres see S. Batten, *Futile Exercise: The British Army's Preparations for War 1902-1914* (Solihull: Helion, 2018).

from its 1st Division staff but neither under the orders of GOC 2nd Division'.¹³¹ Upon the outbreak of war, concerted efforts were made to address the lack of uniformity by affirming the values of *FSR1*. For example, before returning from its posting in Malta, the officers of 1/London Brigade received a lecture from their brigade major stressing that all methods of attack must conform to the principles laid down in *FSR1*. Any other method it was contended 'would cramp the initiative and be a hindrance to the effective training of officers and men to meet the varying circumstances of war'.¹³² Efforts continued throughout 1915 as evident in 39th Division where 'since being Brigaded, Brigade Commanders [continued to find difficulty] in systematising the training of their units owing to their divergent standards... the aim being to obtain uniformity'.¹³³

In February 1915 Sir John French reinforced the necessity of upholding the principles of offensive action in that 'the soul of the defence... and the counter-attack [are] the most effectual means of defence'.¹³⁴ Similarly, Brigadier-General J.P. Du Cane concurred that the British army should pursue 'a relentless offensive spirit... with dogged determination'.¹³⁵ These principles, while constituting the framework in which brigadiers were expected to operate, raised a fundamental contradiction of leadership common to all levels of command. This dilemma stemmed from the fact that the men whose welfare was entrusted to him; a commander would one day send into battle.

¹³¹ TNA, WO 279/25, 'Report on a Conference of General Staff Officers at the Royal Military College, 18-21 January 1909, pp.18-19.

¹³² IWM, General Lord Horne Papers, 12468, 82/18/2, 'Notes from a lecture of the Brigade in attack, general guidance to all concerned that there may be a certain amount of uniformity in the attack by units of the Brigade', Brigade Major R.F. Legge, October 1914. The 1/London Brigade, 1st London Division, a Territorial Force formation, was amalgamated with other London brigades to become 2/1 London Brigade and later formed part of 58th (2/1 London) Division.

¹³³ TNA, WO 95/2563, 39th Div. WD, appendix V, Note 39/100/G, 2 October 1915.

¹³⁴ J.E. Edmonds and G.C. Wynne, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1915*, Vol.2, (London: Macmillan, 1927), pp.33-4, GHQ Memorandum, 5 February 1915, [henceforth, for example, *OH 1916*, Vol.1.].

¹³⁵ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/38, Brigadier-General Sir J.P. Du Cane, BGGs III Corps to HQ 4th Division, G.340, 13 January 1915.

To counter this effect the establishment of good officer-man relations and enlightened leadership was essential, the qualities of 'personal and expert power' rather than a regime of coercive and institutional power being required.¹³⁶ These qualities, transposed from some parts of wider Edwardian society, assisted in nourishing mutual trust and loyalty. Thus, the hallmark of the successful brigadier was his capability to sustain the welfare and morale of the brigade while upholding the principles of the offensive spirit.

Clearly, there were officers totally unsuitable for positions of command. Basil Liddell Hart, in an allusion to 21st Division, commented upon 'one brigadier who was a man not without ability, but harsh, overbearing and unjust in the extreme... [with] a BM [Brigade Major] who was a disgrace to the Army'. Consequently 'the Division fared badly and lost heavily... a regular Division under Congreve saving the day'.¹³⁷ For some officers, an initial forging of relationships did not come easily. Brigadier-General Lord Loch, GOC 110 Brigade, 21st Division, faced considerable self-doubt in efforts to engage with his battalions which had suffered 'a loss of cohesion, disintegration and bad morale' during operations on 3 May 1917. Comprised of four Service battalions of the Leicestershire Regiment, Loch considered that 'they had no life and... [did not jump] at what he wanted... being dirty and slovenly and [having] no interest in what they were doing'.¹³⁸ Mustering only two other Regular officers, the brigade major and staff captain, the remainder of the brigade's junior officers were of a temporary rank and under the age of thirty, a fact that Loch considered was the reason for the breakdown in discipline and morale. While he conceded that 'some were better men

¹³⁶ Sheffield, *Leadership*, p.42.

¹³⁷ TNA, CAB 45/135, Somme Authors, I-L, Liddell Hart to Edmonds, appendix, p.58. These comments allude to the operations of XV Corps' 7th and 21st Divisions on 1 July 1916.

¹³⁸ IWM, Lord Loch Papers, 9350, Box File 17/12/3, diary entry of 25 August 1917.

than the Regulars' nevertheless 'they failed to check small irregularities by instinct... and small things gradually developed into big ones'.¹³⁹ His failure to establish a fruitful working relationship with his junior officers and NCOs is evident in his perspective on training procedures where he admitted he was

being very bad at making clear to people [sic]. For instance, I laid down that all instructions should consist of explanation, demonstration and execution. They [the instructors] all leave out the first two and keep on trying to make men do things that they can't understand.¹⁴⁰

From Loch's experiences, it would be reasonable to assume that he found difficulty in establishing a working relationship with his men. This could have been attributable to his difficulty in reconciling the ethos of the pre-war officer class with the attitude of newly commissioned officers, NCOs and citizen-soldiers. Conversely, it may have simply been attributable to a lack of man-management skills.

The highly charged atmosphere of brigade HQ also proved exacting. Brigadier-General E. Craig-Brown, 56 Brigade, 19th (Western) Division was disciplined by his divisional commander for 'not enjoying the confidence of his subordinates' considering that he would be better accommodated in 'a responsible administrative capacity where rapid decisions are not required'. To an extent, Craig-Brown, formerly CO 1/Cameron Highlanders, agreed 'having realised from the start that he had very few ideas in common with his staff and often wished to be back amongst [his] *own countrymen...* in a Scots or Highland brigade [original emphasis]'.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 25 August 1917.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 27 August 1917, Loch was taken ill in January 1918 and returned to staff work in May, his tenure as brigadier having lasted five months. For officer-man relationships see Sheffield, *Leadership*, especially chapters 6 and 7.

¹⁴¹ IWM, Brigadier-General E. Craig-Brown Papers, 1862, 77/78/1, Major-General G.T.M. Bridges to Lieutenant-General A. Hamilton Gordon, GOC IX Corps, 29 August 1917. Craig-Brown's tenure as brigadier lasted seven months before he was transferred to Salonika as Chief Instructor at the Army Training School.

Lord Loch's experiences speak volumes of the problems inherent in officer-man relationships where commanders struggled to instil the methods and discipline of the Regular army into citizen-soldiers. It should be borne in mind that Loch's criticism of his junior officers may have reflected a social incompatibility or as Beckett and Simpson contended 'the professional reaction of the regular [officer] against the amateur'.¹⁴² In the case of Craig-Brown, imbued with the regimental ethos of a Scottish Regular battalion, it may be safely assumed that a lack of affinity with officers of the three Lancashire regiments under his command contributed towards his poor performance as a brigadier.

Efficient brigade administration depended upon the qualities and personalities of its staff. Foremost of these was the brigade major. His responsibilities were defined by the multiple demands of the modern army, a far cry from his traditional role where 'brigade majors were in a limbo between regimental officers and the headquarters staff'.¹⁴³ Formerly his duties, in accordance with the Quartermaster-General's department, encompassed 'surveying, sketching, map making, the sifting of intelligence and the movement and quartering of the Army'.¹⁴⁴ With the expansion of the brigade staff, the responsibilities of the 'Q' and 'A' staff work being undertaken by the staff captain, the brigade major's role turned increasingly to the 'G' function of staff work and the handling of reconnaissance and intelligence in the field.¹⁴⁵ Having then digested the context of corps and divisional schemes of attack, his responsibility was to interpret and translate them into precise battalion orders. In addition, he was tasked

¹⁴² Beckett and Simpson, *A Nation in Arms*, p.75.

¹⁴³ Bond, *The Victorian Army*, p.78, fn.6.

¹⁴⁴ S.G.P. Ward, *Wellington's Headquarters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p.37.

¹⁴⁵ The three branches of the General Staff consisted of the 'G' branch responsible for Operations and Intelligence, the 'A' branch which handled personal matters and the 'Q' branch that managed supplies, quartering, transportation and postal services.

with organising the establishment of liaison with adjacent units and relevant artillery support, all constituting what Simkins referred to as ‘the minor tactical planning of the battle’.¹⁴⁶

The collective observations of former brigade majors endorse the peculiar status of brigade staff where the forging of inter-personal links with subordinate officers and Other Ranks provided opportunities for practical and moral support. For example, Brigadier-General G.R. Roupell V.C. claimed that it was

the best staff job to hold in the war [as] one was very largely responsible for three, sometimes four battalions in the brigade and for the brigade HQ. The brigadier was of course in command of the brigade and the brigade major and the staff captain carried out his instructions and looked after the battalions to the best of their ability. This entailed frequent visits, almost daily, to the battalions in the line or in the rest billets.¹⁴⁷

In contrast, having been posted as GSO2 at divisional HQ, Roupell found the work less inviting as the presence of a larger staff meant that his role as a junior officer left him with ‘no full responsibility for any particular job or work’.¹⁴⁸ Brigade Major Walter Guinness, 74 Brigade, 25th Division echoed Roupell’s sentiments insisting ‘that there [was] no doubt that a Brigade Major’s job was the most attractive to his taste’.¹⁴⁹ Anthony Eden, a brigade major at the age of 20, believed that ‘the brigade and its staff seemed exactly the right size and scope for individual efforts to be rewarding, while contact with units was close enough to have a human interest’.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Simkins, “Building Blocks” in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, p.147.

¹⁴⁷ Leeds University, Brotherton Library, Liddle Collection, Brigadier-General G.R. Roupell Papers, LIDDLE/WW/1/GS/ 1388, transcript of interview between Roupell (brigade major 14 Brigade, 5th Division) and Peter Liddle, April 1971.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ B. Bond and S. Robbins (eds.), *Staff Officer: The Diaries of Walter Guinness, First Lord Moyne, 1914-1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), diary entry 9 October 1916, p.13.

¹⁵⁰ A. Eden, *Another World, 1897-1917* (New York: Doubleday, 1977 [1976]), p.167. Eden succeeded Guinness as brigade major of 74 Brigade, 25th Division.

Working in close cooperation with the brigadier and his brigade major, the staff captain's duties were laid down in the *Staff Manual (1912)*. These stated that he should 'assist a commander in the supervision of his duties and control of the operations and requirements of the troops and transmit orders and instructions [and] secondly... to give the troops every assistance in his power in carrying out the instructions issued to them.'¹⁵¹ The duties were diverse, as Colonel Sir Eric Gore-Brown attached to 140 Brigade, 47th (2nd London) Division observed after writing his first operation order. This task involved 'collecting and collating all intelligence from the brigade front in 24 hours, consolidating it and sending it typewritten to the Division with all movement, artillery activity, trench mortars etc. having to be reported and all work by us detailed'.¹⁵² A year later he considered that his work far exceeded that of his brigade major as

all arrangements, billets, commissions, baths, clothing, bombs, classes, stores, promotions and a hundred and one etceteras [sic] are in his department. It is not difficult work but wants concentration and energy... 12 hours a day is not always enough.¹⁵³

The nature of tactical command at brigade level was dependent upon the smooth transmission of information down the chain of command and laterally between brigades. This was reflected in the expansion of the Brigade Signal Service and the challenging role of the Brigade Signalling Officer (BSO) responsible for the supervision and coordination of all communications in the brigade and battalion areas and between neighbouring formation headquarters. James Scrivenor, having served as a BSO, recalled that his role called for an allegiance with both the brigadier and his battalion counterparts who were not under his direct control with all parties encouraged 'to pull together amicably... the chief desiderata being to induce battalion signalling officers to

¹⁵¹ TNA, WO 279/862, *Staff Manual 1912* (London: HMSO,1912), p.7.

¹⁵² IWM, Brigadier-General E. Gore-Brown Papers, 256, 88/52/1, 12 April 1916.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 4 May 1917.

do what you wanted them to do without friction'.¹⁵⁴ The work was physically and mentally demanding, as Captain G. McGowan, a BSO in 30th Division attested, being responsible for 'the largest brigade sector on the British Front'. Handling an average of 10-12,000 messages a day, McGowan considered himself

virtually his own boss with a self-contained unit of 26, including two sergeants, two corporals and two lance -corporals... and sixteen runners [receiving his] copy of Brigade Operations Orders as and when issued to Battalion Commanders and making [his] disposition accordingly... the only contact with Divisional Signals being for the requisition of stores or the replacement of personnel.¹⁵⁵

As the history of the 48th Divisional Signal Company illustrates, with reference to operations on the Somme, as the Company, Battalion and Brigade Signallers advanced with the troops, the 'casualties were heavy, some Divisions reporting fifty percent of their Signallers put out of action in a single day'.¹⁵⁶

The evolution of brigade command between 1914-1918 reflected the changing nature of warfare and the rapid expansion of the BEF. In response to the new challenges imposed by trench warfare, the roles and responsibilities of brigade staff officers were transformed. While carrying out their principal administrative and managerial responsibilities, the eventual transition to semi-mobile operations necessitated brigade officers acting upon their own initiative. This required three pre-conditions on the part of brigade staff: a thorough knowledge of the brigade sector, staff going forward to ascertain the local situation and subject to the provision of secure communications, the capability to exercise their tactical influence. All these factors were dependent upon the establishment of a professional and proficient staff. This

¹⁵⁴ J.B. Scrivenor, *Brigade Signals*, (Oxford: Blackwell), p.50.

¹⁵⁵ IWM, Captain G. McGowan Papers, 09/80, McGowan to parents, 17 July 1916.

¹⁵⁶ F.W. Dopson, *The 48th Divisional Signal Company in the Great War* (privately published, 1938), p.59.

proved a lengthy and irregular process subject to a large scale and rapid turnover of personnel driven by a growing merit-based approach to promotion as opposed to seniority.

1.9: Renewal of command staff

The organisational and tactical development of brigade command corresponded with the transformation of brigade staff. This process was driven by the losses of 1914 which had exhausted the supply of trained officers. The profile and composition of brigade commanders throughout 1915 reflected these changes. First, the expansion of the BEF necessitated the rapid promotion of the few experienced brigadiers available for divisional command. This in turn accelerated the promotion of suitable battalion commanders and laid the foundation for a fresh generation of operationally experienced brigadiers. Second, the hardships of trench warfare exposed the shortcomings of 'dug-out' officers employed to fill the vacuum of vacancies.¹⁵⁷ Third, some newly promoted brigadiers found difficulty in handling large formations and adjusting to the unprecedented conditions of static warfare. The process of renewal continued unabated and was dominated from late 1916 to 1918 by the establishment of a merit-based approach for promotion open to debate and able to adapt to the challenges of modern warfare.

To understand this process of renewal, we need to consider what the patterns of turnover tell us about the demands placed on the army and the difficulties entailed in the creation of a stable and efficient staff. Retaining the services of tactically proficient and experienced brigadiers was challenging. For example, of the 57 brigades of 19 divisions deployed on the Western Front in 1915, 76% were subject to

¹⁵⁷ The term 'dug-out' referred to those officers formally retired from active service but whose previous experience and personal character made them suitable candidates for new appointments.

at least one change of command during the year: all the brigades of 7th and 8th Divisions experienced a complete change. Overall, amongst the brigadiers employed at Second Ypres and Loos, a 74.5% attrition rate was experienced, with all three brigadiers of 20th (Light) Division replaced.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, opportunities for rapid advancement abounded. One of eight brigadiers promoted to divisional command, Brigadier-General R.J. Pinney, GOC 23 Brigade, 8th Division, was appointed GOC 35th Division after 241 days, his rapid promotion attributed to his outstanding leadership qualities.¹⁵⁹ At the Neuve Chapelle offensive, for example, he was instrumental in coordinating both infantry and artillery to sustain the progress of the attack. Two days later, during a period of confusion and delay, he was placed in command of 23 and 24 Brigades in a concerted effort to promote a further attack.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, in recognition of his leadership, Brigadier-General G.H. Thesiger, GOC 2 Brigade, 1st Division achieved promotion after 169 days and Brigadier-General G.M. Harper, GOC 17 Brigade, 6th Division after 221 days 'where he lost no time in instructing officers and men in a form of attack which at the time was employed by no other Division'.¹⁶¹

Similar opportunities abounded at battalion level, where in some cases majors were 'getting commands of Brigades as a matter of course'.¹⁶² After the Battle of Loos in September 1915, where 45 brigades were deployed, 31% experienced a change of command. For example, Field-Marshal Sir C.J. Deverall succeeded to the command

¹⁵⁸ Statistics retrieved from *Quarterly Army List 1914-1918* (British Army); A.F. Becke, *The History of the Great War: Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 1 -The Regular Divisions* (1934), *Part 3A – The New Army Divisions* (9-36) (1938), *Part 3B* (30-41) and *63rd (R.N.) Division* (1945), *Part 2A – The Territorial Force Mounted Divisions and the 1st Line Territorial Force Divisions* (42-56) and *2nd Line Territorial Divisions* (57-69) *with the Home Service Divisions* (71-73) and *74th and 75th Divisions* (London: Naval and Military Press, 2002).

¹⁵⁹ TNA, WO 256/13, Haig diary, 27 October 1915 for Haig's comments upon Pinney's transfer to GOC 35 Division.

¹⁶⁰ TNA, WO 95/1707, 23 Brigade WD and WO 95/1716, 24 Brigade WD, March 1915.

¹⁶¹ F.W. Bewsher, *The History of the 51st (Highland) Division 1914-1918* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1921), p.51.

¹⁶² IWM, Kirke Papers, General Sir Walter Kirke to his wife, 25 September 1915

of 7th Division's 20 Brigade after the death of Brigadier-General J.H.F.S. Trefusis. Deverell had started the war as brigade major of 85 Brigade, 28th Division and his promotion cemented a rapid rise from substantive major to temporary major-general in about a year.¹⁶³ Similarly, Lieutenant-Colonel A.B.E. Cator, 2/Scots Guards, having acted as temporary commander of 20 Brigade in 1914 and overseen a lengthy period of brigade reconstruction, was promoted to GOC 37 Brigade, 12th Division. He had risen from captain to brigadier-general within fifteen months. Considered as 'the best soldier, greatest sportsman and finest type of English Gentleman one could meet' he personified the pre-war qualities traditionally perceived as requirements for the officer's role.¹⁶⁴ His capability to transfer the methods, routines and procedures that he had developed as a Regular officer was critical to the development of his New Army brigade. Equally, Cator provided personal standards of performance and expectations which served as models for his officers and men. When in the line, he shared the same privations that his men experienced. Thus, 'I am writing this in a funk hole, a very good dugout, but simply crowded out with rats who as far as I can gather, hold a meeting most nights on my bed'.¹⁶⁵ The confidence he was able to inspire through his presence was critical to the way in which 37 Brigade operated and to their favourable reputation as a New Army brigade.

Where a consistent flow of personnel, experienced officers and NCOs was experienced, the establishment of a stable brigade staff was more difficult as Major-General Sir F.I. Maxse, GOC 18th (Eastern) Division discovered. Having undergone a

¹⁶³ CCC, Bonham-Carter Papers 9/2, General Sir Charles Bonham-Carter, Autobiography, Chapter VIII, p.; IWM, Henderson Papers DS/MISC/2, Lieutenant-Colonel K. Henderson, Memoirs, p.198.

¹⁶⁴ IWM, Brigadier-General H.E. Trevor Papers, 11445, Box P.229, letter to father, 20 November 1916. Trevor served as Brigade Major in 37 Brigade and then as CO 7/ East Surrey, 35 Brigade, 12th Division. He was killed at Arras on 11 April 1917 when a shell fell on 35 Brigade Headquarters.

¹⁶⁵ Brigadier-General A.B.G. Cator Papers, Cator to 'Di', his sister Mabel Diana Frances Cator, 29 March 1916.

year of intensive training, his division suffered the loss of his 'two best Infantry Brigadiers, best BM, best RFA Brigade CO, first rate RFA Brigade Major... all being promoted to higher appointments'. The division then received 'a Brigade Major who could not write any sort of report and apparently [could] not learn any routine work' which Maxse considered was living under 'a regime of robbing Peter to pay Paul'.¹⁶⁶ Determined to secure the best staff, Maxse appealed directly to Brigadier-General H.C. Lowther, Sir John French's Military Secretary, who suggested that the loss of staff should be perceived as 'the penalty to be paid for achieving such a high standard' but that a suitable replacement brigade major would be found.¹⁶⁷ This resolution, bolstered by Maxse's close relationship with Lowther as former 1(Guards) Brigade commanders, resonates with what Peter Hodgkinson considered was the emergence of 'talent spotting on the Western Front for promotable officers... a process that became more supple as the war went on'.¹⁶⁸ The career path taken by other brigadiers were more diverse, in some instances channelling their talents away from the Western Front. Brigadier-General G.F.S. Maude, 14 Brigade, 5th Division for example, after receiving hospital treatment for his injuries, was appointed GOC 33rd Division and promptly posted to Gallipoli. Similarly, the managerial skills of Brigadier-General Sir L.G. Bols were channelled into his appointment as BGGs, XII Corps and ultimately MGGS Third Army.

¹⁶⁶ IWM, Maxse Papers, File 15, Maxse to Lowther, 18 November 1915.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, Lowther to Maxse, 20 November 1915.

¹⁶⁸ Hodgkinson, *British Infantry*, pp.106-7. Hodgkinson calculated that out of 50 first promotions from battalion to brigade command, only 28% were 'within corps' appointments.

Major Offensives 1915-1917	Loos	Somme	Third Ypres	Average of days in post
Regular Brigades	439	550	362	450
New Army Brigades	380	406	431	405
TF Brigades	592	692	424	569

Table 1.3: Average days in post experienced by brigadiers serving in major offensives 1915-1917¹⁶⁹

In respect of the average tenure of brigadiers serving on the first day of three major offensives, those commanding Regular brigades averaged 450 days as opposed to 405 days for the New Army brigades. The lower average experienced by the New Army brigades was attributable to the 74.5% churn after the Battle of Loos and changes precipitated by preparations for the Somme. The brigadiers of TF brigades meanwhile averaged 569 days across three offensives. While far from conclusive, it may be assumed that the disparity between the TF brigades and those of the Regular and New Armies may have been attributable to preserving the cultural characteristics of the former to achieve satisfactory military ends. The process of moulding civilian soldiers into the style of a pre-war brigade was challenging, the response to the initial deployment of TF divisions to France having been mixed.

¹⁶⁹ A.F. Becke, *The History of the Great War: Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 1: The Regular Divisions* (Newport, Westlake Military Books, 1989 [1934]); *Order of Battle of Divisions: Part 3A and 3B: New Army Divisions* (Newport: Westlake Military Books, 1989 [1938 and 1945]); *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 2A: The Territorial Mounted Divisions and the 1st Line Territorial Force Divisions and Part 2B: The Second Line Territorial Force Divisions with the Home Service Divisions and 74th and 75th Divisions* (Newport: Westlake Military Books, 1989 [1937]).

Indeed, Major-General Sir Charles Bonham Carter was moved to suggest that 'they must be carefully nursed when they first come out'.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, for a command relationship to work effectively, a degree of loyalty had to be displayed on both sides. This relationship was crucial to the sustaining of morale when the notion of 'uncontrollability, isolation and empowerment constituted a uniquely frightening, depressing and stressful experience'.¹⁷¹ The readiness of the successive brigadiers of 152 Brigade, 51st (Highland) Division, to address the needs of the civilian soldier was symptomatic of the mechanics of a paternalistic-deferential exchange.

Brigadier-General W.C. Ross, (GOC 152 Brigade November 1914-July 1916), as local secretary of the Territorial Force Association, had been 'intimately known in peace time to many officers, NCOs and men... and their parents, families, homes and employers'. His interest in the Highland soldier was noted and he possessed 'a great knowledge and understanding of him...[being] a familiar figure to them all'.¹⁷² Ross was succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel H. Pelham Burn, a Regular officer with the 8/10 Gordon Highlanders and at 34 years of age the youngest brigadier in the British Army. As a commander, Pelham Burn brought 'an abundant experience of warfare in the front line and 'spent every moment of the day and much of the night in thinking how he could increase the efficiency of his command'.¹⁷³ As Sheffield has demonstrated with reference to officer-man relations 'the British army, dominated by pre-war Regular officers took no chances with the welfare of its lower ranks'.¹⁷⁴ Pelham Burn was no exception. He ensured that the command relationship of the Regular army, based

¹⁷⁰ CCC, Bonham-Carter Papers, BHCT/2, 29 March 1915.

¹⁷¹ A. Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.34.

¹⁷² Bewsher, *The 51st Division*, pp.70-1.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, p.71.

¹⁷⁴ Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, p.81.

upon a structured, paternalistic hierarchy, was transposed upon to the brigade. This he achieved by ensuring that Scottish Territorial Force characteristics were perpetuated, and the welfare of his men served. Based upon this model, obedience was given in return for a leader providing a courageous example and attending to the needs of his men before his own. For example, Pelham Burn's response to the privations of a newly transferred unit were reflected in correspondence written in 1916 stating that he had

a Trench Mortar Brigade here of 46 men who never get any presents and they are an odd lot composed of 4 or 5 different regiments and nobody's children. I wonder if you have any socks, tobacco or such goods which you could spare them. They are a good lot and I would like to keep them along.¹⁷⁵

A soldier's respect for an officer was determined by the way that the officer behaved towards him. Through such acts of benevolence, as demonstrated by Pelham Burn, the paternalistic bond between officer and man was strengthened.

The extent of the brigadier's influence upon the brigade's preparation, planning and training depended upon the length of time he was granted prior to the opening of an offensive. After the losses sustained in early 1915 newly promoted brigadiers were afforded little time to acclimatise, with those of the Regular divisions averaging 56 days before the Battle of Loos. For the opening of the Somme on 1 July 1916, the Regular brigadiers experienced 204 days on average in post and the New Army commanders 133. While 21, or 38% of the brigadiers were appointed between March and June 1916, there were extreme exceptions. Ten brigadiers experienced less than 90 days

¹⁷⁵ Brigadier-General H. Pelham-Burn Papers, letter to parents, 13 August 1916. Pelham Burn served as brigade major to 8 Brigade and 73 Brigade of 3rd Division thus gaining six months experience with Service battalions.

in command, two of 19th (Western) Division being appointed only two weeks before the offensive, one of whom fell sick after three weeks.¹⁷⁶

Overall, from 54 brigades of 18 divisions deployed on 1 July 1916, 51.6% experienced a relatively rapid change of command. From a total of 132 brigades deployed throughout the Somme campaign, 63 experienced a change of command which, excluding temporary commanders, equated to a 47% churn.¹⁷⁷ Of these, 32% were promoted to command a division. However, for some, as the expectations upon brigadiers grew, proved 'convenient scapegoats if things went wrong'.¹⁷⁸ Not all cases however resulted in permanent demotion. Brigadier-General G.D. Jeffreys', 57 Brigade, 19th (Western) Division, was considered to have made '3 elementary errors' during his brigade's attack on the Grandcourt Line in November 1916 but was transferred to acting GOC 1(Guards) Brigade after 'the weight of the Army Commander's displeasure [fell instead] upon his divisional commander'. Jeffreys was subsequently appointed GOC of 19th (Western) Division. As Major-General H.R. Davies observed, 'it was [lucky] for him that he was a Grenadier Guardsman'.¹⁷⁹

By the opening of the Third Battle of Ypres in July 1917, while the tenure of Regular brigade commanders remained relatively constant, those of the New Army brigades almost doubled from 133 to 254 days.¹⁸⁰ This was attributable to three factors: an element of divisional reorganisation, an endeavour to sustain stable command structures and an effort by GHQ to ensure that newly appointed

¹⁷⁶ Becke, *Order of Battle Part 1, Part 2A, Part 3A and 3B*.

¹⁷⁷ *Monthly Army List; Quarterly Army Lists; Becke, Order of Battle*.

¹⁷⁸ J. Bourne, 'The BEF on the Somme; Some Career Aspects, Part Two: 2 July- 19 November 1916', *Gun Fire*, No.39 [nd], p.15. See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSOHzMjobsaspx – 'Hiring and Firing on the Western Front', a lecture given by John Bourne at the WFA, Lancashire and Cheshire Branch, 14 January 2011: retrieved 30 January 2017.

¹⁷⁹ TNA, CAB 45/133, H.R. Davies to Edmonds, 12 October 1936.

¹⁸⁰ Becke, *Order of Battle Part 1 and Parts 3A and 3B*.

commanders were ‘up to date with the various peculiarities of [the] war’.¹⁸¹ Throughout the offensive the turnover increased with a 37.7% churn of brigadiers from the 123 brigades deployed. Many of these would have taken advantage of the ‘six-month ruling’ introduced in June 1917, that allowed for an extended leave and was introduced to mitigate some of the effects of prolonged exposure to offensive action.¹⁸² Discussions at the War Office also resulted in a proposal to ‘send home tired Regimental officers... their appointments being filled by fresh officers from England’. These proposals remained subject to the proviso that those chosen ‘were not to be limited in number but sent home as recommended... and care taken that only war-worn officers are selected’.¹⁸³

	Loos	Somme	Third Ypres
Regular Brigades	56	222	233
New Army Brigades	214	133	254
TF Brigades	229	257	246
Overall average in days	166	204	244

Table 1.4: The average days in post experienced by brigadiers prior to major offensives 1915-1917

¹⁸¹ LHCMA, Kiggell Papers, General Sir Launcelot Kiggell to Brigadier-General H.S. Sloman, 6 March 1917.

¹⁸² TNA, WO 293/6, Army Council Instructions, 29 June 1917.

¹⁸³ TNA, WO 95 /26, Adjutant General WD, 30 June 1917.

Despite possessing the traditional values of the pre-war officer corps, many brigadiers lacked the stamina or skill for effective leadership and were sent home finding themselves 'out of touch with current weapons... and tactical thought'.¹⁸⁴ They also bore the stress caused by the physical rigours of the trenches and the heavy burden of responsibility that could in extreme cases manifest itself in mental breakdown. Any attempt to identify and classify the extent to which a breakdown contributed to an officer's removal is complicated as few officers' medical records survive. Officers were more likely to be considered as suffering from neurasthenia than the more hysterical systems of 'paralyses, trembling and shaking... seizures and gait disorders' which were confined to privates and non-commissioned officers'.¹⁸⁵ Accordingly, all reference to the '[breakdown] mentally' of Brigadier-General W.A. Oswald, 72 Brigade, 24th Division on 25 September 1915 was excised from the original draft of the *Official History*. This followed the intervention of Brigadier-General H.R. Davies, 3 Brigade, 1st Division who objected to Edmond's use of the word 'mentally' suggesting that 'it would be enough to say simply invalided'.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Brigadier-General F. Wintour, 84 Brigade, 28th Division having been removed from his post due to 'insufficient resolution' during operations on 20-21 February, was 'admitted to No. 3 Clearing Station Hospital suffering from neurasthenia'.¹⁸⁷

A brigadier's role was essentially consisted of face-to-face relationships with his subordinates. These placed him and his staff in consistent danger, as in response to an increased tempo of operations and ever-present communication problems, command decisions increasingly had to be taken increasingly near the front line.

¹⁸⁴ Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, p.217.

¹⁸⁵ S. Linden, *They Called it Shell Shock: Combat Stress in the First World War* (Solihull: Helion, 2016), p.94. For neurasthenia see also www.medical-freedictionary

¹⁸⁶ TNA,45/120, Davies to Edmonds, comments on Chapter XXVII, *OH 1915*, Vol.2.

¹⁸⁷ TNA, WO 95/2276, 84 Brigade WD, G877, Bulfin to Plumer, 23 February 1915.

Consequently, a total of 30 brigadiers were killed on the Western Front, of which eight died of wounds and nine were gassed. The number of wounded between 1915 and 1918 rose incrementally to 65, peaking in 1918 with 36 casualties, of which the German Spring Offensives accounted for 12.¹⁸⁸ The extent to which brigade staff were exposed to injury or induced stress, depended upon the length of time a division spent on the Western Front and the frequency with which it was deployed. As Griffith observed, ‘the unavoidable conclusion is that the high command observed an informal “pecking order” of divisions’ where the most reputedly trustworthy were chosen for the most difficult tasks.¹⁸⁹ This is borne out by the fact that five of the Regular divisions were deployed in excess of 30 times, 2nd Division being especially favoured with 44 operations to its name. Of the first tranche of New Army divisions, 19th (Western) Division experienced 44 days of action, while in comparison 16th (Irish) Division was deployed on 12 occasions. The second tranche of twelve New Army divisions averaged 15 large engagements. Whilst Griffith conceded that any pecking order was surely based upon ‘little more than prejudice, hearsay and the cut of the divisional commander’s jaw’, the Western Front nevertheless remained a place where operational success was likely to lead to further employment in major offensives.¹⁹⁰

The profile of brigade commanders during 1915 also reflected the replacement of older commanders by younger men. For example, Brigadier-General E.G. Grogan, 26 Brigade, 9th (Scottish) Division, aged 64, was replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel A. B. Ritchie aged 46. Similarly, two brigadiers of 15th (Scottish) Division who had ‘shot their bolt’ on the grounds of invalidity were replaced.¹⁹¹ However, despite concerted moves

¹⁸⁸ F. Davies and F. Maddocks, *Bloody Red Tabs; General Officer Casualties of the Great War 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1995).

¹⁸⁹ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.82.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ LHCMA, J. Burnett-Stuart Papers, 6/1-112, GSO1 15th (Scottish) Division.

to the contrary, inexperienced brigadiers were being appointed as late as July 1915. Pelham Burn was surprised to discover that Brigadier-General E. St. G. Pratt, 76 Brigade, 3rd Division, aged 51, had no experience of warfare with the BEF having been at the War Office since 1913 where it was still thought 'that age was a qualification for command of a brigade'.¹⁹² Despite his lack of experience and having been gassed at St. Eloi in February 1916, Pratt replaced Brigadier-General H.F. Jenkins, 75 Brigade, 25th Division in July 1916 and served throughout the Somme offensive. It seems that an upper age limit of 56 years for brigade was introduced in May 1915.¹⁹³ By 1918, the average age had fallen to 42.1 years, of whom 120 brigadiers were under 40 years of age, with 49 under 42.¹⁹⁴ Of these, Brigadier-General Roland 'Boys' Bradford VC, was promoted to GOC 186 Brigade at the age of 25, to be killed at Cambrai 20 days later.¹⁹⁵

Some newly promoted brigadiers's introduction to offensive action was ill-starred. In February 1915 Major-General E.S. Bulfin, GOC 28th Division commented that Brigadier-General A.J. Chapman of 85 Brigade had failed to 'get straight with his Brigade Staff... all being new to each other and [having] been thrust into a series of very critical situations'.¹⁹⁶ Chapman's standing as a capable brigadier had been compromised by the conduct of men of the 1/East Surrey and 3/Royal Fusiliers during an enemy attack on 14 February where they had allegedly 'vacated their trenches'.¹⁹⁷ While Bulfin believed that he 'possessed the makings of a capable commander' Chapman later broke down under the strain. In a further blow to brigade cohesion, two

¹⁹² Pelham Burn Papers, Pelham Burn to parents, 11 March 1916.

¹⁹³ J. Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division 1914-1918* (London: John Murray, 1921), p.15, fn. 1. Thorough research has failed to unearth official notification of an upper age limit.

¹⁹⁴ *Quarterly Army List 1914-1918* (War Office); *Who Was Who 1916-1928* (London: A and C Black, 1929).

¹⁹⁵ IWM, Brigadier-General R.B. Bradford Papers, 10809.

¹⁹⁶ TNA, WO 95/1370, 85 Brigade WD, OAR (2) 16, Bulfin to Second Army GHQ, 15 February 1915.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations', G2,692, 14 February 1915.

other brigadiers of 28th Division succumbed to sickness.¹⁹⁸ It says much for the challenges faced by brigadiers that Bulfin considered that 'commanders had to buy their experience... [regretting] the cost that had to be paid'.¹⁹⁹

The difficulties in establishing a stable and efficient brigade command staff were evident in the experiences of 7th Division. Between August 1914 and December 1915 nine brigadiers were attached to the division, of which three were subsequently appointed to divisional command, one was killed and one wounded. A total of eight brigade majors were employed, of which one was appointed CO 2/Scots Guards and ultimately given his own brigade, one returned to the Indian Army and one was killed. The churn amongst staff captains totalled 13, with one promoted to brigade major, one killed and one wounded.²⁰⁰ With a premium placed upon able officers, demand for their services was high. For example, Brigadier-General F.J. Heyworth, 20 Brigade received a request to release Major C.E. Corkran, CO 1/Grenadier Guards to assist in the 'instruction and guidance of a newly arrived Territorial battalion in order that the best may be made of his good material'.²⁰¹ In response, Heyworth wrote that 'I very much regret but it is extremely inconvenient to release Major Corkran'. Eventually he was released to 154 Brigade, 51st (Highland) Division whose own brigadier was considered 'nebulous and doubtful about his place in the attack [and in need of] assistance in formulating his plans properly'.²⁰² Having served as brigade major in 1 Brigade, 1st Division, Corkran assumed command of 5 Brigade, 2nd Division in July 1915, a rise from CO to brigadier in five months.

¹⁹⁸ IWM, Major-General T.L.N. Moreland Papers, 2702, letters, volume 1, Morland to daughter, 17 May 1915.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, Bulfin to Plumer, 16 February 1915.

²⁰⁰ TNA, WO 95/1628, 7th Div. WD; C.T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division 1914-1918* (London; John Murray, 1927), p.238 *et alia*.

²⁰¹ TNA, WO 95/1628, 8 February 1915.

²⁰² CCC General Lord Rawlinson Papers, RWLN, 1/3, Rawlinson diary, 11 June 1915, pp.9-10. The brigadier in question was Brigadier-General St. G.E.W. Burton whose tenure ran from June 1911 to April 1915.

The establishment of a cohesive command structure and beneficial command relationships were also handicapped by the shifting of brigades 'between division to division and from corps to corps... commanders remaining strangers to each other'.²⁰³ This was evident in 7th Division which served under six corps in total with their difficulties compounded by the consistent reconstitution of brigades 'for a third, in some cases a fourth time... as each successive offensive swept away more of the few really trained officers'.²⁰⁴ After Loos, the three brigades acquired eight new battalion commanders and numerous junior ranks, the 2/Gordons alone receiving '3 captains... 2 lieutenants and 11 2nd lieutenants... together with drafts amounting to over 450'.²⁰⁵ Whilst assimilating these drafts, 21 Brigade staff was also focused upon the impending exchange with 91 Brigade, 30th Division designed to acclimatise new recruits to the conditions of trench warfare. While for some brigades this measure was on a temporary basis, for 21 Brigade the exchange was permanent.

A formation's operational performance depended upon efficient staff, and so from 1915 ineffective brigade commanders were replaced by experienced and proficient battalion commanders. Simultaneously, experienced brigade commanders were promoted to divisional command. This pattern of renewal escalated as officers with managerial and tactical skills benefited from a meritocratic process of promotion. These skills were honed during successive operations conducted during 1915, where present and future brigade officers experienced the conditions that shaped operations on the Western Front during 1916-1917.

²⁰³ TNA, CAB 45/188, Birch to Edmonds, 1 June 1930. Birch served as GSO1 25th Division, X Corps January -May 1915 and May 1916-January 1917.

²⁰⁴ Atkinson, *Seventh Division*, p.184.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, pp.238-9.

1.10: Brigade operations 1915

The accepted story of the Western Front in 1915 is one of 'repeated attempts to achieve a breakthrough that failed and degenerated into attrition'.²⁰⁶ The context in which the BEF operated were defined by two broad criteria. First, as a junior member of the Anglo-French coalition, despite Sir John French's desire for an independent strategy, there was little choice other than to pursue 'a strategy formulated in Joffre's headquarters'.²⁰⁷ Thus the British line was extended northwards during January-February 1915 relieving the French IX Corps in the Ypres sector. The BEF's operations were shaped by the presence of German defences on higher ground, which enhanced the advantages of the defence over the assault. The British government's unpreparedness for total war was a second factor. Shaped by financial expediency, rather than military factors, the British army's peacetime establishment of six infantry and one cavalry division was rapidly eroded by the huge losses sustained during 1914. Equally, a shortfall in the pre-war production of artillery and munitions could not be made up quickly. These broad factors defined the shape of brigade operations in 1915.

The fundamental causes of operational failure were clear in the aftermath of Neuve Chapelle, the BEF's first offensive under conditions of true positional warfare. The BEF's leaders recognised that success depended upon the correct and efficient employment of artillery, and it was organised with a degree of sophistication that proved 'positively precocious'.²⁰⁸ A total of 340 guns of varying calibre were assembled

²⁰⁶ G.D. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2002 [2001]), p. 124.

²⁰⁷ J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.111. For the Franco-British coalition see, D. French, *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916* (London: Allan and Unwin, 1986); R.A. Prete, *Strategy and Command: the Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1914* (London: Ithaca, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Harris, *Douglas Haig*, p.118.

providing a thirty-five minute preliminary bombardment.²⁰⁹ Similar meticulous attention was given to the establishment of communications with a direct telephone line established between brigade headquarters and their respective artillery batteries.²¹⁰ In preparation, the three brigades of IV Corps detailed to carry out the assault, 23 and 25 Brigades, 8th Division and the Garwhal Brigade, Indian Corps, were withdrawn on 2 March 'to rehearse the first phase of the operations in every detail'.²¹¹

Despite these arrangements, brigadiers were instructed 'that they should not make unnecessary demands on the artillery'.²¹² Because of this shortage of munitions, IV Corps' frontage was reduced to 5,000 yards accommodating the battalions of two divisions in depth. The restrictions imposed upon the assembly of the battalions was evident in 23 Brigade where it was considered that 'one to one and half Battalions could be "crammed" into the fire trenches... in addition to the trench garrison of 700'.²¹³ Moreover, consisting as they did of a salient jutting into the British lines, the German defensive positions were ideal for concentrating enfilade fire into the brigade lines. The enemy's domination of the British lines therefore influenced the work of brigade staff in securing the safe assembly of battalions and in the planning of suitable formations for attack.

The subsequent loss of impetus by 23 Brigade during the first phase of the assault, caused by a lack of artillery support, exposed the difficulties encountered by departing from the operational timetable. This was evident in the decision taken by Brigadier-General A.W.G. Lowry Cole that in the absence of mutual support from 23

²⁰⁹ *OH 1915*, Vol.1, appendix 16, Artillery Timetable, 10 March 1915, pp.390-1.

²¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/1703, 23 Brigade WD, 10 March 1915.

²¹¹ TNA, WO 95/269, 'Report on Action at Neuve Chapelle', 12 March 1915.

²¹² TNA, WO 95/1707, 23 Brigade WD, 'General Instructions (7)'. For the approximate amount of ammunition available, see *OH 1915*, Vol.1, p.85.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 26 February 1915.

Brigade 'no further advance was practicable' for 25 Brigade, despite a request from Lieutenant-Colonel R.B. Stephens, 2/Rifle Brigade.²¹⁴ Ultimately, Lowry Cole's decision raised questions at GHQ in clarifying the action to be taken in the event of a loss of cohesion. In its endorsement of devolved decision making, a First Army memorandum laid down that 'if a certain body of infantry fails to gain its objectives there is no reason why troops on either flank should be held up'.²¹⁵ However, *FSR1* stated that the decision to attack depended upon 'the conditions which affect the question of the frontage... [which] vary with circumstances'.²¹⁶ Consequently, a brigadier's capability and willingness to attack was determined by his interpretation of accurate intelligence and information related to the circumstances affecting the brigade frontage.

FSR1 was clear: 'the first requisite is information'.²¹⁷ Therefore, the necessity for thorough reconnaissance, figured highly in brigade reports. For example, IV Corps HQ issued a memorandum advising that before committing their troops to an attack 'Brigadiers and OCs should endeavour to find out something of the ground'.²¹⁸ Additionally, brigadiers were ordered to submit regular reports regarding their progress during attacks, every endeavour having been made to check the accuracy of information. If a report was considered inaccurate, it was 'retained for future verification of forwarded with a caution as to [its] necessity'. As an extra precaution 'sketches of a brigade's disposition at the close of fighting were forwarded' as appropriate.²¹⁹ These measures demonstrate that brigade staff were actively engaged

²¹⁴ TNA, WO 95/707, IV Corps WD, 'Rifle Brigade Narrative of Operations at Neuve Chapelle' April 1915.

²¹⁵ TNA, WO 95/1672, 8th Div. WD, First Army GS68A, 1 April 1915.

²¹⁶ *FSR1*, Chapter 7, 104 (3), p.138.

²¹⁷ *FSR1*, Chapter 7, 108 (1), p.146.

²¹⁸ TNA, WO 95/1628, 7th Div. WD, IV Corps to GOC 20 Brigade, 16 March 1915.

²¹⁹ TNA, WO 95/1670, 20 Brigade WD, Memorandum No.11, 17 March 1915. For early examples of panoramic sketches of the battlefield, see LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 5/6, 'The Aisne and the Lys'.

in the systematic capture and interpretation of relevant information as an element of the learning process as early as spring 1915.

The level of information acquired and the degree of influence to which it was acted upon depended initially upon the position of brigade headquarters (BHQ). In the light of Neuve Chapelle, it was generally considered that staff should remain well forward to respond 'to the changing nature of the fight'.²²⁰ It had been demonstrated that despite the disruption encountered by 7th and 8th Divisions, the direct intervention of brigadiers had ameliorated some of the difficulties. Twice Lowry Cole had been able to make a balanced decision upon the feasibility of an attack based upon first-hand intelligence.²²¹ While the advanced position taken up by the brigade commander was beneficial, it also proved perilous. Lowry Cole was subsequently killed during operations at Aubers Ridge (May 1915) when, all communications having been severed, he moved forward to reorganise his battalions.²²²

The optimum position for BHQ proved perplexing, whilst the benefits of adjacent command headquarters were quickly realised. At Aubers Ridge those of 1st Division's 2 and 3 Brigades were situated 3,000 yards behind the front line, 'their proximity to each other greatly [facilitating] command and exchange of news'.²²³ Conversely, Brigadier-General R. Wanless O'Gowan's 13 Brigade, 5th Division considered that during operations at St. Julien in April 1915

the wanderings of the Brigade HQ... [were] of interest... [in showing] how difficult it was to command a brigade under existing circumstances and what a

²²⁰ TNA, WO 158/183, First Army WD, 'Paper B', annex to memorandum from Brigadier-General R.H.K. Butler, Chief General Staff Officer, First Army, 13 April 1915.

²²¹ TNA, WO 95/154, 'Report of Operations of 25 Brigade', 12 March 1915.

²²² TNA, WO 95/1724, 25 Brigade WD, appendix 7 'Report on Operations 9-10 May 1915'.

²²³ TNA, WO 95/1228, 1st Division WD, 'Report on Operations'.

great strain it put on the Signal Service. It also showed how unavoidable it is to place Brigade HQ too close to the firing line.²²⁴

Similar circumstances occurred at Loos, where Brigadier-General C.D. Bruce, 27 Brigade, 9th (Scottish) Division having advanced forward, to steady his men and establish touch with the flank brigade of 7th Division, found his headquarters isolated and overrun. As the divisional report stated 'Brigade HQ should be as far forward as possible and once fixed never move... [but] while 26 and 28 Brigades remained in their battle stations... and never lost touch... 27 Brigade... were never in touch'.²²⁵

In relation to the optimum position for BHQ and in the light of lessons drawn from operations at Loos, guidance was laid down by Brigadier-General A.A. Montgomery, Chief of Staff at IV Corps. This advice recommended 'that brigadiers and brigade majors should not occupy an advanced position' simultaneously. As far as the tactical influence of the brigadier was concerned, it was considered that 'the golden rule to remember is that the only way in modern battle on which a commander can influence the action... is by the handling of reserves and of the artillery'.²²⁶ The debate on the ideal position for brigade headquarters would continue throughout 1916, the growing consensus being that a tendency had developed 'to keep Brigade HQ too far back and out of touch with the immediate situation... [and] consequently support in the form of reserves was not forthcoming'.²²⁷ The issue of *SS119* in July 1916 provided some clarity based upon 'the absolute necessity for direct observation by the Brigade Staff' as laid down in *FSR1*. It was proposed that BHQ should be positioned 'at the

²²⁴ TNA, WO 95/1548, 13 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations 22 April- 1 May 1915'.

²²⁵ TNA, WO 95/1773, 9th Div. 'Special WD dealing with the Battle of Loos, 25-27 September 1915' and 'Lecture given by Lieutenant-Colonel S.E. Holland, GSO1, on the part played by 9th Division at Loos'.

²²⁶ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/1, 'Lessons of the Battle of Loos'.

²²⁷ TNA, CAB 45/190, Brigadier G. W St. G. Grogan (formerly GOC 23 Brigade, 8th Division), to Edmonds, 10 April 1930.

most forward place that can be reached in comparative safety from rifle fire'.²²⁸ However, an ideal solution remained elusive and totally dependent upon a transformation in communications technology.

A material cause of failure at Neuve Chapelle was the collapse of communication in the chain of command, leading to a loss of cohesion and tactical control. As the distances between command posts lengthened 'communications between [brigades] and the units were constantly interrupted... and depended upon orderlies only'.²²⁹ This observation was later endorsed by a staff officer who observed that 'when the first assault had been delivered, the troops got beyond the scope of the communications system'.²³⁰ However, in the aftermath of the attack, all aspects of communication were scrutinised and appropriate measures implemented at brigade level, GOC 20 Brigade instructing that 'all battalion Signalling, Communication and Signallers... would be placed under the Brigade Signals Officer for the purpose of operations and training' being billeted and rationed as separated detachments.²³¹

The absence of secure communications was exacerbated by the unrealistic time allotted for the issue of corps' orders with ' [none passing] from division to division... in less than 30 minutes', usually longer.²³² The attack of 23 Brigade on 11 March was subject to IV Corps' distorted perception of the situation where 'arrangements for communications between the fighting troops and the staff had not been adequately thought out and where... no orders reached the fighting line... [they] reached the batteries'.²³³ In consequence, 23 Brigade received their orders 33 minutes

²²⁸ SS119, Preliminary Notes on Tactical Lessons of the Recent Operations (July 1916), p.3, (8).

²²⁹ TNA, WO 95/1724, 25 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations, 10-15 March 1915'.

²³⁰ IWM, Sir John French Papers, JDPF, 7/2/91, 15 March 1915, 'Notes on Neuve Chapelle'.

²³¹ TNA, WO 95/1670, 29 Brigade WD, 9 April 1915.

²³² R. Prior and T. Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004 [1992]), p.53.

²³³ H. FitzM. Stacke, *The Worcestershire Regiment in the Great War* (Kidderminster: G.T. Cheshire, 1926), p.61.

before the attack, battalion headquarters being a further 1,200 yards beyond. By the time battalion orders were received, two companies of the Worcestershires had already advanced 'to carry the others' the supporting barrage having already ceased.²³⁴

Similar factors that influenced the exercise of tactical control at brigade level were evident at Second Ypres. Here, the principles of *FSR1* were frequently disregarded and the necessity for 'timely information regarding the enemy's dispositions and the topographical features of the theatre of operations' overlooked.²³⁵ The attack of Brigadier-General C.P. A. Hull's 10 Brigade, 4th Division, on 25 April was one such occasion. Originally scheduled to take place with the support of 149 and 150 Brigades of 50th (Northumbrian) Division with a total of 15 battalions, through a lack of coordination and delay, only five battalions were successfully assembled.²³⁶ The staff of 10 Brigade were given no time for reconnaissance, Hull having to issue orders by reference to what maps were available. The late issue of corps' orders broke the unwritten rule that orders should reach brigade headquarters not less than 48 hours before zero. In the event, the attack was postponed for two hours until 5.30am to allow units to pass through the wire undetected. However, this notification was not relayed to the supporting batteries of the Canadian Field Artillery, nor the artillery of 27th and 28th Divisions. Hence the guns stuck to the original arrangements but remained silent when 10 Brigade's attack began. Without artillery support, the attack also suffered from a lack of communication at BHQ, despite *FSR1* stressing 'the maintenance of communication... [in providing] the possibility of cooperation'.²³⁷ While 10 Brigade

²³⁴ TNA, WO 95/1716, 24 Brigade WD, 11 March 1915. The losses to 1/Worcestershire totalled 370 of all ranks including the CO. On the morning of 13 March, the battalion mustered seven officers and 450 men.

²³⁵ *FSR1*, Chapter 6, 90 (1), p.119.

²³⁶ *OH 1915*, Vol.1, p.241, fn.1.

²³⁷ *FSR1*, Chapter 2, 8 (1), p.22.

succeeded in temporarily closing the gap created by the loss of St. Julien, it came at a heavy cost in well trained men and the formation's inevitable reconstitution.²³⁸

Brigade operations at Second Ypres were therefore shaped by various factors: location, inconsistent exercise of command, poor communications and a shortage of munitions. Attacks were delivered from narrow frontages which 'were prone to exposure from enfilade fire' whilst ones from a wide front remained 'impossible because of insufficient ammunition'.²³⁹ Crucially, as Prior and Wilson argue, 'lessons already mastered' had to be learnt all over again, as 24 Brigade's attack at Aubers Ridge demonstrated.²⁴⁰ Here, having benefited from a modest rise in its artillery assets, First Army chose to disperse its fire-power over a wide area in anticipation of a rapid advance, rather than concentrating its fire-power. This deprived brigade operations of the necessary pre-conditions for operational success: sufficient preparation, an appropriate method of attack and adequate logistic support to accommodate the scale of the objectives.

The BEF's ambitious offensive at Loos in September 1915 was, despite its impressive logistic arrangements, shaped by similar unfavourable factors. Numerous contraventions of the principles laid down in *FSR1* were evident. The first of these applied to the absence of limited objectives. *FSR1* stated 'that under all conditions the attacking troops must be given definite objectives'.²⁴¹ First Army orders however presumed that having taken the first two German lines of defence 'the advance would be carried on into open warfare'.²⁴² Many of the attacking brigades were confused as

²³⁸ TNA, WO 95/1479, 10 Brigade WD, losses totalled 73 officers and 2,346 ORs.

²³⁹ LHCMA, Lieutenant-General Sir L. Kiggell Papers, IV/1, General Sir William Robertson, CGS to Kiggell, 20 June 1915.

²⁴⁰ Prior and Wilson, *Command*, p. 88.

²⁴¹ *FSR1*, Chapter 7, 104, (2), p.137.

²⁴² LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, Misc.134, item 2072 'Report on Operations at Loos', 14 January 1916, Hon. M.A. Wingfield, AA and QMG, 7th Division.

to their final objectives, 'with the only clarity being the onus to attack to the utmost'.²⁴³ Thus, Major-General T. Capper, 7th Division, a soldier deeply committed to the spirit of the offensive, instructed his brigade commanders that boldness and clarity were to be the keywords of the action.²⁴⁴ Similarly, when asked by a commanding officer for the next objective after he taken Hill 70, Brigadier-General F.E. Wallerston, 45 Brigade, 15th (Scottish) Division suggested that 'if there is no opposition push on'.²⁴⁵ However, as events proved, a successful advance over open ground hinged upon the timely establishment of a defensive flank guard.

A second factor influencing brigade operations was the controversial handling of 21st and 24th Divisions, their late deployment contravening the principle of 'concentrating the general reserve at the right moment with reference to the approximate place in which it is to be used'.²⁴⁶ Divisional, brigade and battalion orders were drawn up on this premise with the brigadiers of 15th (Scottish) Division being under the impression 'that there would be *at least* a corps in the rear' [original emphasis].²⁴⁷ The failure to deploy the reserve divisions at an opportune moment stemmed from internal and external causes. Broadly, the failure to deploy the reserves at an appropriate time stemmed from the differing conceptions between Haig and French on how they should be used.²⁴⁸ Internally, it demonstrated the inexperience of the divisions, an information vacuum and a failure to maintain adequate command and control during the second phase of the offensive. For example, orders failed to

²⁴³ Beckett, Bowman and Connelly, *The British Army*, p.267.

²⁴⁴ K. Simpson, 'Capper and the Offensive Spirit', *Royal United Services Institute Journal*, Vol.118, No.2, June 1973, pp.51-6.

²⁴⁵ BLL, GS, 0309, 'Account of General Sir Philip Christion', quoted in N. Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006), p.244.

²⁴⁶ *FSR1*, Chapter 7, 105 (5), p.142.

²⁴⁷ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, Misc.134, 2072, 'Report on Operations at Loos'.

²⁴⁸ Lloyd, *Loos 1915*, especially pp.168-171.

materialise for Brigadier-General B.R. Mitford's 72 Brigade's attack on 26 September. Assuming personal responsibility, he authorised the attack to go ahead 'as [written] orders have not been received yet... and they [the battalion COs] have their instructions from me'.²⁴⁹ Given that his battalions had only ten minutes to deploy and execute a difficult manoeuvre, their success in steadying 'the mass of the 63rd Brigade on their right which at that moment was in full retreat' demonstrated the skill of both brigade and battalion staff.²⁵⁰

Already with little margin for error, due to the compressed nature of the operations, operations were affected by poor staff work on the part of both First Army and I Corps. This placed a heavy responsibility on corps and divisional staffs. Subject to their orders from higher levels, but obliged to respond to local circumstances, brigadiers faced painful decisions. This is neatly illustrated by a decision taken by Brigadier-General G.M. Gloster, GOC 64 Brigade, on 26 September, in response to an instruction from GSO3, 21st Division that a resumption of the attack 'at all costs' was necessary.²⁵¹ Despite lacking information and his brigade major erring on the side of caution Gloster resumed the attack. Later, in a wry defence of his decision, Gloster commented that 'if he had done nothing he might be blamed, whereas if we at least tried he would be free of censure'. The consequences for a brigadier sanctioning an attack with insufficient support and unreliable information was implicit: the onus of responsibility in selecting his course of action profound.

²⁴⁹ TNA, WO 95/2189, 24th Div. WD September 1915. Copy of Original Document lent by Colonel C.G. Stewart to Historical Section (Military Branch) in August 1925 with reference to attack on 26 September 1915 of 24th Division in the Battle of Loos. (16). Message timed 11am GSO2 to 24th Division HQ, received at 12.10pm.

²⁵⁰ *OH 1915*, Vol.2, pp.322-3.

²⁵¹ IWM, Henderson Papers, DS/MISC, account of operations. This incident was also witnessed by Major J. Buckley, 9/KOYLI, 64 Brigade. See also TNA, CAB 45/121, Buckley to Edmonds, 1 January 1927.

A third influence on the shape of brigade operations was related to terrain. At Loos, the 30 to 75 metre contour lines made 'an advance eastward... extremely difficult'.²⁵² Conditions did however vary between corps' sectors, that of I Corps being probably the worst within First Army. The attack of the brigades of 2nd Division took place over ground levelled by the enemy to increase the width of no-man's land and studded with advantageously positioned machine gun emplacements. To this was added the difficulties in obtaining artillery observation 'with wire laying in sunken trenches and almost impossible to see from [the forward line] or observation stations'.²⁵³ These factors, combined with a change in wind direction, which blew gas back onto advancing troops, proved disastrous.

The frontage of IV Corps was defined by its featureless terrain, 15th (Scottish) Division's 44 Brigade straying in a south-easterly direction 'partly due to the conformation [sic] of the ground and a natural tendency to follow prominent features'. The loss of direction was exacerbated by ambiguous orders regarding the movement of 47th Division, which stated that a defensive flank would be provided but failed to make clear their final objectives. Consequently, 44 Brigade, under the assumption that its flank was protected, was deflected towards the crest of Hill 70, 46 Brigade conforming to the same direction; this pronounced swing to the south destroyed the cohesion and weight of the attack and exposed its left flank.²⁵⁴ The difficulties caused by terrain and the configuration of the German lines shaped brigade operations throughout the war. In response, great emphasis was placed upon navigational skills during brigade training. As the war progressed a proficiency in map and compass

²⁵² IWM, French Papers, 7/2, Haig to GHQ, 23 June 1915.

²⁵³ A.F. Mockler-Ferryman (ed.) *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Chronicle, 1915-1916*, Vol. XXV (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, nd), p.221.

²⁵⁴ TNA, WO 95/1934, 44 Brigade WD, 'Report of Attack 25 September', 2 October 1915. See Map 1, p.314.

reading proved invaluable, with COs, junior officers and NCOs consistently ‘warned that it was no good relying upon landmarks’.²⁵⁵ For example, Brigadier-General J. Ponsonby, GOC 2 (Guards) Brigade laid down in his scheme of training that ‘all young officers and NCOs [should] be taught to take compass bearings on different points and to find their own positions by the intersection of bearings’.²⁵⁶

1.11: Conclusion

This chapter has laid the foundation for examining the evolution of brigade command throughout 1916-18. It has outlined the structure and principal roles of the brigadier and his immediate staff. It has been demonstrated that the establishment of a stable and professional brigade staff, able to adapt to the challenges of modern warfare, was a lengthy and uneven process. From a snapshot of operations undertaken throughout 1915, it has been shown that brigade operations were shaped by factors over which subordinate commanders had little or no influence. As the BEF adjusted to the complexities of static warfare, the necessary preconditions for success were gradually established: thorough operational and logistical preparation, realistic objectives and the suppression of enemy artillery fire. However, the evolution of brigade command as an effective tactical force was aligned with the development of communication technology. The optimum position for BHQ proved a matter of considerable debate. Whilst it was desirable to move a headquarters forward to secure observation and reduce the distance between command posts, the exposure to enemy increased the likelihood of being overwhelmed or destroyed. With the development of communication technology and the establishment of intermediary report centres these

²⁵⁵ TNA, WO 95/1344, 5 Brigade WD, appendix 1, 18 November 1916.

²⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/1217, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, appendix 12, No.201/G, 8 October 1916 and appendix 53, ‘Report on A Conference at 2 Guards Brigade HQ’ 19 September 1916.

problems were alleviated to some extent. The debates which took place within the BEF with regards to the location and distance between brigade and battalion headquarters suggest that British commanders were prepared to modify existing practices in order to improve communications. However, as Hall contends, it is only at the end of 1917 that 'the BEF's communication system did show signs of being stronger and more flexible and sophisticated'.²⁵⁷

Also, as this thesis argues, the influence on brigade operations of the terrain and the configuration of the enemy front line cannot be underestimated. Local intelligence was crucial in planning attacks and brigade defence schemes. The degree to which these criteria were met reflected the staff's adaptation to the challenges of trench warfare and where successful suggests the organisational and operational progression of brigade command. As brigade staff grappled with new methods and innovative technology, their capability for adaptation was enhanced by the ethos of the pre-war Edwardian British army which provided a platform for organisational and tactical reform. This ethos, as Fox has argued, enabled instances of horizontal learning and good practice to take place suggesting 'a culture that facilitated rather than hindered' change.²⁵⁸ Throughout 1916 the pre-war concepts of warfare were reshaped and clarified through a systematic process of tactical appraisal. The gradual expansion of brigade staff signified GHQ's acknowledgement of these changes and the need for tactically proficient officers willing and able to implement them. The implementation of these measures correlated with the evolution of brigade command and are examined in the following chapters.

²⁵⁷ Hall, *Communications*, p.241.

²⁵⁸ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, pp.58-9.

Chapter 2

Fourth Army: Brigade Operations on the Somme, 1916

2.1: Introduction

Throughout 1915 the BEF struggled to find ways of applying offensive principles in an operational environment that was totally different to that which had been expected. Operations were shaped by universal factors over which commanders had little influence, principally a lack of manpower and material resources. At a tactical level, formations grappled with embryonic methods of attack and innovative technology as they adjusted to the complexities of static warfare. It is the aim of this chapter to explore the BEF's responses to these constraints and their effect upon the evolution of brigade command during operations on the Somme in 1916.

Three research questions were posed. First, to what extent were brigade operations shaped by the preparation and scale of Fourth Army's offensives? Second, to what extent were the organisational and tactical developments at brigade level determined by the style of command practiced by the corps in which they served? Third, to what degree did the development of brigade command reflect the nature of the British army's capabilities for adaptation and innovation? It will be argued that brigade command's contribution to the BEF's learning process has been substantially underestimated. This chapter examines three broad avenues of influence that shaped the course of brigade operations: training, operational organisation, and command and control. The operations of two Fourth Army corps were selected as case studies, XIII

Corps at Delville Wood between 15 July-10 August: and XIV Corps at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on 15 September.¹

The battlefield performance of XIII Corps between July and September were shaped by the variable scale of Fourth Army operations. These operations can be classified into three phases. The first, the capture of Montauban on 1 July, demonstrated what could be achieved 'when the objectives demanded matched the means available'.² The second, on 14 July, proved that given enough artillery support, the New Armies were capable of greater tactical sophistication than some senior commanders expected. The third phase, from 15 July to 10 August in the Delville Wood-Guillemont area, was marked by the degeneration into 'a multiplicity of piecemeal operations'.³ Lower order commanders were acutely aware of the inadequacies of these operations, which were marked by insufficient preparation, difficulties of communication and lack of cooperation with neighbouring units.⁴ Under these circumstances, command and control broke down and lessons were shown to be imperfectly learned.

2.2: XIII Corps: Brigade Operations, 1 July 1916

The piecemeal operations of the brigades of 2nd, 3rd (Regular) and 30th (New Army) Divisions have been examined. A summary of the attack upon Montauban on 1 July provides a point of comparison for evaluating the difficulties encountered by XIII Corps at Delville Wood. A profile of the corps, divisional and brigade staffs also

¹ E.A. James, *A Record of the Battles and Engagements of the British Armies in France and Belgium 1914-1918* (London: London Stamp Exchange, 1990 [1924]), pp.11-12.

² S. Jones, 'XIII Corps and the Attack at Montauban, 1 July 1916', in S. Jones (ed.), *At All Costs: The British Army on the Western Front, 1916* (Solihull: Helion, 2018), p.271.

³ Harris, *Douglas Haig*, p.255.

⁴ See for example, IWM, Maxse Papers, 69/53/6, 'Remarks by Brigadier-General H.W. Higginson, 1 August 1916'.

provides a flavour of the social homogeneity and stability that served to perpetuate regimental values throughout the corps.

The conditions that shaped XIII Corps' capture of Montauban were in marked contrast to the unfavourable ones experienced later at Delville Wood. This was attributable to several factors. XIII Corps' position dominated the entire German front, providing a panoramic view as far back as Montauban, giving excellent artillery observation. In addition, whereas the chalk subsoil in the northern sector allowed the divisions of XIII Corps to build sturdy dugouts, in the south, the mixture of unstable soil and clay made deep excavation difficult.⁵ Capitalizing upon these factors and liaising with their counterparts in the French XX Corps artillery, XIII Corps deployed three Heavy Artillery Groups (HAG) to shatter the German First Line. Counter-battery operations were given the highest priority of any British corps during the preliminary bombardment.⁶ To ensure enough firepower, the corps rationed artillery ammunition.⁷ Subsequently, the combination of the weight of Allied artillery and superior observation combined to create a devastating preliminary bombardment upon the vulnerable and weakly held German lines. These factors provided the assault brigades of XIII Corps with the maximum operational and tactical benefits.

The brigades detailed for the attack on 1 July were given ample time for planning, preparation and practice. Having been allotted a suitable training ground, 'a complete system of trenches... was constructed representing the whole of the objectives to be attacked by each brigade'.⁸ The units of 30th Division's 90 Brigade trained 'over ground specially chosen to resemble as close as possible the ground to

⁵ P. Doyle, *Disputed Earth: Geology and Trench Warfare on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Uniform, 2017), pp. 89-90.

⁶ TNA, WO 95/895, XIII Corps WD, June 1916, 'XIII Plan of Operations: Artillery'.

⁷ *Ibid*, 'Report of Operations of XIII Corps for period ending 1 June 1916', 18/4. G.

⁸ *Ibid*, 'XIII Corps Operations on the Somme', Section A, Training'.

be taken in the following attack'.⁹ Similarly, the units of 89 Brigade, with their attack frontage increased by 350 yards, had their training ground 'adjusted accordingly'.¹⁰ The divisions spent 17 full days in training, as opposed to five to nine days afforded to many other divisions.¹¹ Accommodation for the staff and those of the artillery attached to the brigade, ensured that 10 officers and 70 men were provided with adequate shelter by the construction of a substantial Battle HQ. Close cooperation between brigades was actively encouraged, 89 Brigade on the right of the British line cooperating with its counterpart in the French XX Corps where 'all [the] fellows, Battalion Commanders, Company Commanders and men were on very good terms with them so that we could congratulate ourselves that our liaison was good'.¹² By 23 June 'as the result of a very strenuous time... everything had been done... and everything was as we wanted... [being] so well prepared that we were actually lending people to the 21 Brigade for work on their piece'.¹³

The adoption of appropriate infantry and artillery tactics provided the assault troops with the maximum support available. An advance in close order formation, was ordered, rather than the more complicated open order formation of "fire and movement".¹⁴ It is also likely that some brigades of XIII Corps benefited from the protection of a creeping barrage, whilst others benefited from the support provided by a system of timed lifts.¹⁵ The adoption of this formation dramatically reduced the

⁹ TNA, WO 95/2337, 90 Brigade WD, 19-25 June 1916.

¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/2331, 89 Brigade WD, 5-6 June 1916.

¹¹ J. Porter, *Zero Hour Z Day: XIII Corps Operations between Maricourt and Mametz* (Antrim: W and G. Baird, 2017), pp.178,483.

¹² F.C Stanley, *The History of the 89th Brigade 1914-1918* (Liverpool: Daily Post, 1919), p.122.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp.120-121.

¹⁴ See T. Ball, 'Over the Top: British Infantry Battle Tactics on the First Day of the Somme – 1 July 1916', *Stand To*, No.103, May 2015, pp.23-32.

¹⁵ TNA, WO 95/895, 'XIII Corps Plan of Operations: Artillery'. Regarding the shape of the protective barrage, Brigadier-General E.C. Anstey claimed that only 18th Division employed a creeping barrage on 1 July, that of 30th Division constituting a system of timed lifts, see Jones 'XIII Corps' 1916' in Jones (ed.), *At All Costs*, p.288, fn.102.

casualties suffered by the brigades of both XIII Corps and XV Corps 'in which the greatest success was achieved'.¹⁶ Whilst credit for the artillery arrangements for XIII Corps' attack were given to Brigadier-General R. St. C. Lecky, BGGs, the pervasive influence of Brigadier-General H.H. Tudor, BGRA 9th (Scottish) Division was clear. Brigades drew upon lessons gained from combat experience at Neuve Chapelle and Loos. These advocated the establishment of a carefully designed system of FOOs, Tudor maintaining 'that every effort should be made to establish one artillery line with each attacking brigade... [as] the inability of infantry to locate their positions is a disability that will be liable to increase as trained and experienced officers diminish'. Other lessons stressed the importance of ensuring that assembly trenches were established as far as forward as possible to reduce the distance between opposing lines and that reconnaissance ensured that all wire cutting procedures were monitored.¹⁷

Again, drawing upon lessons of Loos, brigade objectives were strictly limited and predominately set by Corps and Division HQ..¹⁸ Success remained 'dependent upon the consolidation of definite objectives...[with] no serious advance to be made until preparations [had] been completed for entering the next phase of operations' ¹⁹ This arrangement, combined with the beneficial factors outlined above ensured that 30th Division, with three brigades in line, achieved the greatest advance of any division on the day. This applied especially to Brigadier-General F.C. Stanley's 89 Brigade in achieving all its objectives by midday. Brigadier-General Hon. C.J. Sackville-West's 21 Brigade also made significant progress, but with more casualties. With the final

¹⁶ A.F. Becke, 'The Coming of the Creeping Barrage' in *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, 58, 1931-32, p.35

¹⁷ TNA, WO 95/1734/2, 26 Brigade WD, 'Notes of Lessons Learnt at Neuve Chapelle and Loos, 24 March 1915 and 7 October 1915.'

¹⁸ TNA, WO 95/895, XIII Corps WD, Plan of Operations 132/6, (G) Part 1, June 1916.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, XXIII Corps OO No.14, 22 June 1916.

assault by 90 Brigade, delivered from well behind its own front line and shielded by a smokescreen put down by the advanced brigades, Montauban was overrun. As the only division deployed in all three phases of XIII Corps' operations, 30th Division's casualty figures speak volumes with regard to the severity of future successive operations. In accomplishing their objectives on 1 July, 89 and 90 Brigades' casualties were relatively low, the former losing only 24 men.²⁰ In comparison, including losses experienced whilst serving under XV Corps, the total number of casualties suffered by 30th Division rose throughout 1916 to a sobering 17,374, the highest of any division on the Somme.²¹

In evaluating the operational performance of 30th Division's brigades on 1 July, it is safe to assume that success was influenced by the geographical dispositions of the brigades and a diligent approach to planning and preparation. These benefits were largely attributable to the influence of Lieutenant-General Sir W. Congreve and the establishment of a stable XIII Corps staff. Congreve brought to the corps the traditional, regimental values of strict but fair discipline and the primacy of efficient training. By encouraging favourable relationships between the corps and subordinate command staffs, he fostered the benefits of social homogeneity and high group morale. These qualities afforded him the respect of officers and the men of the novice battalions alike.²²

In disseminating these values throughout the corps, Congreve was fortunate in procuring the services of divisional commanders that shared his ideals. The training of 18th (Eastern) Division's battalions was subject to Major-General F.I. Maxse's

²⁰ TNA, WO 95/2337, 89 Brigade WD, 1 July 1916.

²¹ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920* (London: HMSO, 1922).

²² See especially L.H. Thornton, *The Congreves: Father and Son* (London: John Murray, 1928).

exacting standards based upon a strict doctrine of “Organisation and Interior Economy”. These principles were manifested in ‘the exhaustive explanation of every tactic, every theory... and a discipline rooted in confidence and self-respect’.²³ Based on the idea that training directives should concentrate upon methods rather than principles, the doctrine of 18th (Eastern) Division was to

Teach, drill and practice a definite form of attack so that every man shall know it thoroughly. On this basis of theory and knowledge common to all, any brigade, battalion or company commander varies his attack formation to suit any condition which may be peculiar to his front and to his objective.²⁴

This guidance reflected *FSR1*’s principle of valuing the opinion of ‘the man on the spot’. Similarly, Major-General J.S.M. Shea, GOC 30th Division endorsed the principles of *FSR1* when advising that ‘subordinate commanders should take up positions where they can obtain a good view of the area in which their commands are operating and which are of easy communication’.²⁵ Ultimately, Maxse and Shea both of whom ‘had commanded brigades and divisions’ would be invited to advise GHQ on training as the war progressed.²⁶

A range of questions issued to subordinate commanders, relating to operational and tactical procedures, were symptomatic of a proactive approach to learning within XIII Corps. This provided a platform from which the lessons and grievances of brigade command were discussed and disseminated. Major-General W.G. Walker V.C., GOC 2nd Division, addressed concerns raised by brigade staff about the relay of operational orders after XIII Corps’ operations at Delville Wood.

²³ D. Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (London: Collins, 1982), p.68. Fraser’s text based upon the recollections of Major Alan Brooke, BMRA, 18th (Eastern) Division, November 1915.

²⁴ IWM, Maxse Papers, 69/53/7, p.5, paragraph 3, *The 18th Division in the Battle of the Ancre*, or ‘The Red Book’.

²⁵ LHCMA, General Sir J.S.M. Shea Papers, 8, p.3, 2 August 1916. See *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 104 (3), p.138.

²⁶ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 9/3, Montgomery to Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Butler, 27 January 1917.

Bringing together officers actively engaged in the July fighting, the agenda for a conference held at X Corps HQ on 15 August was based upon divisional and brigade reports. Guidance issued by GHQ after 1 July in the form of SS119 laid down that a time of six hours was long enough to transmit orders from corps to company commanders: this estimation did not conform to the experiences of the brigade commanders. Heeding these concerns, Walker produced a scheme to facilitate 'the economic use of time to offset delays and assist brigade staff in their duties'. This consisted of brigade conferences, the timely issue of signals and the systematic issue of battalion, company and platoon orders:

unless time is given for all the stages mentioned [in paragraph 4] to be worked out carefully and deliberately, failure is likely to ensue, the good moral effect of everything that has been done in a deliberate manner with no appearance of indecision or counter order is desirable. If the opposite occurs the effect is most unfortunate and requires to be seen to be appreciated.²⁷

From this evidence, it can be assumed that a supportive culture of command facilitated the rapid exchange of knowledge and experience to the benefit of brigade command.

The capacity to sustain unit cohesion and organisational uniformity depended upon the retention of corps and divisional staff. XIII Corps was fortunate in retaining the services of its BGGs, BGRAs and DAQMGs from its formation in November 1915 until late 1916-early 1917.²⁸ Equally, the divisional commanders averaged 19 months tenure of service with the corps. This continuity was also evident at brigade level. The

²⁷ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers 7/3, 2nd Division, 'Notes on Recent Operations', paragraphs 4-6, G.S. 1000/ 1/52, 16 August 1916; see IWM, Sir Henry Wilson Papers, diary entry 24 February 1916, for evidence that despite his contribution to the tactical debate, Walker was considered lacking in tactical knowledge by Sir Henry Wilson and eventually removed in November 1916.

²⁸ A.F. Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 4: The Army Council, G.H.Q.s, Armies and Corps 1914-1918* (London: HMSO, 1944). For the tenure of divisional commanders see Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 3A and Part 3B*. The three divisional commanders' tenure of service were as follows: Major-General W.T. Furse, 9th (Scottish) Division, May 1915-December 1916, Major-General F.I. Maxse 18th (Eastern) Division, September 1914- January 1917, Major-General J.S.M. Shea, 30th Division, May 1916 – April 1917.

combined average length of service for the brigadiers of 30th Division equated to 353 days. This was the highest of any division deployed on the Somme on 1 July. Of those divisions replacing the shattered 18th and 9th Divisions in late July, the brigadiers of 2nd Division averaged 275, 3rd Division 131 and 55th (West Lancashire) Division 207 days of service, respectively.²⁹

The routes for officers to brigade appointments were varied. Notable amongst the brigadiers of 30th Division, Stanley of 89 Brigade benefited from the influence of his brother, Lord Derby, in assisting him in the raising of the Liverpool Pals. Remaining with 30th Division until April 1917, his close affiliation with the Liverpool battalions proved highly valuable. The route to brigade command for Sackville-West of 21 Brigade, was entirely different. Having served as aide-de-camp and GSO1 in Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Hildyard's I Corps between 1901-02, the need for experienced officers prompted a move to the Indian Army, before he assumed command of 21 Brigade in December 1915.³⁰

The assault of XIII Corps on 1 July 'demonstrated what the New Army could achieve when the objectives demanded met the means available'.³¹ Equally, brigade operations benefited geographical, logistical and tactical advantages. The implementation of rigorous training programmes and thorough preparation, sustained by a stable command structure, provided a firm foundation for brigade development. Divisional commanders possessing combat experience and managerial skills reflected the rise of meritocratic promotion in response to the challenges of the Western Front.

²⁹ Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions: Part 1*, pp. 42 and 50 and *Part 2*, p.134. Raised in December 1914 as the 37th Division and comprising 110, 111 and 126 Brigades, the unit was renumbered during the reorganisation of Fifth New Army in April 1915 and thus becoming 30th Division comprised of 89, 90 and 21 Brigades.

³⁰ Sackville-West was one of 30th Division's casualties of the fighting at Delville Wood, being wounded on 30 July.

³¹ Jones 'XIII Corps and the Attack at Montaubon' in Jones (ed.), *At All Costs*, p.291.

This process was also seen at brigade level, with the appointment and retention of an impressive proportion of brigadiers with organisational and tactical flair.

2.3: XIII Corps: Brigade Operations, July-August 1916

In stark contrast, the influence of corps command at Delville Wood was diminished as Fourth Army, deprived of sufficient manpower and artillery support, lapsed into hastily conceived and poorly coordinated operations. The Anglo-French operations conducted between 23 July and 8 August were characterised by a series of uncoordinated operations that 'combined with dreadful weather... removed effective control from the British and French commanders'.³² In contrast to the operations of 1 July, a combination of geographical, logistical and tactical factors denied brigades opportunities for success. Piecemeal attacks were delivered from a cramped salient, often carried out by scattered battalions unable to exploit any significant gains. Logistic problems, especially concerning supply of ammunition and the maintenance of the guns, left brigades with insufficient artillery support. The neglect of organisation and preparation compromised command and control. The attacks of depleted and tired battalions 'bearing little resemblance to those who went over the top on 1 July' proved a comprehensive failure, save for a precarious hold gained in Delville Wood.³³

Summarising these events, Shea considered that

the influence of constant changes in plan due to sources outside the Corps or Division was very marked, but as it very possible that under similar circumstances plans will be again frequently changed, it is important to concentrate upon the main essentials of preparation as indicated in the period 7-13 July.³⁴

³² E. Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.154.

³³ TNA, WO 95/2310, 30th Div. WD, Major-General J.S.M Shea, 'Nature of Operations July 1916'.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

From the perspective of 89 Brigade command, Stanley observed that the period was one of 'order and counter-order... his staff never [knowing] where to be at'.³⁵

This case study assesses the extent to which brigade staff were able to respond to challenges during this difficult period. It identifies the emergence of a cadre of flexible and tactically proficient brigade staff, whose influence on operations is explored through four avenues of research: preparation, communication, the need to repel counter attacks in accordance with the principles laid down in *FSR1* and the impact of operations upon the fighting strength of the brigade.³⁶

2.4: The attack of 9 Brigade, 3rd Division, at Delville Wood, 23 July 1916.

In contrast to the operation conducted by Brigadier-General H.C. Potter's 9 Brigade on 14 July, that undertaken on 23 July suffered from insufficient preparation and reconnaissance.³⁷ Previously, arrangements had been subject to thorough preparation and familiarity with the ground, Potter stressing the advantage of the brigade having been in the line for six days, a factor that 'could only be estimated by the results achieved'.³⁸ Equally, the CO 13/K.L.R. attributed the success to everything being ready 'at the appointed time and therefore no unforeseen difficulties arose... [demonstrating] how necessary it is for the sake of all concerned to make full preparations'.³⁹

No such benefits were provided on 23 July, showing that many lessons had been swiftly forgotten. On this occasion an advance over unreconnoitred ground was

³⁵ Stanley, *89th Brigade*, p.154.

³⁶ *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 109, pp.145-146.

³⁷ For the broad picture of Fourth Army's attack on 23 July and the unilateral actions taken by its divisional commanders see R. Prior and T. Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven: Yale University Press, p.146-151.

³⁸ TNA, WO 95/1426, 9 Brigade WD, 'Some Lessons of the Operations July 14, 1916'.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 'Report of OC 13/K.L.R.'.

hampered by 'the greatest difficulty in the assembly of the four battalions at the position of deployment'.⁴⁰ The CO 12/West Yorkshire reported a loss of 40 NCOs and men during its assembly, with a late change in the battalion dispositions leaving very little time to explain the change in plan to his officers.⁴¹ Detailed to support the 12/West Yorkshire, CO 13/K.L.R. considered that 'the attack unlike the previous one on 13-14 July, was carried out (in my opinion) too rapidly and without any previous preparation or reconnaissance of the positions... and that the troops did not advance on the same order as settled by the Brigadier the previous evening'.⁴² The losses sustained during the assembly further depleted understrength battalions, the CO 1/Northumberland Fusiliers remarking that 'even with careful preparation the task for this Battalion only 400 strong was colossal'.⁴³ So surprised was the OC of the leading company of the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers at the lack of artillery support, that he contacted battalion headquarters to establish whether the attack was still to take place.⁴⁴

The attack did go ahead, and 1/Northumberland Fusiliers suffered 50% losses. Potter moved forward to battalion headquarters to assess the situation. As soon as 'he was in a position to judge... he decided that it was inadvisable to recommence the attack'. Instead, in compliance with the principles laid down in *FSR1*, he ordered and closely supervised his units in consolidating the precarious position held, concluding that 'he was [now] better placed to meet any counter-attack and to avail himself of such opportunities as a counter-attack might afford'.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 'Report of Operations of 9 Brigade, 23 July 1916'.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 'Report of OC 12/West Yorkshire', 28 July 1916.

⁴² *Ibid*, OC 13/K.L.R. 'Remarks on the situation during the attack by 9th Brigade on Longueval and Delville Wood on the 23-24 July',

⁴³ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations of 1/Northumberland Fusiliers on 23 July', 27 July 1916.

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 95/1426, 9 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations carried out by 9 Infantry Brigade at Longueval and Delville Wood, 23 July 1916'.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

It would be reasonable to assume that Potter's previous experiences influenced this decision to move forward to monitor the consolidation. During his brigade's attack on 14 July, he had identified consolidation as a particular weakness, with little work having been commenced prior to 'the arrival of the Brigadier or Brigade Staff on the scene... the Infantry almost entirely doing nothing'. This he suggested 'pointed to the necessity of having some better plan for organising and commencing consolidation at once'. In his opinion junior officers lacked the experience for this work and that 'it would appear advisable to retain a proportion of experienced company commanders... fresh and without fatigue' to go forward at the appropriate time to organise the work.⁴⁶ In both cases however, it was Potter's personal intervention that stabilised a precarious situation. This response clearly demonstrated the qualities of adaptability and initiative required to influence the tactical course of brigade operations.

2.5: The attack of 30th Division at Guillemont, 30 July 1916.

30th Division's assault on Guillemont was affected by a late change of plan and zero hour. Divisional and brigade staff's, positive response to these changes testified to their organisational and operational capabilities. Originally conceived as a combined Franco-British attack, after five days of prevarication Major-General Shea was notified that the French would not attack in conjunction with his division but with 3rd Division in a supplementary operation. Given the minor nature of the French support and Rawlinson's unwillingness to alter the start of the main assault, zero hour for XIII Corps attack was therefore brought forward an hour 'so divorcing 3 and 30 Divisions from the main attack'.⁴⁷ For Brigadier-General C.J. Steavenson's 90 Brigade this arrangement, with zero hour scheduled for 4.45am after daybreak, was 'an alteration of great

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 9 Brigade WD, 'Report of Operations of 9 Brigade, 13-14 July, 1916'.

⁴⁷ Prior and Wilson, *The Somme*, p.146.

moment as regards the attack'. Whilst the dispositions of his battalions remained unaltered, the original plan to form up in the open now proved impracticable and necessitated 'the assembly of 90 Brigade in trenches and NOT on a taped line as intended [original emphasis]'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, through the efficiency of the brigade staff and the rapid organisation of labour, the trenches were rapidly constructed without attracting the attention of the enemy. As the means of approach were limited, they were carefully 'apportioned by brigade staff... in order to avoid congestion and so that "crossing" [of designated units] could take place'.⁴⁹

Operational difficulties were not confined to late changes of zero hour. As the divisional orders stated, close cooperation throughout was essential to success, 'the maintenance of touch with the French on the right, in whatever position they had reached... being a priority [original emphasis]'.⁵⁰ In the event, this goal was jeopardised when it was discovered that the adjoining brigade frontages of Stanley's 89 Brigade and a brigade of the French 39th Division were misaligned. To rectify this mistake, which apportioned incorrect dispositions for the battalions, brigade staff were called upon to make precise adjustments at a late hour. As Shea commented 'there was a slight clash between the French left and our right which might have been serious but for the good understanding between the Allied Brigades'.⁵¹

The strength of communications within 89 Brigade's area of operations varied considerably. Visual signalling remained subject to the nature and topography of the battlefield: the benefits of visual signalling and aeroplane contact nullified by dense mist. Useful results from the wireless stations established at 89 Brigade HQ and

⁴⁸ TNA, WO 95/2337, 90 Brigade WD, 6.30am, 29 July 1916; WO 95/2310, 30th Div. WD, appendix 6, 'Report on Operations of 30th Division July 24-31, 1916'. See Map 2, p.314.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 28 -29 July, 1916.

⁵⁰ TNA, WO 95/2310, 30th Div. WD, 'Special Instruction', g.307, 29 July, 1916.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations of 30th Division July 1916'.

Advanced Brigade HQ 'were practically nil'.⁵² This was attributed to 'the system of codes [which] made it difficult in the heat of battle to send particular messages for which the code applied'.⁵³ However, the prior establishment of a comprehensive network of buried cables by 89 Brigade provided 'good speaking and telegraphic communication [with] 90 Brigade, 2nd Division, 39th French Division and the 35th Division through whose Area [the 30th Division] was attacking'. The relative consistency of this system allowed Stanley to respond to the intermittent loss of touch with the French and send forward reserves at a critical moment. Thus:

although 20/K.L.R. and the French were in constant liaison, by reason of losses became somewhat weak, but before it was broken... the line was reinforced by 2/Bedfords [so that they] were in perfect liaison throughout the whole of a very trying time.⁵⁴

Despite this close liaison, Stanley approached the combined operation with an understandable degree of caution. The problem, as he explained, was defined by the alignment of the French attack moving south east across the front flank of 89 Brigade and into the British barrage to reach their objective. His brigade was attacking east so 'keeping shoulder to shoulder with the French... [was] no easy matter in view of the different ideas obtaining in the two Armies'. Moreover, 89 Brigade's objectives were oblique to the frontage 'the southern end of the objective 750 yards further away from its right than the left objective of this Brigade from the North end of its start line'.⁵⁵ Given these objectives, the disposition and assembly of 89 Brigade and 35th Division's 106 Brigade (placed at the disposal of 89 Brigade) required efficient supervision,

⁵² TNA, WO 96/906, XIII Corps Signal Company WD, 'Report by XIII Corps Signal Company R.E. on Preparations for the Offensive and Signals during the Battle of the Somme August-September 1916', undated.

⁵³ TNA, WO 95/2310, appendix 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, appendix A, 'Report of Operations of 89 Brigade'.

'based upon a thorough knowledge of the brigade sector and those adjacent to it'.⁵⁶

This reflected the principles later laid down that

the Brigade Commander on the spot who knows the state of each of his battalions at a given time and decides on the method in which he will assault the length of objective assigned to his Brigade, can alone decide which system to adopt in the particular case so as to arrive at the best results'.⁵⁷

Having experienced the nature of the operation conducted on 23 July, Stanley had been in no doubt 'of the enormous difficulty of the task' which had been allotted to his brigade for 30 July. In what proved a fruitless gesture, he expressed his concerns to Shea 'which he believed were then conveyed to Congreve'.⁵⁸

The response of Stanley and his brigade staff to these difficulties was testament to their efficiency, assisted by a thorough knowledge of the brigade sector and the disposition of the enemy defences. Communications too proved relatively successful, with buried cables and close liaison with their French counterparts enabling reserves to be deployed at a critical moment. However, opportunities for direct tactical intervention were limited. The greatest influence of the brigade staff was confined to organisational and supervisory roles. In his role as the leader and coordinator of his brigade, Stanley was ably assisted by his long serving brigade major who had, on the eve of the attack, been ordered to go as GSO2 to the Guards Division. It says much for the efficiency and working relationships of the brigade staff that Stanley considered this move 'a dreadful blow... refusing to let him go [the brigade major] until after this fight which I knew we were in for... [his being] a most dreadful loss'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/2489, 106 Brigade WD, Special Instruction, G.308, 30th Div. HQ to 106 Brigade HQ, 29 July 1916.

⁵⁷ TNA, WO 95/167, First Army, 1916-1917, GS, First Army No.1041/1, (G.B), 18 November 1916.

⁵⁸ Stanley, *The 89th*, pp.154-155.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.154.

In accordance with XIII Corps' systematic appraisal of operations, in the aftermath of the attack a questionnaire was circulated by Brigadier-General W.B. Stavely, BGRA 35th Division to elicit the thoughts and suggestions of all brigade commanders. This procedure was in response to the poor support provided by the inexperienced 35th Division artillery: 'an unattached group of Heavy Artillery... could not have the same intuitive cooperation as is possible with its own Division'.⁶⁰ Brigadiers were specifically invited for their impressions of the efficiency of the Liaison Officers attached to brigade headquarters. To assess their effectiveness, all messages sent between brigade headquarters and 35th Divisional Headquarters were collated and evaluated.⁶¹ This offers evidence of the increasing sophistication of brigade staffs' analysis of operations.

XIII Corps' operations during this phase 'reflected the British high command's failure to apply the methods of 14 July'.⁶² In comparison to their successes on 1 and 14 July, XIII Corps' failure was particularly harsh. An officer of 55th (West Lancashire) Division identified the reasons for failure on the fact that 'Corps and Higher Commanders refused to believe that Guillemont could not be taken in an isolated attack... that the terrain lent itself to a strong machine gun defence and the attack allowed the Germans to concentrate the whole of their artillery in that sector'.⁶³ In the aftermath of the attacks, shying away from these considerations, Rawlinson laid

⁶⁰ TNA, WO 95/2310, 30th Div. WD, appendix 6, 'Report on Operations of 30th Division'.

⁶¹ For the supporting role of 35th Division see H.M. Davson, *The History of the 35th Division in the Great War* (London: Sifton Praed, 1926), pp.41-45.

⁶² G.D. Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell, 2004[2003]), p.97.

⁶³ TNA, CAB 45/132, Cochrane to Edmonds, 8 January [year undecipherable], GOC 61 Brigade, 20th (Light) Division.

responsibility upon what he perceived was 'the want of go and inferior training' of the rank and file of Fourth Army.⁶⁴

Faced with these recriminations, brigadiers were swift to bring important factors that influenced battlefield performance to the attention of high command. Brigadier-General A.C. Daly, GOC 6 Brigade, 2nd Division, highlighted the plight of his weary and depleted battalions in

considering it his duty to bring the following facts to the notice [of his divisional commander that] the battalions of 6 Infantry Brigade will, by the time they are relieved tonight have spent 6 days and 6 nights in Delville Wood exposed to continuous shell fire. An attack undertaken now is with all the will in the world a different proposition to what it would have been a week ago with all the Battalions intact. The physical strain of the last 6 days... has been very great and there is no use in blinking one's eyes to the fact. Whilst he hoped that no misinterpretation would be placed on his report... the fighting spirit of the Brigade is entirely undermined [as] numbers are getting reduced [original emphasis].⁶⁵

This protest proved of little avail: despite only seven days' rest, 6 Brigade was detailed for further operations on 9 August. While casualties sustained over the six days in Delville Wood totalled 32 officers and 905 other ranks, 6 Brigade's replacements amounted to only four officers and 69 other ranks. Daly's concerns were also borne out by Major G. Dawes, OC 2/South Staffordshire, and corroborated by his Medical Officer, who said that

the proposal to carry out an attack hurriedly planned with troops both physically and mentally fatigued was ill inspired. The insistence on disregarding the physical condition of the men after urgent protest by those on the spot who were in a position to judge and understand the facts of the case, I concluded and still conclude ill advised to the last degree.

⁶⁴ CCC. Rawlinson Diary, 8 August 1916. For a discussion of Rawlinson's policy during this phase of operations, see Prior and Wilson, *Command*, pp.216-226.

⁶⁵ TNA, WO 95/1355/1, 6 Brigade WD, G.S. 1001/1/23, 1 August 1916.

With a large percentage of fresh reinforcements, many of whom without active service experience, he considered that 'more harm was done to the efficiency of the battalion than can possibly be realised by days of rest and training'.⁶⁶ Daly, concurred, and acknowledged that 'the attack on the 9th inst. was ill advised and except for a miracle had no chance of success, whilst it was bound to cost the lives of many valuable officers, NCOs and men'.⁶⁷

Whilst a check was maintained by Fourth Army upon the number of days that each division spent in the front line, formations were liable to be sent into action irrespective of their fighting capacity.⁶⁸ The brigades of 3rd Division, having spent 1-25 July in the front line and losing 8,000 men, were considerably below strength. They were however sent into action on 15 August losing a further 1,900 before being withdrawn and sent north for recuperation.⁶⁹ Units also suffered from a loss of regional identity as, in the face of mounting casualties and 'at the expense of regimental "esprit de corps" [the War Office] posted reinforcement drafts to regiments other than their own'.⁷⁰ Assimilation of drafts was a crucial element of the brigadier's role. As Shea explained:

The identity of the brigades of 30th Division that went into action on the 23rd and 30th [of July] bore little resemblance to those who went over the parapet on July 1st. This doubtless had an effect more realised within the units than without. The South country reinforcements did not mix well with the men from the North.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, Temporary Major G. Dawes, OC 2/South Staffordshire, 10 August 1916.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, G.S.499/22, Daly to Dawes, 11 August 1916.

⁶⁸ TNA, WO 153/1265, Fourth Army 'Tartan' and Days in the Line for Each Division 1 July- 31 October 1916. See also, Bedfordshire County Council Record Office, Luton for Divisional Distribution Chart: British Infantry Divisions. Prepared by the Historical Section Committee of Imperial Defence.

⁶⁹ A. Hines, *Refilling Haig's Armies: The Replacement of British Infantry Casualties on the Western Front, 1916-1918* (Solihull: Helion, 2018), pp.122-3.

⁷⁰ *OH 1916*, Vol.2, p.147.

⁷¹ TNA, WO 95/2310, 30th Div. WD. 'Report on Operations of 30th Division on 23 July 1916', p.8.

Stanley attributed the successful reception of fresh drafts into 89 Brigade to 'a tremendous *esprit de corps* that carried us a long way'. Many of the men had no affiliation with the brigade and were expecting to be sent to battalions for which they had enrolled but were sent to where they were most required. Sensitive to the needs of his men and the new drafts, Stanley promoted measures to instil unit cohesion, whilst ministering to the wellbeing of his men. In sustaining a healthy command relationship, he had already introduced a scheme to acknowledge his men's endeavours. This comprised the presentation of 'little cards... that could be signed by Commanding Officers and counter-signed by the Brigadier... as a means of conveying to them and their relations at home the appreciation of those under whom they were serving'.⁷² Various opportunities existed for brigade staff to soften the hardship experienced by their men. These included the profits made from battalion canteens being redistributed in the form of free cigarettes, tobacco and matches. During the reorganisation of the brigade out of the line, this surplus provided cash for the purchase of fresh vegetables and provisions.⁷³

Numerous sporting events and amusements were held with a great deal of friendly rivalry assisting in 'pulling together the new troops [who] saw at once that they were welcomed amongst us'. These included inter-brigade sporting events, designed to bond the battalions of the respective brigades together. Both 90 and 91 Brigades 'consisted entirely of Manchester troops and [89's] relations with these were of the friendly nature which added to a good honest feeling of rivalry which is the best thing we can have'.⁷⁴

⁷² Stanley, *The 89th*, p.138.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.161.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp.161-163.

From Stanley's evidence it can be assumed that he had forged a successful officer-man relationship within the brigade. The brigade diary demonstrates that the brigade was provided with adequate rest, fresh equipment, bathing facilities and recreation.⁷⁵ For a command relationship to work effectively officers expected men to be loyal to their unit and by association to their officers. Conversely, the men expected loyalty and support from their officers: this was the traditional basis of the regimental system. Theoretically, the existence of a paternalistic/deferential dialectic ensured that obedience was given in return for an officer providing a courageous example and succour for the needs of his men before his own.⁷⁶ Those brigadiers who maintained a face-to-face relationship with their men, were ideally placed to ensure the dissemination of this ethos.

The establishment of command relationships also brought brigadiers face-to-face with a contradiction of leadership in war: that commanders had to be willing to sacrifice those officers and men whose welfare he had nurtured in order to conform with operational orders. Much depended upon the calibre of the brigadier. For example, Sackville-West, of 21 Brigade considered that in the absence of sufficient artillery support on 23 July to 'merely send forward more troops would have resulted in a useless sacrifice of lives'.⁷⁷ Similarly, with regard to the needless loss of officers, Daly considered that:

Whilst it was a glorious thing to die for one's country [it is] much more useful to live for it. The British Soldier appreciates the fact that his Officers are prepared to be killed first [but] it is not at this stage of the war desirable for an Officer to go out of his way to give further proof of it.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ TNA, WO 95/2331, 89 Brigade WD, 5-7 and 17 July 1916; TNA, WO 95/2334, 19/Kings WD, 24-25 August 1916.

⁷⁶ See Sheffield, *Leadership* and McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers*, especially chapter 6.

⁷⁷ TNA, WO 95/2327, 21 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations of 21 Brigade', 28 July 1916.

⁷⁸ TNA, WO 95/1291, 2nd Div. WD, 'Notes for Future Operations', 6 Brigade, 21 July 1916.

Despite the need to maintain a stable staff structure, once an efficient team had been established it remained at risk of being dismantled as the services of individuals were required elsewhere. The loss of experienced and efficient Brigade Majors was keenly felt, not least than that of Captain E. Seymour of 89 Brigade whose 'services to the Brigade [had] been absolutely invaluable [having]... endeared himself to all'.⁷⁹ Promoted to GSO2, Guards Division, his replacement was transferred from GSO3, 55th Division, the natural route to a post as Brigade Major. The loss of an efficient officer impacted upon the efficacy of a brigade. Despite the shortage of trained staff officers, the Army did itself few favours by removing talented officers from the front line at inopportune moments of an offensive. Nevertheless, this division had the lowest staff turnover of any TF formation, although as Paul Harris has demonstrated 'no consistent pattern emerges... to suggest differences in stability between regular, Territorial and New Army units'.⁸⁰

In relation to the reconstitution of brigades, that of 3rd Division's 76 Brigade highlights the establishment of a uniform process of training. As Brigadier-General R.J. Kentish observed, each of his battalion COs had different ideas on training, being led by a Regular, TA and a Special Reserve Officer. Having 'looked for direction from their Brigadier and got it' a uniform system of training was eventually established through divisional command. This ensured that although 'all Brigade staff were killed during the battle...because of our system we were able to retrain our ranks filled with men from all Battalions because of a system embedded in the heads of the COs'.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.160.

⁸⁰ P. Harris, *The Men Who Planned the War: A Study of the British Staff of the British Army, 1914-1918* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), p.172.

⁸¹ IWM, Maxse Papers, 43, Kentish to Maxse, 22 February 1917

Fourth Army operations conducted between late July and early September proved costly and unproductive. Given insufficient time for planning, accurate reconnaissance or the coordination of combined tactics, command and control at brigade level was compromised. Few opportunities arose for brigade commanders to exercise direct control of operations. Where opportunities did arise, they were chiefly confined to stabilising vulnerable situations. However, the capability of brigadiers to adapt to these circumstances marked a step in the progressive development of brigade command. Subject to the constraints of small scale and under-resourced attacks, the primary influence of the brigade staff was directed towards ameliorating the difficulties caused by lack of preparation and operational mismanagement. In accordance with the brigadier's paternalistic role, in the face of high casualties, great emphasis was placed upon the material wellbeing of the brigade. XIII Corps' command style encouraged a culture of open discussion and dialogue that ensured that the lessons were discussed and duly disseminated. This case study has demonstrated the flexibility of the brigadier's role and their perpetual struggle to maintain the operational capacity of their brigades.

2.6: XIV Corps: Brigade Operations at Flers-Courcelette and Morval, September 1916

This case study examines brigade operations of the Guards and 6th Divisions on the right of XIV Corps during Fourth Army's offensive at Flers and Morval on 15 September. This was the largest assault since 1 July with British casualties almost as heavy in relation to the numbers involved. Four areas of brigades's influence are explored: training, preparation, communications and command and control. The second phase of the battle on 25 September was selected to examine the extent that

lessons were learned from earlier attacks, to gauge as a measure of tactical development.

III, XIV and XV Corps of Fourth Army attacked on a seven-mile frontage, supported by II Corps of the Reserve Army on the left flank. Operational orders laid down that the attack would be pressed 'until the most distant of objectives [were] reached'.⁸² However, the geography of the corps' frontage imposed its own logic on the operations, the German Third Line being located at the extreme limit of the British artillery range, with observation barely extending to the German Second Line. Furthermore, the disposition of the Guards' brigades, with the heavily defended Quadrilateral to their right and Hop Alley to their left, meant that any failure on the part of the flank divisions would leave them dangerously exposed. In terms of logistics, it was also recognised that prospects of success would be determined by the difficulties entailed in moving men and material forward over the broken ground of 'a high, waterless and roadless plateau'.⁸³ The offensive saw the first use of tanks on the battlefield. These proved a mixed blessing, as on the front of 1(Guards) Brigade where 'the tank advance previous to zero hour produced little effect'.⁸⁴ Thereafter no tanks operated within the Guards Division's sector.

The commander of XIV Corps was Lord Cavan. He was described as an officer 'cautious in his attitude to making progress and the new weapons of war'.⁸⁵ Cavan's approach to command is illustrated by a document issued on 3 August 1916. This

⁸² TNA, WO 158/235, Fourth Army Operations, 27 July- 8 September 1916, Rawlinson to GHQ, 31 August 31, 1916.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *OH 1916*, Vol. 2, pp.311-312.

⁸⁵ LHCMA, Liddell Hart Papers, LH/1/155/2, 10th Earl of Cavan to Liddell Hart, 3 August 1916.

endorsed the established principles of the BEF in promoting a less assertive style of command. Thus:

Without wishing in any way to curb the initiative of Divisional Commanders, I should like to impress the following short memoranda on the minds of all, which are based on the experience of this battle, backed by the teaching of our text books.⁸⁶

This guidance, whilst acknowledging that subordinate commanders resented encroachment on their perceived autonomy, provided the means to keep a check on their actions. Significantly, numerous principles in the memoranda were drawn from information solicited from the experiences of the brigadiers that highlighted an upward dissemination of information. The preparations also acknowledged the time required for the issue of operational order so that 'they [could] be studied by subordinates and checked by Corps HQ' [original emphasis].⁸⁷ However, whilst these and other preparatory arrangements were designed to benefit brigades and battalions alike, the final arrangements were shaped by the irregularity of brigade frontages and the configuration of the German lines.

2.7: Guards Division-Brigade Operations, 15 September 1916: Preparations

Prior to its attack, the energies of 1(Guards) Brigade staff were focused upon a scheme of systematic training. This process represented the brigade's efforts to embrace innovative methods, whilst endeavouring to mould a universal tactical doctrine. For ten days 'every phase in an attack upon the enemy's prepared positions was rehearsed... in conditions which were made as realistic as circumstances would allow'.⁸⁸ The actual training was left to the COs with but Major-General G.P.T. Feilding,

⁸⁶ TNA, WO 95/910, XIV Corps WD, Corps S.72, 3 August 1916.

⁸⁷ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p. 41.

⁸⁸ TNA, WO 95/1213, 1(Guards) Brigade WD, Brigade Conference, 26 August 1916.

GOC Guards Division and his brigadiers usually present. Through these measures 'a uniformity of tactical doctrine was established throughout the division which was to prove of great value in the confused fighting in which the Guards were soon to be engaged'.⁸⁹ The promotion of cascade learning represented an economic approach to the training. For example, a rota was introduced to ensure that all companies underwent a period of elementary bombing practice under the supervision of the Brigade Bombing Officer. By this means it was hoped that in the future 'Companies could do their own training and allow of more advanced training to be done by the Brigade Bombing Officer'.⁹⁰ As the brigade's objectives had not be finalised, formations for attacks on variable objectives were practiced, with the primacy of consolidation with Lewis guns being stressed. Drawing upon the memoranda issued by XIV Corps on 3 August, exercises in 'getting men across No-Man's Land in the shortest time' were undertaken. More specific guidance as to the shape of formations was not addressed, except that 'brigades and battalions should adopt dispositions which would allow for the purpose of establishing a defensive flank'.⁹¹

Other brigade training highlighted some of the tactical and technological innovations shaping tactics. In anticipating the support of tanks 'great attention was paid to training in open warfare' although there is little evidence that the infantry and tank crews were afforded time for combined exercises.⁹² Infantry-tank training prior to the Battle of Flers remained haphazard and restricted, which partly explains why cooperation between the two arms was not particularly successful. The only direct evidence of training within XIV Corps is that of an exercise undertaken by 7/Middlesex, 56th (1st London) Division, on 26 August, where Haig observed that 'the demonstration

⁸⁹ C. Headlam, *The Guards Division in the Great War* Vol.1 (London: Murray, 1924), p.140.

⁹⁰ TNA, WO 95/1213/1, 'Report on Brigade Training'.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 'Report on Brigade Conference, 3 September 1916'.

⁹² *Ibid*, 'Report on Brigade Training'.

was encouraging... but we require to clear our ideas as to the tactical handling of these machines'.⁹³ Further opportunities for the brigades to develop coordinated tactics were curtailed by essential battle preparations and constant demonstrations of the new weapons.⁹⁴ Overall however, the training schemes initiated by the brigades of XIV Corps reflected their capacity to adapt to the changing nature of warfare.

The brigade arrangements for assembly were subject to the irregularity of brigade frontages in relation to the designated objectives. These factors created great problems for brigade staff. The allotted dispositions for 1(Guards) Brigade 'could not have been worse' shaped as they were by an irregular and exposed 500-yard semi-circular line with no suitable trenches for assembly.⁹⁵ This misalignment, curving backwards on both flanks, rendered it impossible to launch an attack from a position parallel to the objectives without the simultaneous advance of the flank divisions. Despite efforts of the brigade staff and the 1/Grenadier Guards to straighten the line, a gross underestimation of the ambitious objectives, ranging in error from 400 yards on the first, to 1,000 yards on the fourth objective, left the brigade hopelessly exposed. In relation to these dispositions, Brigadier-General C.E. Pereira, GOC 1(Guards) Brigade argued that

it would seem worthwhile always carrying out minor operations before hand to give troops a straight line at their objectives... and a straight line and not a semi-circular barrage in front of the leading troops.⁹⁶

Preparations for the attack of 2(Guards) Brigade followed a similar pattern, the formation for the attack being on a restricted 400-yard frontage.⁹⁷ Given these

⁹³ TNA, WO 95/2950, 7/Middlesex WD, 26 August 1916; TNA, WO 256/12, Haig Diary, 26 August 1916.

⁹⁴ See P. Ventham, 'Early Tank and Doctrinal Training' in Jones (ed.), *At All Costs*, pp.394-413.

⁹⁵ TNA, WO 95/1213, 1(Guards) Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations carried out by 1st Guards Brigade during August and September 1916'.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ See Map 3, p.315.

circumstances Brigadier-General J. Ponsonby considered that 'it [was] not possible to lay down any hard-and-fast attack formations' as the frontage did not conform to the ideal of 6-800 yards. Instead, he reminded his brigadiers of the 'certain principles which represent an ideal to which arrangements should always conform as the circumstances arise', especially the necessity of forming up within 50 yards of the front line, in strength in number to 'provide a man every other yard in each of the objectives when gained'. In the event, three alternative forms of attack were proposed, the views of the battalion commanders invited, and the conclusions of the meeting circulated in the form of 'Notes of the Attack'.⁹⁸ A further conference was then held, to address questions arising from this memorandum. Amongst the conclusions drawn 'it was decided... according to the view of the majority of the officers present that the first line of attack should not go through to the last objective'.⁹⁹

Ultimately, the arrangements settled upon by 2(Guards) Brigade staff consisted of a formation of four platoons per battalion, arranged in successive waves ten yards apart compressed into a semi-circular and cramped position.¹⁰⁰ This unfavourable disposition was proposed by Major Roche, CO 2/Irish Guards who had recognised that the original area for assembly was susceptible to 'a regular barrage... put down along the east edge of Ginchy'. It was later agreed that this decision (in spite of the difficulties involved) ... had alone avoided [sic] very heavy losses in the twenty minutes preceding the attack'.¹⁰¹ Even so 'no adequate landmarks could be found... to put out marking boards for alignment for the Brigade on a compass bearing... the Irish Guards

⁹⁸ TNA, WO 95/1217/2, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, appendices 52, 'Notes on the Attack', 30 August 1916.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 2(Guards) Brigade Conference, appendix 55, 2 September 1916.

¹⁰⁰ TNA, WO 95/1192, Guards Div. WD, OO No.77, 14 September 1916, see also Headlam, *History of the Guards*, Vol.1. p.146.

¹⁰¹ TNA, WO 95/1217, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, 12 and 14 September 1916.

already in the line [planning] the relief most carefully and directing units as they came up'.¹⁰²

The work of the brigade staff in arranging the safe assembly and advance of the battalions cannot be overestimated. The influence of narrow brigade frontages and dominant enemy defences called for an accurate knowledge of brigade sectors. This was not always achievable. For example, whilst XIV Corps was well advanced with implementing the preliminary measures for the attack, the brigades were aware by 11 September 'that assembly trenches were out of the question for want of time'. This error would suggest that not all lessons of the previous operations had been learned, brigade officers having consistently voiced their concerns at the lack of time available for preparations.¹⁰³ In relation to a lack of reconnaissance, it is notable that the attack of 2(Guards) Brigade was checked by the existence of an unknown, heavily manned trench, reinforced by a switch line which had proved unidentifiable from the air.¹⁰⁴

The work undertaken by the staff of the Guards Division's brigades at Flers highlighted the staff's influence upon the assembly, formation and direction of attack of their battalions. The staff's ability to ameliorate the effect of irregular brigade frontages was a further step in the evolution of brigade command. This process was assisted by the support of experienced officers from other divisions. Prior to the attack, a meeting was convened at 2(Guards) Brigade HQ to discuss the imminent offensive with officers who had recent experience on the same ground.¹⁰⁵ It is likely that information regarding the ground to be crossed and the disposition of the German lines would have been provided by Brigadier-General Lord Esme Gordon-Lennox, GOC 95

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 2 G.B. No.135/G,14 September 1916.

¹⁰³ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/3, Fourth Army, 'Notes on Recent Operations', 15 August 1916.

¹⁰⁴ TNA, WO 95/1217, 'Report on Experience in the Attack of September 15, 1916'.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, 8 September 1916.

Brigade of 5th Division, his brigade having recently taken three objectives in the German Second Position. Having been supplied with accurate communication by both air and ground observers throughout this operation, he noted that the attack 'undertaken from the forward slope of a hill in packed trenches hastily constructed' had come as a complete surprise to the enemy.¹⁰⁶ Based therefore upon a thorough reconnaissance of 5th Division's frontage 'in preparation for the main attack [of 15 September] a most excellent and accurate' description of the battlefield was produced and shared amongst the Guards' brigade officers.¹⁰⁷

Communications and accurate intelligence were the lifeblood of brigade command. The arrangements of 2(Guards) Brigade highlighting the priority given to these procedures. In readiness for the operations, the Guards Divisional Signal Company arranged comprehensive training for 27 men of 1(Guards) Brigade, three allotted to brigade headquarters and six to each of the battalions. All personnel of the Brigade Signal Company were provided with three days of intensive map reading instruction. However, the distribution of trench maps was not a strong point. On numerous occasions 'maps on which great effort had been put forth at Army HQ never reached the front-line troops at all... the machinery for distribution [not going] beyond Divisional HQ'.¹⁰⁸ No special sheets appeared to have been issued by Fourth Army for the tanks or for the preliminary bombardment.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ TNA, WO 95/1575/4, 95 Brigade WD, 7 September 1916, appendix 28, 'Report on Operations 3 September 1916'.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, WO 95/1567/3, 15 Brigade WD. 'Communique of Operations from 3 – 5 September 1916'; 'Notes on the Country Around Morval'.

¹⁰⁸ M. N. McCloud, 'Survey in the Great War' in *Empire Survey Review*, Vol.1, 1932, quoted in P. Chasseaud, *Topography of Armageddon: A British Trench Map Atlas of the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Lewes, Mapbooks, 1991), p.200.

¹⁰⁹ P. Chasseaud, *Artillery's Astrologers: A History of British Survey and Mapping on the Western front 1914-1918* (Lewes: Mapbooks, 1999). A captured German map, incorporating in detail the enemy's defence scheme including Flers, enabled GHQ to produce a small 1:10,000 sheet.

The innovative employment of contact aircraft to provide the earliest information on the progress of the battle was welcomed by the British commanders.¹¹⁰ On occasions the use of contact aircraft proved useful for retaining command control.¹¹¹ At other times however, 'cases occurred in which the Corps knew more of the tactical situation and of the position of the troops than the Brigades to which the troops belonged'.¹¹² Such a situation arose on 15 September at Flers, where conflicting reports from brigade headquarters and those from the contact aircraft continued throughout the morning of the battle. To address the difficulties encountered in maintaining communication between ground troops and the aircrew, all company, battalion and brigade officers of 1(Guards) Brigade attended a lecture at No. 9 Squadron R.F.C. HQ for instruction in the use of contact patrols.¹¹³ The tasking, disseminating and analysing of air photographs was an innovative step that assisted in the planning of operations and provided valuable intelligence on enemy dispositions. By embracing these innovative measures, brigade staff demonstrated their capacity for flexibility and adaptation. Conversely, an emphasis was placed upon standard battle procedures, with Ponsonby of 2(Guards) Brigade impressing upon his subordinate commanders 'the necessity of scrupulous care in dating and timing messages [and] addressing and signing them'. It had been previously noted that messages received at brigade headquarters had caused 'confusion... and were a common cause of loss and failure'.¹¹⁴ After operations on 25 September, brigade

¹¹⁰ IWM, Fourth Army Records, Vol.6, 'Notes of a Conference Held at Heilly', 10 September 1916.

¹¹¹ See LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/3, 'Lessons Deduced', 6 August 1916.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 7/3, 'IX Corps Notes on Information Collected from Various Sources, Including Troops Who Have Been Engaged in the Recent Fighting', 31 July 1916.

¹¹³ TNA, 95/1205, Guards Brigade Signal Company WD, 29 August 1916.

¹¹⁴ TNA, WO 95/1217, 2(Guards) Brigade WD.

officers were instructed to revisit *FSR1* and the *Field Pocket Book* to reinforce their understanding of the issue of orders and the transmission of messages.¹¹⁵

The transformation of staff responsibilities at this stage in the evolution of brigade command demanded a more responsive approach to combat conditions and more professionalism and better teamwork. On this basis, the training and organisation in preparation for operations at Flers left nothing to be desired. Measures to moderate the difficulties caused by the brigades's dispositions were vigorously implemented. New methods of obtaining intelligence and the maintenance of communications were adopted to assist in planning and maintaining command and control. The shared experiences and information disseminated by brigadiers of other divisions provided evidence of a robust learning process. All these measures point to the enhanced role of the brigadier as the ultimate leader and coordinator of his brigade whilst reflecting the BEF's capabilities for adaptation and innovation.

2.8: The attack of the Guards and 6th Divisions.

When examining the operations of 15 September, two lines of research were pursued: the initial lack of cohesion and the consequent loss of command and control. The lack of coordination between the Guards and 6th Divisions was rooted in difficulties in establishing a common line of assembly upon irregular brigade frontages.¹¹⁶ To some extent the barrage lines were arranged to conform with this misalignment, with the barrage supporting 6th Division advancing 500 yards beyond the enemy defences and several hundred yards behind that of the Guards. This arrangement provided an echeloned frontage and flank protection. In the event 6th Division's barrage did not coincide with that of the Guards Division. Major-General C. Ross, GOC 6th Division,

¹¹⁵ *FSR1*, Chapter II, Inter-Communication and Orders; *Field Service Pocket Book 1913*, (War Office: HMSO).

¹¹⁶ See Map 4, p.315.

conceded that 'it had been impossible to coordinate the action of the artillery' as ordered for the support of 16 and 71 Brigades. This he blamed upon a failure to bring the artillery under centralised command: 'one portion of the artillery covering the front being under the orders of the Guards Division and the other under the 56th Division'. This left 'the whole matter to the Infantry Brigades and their Group Commander'.¹¹⁷

The lack of accurate artillery support was addressed by both brigade commanders, who corroborated Ross' view that 'the German lines 'lay not behind the crest but down the slope on the British side'.¹¹⁸ Brigadier-General J.F. Edwards GOC 71 Brigade recorded that 'at 9am... our shells appeared to be falling over the Quadrilateral and consequently the GOC ordered the range to be shortened at 11.55am'.¹¹⁹ By that time the Quadrilateral, which dominated XIV Corps frontage, had inflicted heavy losses on both 16 and 71 Brigades, their lack of progress exposing both 1 and 2(Guards) Brigades to heavy enfilade machine gun fire. Consequently, the 1/Coldstream of 2(Guards) Brigade, inclined to the left to gain touch with the right of 1 (Guards) Brigade and came under the protection of the latter's creeping barrage. This movement to the left drew in two further battalions. Thus:

The change in direction caused by the intensity of the MG fire... to a certain extent broke up the attack of 2 Guards and led to an intermingling of units, officers and men fighting forward in small groups without paying much attention to what was happening on the flanks.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ TNA, WO 95/1582, 6th Div. WD, 'Lessons to be Learnt', undated.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 'Report of the Operations of 6th Division'.

¹¹⁹ TNA, WO 95/1619, 71 Brigade WD, 15 September 1916. An enquiry into the difficulties encountered in targeting the Quadrilateral traced the error to an incorrect spot height on the map, suggesting that the fire plan may have been based upon inaccurate information. See TNA WO 153/550, 57Csw which shows the Quadrilateral on the 150m. contour line, its bulk on the far side of the ridge. When compared to a modern map, this height appears to be incorrect.

¹²⁰ TNA, WO 95/1217, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, appendix 6, 'Report on Experiences in Attack, September 15, 1916'.

This combination of events was sparked by attempts to mitigate the difficulties caused by the irregularity of the brigade frontages and 'a failure to set brigade objectives upon topographical and tactical features rather than the arbitrary lines that nowhere coincided with the German trenches'.¹²¹ Inflexibility of the artillery barrages reflected the difficulties encountered by the British gunners in accommodating changes in timing and objective. Moreover, the initial impact of the tank was diluted by its mechanical vulnerability, both leading brigades of 6th Division losing their support in the early stages of the battle. This loss was felt especially by 71 Brigade which had been reliant 'upon the tanks to carry the line of trench in front of the first objective, 25 to 30 minutes in front of the infantry'.¹²² The deployment of the tanks also interfered with the arrangements for the barrage, drew attention to the infantry attack and attracted heavy machine gun fire.

Given an early loss of momentum, with the strength of the Guards' battalions reduced to as little as 200, the tactical control of brigade command was essentially confined to the reorganisation of mixed units and the consolidation of the ground gained. However, these measures were hampered by a lack of reliable information which influenced the deployment of reserves. With telephonic and visual communication forward of 1(Guards) Brigade HQ lost, and reliant upon the use of runners and pigeons, great difficulty was experienced in maintaining touch with the Coldstream Guards in order to establish their exact positions. Because BHQ believed that they would be bound to be in touch, all messages were directed through 2/Grenadiers HQ. In reality 'the 2/Grenadiers were unaware of the position of the 2/Coldstreams'.¹²³ Throughout the day therefore, conflicting reports as to whether

¹²¹ TNA, WO 95/1582, 6th Division WD,

¹²² *Ibid*, 6th Div. 'Operations of 6th Division between 12-18 September at the Quadrilateral'.

¹²³ TNA, WO 95/1213, (Guards) Brigade WD, 'Following points based upon Operations on 15 September 1916'.

forward parties of the battalions had been established on the third objective passed through brigade headquarters. Only when it was confirmed, by a contact aircraft, at corps headquarters that the Third Line had not been taken, did Cavan 'on his own responsibility' take the decision to bombard the objective.¹²⁴

The conflicting reports received at brigade headquarters compromised the fleeting opportunities for brigadiers to sustain the advance, exacerbated by a shortage of reserves. Ponsonby of 2(Guards) Brigade endeavoured throughout the morning to obtain reserves to capitalise upon what he understood was a disorganised enemy.¹²⁵ Reporting later, he stated that 'there was a universal belief amongst the officers of the Brigade that had it been possible to throw in a strong reserve at any time between 9am and 2pm... a decisive advantage would have been secured'. However, on reflection he admitted that 'the strength necessary in such reserves and the possibility of throwing them in on a sufficient scale are questions beyond the purview of this Brigade'.¹²⁶ A late deployment of reserves also influenced Ponsonby's ability to establish enough forces to enable the resumption of the attack the following day, orders having been received to consolidate the ground gained. A battalion of 1 (Guards) Brigade was detached but by the time it was deployed the most advanced parties of the brigade had been forced to retire, as Lieutenant-Colonel E. Mackenzie explained:

as far as I can make out I am the only officer left of the 1 Battalion Coldstream Guards and I have collected in all about 65 men. I am hoping that I may be able to collect more men of the Battalion as they emerge from shell holes after dark.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ TNA, WO 95/910, XIV Corps WD, 15 September 1916.

¹²⁵ TNA, WO 95/1217, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, 2pm 15 September.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, appendix 6, 'Report on Experiences in the Attack, September 15'.

¹²⁷ TNA, WO 95/1217, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, 1/Coldstream Guards HQ to 2 Guards Brigade HQ, message sent 8.45pm, 15 September 1916.

The operations of the brigades of 6th and Guards Divisions on 15 September highlight the limitations of tactical flexibility at brigade level. Having organised measures designed to mitigate the difficulties of assembly and the initial advance, the brigade commanders capability to influence the course of the attack was determined by factors beyond their immediate control. Fleeting opportunities to deploy reserves, in accordance with the principles laid down in *FSR1*, were handicapped by insufficient manpower. The breakdown in communications forward of brigade headquarters made it extremely difficult to take an advantage of fleeting opportunities, whilst the BEF's machinery for command and control remained, as Brian Hall has argued, in 'a tactical void'.¹²⁸

This case study has focused upon the areas of training, preparation, communications and tactical proficiency that constituted some of the responsibilities of brigade staff. It has demonstrated that despite the energy and foresight of brigade command, operations were shaped by a combination of topographical, logistic and technological shortcomings. The success of the Guards' brigades, in capturing a portion of the second objective, was tempered by heavy losses caused by an irregular line of advance and 'a bombardment which in terms of the revised method of defence... was not of such an intensity as to ensure a reasonable chance of success'.¹²⁹ The tanks deployed to support the Guards had problems, accurate observation of the German lines proved haphazard and communication was inconsistent. Command and control at brigade level were thus essentially limited to

¹²⁸ Hall, *Communications*, p.196.

¹²⁹ Prior and Wilson, *Command*, p.233.

organisation, the deployment of reserves where opportunities arose and the stabilisation of difficult situations.

The renewal of operations on 25 September was considered by Brigadier-General C.E. Pereira, GOC 1(Guards) Brigade as 'different from the last in that the whole scheme was not such an ambitious one' with 'every spare moment spent... preparing narratives of the previous operation'.¹³⁰ Aimed at a single German trench system and a group of villages- Gueudecourt, Lesbouefs and Morval – the assault was preceded by a bombardment some 40% more intensive than that of 15 September. Less ambitious objectives were allotted to the brigades: the distance between the three objectives for 1(Guards) Brigade were reduced to 300, 800 and 1,300 yards, in each case 'the objective [being clearly] defined and not merely a line drawn across the map'.¹³¹ To aid units over unknown ground, large scale maps were sent to all battalions early enough to allow for detailed study and for 'all runners and signallers [to identify] the position of the Advanced Brigade Report Centre and the best approaches to it'.¹³²

With the advent of semi-mobile operations, the importance of the 'man on the spot' was accentuated, as evident in the attack of 1(Guards) Brigade. Pereira laid down that the attack would be undertaken in two waves, to avoid overcrowding, with '2/Grenadier Guards sending up such support as is required and follow up when they consider the time is suitable to do so'.¹³³ This arrangement was not to the satisfaction of the CO 2/Grenadier Guards, who considered it would be better to attack in three waves, 75 yards apart, with battalion HQ advancing with the third. By this means, he

¹³⁰ TNA, WO 95/1213, 1(Guards) Brigade, 'Narrative of Operations on 21-26 September 1916'.

¹³¹ R. Kipling, *The Irish Guards in the Great War*, Vol.1 (London: Macmillan, 1923), p.183.

¹³² TNA, WO 95/1213/1,1(Guards) Brigade WD, OO No.77, 21 September 1916; see also Kipling, *The Irish Guards*, Vol.1, 1(Guards) Brigade OO No.262, Captain M.B. Smith, Brigade-Major 1(Guards) Brigade, 22 September 1916, p.183.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 1(Guards) Brigade OO.No.77.

suggested, the whole battalion would not be 'on top of the ground at the same time and [would] leave a company at the disposal of the CO in case anything unforeseen should occur'.¹³⁴ Having agreed to this request, Pereira issued an amendment to the operational order stating that 'the Brigadier considers this will give Battalion Commanders latitude to carry out the assault according their suggestions'.¹³⁵ These arrangements highlight a progression of devolved responsibility at brigade level with an emphasis upon flexibility and the deployment of reserves.

In the event, the battalions of the Guards Division were subject to mixed fortune. On the right of the attack, 1(Guards) Brigade was held up by three belts of uncut wire, reminiscent of the experiences of 16 and 71 Brigades at the Quadrilateral on 15 September where the artillery had failed to pinpoint their targets with any accuracy. Thus:

the co-operation of the Artillery was remarkable for its absence and a great deal of ammunition was uselessly expended on ground where no Germans were and places where Germans could be seen were left untouched.¹³⁶

In what constituted a gross oversimplification the Guards Division's historian later recorded that 'all went well with the infantry attack and there is little to record from the artillery point of view, except the by no means invariable information that the infantry was "highly satisfied with the covering barrage."¹³⁷ Other battalions took their objectives with little loss, those of 3(Guards) Brigade suffering only 14 casualties.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, GOC 2/Grenadier Guards to GOC 1(Guards) Brigade, memorandum 23 September 1916.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, amendment to OO. No. 77, paragraph 11, 23 September 1916.

¹³⁶ TNA, WO 95/1215, 2/Grenadiers WD, 'Narrative of Events for 24-25 September 1916.

¹³⁷ Headlam, *The Guards Division*, p.186 with reference to TNA, WO 95/1203,75 Brigade R.F.A. WD, September 1916. The total losses incurred by the division amounted to 1,900, twice those of any other division in XIV Corps.

¹³⁸ TNA, WO 95/1215, 2/Grenadiers WD, 'Narrative of Events carried out by XIV Corps on September 25th, 1916'.

In the aftermath of operations at Flers and Morval, the capture and dissemination of knowledge, based upon a systematic process of evaluation, flourished at brigade level. Pereira concluded that 'from the attacks on September 15 and 25 many of the lessons from the previous fighting on the Somme have been emphasised, while new points have been brought to light' and itemised the lessons in rank order. The primacy of intelligence and reconnaissance remained supreme. Prior to an attack, Pereira stressed that, 'Infantry Officers with Artillery representatives must inspect the wire and make a final reconnaissance'.¹³⁹ Some tactical measures, the necessity of hugging close to the barrage, were reinforced. Others reflected guidance provided by the corps commander and substantiated at divisional level; for example, the necessity of getting men across No-Man's Land as swiftly as possible: on 25 September the German barrage came down on the British front line within one minute of zero hour. In compliance with training in open warfare, the action taken in the capture of the final objective was stressed, asserting the need for rapid consolidation and pushing out patrols to secure the final objective. To maximise the efficient employment of Artillery Liaison Officers, Pereira considered 'that they should be only sent forward to establish FOOs when the situation is established'.¹⁴⁰ Particular attention was focused upon the use of new technology with Pereira suggesting that 'tanks should be used for clearing the enemy trenches out of such positions as may hamper the immediate formation of trenches for the attack'.¹⁴¹ Similarly, the experience gained from the use of contact aircraft was evaluated in relation to ground to air communication.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ TNA, WO 95/1213, 1(Guards) Brigade WD, appendix 6, 'Lessons to be Learnt from the Operations of 15 and 25 September 1916'.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, No.2339, 'Lessons learnt from operations', p.2, 5 October 1916.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, No.329, 11 October 1916.

The lessons drawn from the Guards' brigade operations were collated, shared with the subordinate officers and disseminated to divisional HQ where 'a Report had been called for by the Army Commander'.¹⁴³ In accordance with their role in ensuring that the battalions were possessed of individual skills, specific programmes of training were then drawn up by the brigade commanders with Ponsonby suggesting 'that all units should have had some careful training in the following subjects during the 10 days available'. These included practice attacks 'across diagonal obstacles without losing direction'. It would be reasonable to presume that this exercise was in response to 2(Guards) Brigade having to deal with an unidentified switch line during their attack on 15 September.¹⁴⁴ Acknowledging the inexperience of young officers and NCOs, training revisited basic fieldcraft exercises, in response to the difficulties encountered in traversing a featureless landscape, officers being 'taught to take compass bearings on different points and to find their own positions by intersection of bearings'.¹⁴⁵

2.9: Conclusion

This chapter has examined the brigade operations undertaken by Fourth Army's XIII and XIV Corps on the Somme. There are four principal conclusions relating to the factors that influenced brigade operational performance. First, brigade battlefield performance was related to the style of command practiced by the corps commander. This conclusion supports Simkins's argument that 'bearing in mind the various strengths and weaknesses of the corps commanders... it mattered what corps you were in at a given time than how many corps you passed through'.¹⁴⁶ In relation to XII Corps it has been demonstrated that a stable command structure was beneficial to

¹⁴³ TNA, 95/1217/3, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, appendix 5, 2.G.B. No.101/G, 5 October 1916.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 'Report on Experiences in Attack, 15 September 1916'.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, appendix 12, No.201/G, 8 October 1916.

¹⁴⁶ P. Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front, 1916-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014), p.70.

unit cohesion and organisational uniformity. The culture of inclusiveness nurtured by Lieutenant-General Sir W. Congreve was reflected in the relationships at divisional and brigade level where Major-General J.S.M. Shea, GOC 30th Division 'showed extraordinary personal interest in everyone' to the mutual benefit of all ranks.¹⁴⁷ The role of brigade command in the BEF's learning process is exemplified in Major-General W.T. Furse's instructions to the brigadiers of 9th (Scottish) Division in that they 'must...dig out and clarify by close discussion the lessons of the fighting so far that we may do even better in the future... [and so] get down to facts. I want all brigadiers, both artillery and infantry, C.R.E. and all COs...to organise an investigation at once'.¹⁴⁸ In relation to XIV Corps' prevailing style of command, Lieutenant-General Earl of Cavan, whilst maintaining stringent control of his subordinates, also encouraged a culture of inclusiveness and learning. Thus, information was upwardly disseminated and lessons learnt, whilst 'many Brigadiers' were consulted upon their favoured means of attack.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Cavan did not order but made 'an appeal to all divisional commanders' to ensure that they got their troops across no man's land as quick as possible to avoid the German counter-bombardment.¹⁵⁰ This style of command suggests the existence of a healthy working relationship that encouraged initiative and proved beneficial to brigade commanders.

A second conclusion relates to the degree of tactical control enjoyed by brigade commanders. Of the Fourth Army operations examined, it can be safely assumed that brigadiers benefited from the inclusive style of command that prevailed within XIII and XIV Corps. This was however basically limited to the initial planning process and the

¹⁴⁷ Stanley. *89th Brigade*, p.153.

¹⁴⁸ TNA, WO 95/ 1762, 26 Brigade WD, No. X. 4/1519, 21 July 1916.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, WO 95/910, XIV Corps S.72, 3-4 August 1916.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

sharing of knowledge and expertise. Whether or not a brigadier was free to exercise tactical control during the battle depended upon the establishment of fundamental preconditions, as discussed earlier in this thesis. Of these the sustainability of communication, sufficient fire-power and a flexible programme of artillery support were crucial in retaining command and control. A case in point was the attack of 1 and 2 (Guards) Brigades at Flers where communication was cut forward of the BHQs with a subsequent loss of tactical control and the inability to take advantage of fleeting opportunities in the deployment of reserves. The attack also exposed the problems generated by inflexible artillery programmes and the inability of subordinate commanders to call upon artillery support. Major-General C. Ross, 6th Division, claimed that on Cavan's orders he had not been 'permitted to alter objectives' or call upon artillery support having been informed that 'the tanks were to flabbergast the enemy', a claim later refuted by the corps commander.

Where brigades were left relatively powerless in the absence of the preconditions crucial for operational success, the roles of brigade staff were principally confined to preparation and organisation, the safe assembly of battalions and the appropriate formations for attack. In the aftermath of operations, the brigade staff's work focused upon the wellbeing of their men, unit morale and the successful reconstitution of their brigades. This reflected the brigade staffs' capability for adaptability and innovation in their multi-functional role.

A third conclusion drawn from the case studies indicates that brigade operational performance was related to the topography of the battlefield. The success of the brigades of XIII Corps on 1 July was in part due to the disposition of brigade sectors where full advantage was taken of the observation afforded the British artillery. In contrast, the operations at Delville Wood were undertaken from narrow and exposed

frontages over terrain lending itself to strong defences. The attack of XIV Corps at Flers was also delivered from cramped, irregular positions, dominated by the enemy lines and prone to enfiladed machine gun fire.

A fourth conclusion is that brigade operational performance was shaped by the scale of the offensive. This was reflected in the degree of tactical influence exercised by the brigade commander, in relation to the manpower, artillery and logistical support invested in the offensive. The operational and logistical preparations for the opening of the Somme offensive were unprecedented, with ample time afforded to brigades to make their own arrangements. In contrast, the multi-division battles of early July degenerated into diluted, ill-conceived, narrow-front attacks. Fourth Army's sophisticated offensive on 15 September was bedevilled by technological errors, poor communication and a flawed system of devolved operational command. In line with that of the wider BEF, the operational and tactical transformation of brigade command was erratic and regressive.

Having examined operations conducted under Fourth Army on the Somme, the next chapter takes a similar approach by evaluating the brigades of Fifth Army during operations on the Ancre in November 1916. It then evaluates the minor operations conducted during the advance upon the Hindenburg Line during the spring of 1917 to determine the extent to which the lessons of the Somme were implemented at brigade level.

Chapter 3

Fifth Army: Brigade Operations on the Ancre, 1916-1917

3.1: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, to examine the development of brigade command during Fifth Army's operations on the Ancre in November 1916. These operations, combining V Corps to the north and II Corps to the south of the river, were generally a success and effectively ended the campaign for the winter.¹ The second aim is to evaluate the minor brigade actions conducted by the two corps during the advance to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917. These actions were considered by 'from the tactical point of view... worthy of more detailed study [to] bring out the increase in skill in warfare of this type gained by the British Armies in the past six months'.²

The chapter poses three research questions. First, to what extent was brigade command able to respond to the consistent factors that shaped operations on the Western Front? Second, to what extent did these responses conform to the BEF's capability for adaptation and learning? Third, to what extent did the style of command of the corps in which a brigade served influence its operational performance? The research focused upon three factors: preparations, communications and command and control.

¹ Fifth Army was supported by Fourth Army's XIII Corps which provided flank protection north of the Ancre.

² *OH 1917*, Vol.1, p.73.

Before examining the case studies, it is necessary to establish the characteristics of command in Fifth Army. As Simpson has demonstrated, in contrast to Fourth Army, whose corps commanders were afforded more responsibility, 'Fifth Army exhibited a different way of doing things'.³ In response to what he considered their relative inexperience, General Sir Hubert Gough was inclined to keep a tight grip over his subordinate commanders. This approach, as Sheffield and McCartney argued, departed from the principles of *FSR1* which warned against the danger of proscribing to subordinate commanders at a distance anything they should be better able to decide on the spot.⁴ Instead, it was laid down that 'the choice of the manner in which the task assigned to each body of troops is to be performed should be left to its commander'.⁵ Whilst, as the *Official History* claimed, Gough 'consulted his subordinate commanders freely', the extent to which their advice was heeded remains debatable.⁶ For example, Major-General G.M. Lindsay, brigade major of 99 Brigade, 2nd Division, related how Brigadier-General R. O. Kellett's observations upon the deteriorating state of the ground were overridden before his brigade's attack on 13 November.⁷

A Fifth Army memorandum drawing upon lessons of earlier operations was issued to divisional and brigade commanders in October 1916. This was intended to introduce uniformity to the exercise of command. Overall, the guidance encapsulated Gough's views that attacking troops should advance as far and as fast as possible and should be given as many as five objectives. These views, however, failed to recognise that at this point in the war it was unreasonable 'to ask tired and relatively

³ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p.53.

⁴ G.D. Sheffield and H. McCartney, 'Hubert Gough, Fifth Army 1916-1918' in I.F.W. Beckett and S.J. Corvi (eds.), *Haig's Generals* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2009 [2006]), pp.81-83.

⁵ *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 104 (2 iv), p.137.

⁶ *OH 1916*, Vol.2, p.476.

⁷ TNA, WO 95/747, Fifth Army WD, GS.1017/2/45, 27 October 1916; TNA, CAB 45/135, Lindsay to Edmonds, 28 June 1937.

inexperienced troops to attempt five consecutive attacks'.⁸ Measures were however advocated to assist brigade commanders in retaining a firm control on operations. With regard to the position of brigade headquarters, these measures were in contrast to the guidance issued by Fourth Army in late 1915 stating that brigadiers should not place themselves in a forward position. Instead, it was suggested that they should be established 'in an advanced position, being a serious error, almost an unpardonable one when [they] do not go forward as their formation advances'.⁹ Even this measure did not sufficiently consider the maintenance of communications which remained an essential precondition to operational success. Overall, Gough's unrealistic objectives, combined with the impact of unfavourable terrain and overstretched divisions, adversely influenced brigade operations. To a degree these difficulties were mitigated by the style of command exercised at corps level, as demonstrated below.

3.2: II Corps – Brigade Operations on the Ancre

Having assumed command of II Corps in May 1916, Lieutenant-General Claud Jacob transformed its fighting efficiency. This was achieved through providing continuity of thought, leadership and systematic organisation to the benefit of subordinate command. The establishment of a stable command structure was reflected in the retention of its command staff and the operational experience they provided. In relation to the appointment of brigadiers, as Hodgkinson has demonstrated, out of a sample of 50 first appointments of COs to brigadier command between 1914-1918 only 28% were 'within corps' appointments.¹⁰ This indicates the existence of a talent-spotting system on the Western Front for promotable officers as

⁸ Sheffield and McCartney, 'Hubert Gough' in Beckett and Corvi, *Haig's Generals*, pp.85-86.

⁹ TNA, WO 95/518, Reserve Army, S.G.43/0/5, 'Memorandum for Divisional and Brigade Commanders', 4 October 1916.

¹⁰ Hodgkinson, *Battalion Commanders*, p.106.

the services of experienced COs were sought by corps commanders in their efforts to establish a successful command structure. The brigade appointments in II Corps reflect Jacob's desire to retain the services of his brigadiers. Brigadier-General T.P.D. Ternan's tenure as GOC 102 Brigade lasted 549 days. The brigadiers of 1st Division averaged 358 days tenure up to 1 July 1916, with Brigadier-General H.R. Davies, GOC 3 Brigade serving 495 days.¹¹ The brigadiers of 11th, 12th and 23rd Divisions averaged 220, 197 and 164 days consecutively.¹² The length of service for brigadiers in 34th Division was not as consistent with four changes of command within ten months. Nevertheless, all brigadiers serving within II Corps on the Somme, except for Brigadier-General Hornby, GOC 116 Brigade, were replaced by March 1917. These changes were attributable to sickness, injury and a need for rest from the existence of life on the front line.

Jacob was considered by Brigadier-General J.L. Jack of 9th Division's GOC 28 Brigade as 'one of the soundest, most considerate High Commanders'.¹³ As one of the few officers willing to stand up to Hubert Gough, 'there [was] nothing "slapdash" about any of his arrangements; all are most carefully prepared, and he never [sacrificed] his men needlessly'.¹⁴ In keeping in close contact with his subordinate commanders he 'always knew the situation of everyone and the condition of his troops'.¹⁵ The benefits of this support was evident before 29th Division's attack at the Schwaben Redoubt on 14 October. Brigadier-General E.H. Finch-Hatton, GOC 118 Brigade was approached by Lieutenant-Colonel E. Riddell, CO 1/1 Cambridgeshires, to request substantial support for his battalion. This included the assistance of three

¹¹ Worcestershire County Council Record Office, Worcester, Major-General H.R. Davies Papers.

¹² Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions, Part 1: The Regular Divisions and Part 3A and 3B: The New Divisions*.

¹³ J. Terraine, (ed.), *General Jack's Diary 1914-1918* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), 4 July 1917, p.225.

¹⁴ Terraine, *General Jack's Diary*, 18 September 1918, p.266.

¹⁵ CCC. Bonham -Carter Papers, Autobiography, chapter IX, p.31.

divisional artillery groups and corps artillery. Through the intervention of Finch-Hatton and Major-General H. De B. De Lisle, GOC 29th Division, the request was duly sanctioned by Jacob, who considered that 'as [Riddell] had to do the job, he intended to do everything he could to help... and that he [Riddell] should meet with the CRAs to outline his plan'.¹⁶

Given the efficiency of Jacob's BGGs, Brigadier-General P. Howell 'on more than one occasion, as Earl Stanhope maintained 'divisions made almost super-human efforts either to remain with the corps or to get back to it at the earliest opportunity'.¹⁷ The style of command favoured by Jacob also lessened the workload on brigade staff by simplifying the formulation of operational orders. This was established before II Corps' attack at Thiepval in September, setting a pattern for future operations.

What is required by the Corps Commander is a brief rough summary, compiled by Divisional staff... of how the units taking part in an attack propose to carry out the actual execution. Copies of Division or Brigade orders which quite rightly allot the tasks do not give this information and need not necessarily be forwarded. It is not the intention of the Corps commander to interfere in these details.¹⁸

These instructions deferred to the 'man on the spot', as laid down in *FSR1* and were intended to provide brigade command with enhanced flexibility. This approach also provides an early example of the compression of standard battle procedures. To compensate for extremely detailed operational orders written by brigade staff 'working on a scale and in conditions in which they had no experience', a less prescriptive approach acknowledged the value of self-reliance.¹⁹ However Jacob still maintained

¹⁶ E. Riddell and M.C. Clayton, *The Cambridgeshires 1914 to 1919* (Bowes and Bowes, 1934), pp.65-67; TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD, OO No. 49, 12 October 1916.

¹⁷ B. Bond (ed.), *The War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope 1914-1918* (Brighton: Tom Donovan, 2006), p.111.

Stanhope was GSO2 at II Corps from January 1917 and previously served as GSO3 V Corps.

¹⁸ TNA, WO 95/638, II Corps WD, appendix 472, G.671 (12-19) 26 August 1916, with reference to II Corps OO No. 14, paragraph 3 and II Corps OO No.15, paragraph 1.

¹⁹ TNA, CAB 45/132, Lieutenant R.P. Choate to Edmonds, 6 April 1936.

firm control by ensuring that a continuity of policy was maintained, as, for example, demonstrated in the corps defensive measures.²⁰

The systematic process of tactical evaluation established within II Corps also benefited brigade command. Summaries relating to operations were gathered from divisional and brigade staff to assist in future guidance, by noting those methods that succeeded and 'those opinions [which] are known to be divided'.²¹ This information was supplemented by details of operations undertaken by the French and Canadian forces.²² A robust and universal scheme of instruction then ensured that tactical lessons were 'thoroughly rubbed into the ranks down to the lowest... so as to be practically independent after the attack has started'.²³ With the value placed on reconnaissance and a thorough knowledge of brigade sectors, prior to operations at Thiepval, arrangements were made 'to acquaint all company battalion and brigade commanders with the ground' a lecture by the BGGs establishing 'the *local* situation on this particular front'.²⁴ The benefits afforded to the brigades of II Corps were manifest. A methodical command style, systematic organisation and continuity of leadership provided a firm framework for brigade development. Where opportunities arose, the opinions of subordinate commanders were given due weight, with the brigade staff's contribution to tactical evaluation pointing to their role as facilitators of change and capacity for adaptability.

Despite these benefits, the operational performance of the brigades of II Corps remained subject to the influence of universal factors. The consistent impact of terrain

²⁰ TNA, WO 95/638, II Corps WD, G.555, 23 August 1916.

²¹ *Ibid*, appendix 472, G.671 (12/19), 26 August 1916, with reference to II Corps OO No.14, paragraph 3 and II Corps OO No.15, paragraph 1.

²² *Ibid*, G.493, 21 August 1916, G.389, 17 August 1916 and G.1312, 9 September 1916.

²³ *Ibid*, appendix 546, 'Notes on a Conference held at II Corps HQ, 27 August 1916.

²⁴ IWM, Maxse Papers, 69/53/8, 'The 18th Division in the Battle of the Ancre', p.4, (7), December 1916.

on operations was compounded by the technical and logistic difficulties encountered by the artillery. These problems were exacerbated by a shortage of trained manpower were an additional constraint on brigades which had lost heavily. Figures released to the Manpower District Board on 26 September indicated that the BEF was short of 80,000 men and that no more than 105,000 would be sent to France over the next three months. In addition, it was estimated that by 15 March 1917, a further 400,000 men would be required to maintain the present complement of divisions up to strength.²⁵ These figures highlight the difficulties of maintaining the fighting strength of battalions. For the brigade commander, the consistent 'churn' of officers and men constituted a perpetual challenge to fighting efficiency and morale of his brigade. For example, the brigades of 51st (Highland) Division suffered a 45% casualty rate during the attack on Beaumont Hamel in November 1916, with 123 officers and 2355 OR killed, wounded or missing.²⁶ Significantly below fighting strength at the commencement of operations, with only 91 officers and 1986 OR, the casualties in 153 Brigade alone amounted to 47 officers and 851 OR.²⁷ This equated to a loss within the brigade of 51% of officers and 23% of OR.

The importance shortfall in manpower and the problems of reconstituting brigades can be illustrated by the case of 39th Division. The casualties suffered by the division in its attack of 3 September at Beaumont Hamel amounted to 2,600. By 13 November, a total of three battalions had been reconstituted, although 'in the case of a further three others... the present strength exceeded the reinforcements received by

²⁵ IWM, Manpower District Board, First Day evidence of General Sir N. Maccready [Adjutant-General GHQ] 26 September 1916. See also Haig's concerns relating to manpower prior to the BEF's spring offensive at Arras in 1917 in TNA, CAB 37/160/15, 'Memorandum by C.I.G.S. to the Secretary of State, 24 November 1916'.

²⁶ Bewsher, *51st (Highland) Division*, p.123.

²⁷ TNA, WO 95/2871, 153 Brigade WD, appendix 2, 153 Brigade November Daily Strength and 153 Brigade Corrected Casualties to 7pm 16 November 1916.

[only] a small margin'.²⁸ This placed undue stress on the overstretched division detailed to hold 5,300 yards of the most important position on Fifth Army's front as 'it took over the front held by 2nd Division... in addition to that held at the moment'.²⁹ The shortage resulted in the battalions spending an average of 22 as opposed to approximately 14 days in fire or support trenches 'with some... having done as much as 28 and 35 days out of 36'. Given these circumstances, it was considered by Major-General G.J. Cuthbert, GOC 39th Division, that unless 'five battalions were withdrawn into Brigade Reserve the efficiency of the Division will suffer'.³⁰ To resolve the situation, and provide brigades with rest and recuperation, Cuthbert suggested that the divisional frontage should be reduced to that normally held by two brigades.³¹ This request appeared to have assisted brigades in providing the necessary respite from the front line. For example, 118 Brigade's time spent in the front line was reduced from 20 days in September to 6 days, followed by 6 days in reserve.³²

The net result of 39th Division's reconstitution was the replacement of 50% of the officers and 66% of other ranks. This prompted the rebuilding of brigades where junior officers lacked significant operational experience and most of the other ranks were inadequately trained. Despite the front line now being held by one brigade, the necessity for constant reliefs and the provision of large working parties precluded any consistent brigade training. As Cuthbert wrote on the eve of the division's attack on 13 November, 'I hope that as soon as these [operations] are completed, that the Division may be rested and trained'.³³

²⁸ TNA, WO 95/2565, 39th Div. WD, 39/G/11/21, 1 October 1916.

²⁹ TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD, 39th Division OO No.42, 18 September 1916.

³⁰ TNA, WO 95/2565, 39th Div. WD, 1 October 1916.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD, September-October 1916.

³³ TNA, WO 95/2565, 39th Div. WD, 39/24/29/G, 10 November 1916, with reference to 39/G/11/21, 1 October 1916.

The brigades of V Corps were subject to similar difficulties in maintaining their fighting strength. The attack of 51st (Highland) Division on 15 November 'lacked sufficient weight... with all the Battalions under strength'. The three battalions mustered for 152 Brigade' attack totalled only 1806 other ranks 'although every available man, a few senior NCOs and instructors excepted, were in the field'. The situation was exacerbated by the casualties then sustained during the attack when 'of those who went over the parapet, 45% were lost'.³⁴ In addressing the shortage of manpower, Brigadier-General H. Pelham Burn noted that whilst the brigade possessed 'Officers, NCOs, transport and equipment for 1,000 men, it would seem that no good object is to be had by keeping the Battalions under strength'.³⁵

The fighting strength of brigade formations remained in a perpetual state of flux. The scale of rebuilding a brigade and sustaining its fighting ability was proportionate to its losses through casualties and sickness. Thanks to a universal manpower shortage, battalions were frequently undermanned with the shortage of junior officers and NCOs hampering effective training. Brigades also suffered losses of staff at critical times. In 189 Brigade, 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, Brigadier-General L.F. Philips suffered 'a complete nervous breakdown just two hours before zero hour', whilst the brigade major, Major R.A. Sandilands, was transferred to I Corps as GSO2 on the eve of the attack.³⁶ The lack of continuity caused by the transferral of staff to other units added to the difficulties. Finch-Hatton complained of the problems encountered in the marking out of assembly positions for 118 Brigade when 'Lieutenant Kirby of 234 Field

³⁴ TNA, WO 95/2861, 152 Brigade WD, appendix A, 'Report on Operations of November 13-15 including the capture of Beaumont Hamel'.

³⁵ *Ibid*, appendix "XI".

³⁶ TNA, CAB 45/137, Sandilands to Edmonds, 20 November 1936. I cannot find any specific reference to Philip's breakdown in the war diaries. His incapacitation appears to have been less severe than Sandilands believed, for Philips returned to duty on 12 December 1916.

Company... [was] suddenly transferred as Adjutant to the C.R.E.'. This meant that different officers had to organise the assembly positions, 'the situation having to be explained afresh on each occasion'.³⁷

Several factors influenced the operational performance of the brigades of Fifth (initially Reserve Army) Army during the autumn of 1916. The first was Gough's interventionist style of command and his insistence on exercising control over the planning process. In contrast to Fourth Army, this assertive style of command influenced the degree of flexibility afforded to subordinate commanders. As Simpson has demonstrated, by August of 1916 'Gough was attempting to instruct all his corps commanders in how to do their job' and by October he had issued a memorandum telling divisions and brigades how to conduct an attack.³⁸ The responses to Gough's micro-management differed according to how his corps commanders handled the situation. Lieutenant-General Claud Jacob of II Corps was able to mitigate some of these interventions whilst providing enhanced flexibility to his brigade commanders. Jacob's confidence can be traced in part to II Corps' operations at Thiepval when, having presented his plans for the attack, he was severely criticised by Gough. In response, Jacob replied that 'he must carry out his attacks in his own way or he had better resign'. In the event, Gough conceded to the plan and it proved a great success. Building on this success, Gough and Jacob became the greatest of friends and consequently 'no Corps got on as well with Fifth Army as II Corps'.³⁹ In contrast, his counterpart Lieutenant-General E.A. Fanshawe at V Corps readily conceded to Gough's intervention. Consequently, his operations were subject to a lack of strict corps control with an inevitable impact upon brigade operations. In respect of tactical

³⁷ TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations on the Ancre', November 1916.

³⁸ TNA, WO 95/518, Reserve Army S.G. 43/0/5, 5 October 1916.

³⁹ Earl Stanhope, *War Memoirs*, p.130.

flexibility at brigade level, the response of corps and divisional commanders to the army's prevailing culture of command cannot be overstated.

The second factor was the weather: heavy rain turned the battlefield into a morass impeding the progress of attacks, logistics coming close to collapse. Third, short of manpower and with casualties rising, brigades struggled to maintain the fighting strength of their battalions. However, the benevolent but firm leadership and systematic organisation promoted within II Corps ameliorated some of the hardships experienced at brigade level. A less prescriptive approach to command and the introduction of standard battle procedures, eased the burden of brigade staff, whilst encouraging self-reliance. Where opportunities arose, an increased emphasis was placed upon devolved responsibility, in appreciation of the value of the 'man on the spot'. These measures helped create a useful framework for tactical and organisational development, which in turn greatly benefited the operational performance of II Corps' brigades. In contrast to earlier operations Fifth Army had the time and space to make proper arrangements for its November offensive, and the significant success achieved by the brigades of 39th Division testified to the professionalism of its officers and the command style practiced by II Corps.

Jacob's plan of attack for II and V Corps on 13 November was in effect a modification of the first phase of the offensive as ordered on 15 October. Designed to reduce the German defences between the Albert-Bapuame road and Serre the attack was thoroughly planned and provided with clear designated objectives. With the distance to the first objective limited to 1000 yards, the corps commanders retained the option to attack a second objective if circumstances altered.⁴⁰ The objective of II

⁴⁰ TNA, WO 158/256, Fifth Army WD, 'Memorandum on Operations, 13 November 1916'.

Corps was to drive the enemy from the remains of his front-line system and having cleared its south bank, secure two safe passages across the river. To evaluate the benefits of thorough preparation and limited objectives, this chapter now focuses upon the attack of Brigadier-General E.H. Finch-Hatton's 118 Brigade (39th Division), which was reinforced by one battalion each from 116 and 117 Brigades. It covers three areas influencing the brigade's attack: preparation, artillery-infantry cooperation, and command and control.

Preparations for 39th Division's attack were shaped by several factors. The first of these was the unpredictability of the weather. To ameliorate the impact of wet weather, brigadiers were invited to comment upon the state of the ground 'so that they were able to give the corps commander their opinion at short notice'.⁴¹ This instruction was in accordance with the principles laid down in *FSR1*, which stated that 'the conditions which affect the question of frontage... must vary' the state of the ground constituting an 'inconstant factor to be weighed'.⁴² Following a thorough reconnaissance, Finch-Hatton, reported that the prevailing conditions necessitated a modification of the barrage. Thus:

The barrage to the HANSA Line should be modified as the rate of progression will be not more than 15 yards a minute... and I am of the opinion that it will take the last wave of attacking infantry from the Schwaben Redoubt 20 minutes to reach Point 64 [original emphasis].⁴³

Two points of interest can be drawn from Finch-Hatton's tactical appreciation of the situation. First, that the local knowledge of the 'man on the spot' was appreciated at II Corps HQ, his intelligence helping to formulate the shape of the artillery

⁴¹ TNA, WO 95/457, Fifth Army WD, GS 1017/2/45, 27 October 1916; WO 95/518, Fifth Army S.G. 72/81, 'Memorandum on Operations', 13 November 1916.

⁴² *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 103 (3), p.138.

⁴³ TNA, WO 95/2565, 39th Div. WD, 118 Brigade HQ to 39th Division HQ, 118/3521, 3 November 1916.

programme. Thus, the rate of the barrage was established to progress 50 yards a minute on the right of the brigade sector and 25 yards a minute on the left to conform with variable conditions underfoot.⁴⁴ The second point relates to Finch-Hatton's decision to compensate for the difficulty in crossing the ground by replacing the 4/5 Black Watch with fresh 1/1 Hertfordshires in the first wave of the attack.⁴⁵ Having lost 1,000 men in two previous attacks, the Black Watch was depleted, tired and suffering from the effects of prolonged shellfire. Instead of being committed to the main assault, it was deployed to support the attack upon St. Divion where little opposition was expected.⁴⁶

A second factor that shaped 118 Brigade's attack was the strength of the artillery support. A proportionally greater weight of firepower than on 1 July was available to assist the infantry with the attack supported by a field gun every 10.25 yards and a heavy gun every 38.5 yards of its frontage.⁴⁷ To aid close cooperation, the artillery was placed under the orders of the Corps Artillery commander, 'with each infantry brigadier detailed a battery commander whose battery when required was at the disposal of the former'.⁴⁸ This mutual support is illustrated by a battery commander's report. On the morning of the attack Captain J.R.F. Farrington, OC "A" Battery, RFA, having discovered that the infantry was advancing rapidly through thick mist

did not consider the results of... following the barrage with my two guns by watch and dial would justify the risk entailed... [instead] putting one gun onto Hansa road and the other onto the trenches just right of St. Pierre Divion.

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 95/2589, 118 Brigade WD, 118 Brigade OO No.55, 26 October 1916.

⁴⁵ TNA, WO 95/2590, 1/1 Hertfordshires WD, 13 November 1916.

⁴⁶ TNA, WO 95/2591, 4/5 Black Watch WD, 4/5 Black Watch OO No.1, appendix 4 and 'An account of the part played by the 4/5 Black Watch at the Battle of the Ancre and the capture of St. Pierre Divion, 12-13 November 1916'; A. G Wauchope, *The History of the Black Watch* Vol.2 (London: Medici Society, 1926), pp.76-77.

⁴⁷ *OH 1916*, Vol.2, p.478, fn.1.

⁴⁸ TNA, WO 95/2565, II Corps WD, II Corps OO No.41 (Preliminary) 16 October 1916.

During the afternoon, having received orders to place his guns at the disposal of GOC 118 Brigade, he met with the temporary brigadier and under his direction 'put another section with my section in front of St. Pierre Divion whilst keeping one in reserve'.⁴⁹

A third beneficial influence was the communication that was maintained throughout the day. This was facilitated by field telephones linking division and brigade, whilst forward of brigade headquarters telegraphs were used. Upon the first objectives being taken, arrangements were made for OC 39 Division Signal Company to move forward and establish 'a Brigade Advanced Station with buzzer facilities'.⁵⁰ The influence of these arrangements on tactical control at brigade headquarters cannot be overstated, as evident in 39th Division's log of messages.

Throughout the morning, a stream of messages confirmed the success of the forward parties of the battalions, with requests for additional support meeting with a swift response. That of the CO 16/Nottingham and Derby, was dealt with in less than 20 minutes, Brigadier-General R.D.F. Oldman, GOC 117 Brigade having sought permission to deploy a reserve battalion.⁵¹ As the morning progressed and the battalion 'made touch with the Black Watch', a further request enabled companies to be fed in appropriately to maintain tempo.⁵² With responsibility for consolidation devolving upon 118 Brigade, Finch-Hatton was able to respond rapidly by sending up '2 Companies of the 14/ Hampshires to reinforce the 1/Cheshires and 2 Companies to

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, Farrington to GOC 39th Division, 16 November 1916. During the late afternoon, Finch-Hatton was taken ill and replaced by CO 4/5 Black Watch.

⁵⁰ TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade OO No. 35, undated.

⁵¹ TNA, WO 95/2565, 39th Div. WD, Log of Message, Message 12, CO 16/Nottingham and Derby to 117 Brigade HQ, timed 6.49am and Message 13, 39th Division HQ to 117 Brigade HQ, message timed 7.07am.

⁵² *Ibid*, Message 40, CO 16/Nottingham and Derby to 117 Brigade HQ, message timed at 9.10am.

mop up and reinforce the Black Watch'.⁵³ Frequent reports were sent in by the Brigade Intelligence Officer and Liaison Officers from the Advanced Brigade Station 'forwarded to Divisional HQ and where necessary to the Group R.A.'⁵⁴

Whilst the telephone remained the main means of communication, a Visual Signal Station was established to carry messages, and cables were laid forward. Special attention was also paid to the establishment of a series of relay posts in order to guide runners across the broken ground. The arrangements also acknowledged the large-scale introduction of contact aircraft, with an R.F.C. Liaison Officer attached to each battalion and brigade headquarters.⁵⁵ All these measures combined to provide brigade staff with a smooth and efficient flow of information and the means to retain a firm tactical grip.

A fourth benefit for 118 Brigade's initial advance was that brought by the configuration of the brigade frontage. As opposed to the difficulties presented by attacking from a narrow and cramped front, this operation was delivered from 'a somewhat wider front of attack'. This facilitated a formation of eight waves of four battalions. Three battalions were assembled to advance 1,100 yards in a northerly direction, a fourth in a divergent movement to the north west. These moves were in keeping with the inflexible methods advocated by Gough.⁵⁶ The tactics were essentially designed to ensure that enough troops were available to cater for any eventuality 'since communications were bound to break down and so deprive anyone

⁵³ *Ibid*, Message 51, 118 Brigade HQ to 39th Division HQ, message timed at 10.04am. The consolidation of 118 brigade was completed on 14 November under the orders of CO 4/5 Black Watch, Finch-Hatton being indisposed and leaving the battlefield. He relinquished command of the brigade on 4 December through sickness.

⁵⁴ TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD, 118/3013, 'Report on Operations of 27 September'.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 118 Brigade OO No.55, 'Communications (23 and 24)', 26 October 1916.

⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/2590, 1/1 Cambridgeshires WD, 26 October 1916.

but the 'man on the spot' of the ability to influence matters'.⁵⁷ The assembly of the assault units was also influenced by the absence of 'jumping off' trenches but compensated by precise brigade instructions that ensured 'all lines [were] taped out and the dividing lines between the Battalions... marked out with iron screw pickets and spun yarn with labels attached stating the flanks of the Battalions'.⁵⁸

Three significant conclusions can be drawn from the attack of 118 Brigade in relation to the organisational and tactical development of brigade command. First, the efficient preparation conformed to II Corps' command culture. These arrangements were marked by the deployment of sufficient firepower, close cooperation between arms and a consistent flow of communications that provided a significant degree of tactical flexibility. Second, in recognition of the value placed on 'the man on the spot', Finch-Hatton and his staff were given enhanced flexibility in their responses to the difficulties caused by the brigade frontage. Third, the importance of delivering an attack from a broad frontage, as opposed to a cramped position, was borne out by the degree of flexibility that shaped the formation for attack.

3.3: V Corps – Brigade Operations on the Ancre

In contrast to the attack of II Corps, that of V Corps was subject to want of strict corps control, lack of coordination and late changes in the order of battle. To illustrate the effect of these problems here follows a case study of brigade operations of 2nd and 3rd Divisions, examined through two perspectives: the measures employed by the brigade staffs in preparing for the attack; and the consequences of changes made to the original battleplan and the issue of subsequent amendments.

⁵⁷ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p.53.

⁵⁸ TNA, WO 95/2590, 26 October 1916.

Before the battle, there was through reconnaissance to ascertain the strength of the German defences. Brigadier-General R.O. Kellett, GOC 99 Brigade, 2nd Division personally 'observed and examined the wire... from several places with a very powerful telescope' concluding that he could not find 'any appropriate lessening of the Enemy Front Line Wire and that of the rear lines still seemed... intact'.⁵⁹ Further information was provided from numerous raiding parties and patrols as efforts were made 'with a view to finding a practicable gap in this sub-section'.⁶⁰ Based upon these observations, Kellett expressed his concerns to Major-General W.G. Walker, GOC 2nd Division.

There is no one more keen about these operations... and more sanguine as to its result than myself, but I do think that to launch an Attack in the existing state of the enemy wire would be premature and... court disaster'.⁶¹

The arrangements for the attack were fashioned by the 'state of the ground and the necessity to increase the times of the barrage at present laid down', the opinion of each attacking brigade being sought as to the suitability of these times in relation to conditions underfoot.⁶² Opinions differed. The general consensus amongst the brigadiers of 2nd Division was that if the ground was considered good enough to go ahead with the attack 'infantry should be able to maintain the pace of 100 yards in four minutes'.⁶³ Kellett concurred, considering 'that as the times had been laid down, studied and impressed upon all Ranks... any alteration would be inadvisable'.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ TNA, WO 95/1294, 2nd Div. WD, G.S.1017/3/27, 1 November 1916, 7pm.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, G.S.1077/3/28, 'Report on Reconnaissance by OC 23/Royal Fusiliers', 2 November 1916.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, G.S.1017/3/27.

⁶² TNA, WO 95/747, V Corps WD, GS 1017/2/45, 27 October 1916.

⁶³ *Ibid*, Brigadier-General G.M. Bullen-Smith, GOC 5 Brigade, reply to G.S.1017/2/45, 27 October 1916.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, Brigadier-General R.O. Kellett, GOC 99 Brigade, reply to G.S.1017/2/45, 27 October 1916.

Brigadier-General A.C Daly, GOC 6 Brigade strongly disagreed, stating that ‘with the ground in its present condition the time allowance should be doubled’.⁶⁵

Similar conditions influenced the attack of Brigadier-General E.G. Williams’ 8 Brigade.

Thus:

It may be doubted whether it is at all feasible to write a plan of attack... under distinctly varying conditions i.e part of the frontage under chalk and part under clay with the probability of all objectives being gained. Either the barrage will be too slow for the troops moving over the chalk or too quick for those moving over clay. The latter appears the greatest evil and is what happened to the 8 Infantry Brigade on 13 November 1916.⁶⁶

As a result of the conditions underfoot, as identified by Williams, the brigades of 3rd Division were denied any possibility of a swift advance; the troops of 8 Brigade, like those of 6 Brigade on their right ‘[lost] the battle in the mud’.⁶⁷

Faced with featureless ground, the attention of the brigade staff also turned to the difficulties of maintaining the direction of the advance.⁶⁸ Accordingly, appropriate measures were taken to ensure that all battalion and company officers were had the requisite skills to establish and maintain the direction of attack. The initial preparations entailed establishing an assembly line parallel to the opposing objective. However, irregular brigade frontages complicated matters. To compensate, brigade training schemes focused upon marching on map reading with officers and NCOs of 6 Brigade practicing ‘constantly in marching on a compass bearing [original emphasis]’.⁶⁹ The consistent training proved beneficial when, on 13 November, 6 Brigade strayed into 8 Brigade’s sector and *vice versa*. Similarly, at the beginning of the attack the left

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, Brigadier-General A.C. Daly, GOC 6 Brigade, reply to G.S.1017/2/45, 27 October 1916.

⁶⁶ TNA, WO 95/1416, 8 Brigade WD, ‘Report on Operations of 8 Brigade on 13 November’, 23 November 1916.

⁶⁷ *OH 1916*, Vol.2, p.498.

⁶⁸ See Map 4, p.314.

⁶⁹ WO 95/1357, 6 Brigade WD.

company of 2/South Staffordshires, in order to get the correct bearing in thick fog, were required to wheel sharply to the left. Guided 'by their officers marching on compass bearings they went straight towards their objective'.⁷⁰

Despite the preparations for the attack, the call upon men for corps working parties continued unabated. These demands were addressed by the divisional commander, who 'considered it most important that the greatest amount of work should be demanded from the Battalions holding the line [because]... it is much better for a man in the line to be kept really hard at work' and 'the men out of the line will get some rest'. Instructions issued to the brigadiers stated that 'it is a rule that additional labour be demanded as a "standing order" for a particular piece of work rather than a sudden demand'. However, these measures did not ease the demand placed upon brigades out of the line, the returns for November showing that a total of 800 men were drawn from the reserve brigade.⁷¹

While providing the labour for maintaining the front line, it was also the responsibility of the brigadier to ensure that his defences were sufficiently manned, a measure that the brigadiers of 2nd Division appeared to have neglected. This lapse was highlighted in a memorandum from the divisional commander which noted that 'garrisons appeared to have been materially reduced, if not withdrawn altogether without reference to me... I want to remind brigadiers that the garrisons are fixed by me in Defence Scheme [sic] and are not to be altered without my sanction'.⁷² In response, all CO s were notified that

⁷⁰ J.P. Jones, *History of the South Staffordshire Regiment* (Wolverhampton: Whitehead Brothers, 1923), p.335.

⁷¹ TNA, WO 95/1294, 2nd Div. WD, 2nd Division Instruction G.S.1017/1/130, 3 November 1916; G.S.967/29/1, 6 November 1916 and 2nd Division Instructions No.141, 'Organisation for Work in the Trenches', 8 November 1916. For the appalling state of the trenches see 99 Trench Mortar Battery Memorandum, 4 November 1916.

⁷² *Ibid*, 2nd Division No.G.S.1017/1/152, 6 November 1916.

in case of urgent necessity, the Battalion Commander may sanction the temporary withdrawal of a Post to prevent heavy casualties but this must be reported at once to the Brigadier for covering authority and the Post must be re-occupied immediately the emergency is past. This does not apply in the case of an enemy attack when all ground is to be held to the last [original emphasis].⁷³

This process of micro-management reinforced the control exercised by the divisional commander and reminded his subordinates of his expectations.

The implementation of these measures demonstrates the influence of brigade command in preparing for offensive and defensive action. However, the extent to which the advice of the brigadiers was heeded at V Corps HQ was inconsistent. For instance, despite Daly's recommendation to reduce the rate of the barrage on 6 Brigade's front for the attack of 13 November, it remained set at 100 metres a minute and consequently 'ran away from the troops'.⁷⁴ Where the going was better to the right of the brigade sector 'the advance proceeded according to the Timetable'.⁷⁵ Clearly, the command structure suffered from a significant breakdown in communications in infantry-artillery cooperation which had an adverse impact on the troops of 6 Brigade. Having reached their first objective the assault troops, 'not having been told that 25% of [our] guns would barrage 50 yards short of the enemy front line', suffered severe casualties.⁷⁶

The failure experienced by the brigades of 2nd and 3rd Divisions may be attributed to two fundamental causes. First, despite reservations on the part of subordinate commanders, arrangements for the attack did not fully take account of the

⁷³ *Ibid*, BM (5) 672, 8 November 1916.

⁷⁴ TNA, WO 95/1355, 6 Brigade WD, 6 Brigade OO No.221, amendment 9, 'Table of Artillery Lifts and Infantry Advance', 23 October 1916 and OO No.221 amendment 10, 11 November 1916.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations of 6th Brigade on 13 November 1916'.

⁷⁶ TNA, WO 95/1294, 2nd Div. WD, 'Report on 2nd Division Artillery Intelligence Scheme', 14 November 1916.

conditions on the battlefield. The observations and recommendations of the brigadiers were overridden, and the value of the 'man on the spot' was insufficiently appreciated. Second, V Corps arrangements were subject to hastily conceived amendments, and infantry-artillery cooperation was faulty. The flexibility of artillery programmes remained conditional to the technological ability of the gunners to accommodate changes in timing and objectives. Given these limitations, brigade command was deprived of any effective tactical control.

Arrangements for the opening of the offensive were also affected by the manpower shortage. This influenced the formations adopted for brigade attacks. Kellett's 99 Brigade, for example, was ordered to undertake an attack on Munich Trench on 14 November, less one battalion. To adjust to the brigade frontage, he was forced to adopt a formation consisting of two waves of the 1/Berkshires 'as had they remained in 4 waves touch could not have been maintained'. This order clearly contravened the principles of *FSR1* which prescribed the value of the 'man on the spot' for Kellett was clearly conversant with the challenges of by his brigade sector. Later, in commenting upon 'the weakness of the battalions in relation to the Frontage allotted... a weakness accentuated as the attack proceeded', he advocated a minimum ratio of one yard per man of battalion strength as the optimum number to press an attack to a successful conclusion.⁷⁷

Late change in arrangements also influenced the establishment of close cooperation between units. For three weeks before the attack, Daly of 6 Brigade remained in close touch with his counterpart in 9 Brigade, 3rd Division, Brigadier-General H.C. Potter. Throughout this period 'the COs of [9 Brigade's] right and leading

⁷⁷ TNA, WO 95/1368, 99 Brigade WD, appendix G, 'Report on Attack of 99 Brigade (less one battalion), 14 November 1916', 22 November 1916.

supporting battalions were in constant touch with the COs of [6 Brigade's] left supporting battalions' when 'all possible eventualities and difficulties were discussed'. However, two days before the attack, Major-General C.J. Deverall, GOC 3rd Division, decided to deploy two brigades instead of three. Because of this change of plan, Daly was told that due to a change of dispositions 'the 8 Brigade, with whom we had no previous liaison, was taking the place of 9 Brigade'. The effect of these changes was that throughout the attack, the barrage being lost 'all four battalions of 8 Brigade lost direction and mixed in confusion with the left of the 2nd Division'.⁷⁸

The late issue of amendments to the operational plans, issued in response to Fifth Army's orders, influenced the course of brigade operations and continued to do so during the resumption of operations on 18 November. These procedures were not restricted to V Corps. To a lesser degree they were experienced by the brigades of II Corps. For example, the plans of the two assault brigades of 19th Division (II Corps) were both subject to late amendments that placed an inordinate workload on brigade staffs. Brigadier-General G.D. Jeffreys, GOC 57 Brigade judged that

the additions to the tasks already laid down [entailing] hurried amendments to the orders of corps and lower formations and eleventh-hour preparations which as previous experience had shown over and over again, were fatal to success. Lieutenant-General Jacob, whose information differed from that on which the Army had acted, protested in vain.⁷⁹

Similarly, Brigadier-General F.G.M Rowley, GOC 56 Brigade received amended orders at 1am on the morning of 18 November having been allotted two more local objectives. With barely five hours before zero hour, Rowley was forced to issue verbal

⁷⁸ *OH 1916*, Vol.2, p.498. In the aftermath of the operations Brigadier-General E.G. Williams, GOC 8 Brigade was replaced, as was Major-General W.G. Walker VC, 2nd Division.

⁷⁹ TNA, WO 95/2083, 57 Brigade WD, 17 November 1916.

instructions to OC 7/East Lancashires with the '56 Infantry Brigade OO No.132 being amended at 3.15am'.⁸⁰

The attack on 18 November by Brigadier-General J.B. Jardine's 97 Brigade, 32nd Division, on the Munich and Frankfort trenches, crystallises the difficulties encountered in complying with Fifth Army's late amendments to the plan of attack. In this instance, no written orders were received at 97 Brigade Headquarters by 10.35pm on the eve of the attack. Jardine then, having briefed his COs, sent a verbal confirmation forward ordering them to 'carry on in accordance to instructions... as [he] was of the opinion that it was impossible under the circumstances that existed for orders to reach OCs in time, nor were actual written orders necessary'.⁸¹

The late issue of Fifth Army orders was typical of Gough's interventionist style of command that deprived subordinate commanders of tactical influence. This was reflected in the preparation for Jardine's attack where 'the whole of the arrangements, even including the selection of Advanced Brigade HQ were definitely laid down to us by Corps HQ as the *Army Commander's decision* [original emphasis]'.⁸² This decision did not sufficiently reflect the importance of the 'man on the spot' as laid down in *FSR1*. It denied the brigade commander the opportunity to choose the optimum position for his Advanced Brigade Headquarters (ABHQ) based upon personal local knowledge. In the event, Jardine found himself marooned with 'little contact with his forward units and hardly any means of communication with his artillery and certainly not in time for its action to be of any use'.⁸³

⁸⁰ TNA, WO 95/2079, 7/East Lancashire WD, 'Narrative of Operations 18 November 1916'.

⁸¹ TNA, WO 95/2399, 97 Brigade WD, appendix E, 'Report on Operations of 97 Brigade on 13 November 1916'.

⁸² TNA, CAB 45/138, Brigadier-General E.G. Wace to Edmonds, 30 November 1936. GSO 1, 32nd Division 1916.

⁸³ TNA, WO 95/2399, 97 Brigade WD, appendix E, 'Report on Operations of 97 Brigade, 18 November 1916', p.2.

This style of command exacerbated the gulf between Fifth Army and subordinate commanders, as demonstrated by Gough's displeasure at the handling of 112 Brigade, 37th Division on 15 November. The incident concerned two battalions of the brigade being placed under the orders of Major-General W.G. Walker, GOC 2nd Division. Walker, having tried in vain to persuade V Corps to postpone the attack to allow for reconnaissance, realised that Brigadier-General P.M. Robinson, GOC 112 Brigade, possessed no knowledge of the ground to be attacked. Walker therefore decided

that the only feasible way of giving the attack a chance of success was to place the two battalions [of 112 Brigade] under the orders of GOC 99 Brigade whose troops had attacked on the 14th and knew the ground.⁸⁴

Gough's response showed no understanding of or sympathy for Robinson's predicament: 'there seemed no reason why GOC 112 Brigade should have been ignorant of the situation and handed over his Brigade to another officer... [this being] an improper proceeding'. Instead, he stated that Robinson should 'have made more effort to keep himself and his battalion commanders better informed and that... the Corps should have given him some guidance'.⁸⁵

Fifth Army's attack was generally a success. Beaumont Hamel and portions of the Redan Ridge were captured although the cost was considerable. Gough's interventionist style of command influenced both the planning and execution of brigade operations. However, several positive factors contributed to the success. The offensive benefited from enhanced artillery support, meticulous preparations and an attack frontage that lent itself to logistical support. From a negative perspective,

⁸⁴ TNA, WO 95/1295, 2nd Div. WD, 'Narrative of Operations 15 November 1916', 17 November 1916.

⁸⁵ TNA, WO 95/ 747/7, V Corps WD, 'Failure of Attack on Munich and Frankfurt Trenches, 15 November 1916', 25 November 1916.

attacks were hampered by unfavourable ground and inexperienced divisions, whose 'period of training [had been] necessarily short'.⁸⁶ The resumption of the attack on 18 November was complicated by hastily conceived orders and divided command. With relatively little latitude for control after zero-hour, the brigade staff's influence was mostly confined to preparation and moderating the difficulties raised by a pronounced lack of coordination.

Two conclusions about the development of brigade operations can be drawn from this case study of the Ancre. First, that the brigades of II and V Corps were subject to differing styles of command: this influenced their operational performance. The commanders of II Corps operated within the parameters of an unambiguous concept of operations, with a significant degree of flexibility. This was reflected in a systematic approach to operational and logistic planning, an approach reflected at brigade level where the value of the views of subordinate commanders was acknowledged and acted upon. A benevolent but disciplined corps-level leadership fostered a culture of mutual support and sustained morale. These benefits suggest that this approach enhanced opportunities for success. V Corps command, in contrast, was characterised by lack of cohesion and consultation. This was manifested in poor cooperation between the infantry and artillery during 2nd and 3rd Divisions's attack of 13 November. Contrary to the principles laid down in *FSR1*, affecting 'the question of the frontage to be allotted for the attack', the local knowledge of the brigadiers was side-lined.⁸⁷ Gough's intervention and Lieutenant-General E.A. Fanshawe's indifference to the opinion of his subordinate commanders did not bode well for operational cohesion.

⁸⁶ TNA, WO 95/1294, 2nd Div. WD, 'Lessons Learnt During Operations 13/17 November 1916'.

⁸⁷ *FSR1*, Chapter vii, 102 (3), p.138.

The second conclusion relates to the role of the brigadier in unit administration and maintaining the fighting proficiency of his brigade. This raised a fundamental contradiction of leadership for brigadiers. As John Bourne argued, ‘the certainty that the men to whose welfare they devoted so much attention would one day have to be sent into battle’ proved problematic.⁸⁸ However, measures were implemented by brigade staff to mitigate adversity. These included appropriate training programmes, thorough preparations for attacks and the provision of rest and recreation. By these means the morale of the brigade was sustained and the paternalistic obligations of the brigadier satisfied.

A further influence was brought to bear through the brigadier’s role as a facilitator of tactical change. This was achieved through ensuring that soldiers possessed individual skills to meet the challenges of the battlefield. Lessons ‘learnt in the earlier fighting on the Somme [were] borne out in the recent operations’.⁸⁹ As part of the BEF’s tactical reappraisal, these were disseminated and incorporated within appropriate brigade training schemes for the specific benefit of inexperienced officers and men. This process constituted a significant step in the organisational and tactical development of infantry brigade command.

3.4: Brigade Minor Actions, January-April 1917

The second part of this chapter focuses upon the minor operations conducted by II and V Corps of Fifth Army during its advance towards the Hindenburg Line in 1917. As noted above, these actions were considered by an official historian as worthy of study ‘to bring out the skill in warfare ... gained by the British Armies in the past six

⁸⁸ J.M. Bourne, ‘British Generals in the First World War’, in Sheffield, *Leadership*, p.101.

⁸⁹ TNA, WO 95/1294, 2nd Div. WD, ‘Lessons learnt during operations 13/17 Nov. ’16 [sic]’.

months'.⁹⁰ From the perspective of artillery support, the advance 'was fruitful in useful lessons... due to the fact that it was a miniature campaign compressed into a small space of time and country'. Great emphasis was placed upon 'the importance of good co-operation between the infantry and artillery... especially in the attack of the villages, when the artillery needed information from every possible source in order to locate the hostile machine guns'.⁹¹ Within this context, this chapter now assesses the extent to which brigade operations benefited from the operational and tactical reform based upon the lessons of the Somme. Fundamentally, the operations were shaped by the principles laid down in *SS135* that promoted a systematic step-by-step approach with limited objectives.⁹² As the offensive doctrine of the BEF developed further, the standard procedures laid down in *SS143* and *SS144* provided the general framework for the planning and implementations of brigade operations.⁹³

The first case studies examine two successive brigade operations conducted by II Corps in February 1917. These are followed by a comparison of two attacks undertaken by II and V Corps in March upon similar fortified villages. Three factors that defined the shape and outcome of the operations are assessed: preparations, the formation adopted for the attack; and command and control.

3.5: Action at Puisieux Trench – 3 February 1917

An attack on the Puisieux and River Trenches by 63rd (Royal Naval) Division of II Corps was the first of four phases of operations designed to secure the Loupart Wood Line to gain observation for the further advance of Fifth Army. The attack of

⁹⁰ *OH 1917*, Vol.1, p.73.

⁹¹ C.N.F. Broad 'The Development of Artillery Tactics 1914-1918' in *The Journal of the Royal Artillery*, Vol. XLIX, 1922-23, (Woolwich: Royal Artillery Institution), pp.127-28.

⁹² *SS135, Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, (December 1916).

⁹³ *SS143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, (February 1917) and *SS144 The Normal Formation in the Attack* (February 1917).

Brigadier-General L.F. Philip's 189 Brigade is significant because of its similarity to an operation conducted by the same brigade on 13 November 1916. In both cases the brigade assembly area was overcrowded. In November it was confined to a frontage of 600 yards and 'attended with every element of risk since the conditions of the trenches and the absence of adequate communications made movement slow and retirement impossible'.⁹⁴ In 3 February 1917 the assembly area was constrained by a frontage of 1,300 yards, requiring careful arrangements by brigade and battalion staffs. Despite the difficulties imposed by these cramped conditions, all brigade arrangements conformed to II Corps' systematic approach to operations.

The benefits of mutual support between 189 and 190 Brigades were abundantly evident. Close cooperation between the Brigade Transport Officers of the two brigades ensured that a reserve echelon of men were formed to be held in readiness to replenish the supply dumps when necessary.⁹⁵ The administrative arrangements were efficiently supervised by 'Staff Captain A.E. Barre in organising the Transport and Supply of stores whilst also carrying on the duties of the Brigade Major during Captain Barnett's absence at Advanced Brigade Headquarters'.⁹⁶ The manual work carried out by 190 Brigade when holding the line, provided adequate cover for the assault and reserve companies detailed for the attack.⁹⁷ The deployment of 190 Brigade Machine Gun Company provided tactical support for 189 Brigade's attack. A total of 22 Vickers guns reinforced those of 189 Machine Gun Company under the overall control of OC 190 Machine Gun Company. Having moved forward to the approximate line of consolidation, the exact line being left to the discretion of

⁹⁴ D. Jerrold, *The Hawke Battalion*, (London: Ernest Benn, 1925), p.137. Lieutenant D.F. Jerrold, R.N.V.R.

'C' Company, Hawke Battalion, Adjutant.

⁹⁵ TNA, WO 95/3112, 189 Brigade WD, 189 Brigade OO No.60, 31 January 1917.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 189 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations of 3 February 1917'.

⁹⁷ TNA, WO 95/3093, 63 Div. WD, 63 Division OO No.82, 27 January 1917.

the commanders on the spot, great assistance was provided in repelling counterattacks during the phase of consolidation.⁹⁸

Whilst the preparations for 189 Brigade's attack benefited from systematic organisation, the attack highlighted the importance of training in platoon tactics. The formation for the attack on 3 February was in direct response to the failure of the attack on 13 November when an unidentified strongpoint escaped the attention of the artillery and inflicted large casualties upon the brigade. The formation thus adopted specified that 'troops were not allowed to be held up by any defended points in the enemy's line'.⁹⁹ This arrangement, conforming with guidance issued by GHQ to brigade and battalion commanders as early as August 1916, stated that attacks should not be wasted in frontal assaults against 'strong places' but be delivered by attacks from 'the flank and rear'.¹⁰⁰ The platoon attack therefore was organised in two waves, the first pushing on to a second objective, whilst the second "mopped up" the first objective, supported by parties on both flanks. However, this formation proved difficult to maintain during the attack as 'whilst the men passed by on either side... a coordinated attack on the strongpoint proved difficult to organise'.¹⁰¹ Thus:

Throughout the day the existence of the strongpoint hypnotised the attention of Brigade Headquarters who on the one hand denied vigorously that it existed and on the other hand gave continuous instructions for its capture.¹⁰²

In a later report on the attack, Brigadier-General L.F. Philips blamed a lack of training by inexperienced junior officers and NCOs and a failure on the part of platoons from

⁹⁸ TNA WO 95/3112, 189 Brigade WD, 189 Brigade OO No.60, 31 January 1917; 'Report on Operations 3 February 1917'. For their services in preparation for the attack Captain Barnett (Brigade Major) was awarded a bar to his MC and Sub-Lieutenants Fernie and Robotti (Brigade Bombing and Transport Officers) the MC.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189 Brigade WD, 189 Brigade OO No.60, 2 February 1917.

¹⁰⁰ TNA, WO 95/166, First Army and General Staff WD, GHQ to Armies, O.B. 1762, 13 August 1916.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, '189 Brigade Report on Operations of 3 February 1917'.

¹⁰² D. Jerrold, *The Royal Naval Division* (London: Hutchinson, 1923), p.216.

supporting flank companies 'to counterattack without further orders as instructed'.¹⁰³

However, the historian of the Hawke Battalion took a different view, blaming brigade staff for ordering frontal assaults on the strongpoint:

regardless of the fact that the tactics which had led "D" company of the Hawke's to go round it in the initial advance instead of attempting to rush it... followed on General Shute's wholly correct enunciation of the outstanding lesson of the earliest battle of the Ancre.¹⁰⁴

Whilst from these observations it is evident that 189 Brigade's staff struggled with the application of tactics drawn from the lessons of the Somme, it can be seen that the emergence of the platoon as a fighting unit constituted a milestone in tactical development. As operations transitioned from static to semi-mobile, the ability of brigade staff to capitalise upon these new tactics, through appropriate platoon training exercises, marked a further step in brigade development.

The benefits of close infantry-artillery cooperation implemented by robust communications were evident during 189 Brigade's attack on Puisieux Trench. 189 and 190 Brigade Signal Companies combined to establish cables to 189 Advanced Brigade Headquarters, complemented by a line of runner posts. Specific instructions laid down by OC Signals stated that 'all battalion COs should see that reports were sent back at least every quarter of an hour until everything went quiet'.¹⁰⁵ The establishment of communication to battalion headquarters proved vital, as information regarding the deterioration of the situation on the northern flank flowed down to 189 Brigade HQ. When observed to be preparing for a counterattack, Brigadier-General Philips was able to call down an artillery bombardment upon the assembled troops.

¹⁰³ TNA, WO 95/3112, 189 Brigade WD, 189 Brigade OO No.60, 'Action in Attack'.

¹⁰⁴ Jerrold, *The Hawke Battalion*, p.149. Major-General C.D. Shute, GOC 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, acting GOC II Corps during the attack of 3 February.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, WO 95/3112, 189 Brigade WD, 'Report of OC Signals, 'K' Corps Signal Company, 1-28 February 1917.

Guns were 'detached from the barrage groups and sent to straighten the flanks' in less than an hour.¹⁰⁶

189 Brigade Signal Company worked alongside their counterparts in 190 Brigade to establish cables forward to the ABHQ, complemented by a line of runner posts. Instructions laid down by OC Signals stated that all 'battalion COs should see that reports were sent back [using power buzzers] at least every quarter hour until everything was quiet'.¹⁰⁷ The benefits of close communication between brigade and artillery commanders were evident as the Germans prepared to counter-attack. As the situation on the northern flank deteriorated, orders were relayed from brigade headquarters to request that '4 guns be detached from the barrage groups and sent to straighten the flank', the procedure being completed in one hour.¹⁰⁸

The attack carried out by 189 Brigade on 3 February benefited from efficient administrative and logistic arrangements implemented by mutually supportive brigade staff. New flexibility in attack formations reflected the BEF's efforts to penetrate the German defences through the adoption of platoon tactics. These factors provided a substantial framework for operations and illustrate the strides achieved in the form of brigade attacks. Conversely, the attack exposed the difficulties encountered by brigade staff in sustaining a coordinated attack.

3.6: Action at Irlles – 10 March 1917

The operations undertaken at Irlles and Bucquoy were designed to capitalise upon the German tactical withdrawal to a second line of defence astride the Ancre (Operation *Alberich*). The *Official History* claimed that:

¹⁰⁶ TNA, WO 95/3093, 63rd (Royal Naval) Division WD, 'Report on Operations of 3 February - Lessons'.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 'Report of OC Signals, 'K' Corps Signal Company, 1-28 February 1917'.

¹⁰⁸ TNA, WO 95/3093, 63 Div. 'Reports on Operations of 3 February – Lessons'.

It is seldom, in comparing two attacks such as those against Irlles and Bucquoy, each against a ruined village and a section of earthworks, each conducted by two brigades of different divisions, one finds it so easy to realise why one succeeded and one failed.¹⁰⁹

These case studies explore preparation, artillery-infantry cooperation, the formations for attack, and command and control.¹¹⁰

Grevillers Trench, and the village of Irlles which dominated its north western extremity, were the objectives for II Corps' attack on 10 March. The attack was undertaken by 99 Brigade, 2nd Division and 53 Brigade, 18th (Eastern) Division. In accordance with II Corps's command culture, the administrative and logistical arrangements were meticulously addressed. The arrangements benefited from thorough preparations made by energetic and efficient divisional and brigade staffs. When the onset of wintry conditions made it necessary to keep transport off the roads, the attack was postponed until conditions improved to ensure enough ammunition and supplies were available.¹¹¹

Kellett's 99 Brigade was fortunate in obtaining the services of a most capable and efficient staff to implement the preparations for his attack. As brigade major, Major G.M. Lindsey displayed 'unceasing energy and tactical administration... having the knack of getting the maximum amount of work done with the minimum of friction'.¹¹² Similarly, Captain E.M. Allfrey, the staff captain, whilst perfecting the administration arrangements, 'was responsible for the Outpost Lines being pushed out [as far as

¹⁰⁹ *OH 1917*, Vol.1, p.109.

¹¹⁰ See Map 5, p.316.

¹¹¹ *OH 1917*, Vol.1, p.104.

¹¹² TNA, WO 95/1369, 99 Brigade WD, 'Report on the Capture of Grevillers Trench and Lady's Leg Ravine', especially p.9, paragraph 18, 13 March 1917, see also appendix C1, 8 March 1917, 'Administrative Arrangements'. For Major G.M. Lindsay's role in the development of the MGC and machine gun tactics see Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p.120-134 and LHCMA, Major-General G.M. Lindsay Papers, File A10 'Scheme for the Machine Gun Training of New Armies'.

possible]’. The work of Lieutenant N.V Shillito, R.E. Brigade Signals Officer, proved WHOLLY satisfactory and successful [original emphasis]’.¹¹³ As Roger Lee has argued, ‘an understanding of and confidence in the ability and judgement of others in the chain of command is well recognised as critical to success in battle’.¹¹⁴ Clearly, previous lessons were embodied in the preparations. For example, with regard to the positioning of supply dumps, Kellett ordered that ‘as far as possible [dumps] should be kept out of anything like a STRICT ALIGNMENT so that if the enemy discovers one dump and shells a line through it, some of the dumps in any case will escape unscathed [original emphasis]’.¹¹⁵

As with the attack at Miraumont, the artillery arrangements were designed to conform to the attack frontage and the irregularities of the enemy defences. These arrangements necessitated a detailed knowledge of the brigade sector and close infantry-artillery cooperation.¹¹⁶ Preliminary arrangements were shared between Kellett, his battalion COs and their supporting adjutants who ‘held several joint reconnaissance’s [sic] from convenient spots lasting several hours, with all the information tabulated at Divisional HQ’. It was standard practice, that if the brigade was out of the line ‘officers went up each day to observe the wire and report back to the Brigadier’.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p.17, paragraph 17.

¹¹⁴ R.V. Lee, ‘British Battle Planning in 1916 and the Battle of Fromelles: A Case Study of an Evolving Skill’, University of New South Wales, PhD thesis, 2013, p.305.

¹¹⁵ TNA, WO 95/1369, 99 Brigade WD, ‘Report on the Capture of Grevillers Trench and Lady’s Leg Ravine 10 March’, especially p.9, paragraph 18, 13 March 1917, see also appendix CI, 8 March 1917, ‘Administrative Arrangements’.

¹¹⁶ See for example, *The King’s Royal Rifle Corps Chronicle 1917* (London: John Murray, 1920), p.80.

¹¹⁷ TNA, WO 95/1295, 2nd Div. WD, ‘Lessons learnt from Operations in which the 2nd Division took part between 17 February and 20 March 1917’. The role of adjutant was usually held by an upwardly mobile lieutenant, whose role was to support/ease the administrative and operational duties of the brigadier. Many brigades also had a junior subaltern on the staff acting as an orderly officer.

The action at Irles was notable for the methods adopted for an attack of limited scope 'in which the artillery left the least possible burden on the infantry's shoulders'.¹¹⁸ The artillery scheme conformed to the attack frontage and was designed to progress at a rate of 100 yards in four minutes with twelve 18-pdrs concentrated upon the dangerous ravine known as the "Lady's Leg", their fire moving through it with the rolling barrage. Thus:

Two of four guns on the Left were detailed to establish themselves on the South entrance of the [Ravine] to support our Infantry in their progress if called upon to do so and the other two guns to take up a position about 250 yards in advance: the idea being that two of the guns would always be in a position to fire while the other two moved forwards to assist the infantry.¹¹⁹

All troops proved 'eloquent with regard to the accuracy, intensity and efficiency of the barrage... having implicit confidence in the skill of the 2nd Division gunners'. In order to establish strongpoints, the 99 Brigade staff devised an innovative scheme, in cooperation with the artillery, by which a series of shell holes were formed by 6-inch howitzers on a line 200 yards beyond the first objective. This was subsequently occupied by section of Lewis gunners. A machine gun barrage, employing 18 guns and supported by those of 7 Australian Brigade conformed with the progress of the attack throughout.¹²⁰

The shape of the attack consisted of 'a normal formation modified into two waves against a single objective'. Where it differed was that having completed the first advance, the assault troops circumvented the village, a form of attack considered 'a bold conception for that period of the campaign'.¹²¹ Summarising the brigade's

¹¹⁸ *OH 1917*, Vol.1, p.106.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ TNA, WO 95/1369, 'Report on the Capture of Grevillers Trench and Lady's Leg Ravine'.

¹²¹ G.H.F. Nichols, *The 18th Division in the Great War*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1922), p.157.

success, Major-General C.E. Pereira, GOC 2nd Division considered that ‘no new lessons were learnt regarding trench-to-trench warfare... but several were emphasised’. Significantly, in recognition of the advent of semi open warfare, Pereira’s post-operational report is divided into two sections: one related to the exercise of trench-to-trench warfare and one to semi-open warfare.¹²²

While it would be misleading to suggest that the transformation of brigade command was smooth, 99 Brigade’s success suggests that the process was well advanced within II Corps. This was achieved despite the brigade being significantly undermanned: the fighting strength of the four battalions ranged from 527 to 270 other ranks and 20 to 12 officers per battalion. Consequently, far fewer men were kept back from the attack, although a total of 20 brigade staff remained in reserve.¹²³ This deficiency was offset by several beneficial factors that combined to provide adequate support for the attack. A cohesive and systematic approach to administrative, operational and logistical planning laid a firm foundation for success. These arrangements were implemented by efficient, flexible and courageous brigade staff officers. A close cooperation between infantry and artillery command lent strength to this support, substantiated by the trust placed upon the 2nd Division gunners by the assault troops. Kellett, whilst remaining at 99 Brigade HQ was, throughout the day, provided with valuable information by his Brigade Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant F.C. Bull, who ‘went twice through a heavy barrage [to] examine the objective captured and conferred with the COs... as to exactly the conditions’.¹²⁴ From this snapshot of brigade operations at Irlles, it can be appreciated that when the necessary

¹²² TNA, WO 95/1295, 2nd Div. WD, ‘Lessons learnt from Operations in which the 2nd Division took part between 17 February and 20 March 1917’.

¹²³ TNA, WO 95/1369, 99 Brigade WD, reply in response to 2nd Division OO No.202, 2 March 1917.

¹²⁴ *Ibid* ‘Report on the Capture of Grevillers Trench and the Lady’s Leg Ravine 10 March’.

preconditions were in place, the opportunities for operational success were substantially increased.

3.7: Action at Bucquoy – 14 March 1917

In contrast to the action at Irles, that of V Corps at Bucquoy was a comparative failure.¹²⁵ The attack, undertaken by 7th Division's 91 Brigade and 46th (North Midland) Division's 137 Brigade was considered

a most unsatisfactory incident that tended to create a feeling that the highest authorities in rear [sic] hardly appreciated the practical difficulties to be encountered by those in front and were in consequence asking officers and men to attempt the impossible.¹²⁶

The attack, originally conceived as a joint exercise to capture the high ground north of the village on 15 March, was reduced in scope at short notice and brought forward to 14 March. This late change of plan served to exacerbate an operation already subject to a lack of time and exposed fundamental flaws in V Corps command structure. A lack of preparation, flexibility and cohesion ran counter to the establishment of a firm base for the attack. Disregard for the views of the brigade commanders militated against the value of the 'man on the spot'.

A want of strict corps control, manifested in misapprehension and a lack of cooperation, influenced the outcome of 91 Brigade's attack. The first of these related to the disregard of reconnaissance carried out on the German lines that had identified the presence of uncut wire within the multiple lines of defence. This information was duly relayed to V Corps HQ, Major-General G. De S. Barrow, GOC 7th Division, having considered that 'the wire was not sufficiently cut to justify the projected attack'.¹²⁷ In

¹²⁵ See Map 6, p.316

¹²⁶ Atkinson, *The Seventh Division*, p.351.

¹²⁷ TNA, WO 95/1632, 7th Div. WD, appendix xxvi, G.9460/35, 13 March 4.30pm.

response, with time at a premium, V Corps suggested that rather than cancelling the attack, if the wire was not sufficiently cut then 'strong patrols with scouts should be sent out' instead of attacking in conventional waves.¹²⁸ By this time however, it was too late to change the formation for attack, Brigadier-General H.R. Cumming, GOC 91 Brigade writing that 'no one who had seen the position by day, with its triple bolt of wire scarcely damaged, can be surprised that it was able to withstand an impromptu attack... by men to whom the ground was entirely new'.¹²⁹

Protests from brigade command over the time set for zero hour were overridden. With the attack scheduled for 11.45pm, the brigade orders and barrage arrangements were received at 6.10pm and 8.15pm respectively. This left little time for the relay of orders down to battalion and company levels: journeys of three hours were needed between brigade and battalion HQs, 'one hour for the Orderly's outward journey and two journeys for the COs'.¹³⁰ In addition, the battalion commanders had to monitor the laying out of tapes and the carrying of sufficient stores. In the event, some concession was given to Cummings' request for a postponement of the attack, zero hour being moved forward to 1pm, but his preferred time for a dawn attack was refused. As Captain C.A.H. Palairt, the brigade major, commented 'these people don't realise the time it takes to make out orders at Brigade and for them to go 3 miles to the ...battalion commanders'.¹³¹ The impact of the late issue of orders was also felt by two battalions of 137 Brigade, 46th (North Midland) Division who were practicing in a rear area, under the assumption that the attack was scheduled for 15 March. The

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 13 March.

¹²⁹ TNA, WO 95/1667, 91 Brigade WD, appendix 3b, 'Narrative of Attack on Bucquoy carried out by 91 Brigade on the night of 13/14 March 1917'.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*.

¹³¹ LHCMA, Lieutenant- Colonel R.N. O' Connor Papers, 'Report on Attack of 7th Division at Bucquoy'. O'Connor served as Brigade Major to 91 Brigade until 1 March 1917.

issue of 1/5 and 1/6 Staffordshire's movement orders, arriving at 2pm on 13 March, resulted in an eight-mile march in rain and darkness, many of the companies arriving after zero hour.¹³²

All possibilities of achieving a surprise attack were negated by the artillery arrangements. While concessions were made to conform with the waterlogged ground, the rate of the barrage being increased from '2 to 4 minutes in 100 yards' no alterations were sanctioned in the timing of the preliminary barrage to accommodate the change in zero hour, as evident in the following instructions.¹³³ Thus:

continuation G.698 attack will take place tonight... artillery programme is cancelled and the following substituted... modifications as in telephone conversation to artillery programmes... zero 1am instead of 11.45pm... timings altered in proportion with the exception of Heavy bombardment which remains at 10-10.30pm.¹³⁴

The failure to adjust the barrage timings left the assault troops facing the ordeal of attacking in darkness across unknown ground, the preliminary bombardment serving only in alerting the enemy to an impending attack.

The lack of organisational and logistical administration resulted a shortage of ammunition and stores. Major-General W. Thwaites, GOC 46th (North Midland) Division blamed this failure in part to the hurried arrangements 'especially with reference to making forward dumps of S.A.A., grenades and R.E. Stores'. In contrast to preparations at Irles, no concessions were made to mitigate the impact of wintry conditions, 'the state of the road communications [and] the impossibility of organising supplies of S.A.A. in the darkness' delaying all attempts at consolidation.¹³⁵

¹³² TNA, WO 95/2684, 137 Brigade WD, 13 March 1917.

¹³³ TNA, WO 95/1632, 7th Div. WD, appendix xxviii, G.77, Fifth Corps to 7th Division, 8.26pm, 13 March.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, appendix xxvii, G.717, March 13, 7th Division to GOCs 91, 20, and 21 Brigades.

¹³⁵ TNA, WO 95/2663, 46th Div. WD, G.245, 17 March 1917, 46th Division to V Corps HQ.

In contrast to the success of II Corps at Irles, the attack at Bucquoy exposed fundamental flaws in the command structure of V Corps. The attack was delivered with unseemly haste and was poorly resourced. Operational orders were subject to late amendments, with little time afforded for preparation. A disregard for the brigadier's views militated against the value of the 'man on the spot' and allowed brigade command little influence. Because of these constraints, opportunities for brigade success were significantly reduced. What assistance was provided to 91 Brigade, proved too little, too late.

3.8: Conclusion

This chapter has examined the development of brigade command within Fifth Army during the closing phase of the Somme and the minor actions undertaken during its advance towards the Hindenburg Line. Three principal conclusions have been drawn. First, the value of a stable and cohesive style of corps command is clear; the corps in which a brigade served did make a difference to its operational performance. This conclusion is given weight by II and V Corps' actions during March 1917. The attack of 99 Brigade (II Corps) on 10 March, benefited from Jacob's measured approach to planning and preparation, which were informed by the views of his brigade commanders. By contrast, the assault of 91 Brigade (V Corps) on 14 March, was shaped by a lack of preparation and flexibility, the views of the brigade commanders having been largely side-lined.

The second conclusion relates to Gough's interventionist style of command and the issue of late amendments to operational plans. Where this occurred, brigade staff were placed under inordinate pressure and attacks jeopardised. Such divergence from battlefield procedure was not confined to V Corps. The operations of II Corps were

also influenced by late changes to operational plans, as crystallised by the attack of 97 Brigade on the Munich and Frankfurt Trenches in November 1916. In these circumstances, the corps commander's influence in ameliorating the impact of these changes was fundamental to operational success.

The third conclusion highlights the brigade staff's role as facilitators of change at a tactical level, with lessons being disseminated and codified as part of the wider learning process of the BEF. The desirability of devolved command at brigade level is shown by the need to shape operations according to a knowledge of brigade sectors, objectives, direction and suitable formations for attack. Where the value of 'the man on the spot' was appreciated, in accordance with the principles of *FSR1*, brigadiers were afforded enhanced tactical influence. This flexibility was evident in the brigade operations of II Corps. Where brigades were subject to excessive micro-management from corps and division, brigadiers were denied tactical flexibility. This lack of influence was evident in V Corps. Although the operations were significantly different in scale, the performance of 2nd Division's 99 Brigade on the Ancre in November 1916, when serving under Fanshawe's V Corps was in marked contrast to its success at Irles when serving under Jacob's II Corps. To assess whether a similar degree of inconsistency was present in Second Army, the brigade operations of X and IX Corps during 1917 comprises the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Second Army: Brigade Operations at Messines and Third Ypres, 1917

4.1: Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the development of brigade command in Second Army during operations at Messines and Third Ypres in 1917. Three research questions address aspects of the operations of the brigades of X and IX Corps: first, to what extent did brigade operations benefit from General Sir Hubert Plumer's meticulous approach to planning and preparation? Second, were these benefits consistent across the two corps? Third, to what extent did the direct influence of brigade staff reflect the BEF's capability for adaptability and learning? The chapter focuses upon four spheres of brigade command: training, operational preparations, communications and command and control.

4.2: X and IX Corps - Brigade Operations at Messines, 7 June 1917

Two broad factors defined the course of brigade operations at Messines. The first related to the topographical and geographical features of the Messines Ridge, which shaped British and German perspectives alike. For the Germans, the predominately sandy and poorly drained soil, compelled the construction of a system of strongpoints designed to repel a frontal assault. In effect this constituted a ten-mile fortress that exploited every spur and natural feature.¹ For the British, clay-rich and alluvium soils necessitated the construction of trenches ten metres lower than their

¹ *The Construction of Field Positions* translated and issued by the British General Staff, 1917.

counterparts. This caused considerable difficulties in the safe assembly of the brigades.² However, the consistency of the Ypres 'Blue' clay, enabled the British tunnellers to excavate to a depth of 100 feet in preparing the mines for the preliminary opening of the attack.³

The second factor related to Plumer's meticulous approach to operational planning that reflected his appreciation of the capabilities of both guns and ammunition. His plans were firmly based upon experience gained during the Somme, with an emphasis upon counter-battery work, the timetabled barrage and the efficient application of machine gun fire. The concentration of guns was unprecedented, equating to one artillery piece to every seven yards and their allocation was based upon careful mathematical analysis rather than a vague notion that more guns would guarantee success.⁴ Having achieved a concentration of force upon a narrow front, it was envisaged that the inevitable counterattack would be drawn forward into a combination of artillery, machine gun and small arms fire. These measures laid down in *SS98 (Artillery Notes)* and applied in conjunction with *SS135*, *SS143* and *SS145* provided the framework upon which the offensive was conceived.⁵

The benefits for brigade command of the unparalleled preparations for the offensive cannot be overstated. For the partnership of General Sir Herbert Plumer and Major-General 'Tim' Harington, his MGGS 'the watchwords of Second Army were

² P. Doyle *et al* 'Terrain and the Messines Ridge' in P. Doyle and M.R. Bennett *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History*, (Kluwer: Dordrecht, 2002), pp.205-224.

³ See for example, I. Passingham, *Pillars of Fire: The Battle of the Messines Ridge, June 1917* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2012 (1998)).

⁴ TNA, WO 158/215, Second Army G.68, 10 May 1917 – with 1,510 field pieces, the British outnumbered the German artillery with a ratio of 2:1 and with 756 HA pieces 5:1.

⁵ *Ibid*, Second Army OO No.1, 10 May 1917 and WO 95/ 882, X Corps WD, X Corps OO No. 83, 11 May 1917. *SS98 (Artillery Notes)* (Jan-June 1916), *SS135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (Dec.1916), *SS143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* (Feb.1917), *SS144 The Normal Formation for the Attack* (Feb.1917).

“Trust, Training and Thoroughness”, the guiding principles of which were circulated to corps and divisional commanders on 7 June.⁶ From a corps commanders perspective, Lord Cavan noted Plumer’s willingness to ‘not only listen to ones [sic] difficulties, but to suggest remedies... and give decisions’.⁷ As Harington later recalled:

There was not a detail of those preparations which the Army Commander himself did not supervise. Every gun position, every light railway for ammunition, every railhead, hospital and back arrangements he visited. He consulted Corps, Divisional and Brigade Commanders as to the best hour of attack, the pace of the barrage and the various objectives and other details and then decided himself and asked me to issue the orders.⁸

This account encapsulates the dynamics of Plumer’s command style in exercising close control of his subordinate formations whilst listening and engaging closely with his commanders. This approach was reflected at brigade level as the staff embraced the principles designed to maximise the likelihood of operational success. Indeed, as GSO2, II Corps, Earl Stanhope considered that Jacob ‘was beloved by us all, as we felt that he would back up his subordinates through thick and thin’.⁹ In contrast, although Gough also ‘took great pains to make his preparations complete... his trouble was that success went straight to his head... and [he wanted] his troops to push on... when they were tired or had suffered severely to be asked to do anymore without rest’.¹⁰ Whilst as Ian Beckett has highlighted, although there were many commanders who challenged Gough and survived, he nevertheless created a command culture based on fear and uncertainty.¹¹ As Neil Malcolm stated in November 1916, in this

⁶ AWM, Monash Mss, 3DRL, item 23, personal file book 14, ‘Notes compiled by Harington, 5 February 1917’ quoted in Simkins, ‘Hubert Plumer’ in Beckett and Corvi, *Haig’s Generals*, p.150.

⁷ CCC, Cavan Papers, 1/1, chapter 6, p.14.

⁸ T. Harington, *Tim Harington Looks Back* (London: John Murray, 1940), p.59.

⁹ Earl Stanhope, *Memoirs*, p. 155.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.131.

¹¹ I.F.W. Beckett, ‘Hubert Gough, Neill Malcolm and Command on the Western Front’, in B. Bond (ed.) *Look to Your Front’: Studies in the First World War* (Staplehurst, Spellmount, 1999), pp.3-4.

atmosphere subordinates were often unwilling to express their candid opinions for fear of appearing 'disloyal' or losing their positions.¹²

4.3: Brigade training and preparation

With the constant demand upon brigades to provide working parties, judicious use of manpower ensured that enough time was provided for training and rest with the front line lightly held. The brigade training schemes, implemented throughout X and XI Corps, reflected Plumer's systematic attention to detail. Extraordinary measures were taken to replicate the ground to be crossed by the assault troops, with designated areas in the corps' sectors providing similar conditions to the battlefield. A large clay model of the Messines Ridge 'the size of two croquet courts' was constructed by IX Corps to show the country two miles beyond the final objective.¹³ Similarly, on its training area north-east of Steenvorde, X Corps were able to practice their attack

over ground marked out as nearly as possible to full-scale size. There was also a well-constructed model of the ground at 41st Division HQ... the first we had seen and of invaluable assistance in the explanation of all detail.¹⁴

The brigades trained over flagged courses, the training schemes stressing the importance of tracing assembly lines in parallel with the enemy lines.¹⁵ Where specific topographical difficulties were envisaged, a greater degree of flexibility was built into the training as befitted the platoon's function as a flexible fighting unit, their 'exact formations... depending upon the ground, obstacles, enemy shellfire etc.'¹⁶ To

¹² *Ibid*, p.3.

¹³ TNA, WO 95/1810, 33 Brigade WD.

¹⁴ Norfolk Regimental Museum, Norwich, Brigadier-General P.V.P. Stone Papers, 'Angres Sector – February-April 1917 (and to June 4th) 1917. Stone was GOC 17 Brigade, 24th Division.

¹⁵ TNA, WO 95/2185, 70 Brigade WD, 1501/17, 'Training', undated.

¹⁶ TNA, WO 95/2217, 73 Brigade WD, 'Special Instructions for the 73rd Brigade with reference to map of Wytschaete and special maps issued to battalion headquarters.

supplement the guidance afforded to subordinate commanders, special maps were issued to 24th Division, showing every enemy trench on the divisional front up to 2,000 yards beyond the final objective. It was later suggested by one divisional commander that, despite the security risk, maps 'should in future be placed where every officer and NCO could see them; YMCA huts, Field force Canteens etc.'.¹⁷

The framing and organisation of brigade training schemes were a major contribution to the BEF's tactical reappraisal. Based upon the guidelines laid down in *SS143*, brigade staff were instrumental in developing flexibility in attack formations and promoting the platoon as a self-contained fighting unit. The platoon training scheme for 109 Brigade for example, was based upon 'thorough organisation and the dissemination of to all ranks of information they should know'. After his brigade's attack at Messines, Brigadier-General W.M. Withycombe commented that 'the new platoon organisation was a complete success'.¹⁸ The thoroughness of training can be gauged from the fact that 'officers from flanking battalions of divisions attended each other's field days to ensure that in the minutest details there was harmony along the line'.¹⁹

Lessons garnered from brigade operations at Messines were disseminated and provided the basis for further training prior to the corps' operations at Third Ypres. Based upon their experiences, all subordinate commanders were provided with guidance as to the form in which their narrative should be submitted for the purpose of future training.²⁰ In response, the brigade training schemes conformed to a consistent pattern. The brigades of 11th Division participated in two days of platoon training, two each of company battalion instruction and one day for the whole brigade.

¹⁷ TNA, WO 95/2190, 24th Div. WD, 'Notes collected by 24th Division as a result of the attack on 7 June 1917'.

¹⁸ TNA, WO 95/2491, 36th Div. WD, 'Narrative of part taken by 36th (Ulster) Division in the Operations against Messines', comments of GOC 109 Brigade.

¹⁹ C. Falls, *History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (Belfast: M'Caw, Stevenson and Orr, 1922), p.83.

²⁰ TNA, WO 95/1810, 33 Brigade WD, appendix B.

A stress upon devolved command was evident in an exercise to test the initiative of junior commanders. Based upon the guidance provided by *SS159*, the scheme required company and platoon commanders to find immediate solutions to tactical problems.²¹ With a focus upon 'vigorous training in flank liaison', combined exercises also took place between 32 Brigade and the brigades of 20th and 48th (South Midland) Divisions. Similar combined exercises were designed to exploit the advantages to be gained by the employment of contact aeroplanes and wireless.²² The implementation of these measures reflected the brigadier's responsibility for ensuring that his battalions were suitably equipped and in possession of the skills required for them to fight successfully. In turn, the training and leadership provided by the brigade commander generated confidence and high morale throughout the brigade.

A fine balance existed within the measures implemented by brigade command in finding time for training and the provision of sufficient working parties. However, the training undertaken before and after Messines in the brigades of X and XI Corps, reflected the BEF's efforts to improve training methods and to develop better tactics. The experiences of the Somme laid the foundation for tactical appraisal and the tactics which the British armies were to employ throughout 1917. Many publications designed to aid the training of formations and units provided the basis of brigade training. Of these, *SS143* was a tactical milestone in platoon training and ultimately brigade success. By 1917 a system of schools at army, corps, divisional and brigade level had been established. A combination of these measures constituted the foundation upon

²¹ TNA, WO 95/1087, 32 Brigade WD, appendix M, 'Notes on a Conference held by Brigadier-General T.H.F. Price, 23 June 1917; *SS158 Tactical Scheme to Train Junior Officers and NCOs*.

²² TNA, WO 95/1087, 32 Brigade WD, 'Tactical Schemes', 2-7 July 1917.

which brigades steadily improved their efficiency and competence, their development aligned with that of the wider BEF.

The dissemination of tactical lessons and the implementation of training schemes across Second Army reflected the development of brigade command as an integral part of the BEF's wider learning process. The benefits afforded by a thorough knowledge of brigade sectors also denoted a progressive line of development within the organisational and tactical acuity of brigade staff. In the brigades of 36th Division (IX Corps), the attention of battalion and company commanders was drawn to ensuring that 'the routes to the front line were thoroughly reconnoitred, day and night, by Platoon Officers'.²³ All eventualities were addressed in the brigades of 11th Division. Thus:

The division is liable to be used on any part of IX Corps Front... [and] it is necessary that officers of all units should have a good knowledge of the Corps Front especially of the different lines of approach... and of the main topographical features... through which the advance beyond our trenches will be made.²⁴

In conjunction with artillery and machine gun practice attacks, brigades arranged substantial raids to gather intelligence while assessing the ability of the assault troops to keep close to the barrage.²⁵ Reports submitted daily, by infantry and artillery officers, provided an up to date picture of the extent of the wire cutting programme on both corps' fronts.²⁶ In essence 'each brigadier [was given] as much information as possible and in as much detail as possible'.²⁷

²³ TNA, WO 95/2508, 109 Brigade, WD, 'Notes of a Conference of COs and 2nd -in-Command at Wakefield Camp, 31 May 1917'.

²⁴ TNA, WO 95/1788, 11th Div. WD, appendix 11, GS261, Divisional Headquarters to Headquarters 32, 33 and 34 Infantry Brigades, 24 May 1917.

²⁵ TNA, WO 95/2054, 19th Div. WD, 19th Division OO No. 137, 4 June 1917 and appendix 3, 19th Division Intelligence Summary, 1-2 June 1917.

²⁶ TNA, WO 95/852/4, X Corps WD, X Corps Instruction, 30 May 1917.

²⁷ AWM, Monash Papers, DRL23167, item 25, personal box No.15, 1 April -31 July 1917, quoted in Passingham, *Pillars of Fire*, p.33.

The benefits of this information were evident in the attack of 23rd Division (X Corps) on 7 June. During 69 and 70 Brigades advance into the enemy lines, between the Zwarteleen Spur and Mount Sorrel, acting upon careful reconnaissance, plans for the attack took maximum advantage of the irregular terrain. To avoid an advance over the marshy ground of the valley, the units attacked on each side of the valley 'the inner flanks of the two brigades... being directed so as to bring them in touch on the enemy's support line at the head of the re-entrant'. With the ground 'previously studied on the training ground, the infantry followed the perfect barrage without the smallest hesitation'.²⁸

As with all aspects of Second Army's planning, the organisational and logistical elements of planning at brigade level were subject to consultation and dialogue. In preparation for his division's attack, Major-General O.S.W. Nugent, GOC 36th Division, invited his brigadiers for their opinions on all administrative arrangements. One suggestion put forward by Nugent, that to avoid unnecessary strain upon the assault troop 'reliefs should take place every 24 or 48 hours, up to 2 days before the attack, by battalions not participating' was met with disfavour. It was the concerted opinion of the brigadiers that 'frequent reliefs would cause more casualties and more fatigue... than would be compensated by the advantage gained'. As an alternative, it was suggested that it should be possible 'to hold the line with one Battalion and if that could be done then matter of reliefs would be greatly simplified'. Similar flexibility was allowed in the choice of equipment used in the attack. Where, for example, 109

²⁸ TNA, WO 95/2163, 23rd Div. WD, appendix D, 'Narrative of events in Connection with Second Army Attack on 7 June 1917', p.3(6). See Map 7, p.317.

Brigade preferred their men to carry a pack, other brigades preferred a haversack, Nugent merely stipulating that 'all Battalions in each brigade must carry the same'.²⁹

Brigade logistic arrangements reflected the importance of maintaining an adequate supply of S.A.A. and resources to consolidate the first objective and provide enough ammunition for the second phase of the attack. For 109 Brigade M.G.C., a total of 5,000 rounds of S.S.A. per gun was carried forward under company arrangements and in accordance with SS143.³⁰ With 16 pack animals held in readiness, guidance for the distribution of the ammunition was issued by the brigade staff to the battalion commanders. Thus:

This will need careful preparation and organisation if the distribution is to be carried out expeditiously and without confusion. The Battalion Commanders must decide whether the stores should be laid down at the assembly trench allotted to each platoon or whether all the carriers will be sent forward before the rest of the Battalion to get their loads and join their respective platoons as they come up.³¹

The experience gained at brigade level assisted other units in their logistic arrangements. Brigadier-General H. Gordon, GOC 70 Brigade, 23rd Division suggested improvements in the construction of S.A.A. dumps to avoid localised loss by shelling through 'having dumps close up and more numerous and smaller with a large Brigade reserve 800 yards in the rear'. Clearly this lesson was based upon personal experience, Gordon noting that 'a large Brigade Reserve, 1,000 yards in the rear, had took fire and this might have caused a shortage... [It is better to have several smaller R.E. Dumps further up'. In respect to the movement of ammunition and stores,

²⁹ TNA, WO 95/2508, 109 Brigade WD, 'Notes of a Conference held at HQ 36th Division', 16 May 1917.

³⁰ *Ibid*, '109 Brigade Instructions for the Offensive', No. 50/5, p.3, 30 May 1917.

³¹ *Ibid*, '109 Instructions for the Offensive', No. 50/6, 3 June 1917.

he maintained that only tried NCOs should be detailed for the Brigade (three officers and 100 men) and Battalion (one officer and 50 men) carrying parties.³²

The benefits of a systematic approach to administrative and logistic planning at brigade level were consistent throughout X and IX Corps. A culture of consultation and dialogue provided brigade commanders with a substantial degree of influence in preparation and planning as befitted their roles as coordinators and supervisors of their brigade. Their contribution to tactical evaluation also ensured that operational best practice was captured and duly disseminated. For example, Harington (MGGS) provided his counterpart in Fourth Army with pamphlets based upon Second Army's operations at Messines, including suggestions for improvements in existing practice.³³ Subsequently incorporated into the SS training pamphlets, this practice, as Fox demonstrated, provided 'a way of distributing best practice without revamping wholesale *FSR*'.³⁴ To this extent, the tactical debate, fuelling the BEF's efforts to break the stalemate of the Western Front, was enhanced by the contributions of brigade command.

The administrative and logistical measures undertaken by Second Army at Messines provided brigade command with maximum operational and tactical benefits. Equally, the measures implemented to ensure the smooth and rapid flow of communications influenced the capability of brigade commanders to sustain effective tactical control. As Hall has demonstrated, the meticulous preparation, limited objectives and successful of counter-battery fire 'made for a generally positive picture as far as communications were concerned'.³⁵ These preconditions were essential for

³² TNA, WO 95/2185, 70 Brigade WD, 'Administrative Lessons'.

³³ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/35, Harington to Montgomery, 6 July 1917.

³⁴ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p.82.

³⁵ Hall, *Communications*, p.217.

effective communication and their benefits a requirement for brigade operational success.

At the heart of Second Army's preparations was the establishment of a Forward Army Report Centre at Locre designed to link army headquarters with the attacking corps'. This enabled 'information from all available sources of the Army to be obtained by the quickest possible manner... with the least delay'.³⁶ The primacy of intelligence was promoted with the establishment of Corps Advanced Intelligence Report Centres.³⁷ The judicious employment of Liaison Officers (LO) provided essential links between subordinate levels of command and was considered by Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Morland, GOC X Corps as 'the eyes and ears of the Corps commander'.³⁸ Thus 'Liaison, Brigade and Battalion Intelligence Officers proved invaluable in assisting the Brigade Majors... and going forward to ascertain the exact position'. Providing the link between brigade and battalion, LOs attached to brigade headquarters also 'supervised runners where the Staff Officers had been detached for special duties'.³⁹ A comprehensive system of LOs was employed to maintain communications between infantry brigade headquarters and the artillery. This called for Senior LOs 'to direct and coordinate all liaison arrangements between the Artillery and Infantry Brigades, to transmit information to R.A.H.Q. and F.A Brigades... [whilst] acting as Artillery Advisor to GOC Brigade'. For this purpose, it was laid down that 'Junior LOs with Battalions will act in accordance with [the Senior LOs] instructions'.⁴⁰

³⁶ TNA, WO 95/288, Second Army Signal Company WD, 28 May- 2 June 1917.

³⁷ TNA, WO 95/852, X Corps WD, appendix 26, V (i) 'Instructions', 31 May 1917: LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/35, 'Second Army Report on Army Centre: Battle of Messines, June 1917'.

³⁸ TNA, WO 95/852, X Corps WD, 'Notes on Liaison', 26 May 1917.

³⁹ TNA, WO 95/2618, 41st Div. WD, 'Lessons learnt from Operations, replies to questionnaire set by GSO2 Major Grant (7).

⁴⁰ TNA, WO 95/2083, 57 Brigade WD, appendix 2, '19th Division Artillery Instructions for the Offensive, Part II', undated.

Overall, their employment by X Corps provided brigade staff with a timely and accurate picture of the battle, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert, GOC 69 Brigade, 23rd Division considering that 'communications between the Artillery Liaison Officer and Brigade Headquarters [were] exceptionally valuable'.⁴¹ The adoption of these innovative measures represented a further incremental stage in the evolution of brigade command and their capacity for adaptation and flexibility.

Whilst two thirds of Second Army's field artillery provided a creeping barrage, a further third were detailed to provide standing barrages 'within the limits as dictated by the Creeping Barrage' to target centres of resistance.⁴² To enable brigade HQ to call upon the assistance of the artillery and sustain a consistent flow of information to and from the R.F.A. and Group Commanders, a comprehensive network of communications was established. These arrangements adhered closely with the principles laid down in *SS148*. Based upon the 'grid' system employed at Arras, telegraph and telephone lines were buried at a depth of six feet as far forward as battalion headquarters. Wireless sets were issued as far forward as Advanced Battalion Headquarters.⁴³ Within 36th Division, a strict allocation of telephone lines, to avoid unnecessary traffic, restricted 'the number of lines laid forward of the cable head not to... 3 pairs per Brigade... in addition to each Artillery Group laying an overhead pair and FOOs laying their line to Brigade Forward Stations'. A suggestion that 'telephone lines be abolished entirely in front of Brigade Headquarters' was received with opposition from GOC 109 Brigade.⁴⁴

⁴¹ TNA, WO 95/2183, 69 Brigade WD, 'Operations of 69 Brigade, 5-13 June 1917 including the Capture of Hill 60 and Battle Wood on 7 June', 20 June; see also TNA, WO 95/852, X Corps WD, 41st Division G.555165/23, 20 June 1917.

⁴² TNA, WO 95/2083, 57 Brigade WD, appendix 3, '19th Division Artillery Instructions, Part II', undated.

⁴³ TNA, WO 95/852, X Corps WD, X Corps OO No. 83, Appendix IV, 'Signalling Arrangements', 18 May 1917.

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 95/2508, 109 Brigade WD, No.GS.111, 6 May 1917.

The role of brigade staff in establishing Brigade Forward [or Advanced] Stations (BFS) as quickly as possible was crucial to tactical control. For example, on IX Corps' front during the morning of the attack, aided by the success of the counter-battery fire and the enemy's weak response, Brigadier-General P. Leveson-Gower's 49 Brigade, 16th (Irish) Division, established his BFS at an early stage from which 'information [was] rapidly sent back... and the necessity of good Command Posts... demonstrated'. Similarly, 19th Division's 57 Brigade left nothing to mischance, brigade orders stipulating that

"A" detachment of the Brigade forward party will go with the 4th line of the attacking battalions and establish the Brigade Forward Station at a designated post. The battalion forward station will lay its wire back to Brigade Forward Station and a detachment must be sent back to... to lay a cable to meet the detachment coming from the Brigade Battle HQ. Relay Runner posts... must then be established on the route.⁴⁵

While the preliminary arrangements for communications for Messines were meticulously addressed, the operations nevertheless exposed the difficulties encountered in sustaining tactical control at brigade level during an extended advance. The loss of control experienced by the brigades of 16th (Irish) Division echoed the losses incurred during previous offensives, where Brigade Forward Stations were exposed to enemy shellfire. In 23rd Division's 69 Brigade, the party detailed to establish the brigade post was 'practically wiped out going forward'. In 70 Brigade, despite 'the rapidity with which a telephone line was laid from 8/Yorkshire to Brigade Headquarters' communications deteriorated as the attack progressed and remained 'indifferent... owing to the loss of signalling equipment'.⁴⁶ In the aftermath of operations, the attention of brigade commanders turned to the difficulties encountered

⁴⁵ TNA, WO 95/2083, 57 Brigade WD, appendix 23, 'Preliminary Instructions for the Offensive, Part I, 31 May 1917'.

⁴⁶ TNA, WO 95/852, X Corps WD, S.G.463/1, 'Report on Operations of 23rd Division', 18 June 1917.

in retaining communications during a distant advance. Brigadier-General T.A. Cubitt, GOC 57 Brigade, 19th (Western) Division suggested that 'to conform to the distance between Brigade and Battalion, Division should establish an advanced exchange so as to shorten the Brigade communication front'.⁴⁷

With communications constituting the lifeblood of command and control at brigade level, the preliminary arrangements were generally perceived as having provided 'the necessary organisation for quickly disseminating information'.⁴⁸ The difficulties arose, in some sectors, as the Brigade Forward Stations advanced and became increasingly exposed to enemy fire. In this respect, those staff sent forward, remained equally as vulnerable as during the battles of 1915. This pattern, underlining the difficulties in maintaining communication forward of brigade headquarters would continue, the losses experienced spiking during the German offensives of March 1918.⁴⁹

Operations conducted at Messines reflected Second Army's style of command. A focus upon meticulous preparation was duplicated throughout corps command to the benefit of brigades. The relative success of the brigade operations reinforces the argument that the corps under which a brigade served influenced their battlefield performance. Through a process of consultation and mutual support, the organisational and tactical influence of brigade command was energised. It has been demonstrated that the tactical influence exercised at brigade level relied solely upon the establishment of a comprehensive and effective system of communications. To determine whether these benefits were transposed onto brigade operations conducted

⁴⁷ TNA, WO 95/2083, 57 Brigade WD, 'Lessons learnt'.

⁴⁸ TNA, WO 95/845, IX Signal Company WD, 'Report on Signal Communication during Recent Offensive Operations on IX Corps Front', undated.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 1 for brigade casualties 1915-1918.

at Third Ypres, the remainder of this chapter examines the operations undertaken by X and XI Corps on 20-25 September 1917.

4.4: Third Ypres – 20-25 September 1917

Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert Plumer's proposals for Second Army's operations during the second phase of the Ypres offensive were dictated by cautious planning and a succession of 'bite and hold' operations subject to limited objectives.⁵⁰ Reflecting the shape of the Messines operations, the assault upon the Gheluvelt Plateau promised no incisive advances and a slow operational tempo: its purpose to capture those strongpoints which had eluded Fifth Army during August. Several advantages, compared to those afforded to Fifth Army, defined Plumer's planning and preparation.

First, for a few weeks at least, a spell of dry weather was forecast, the folly of attacking through deep mud having been acknowledged. Second, a concentration of artillery and ammunition along a frontage of 14,500 yards provided a concentration of shells three times larger than that employed on 31 July. Third, in contrast to Gough, whose attack had involved an advance of 4,000 yards, Plumer adopted a more calculated approach. In recognising that the depth of an attack should be defined by 'the ground that can be covered by the artillery and the limit of endurance of the infantry' Second Army's advance was designed to conform comfortably to the range of the artillery at 1,600 yards, rather than a distant geographical objective.⁵¹ The formations for the attack were significantly shaped by the configuration of the German defensive system. Objectives were 'selected according to the lie of the land and [those]

⁵⁰ For the principles of 'bite and hold' operations see, J.P. Harris and S. Marble, 'The Step-by-Step Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915-1917', in *War in History*, 15 (1), 2008, pp.17-42.

⁵¹ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 7/33, 'Fourth Army Tactical Notes', May 1916.

which gave the greatest advantages to defeat the enemy counter-attack, there [being] no longer any definite lines of trenches to form objectives'. With attacks proposed in greater depth, carefully regulated to ensure mutual support between successive waves, it was considered that 'there was little to add to the principles laid down in SS144 'the New Organisation [having] worked well'.⁵²

The brigade operations conducted by X and XI Corps have been examined in relation to Plumer's calculated approach to the resumption of the offensive. The case study focuses on operations between 20-25 September (the Battle of the Menin Road) seen through the prism of two spheres of influence exercised by brigade command.⁵³ The first focuses principally upon the preparation and planning of brigade operations in 23rd Division (X Corps). The second examines command and control in the brigades of 23rd Division and 19th Division (IX Corps) on 20 September. A similar approach was applied to the brigade operations of 39th Division (X Corps) during the resumption of the attack on 25 September. Finally, the lessons from the operations were evaluated to determine the extent to which they benefited further operations.

4.5: X Corps: Brigade Operations 20 September - Preparations

The preparations undertaken by brigade staff for the attack of 20 September conformed to Second Army's meticulous command style and echoed preliminary arrangements made at Messines. The painstaking work undertaken by the brigade staff of 23rd Division provides a clear example of the focus upon reconnaissance throughout X Corps. The procedures undertaken by 68 and 69 Brigades were intended to survey the Basseville Becke valley 'which formed a considerable obstacle...

⁵² *Ibid*, Second Army Operations, Notes on Training and Preparations for the Offensive', (2), 31 August 1917 and 'Preliminary Notes on Recent Operations on Second Army Front', July 1917; SS144 *The Normal Formation for the Attack* (February 1917).

⁵³ James, *A Record of Battles*, p.22.

rendered difficult by much marshy ground and its northern end blocked by high ground from which dangerous enfilade fire could be brought'.⁵⁴ Acting upon the advice of Second Army Intelligence, a close study of air photographs was undertaken. This confirmed, that between the place of assembly and the brigades' objective, where the elevation had prevented direct observation, there was an area of boggy ground 'where it had been inferred that the prolonged shellfire had probably shattered the natural barriers of the lake'.⁵⁵

Acting upon this information in framing his plans, Brigadier-General G.N. Colville, GOC 68 Brigade, arranged for 'the centre Company of the 10/Northumberland Fusiliers to move... eastwards intending to afterwards sidestep to its objective' and so circumvent the marshy ground.⁵⁶ In 69 Brigade, through the diligent use of patrols, the average width and depth of the stream was established, this intelligence being supplemented by information sought 'from reliable refugees' as to the structure of the sub-soil. Based upon this intelligence, it was concluded that 'there is no question about any portion of this stream or its neighbourhood being impossible for the infantry'.⁵⁷ In the event, the attack proceeded with clockwork precision: 'patrols being pushed forward... as close as possible to the standing barrage and crossings over the Basseville Beek and surrounding boggy ground' established.⁵⁸

Close cooperation between 23rd Division and 68 Brigade staff ensured that arrangements were put in place for their companies to pass through the area to be captured by 69 Brigade in order to reach their objectives beyond Dumbarton Lakes.

⁵⁴ TNA, WO 95/2183, 69 Brigade WD, No.S.G.98/30/1, 'Description of enemy Area Opposite X Corps Front'.

⁵⁵ TNA, WO 95/2181, 68 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations of 68 Brigade at Ypres- Menin Road-Dumbarton Lakes Line, 19-21 September 1917'.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ TNA, WO 95/2183, 69 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations'.

⁵⁸ E. Wyrall, *The West Yorkshire Regiment*, Vol.2, 1917-1918 (London: Bodley Head, nd.), p.103.

This movement was calculated to avoid confusion 'with posts and guides arranged to pass them through... all the companies reaching their allotted places in time to get close to the barrage'. Similar arrangements were provided for the companies of 68 Brigade in passing through the area allotted for 41st Division.⁵⁹ The benefits of previous observation and of those derived from Colville's tactical acuity were demonstrated in his arrangements for the assembly of the battalions. Having established the enemy's practice lines, he ensured that all support and carrying companies were well up in advance of the forward trenches before zero hour. In the event this decision proved a crucial one for, as Colville later reported, 'at 4.30am the enemy put a barrage on this trench system, this verifying my conjecture'.⁶⁰

The systematic approach to preparations, combined with Colville's combat experience and tactical proficiency influenced the course of 68 Brigade's operation. Capitalising upon all sources of information and intelligence, a detailed picture of the brigade frontage and the enemy's intentions was established. This enabled the brigade staff to ensure that all measures designed to moderate the difficulties encountered by the assault battalions were successfully implemented. This decisive approach signified the gradual emergence of a new generation of professional and knowledgeable brigadiers able to adapt to combat conditions.⁶¹

The importance of intelligence capture and interpretation, as illustrated by the brigade staff of 68 Brigade, was not confined to X Corps. In response to the operational needs of its constituent forces, Second Army interacted with Fifth Army in seeking advice. The brigades of Fifth Army's II Corps for example, benefited from

⁵⁹ TNA, WO 95/2183, 'Operations of 69 Brigade between 18-25 September 1917', 5 October 1917.

⁶⁰ TNA, WO 95/2181, 68 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations'.

⁶¹ Brigadier-General G.N. Colville, GOC 58 Brigade, 18 August 1916 – 27 February 1917, 31 March 1917 – 27 September 1917.

information sourced from successive divisions holding the same sector of the line, particularly the three brigades of 56th (1st London) Division. All three brigades prior to their attack at Glencorse Wood on 16 August were issued with 'detailed drawings to be read with the 1/10,000 sheet of 18th Division... outlining the method of holding the brigade sectors [and the] suggested dispositions of the Battalions'.⁶² Subsequently, based upon this map and the lessons gained from their attack, information was shared with the brigades of 23rd Division (X Corps), detailed to attack over the same ground on 20 September. This information was supplemented by a series of questionnaires issued to the brigade commanders of 56th Division, intended 'to elicit full information which may be of benefit to the Division concerned and will probably be extremely valuable to any units which may be called upon later to attack over the same ground'.⁶³

Based upon 167 Brigade's experiences on 16 August, the prevailing conditions influencing operations at Glencorse Wood and Polygon Wood were discussed in a report by CO 2/London and distributed to the brigades of 23rd Division a month before their attack on 20 September.⁶⁴ Information was not confined to matters of terrain. Regarding the most suitable formation for attack, Brigadier-General G.H.B. Freeth, GOC 167 Brigade, stated that 'the method of attack at Glencorse Wood failed to adapt itself' against the enemy's outer zone of defences. In order to conform with the configuration of this outer zone, he suggested the employment of 'a 2-company front, each of 2 platoons in line, with support and reserves'.⁶⁵ This proposal was endorsed by Brigadier-General E.S. De E. Coke, GOC 169 Brigade who advocated that reserves should 'be dribbled forward in an attempt to exhaust the enemy's counterattacking

⁶² TNA, WO 95/2934, 56th Div. WD, No.G.3/625, 7 August 1917.

⁶³ *Ibid*, G.898, 167 Brigade, 'Notes on a Brigade Conference', 19 August 1917.

⁶⁴ TNA, WO 95/2186, 70 Brigade WD, 'Report by OC 2/ London', 19 August, enclosed in 70 Brigade WD.

⁶⁵ TNA, WO 95/2947, 167 Brigade WD, 'Notes on a Brigade Conference'.

troops before going on... instead of doing it afterwards'.⁶⁶ The sharing of information is evidence of learning and progression in tactical thought. Lessons were adopted and implemented to the benefit of brigade command. Through an exchange of ideas and information, individual formations were able to develop their own solutions. These examples support Fox's argument that 'irrespective of time and place, individuals used the best means at their disposal to obtain the ends that they desired'.⁶⁷

Measures designed to identify obstacles upon brigade fronts and the staff's responses to them, represented a seminal step in the development of brigade command. Whilst the principles of reconnaissance remained in accordance with those laid down in *FSR1*, innovative technological and organisational procedures provided new dimensions.⁶⁸ Progressive improvements in the quality of air photography brought clarity to the irregularities of brigade areas. The breadth and depth of aerial coverage created a wealth of material to ascertain enemy intentions, attack frontages being scrutinised for changes in the enemy dispositions which were disseminated to brigade command and helped shape the formation of attacks.⁶⁹ Brigade command's adoption of innovative methods and technique reflected the tempo of the BEF's organisational and tactical development.

4.6: IX Corps-Brigade Operations, 20 September: Preparations

The attack of Major-General G.T.M Bridges's 19th (Western) Division (IX Corps), detailed to establish the southern flank between Groenenburg Farm and the Comines Canal, merits a close examination in relation to the arrangements and tactical

⁶⁶ TNA, WO 95/2958, 169 Brigade WD, 'Notes on a Conference', August 1917.

⁶⁷ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p.77.

⁶⁸ *FSR1*, Chapter V1, 93, (1), pp.124-125.

⁶⁹ For aerial photography see, T.J. Finnegan, *Shooting the Front: Allied Aerial Reconnaissance in the First World War* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2011).

influence exercised by the brigadiers. With three weeks respite between the close of Second Army's operations at Pilckem Ridge and the resumption of the offensive, ample time was made available for preparations. The arrangements of 57 and 58 Brigades show clear evidence of the effective use of this time, the divisional front having been taken over on 12 September. Brigade training took precedence over the preparation of the ground, both time and labour only permitting 'the bare necessities to be undertaken i.e., routes for brigade assembly, communication trenches and aid posts'. Routes were carefully marked out to 'circumvent our own gun positions which were subject to frequent counter-battery fire and to avoid [the targeted] crossings over the canal'. Whilst it was later considered that if more labour had been invested in providing cover, casualties amongst the reserves might have been lessened, Bridges' opinion remained that 'there was no doubt that the policy of having well trained and fresh troops... at the expense of preparing the front... was proved right in this case'.⁷⁰ While these arrangements proved beneficial, the late arrival of reinforcements, to bring the battalions up to strength, underlined the difficulties encountered in incorporating fresh troops into depleted formations. Bridges later commented that 'reinforcements were only received 3 or 4 days before the attack... and therefore they went into the fight before coming acquainted with their leaders and with very little training'.⁷¹

From 15 September, while the assault troops detailed for the attack were afforded four days of rest, 'time at battalion level was devoted to the completion of arrangements... instructions having been received from Brigade from time to time'.⁷² The efficient use of time ensured that arrangements for the brigade staffs and Brigade Signal Companies were suitably advanced, with the GOsC of 57 and 58 Brigades

⁷⁰ TNA, WO 95/2055, 19th Division WD, 'Comments on Attack of 20 September 1917'.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 'Account of Attack'.

⁷² TNA, WO 95/2091, 9/Cheshires WD, 15 September 1917.

sharing a double Brigade Battle HQ which was opened on 18 September.⁷³ This was in accordance with instructions issued by IX and X Corps ensuring that brigades opened their battle headquarters as early as possible and placing a detachment of the Brigade Signals Companies at their disposal.⁷⁴ Communication arrangements were designed to compensate for the loss of cable routes forward of brigade headquarters as the Germans 'targeted labour parties undertaking construction work by night' leaving routes exposed and incomplete.⁷⁵ Five miles of cable were amassed at the Brigade Forward Station, complemented by an eclectic range of alternative communications including wireless, visual, Power Buzzers and pigeons.⁷⁶ In accordance with the stress placed upon liaison, the whole of 56 and 57 Brigade 'Instructions for the Offensive' outlined the comprehensive arrangements for the employment of Liaison Officers.⁷⁷ A combination of these measures ensured that arrangements for brigade operations were suitably advanced.

Plumer's guiding principles were preparation and flexibility, with priority given to the control of reserves.⁷⁸ These were reflected in the attack formations adopted by the brigades to deal with an immediate enemy counterattack. The principles of this formation were laid down in *SS144* and involved keeping reserves under the direct

⁷³ TNA, WO 95/2088, 58 Brigade WD, Instructions for the Offensive, Part 1, (20), 12 September 1917.

⁷⁴ TNA, WO 95/2055, 19th Div. WD, 19th Division 'Instructions for the Offensive' G.127 and appendix 1, 'Communications', G.127/0/27, 17 September 1917.

⁷⁵ Hall, *Communications*, p.219. See also J. Lee 'Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road, 20 September 1917' in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, pp.119-39.

⁷⁶ TNA, WO 95/2088, 58 Brigade WD, Instructions for the Offensive, Part 1, Communications, 16 September 1917 – Buried Cable Systems under OC Divisional Signals Company and 2 Companies of 56 Brigade Signals permanently attached. Despite a rather lacklustre performance during the Somme offensive, by early 1917 the British commanders were beginning to realise the potential of wireless technology. The Power Buzzer or Earth Induction Set used a 15–200-yard base line for the transmission of electrical impulses through the ground which were picked up by a receiving amplifier between 2,000 – 5,000 yards away. They were particularly prone to enemy interception.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, Instruction No.5 for the Offensive, Part 1, 12 September 1917.

⁷⁸ *OH 1917*, Vol. 2, appendix xxiv, pp.456-9.

control of battalion and brigade commanders.⁷⁹ The success of this arrangement depended upon setting minimum objectives and the capability of the artillery to provide consistent firepower throughout the attack. This arrangement for the brigades of 19th Division 'proved right against the present German defence system'.⁸⁰ Devolution of responsibility ensured that each company, upon arriving on its first objective, had one platoon in reserve, each battalion one company and each brigade one battalion. Each commander had therefore troops available to clear any previously undetected enemy positions, reinforce units which had suffered heavy casualties or repel any counterattacks. A battalion commander would be sent forward from brigade headquarters 'to judge the whole tactical situation... and was given power to employ any portion of the reserve troops as he thought fit without asking for the sanction of the Brigade Commander'.⁸¹ The historian of the Cheshire Regiment considered that 'one might think that this was the Brigade Commander's duty and place, if someone is to command his reserves, it is not clear what purpose the Brigade Commander serves in battle'.⁸² This comment failed to comprehend the advance in tactics that these measures represented, especially in dealing with counterattacks and ameliorating breakdowns in communications.

The movements of the battalions of 19th Division's three brigades, informed by intelligence supplied by Brigade Intelligence Officers, Corps observers and contact aircraft, demonstrated the benefits derived from the appropriate deployment of reserves. For example, acting upon intelligence provided from air reconnaissance, a

⁷⁹ *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 102, (3), pp.135-6.

⁸⁰ TNA, WO 95/2055, 19th Div. WD, appendix 20, 'Comments upon the Attack'.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² A. Crookenden, *The History of the Cheshire Regiment in the Great War* (printed for the regiment, nd.), p.121. 9/Cheshires spearheaded 58 Brigade's attack on 20 September. This comment reflected Crookenden's jaundiced view of war diaries which he considered of 'little value in comprising the story of a Battalion in battle... Brigade war diaries being the worst', p.5.

message was sent from 19th Division HQ to Brigadier-General A.E. Glasgow, GOC 58 Brigade stating that ‘we have got another contact map and it shows a gap of about 500m yards at Hessian Wood. I will give you the coordinates [and] have sent you a telegram so you must not let it worry you’.⁸³ Acting upon this information, in order to clear the eastern half of the wood, Glasgow requested that ‘the 2 remaining Companies of the battalion of 56 Brigade be placed at [his] disposal’.⁸⁴ Consequently, divisional orders were issued to 56 Brigade for ‘the release of the 7/King’s Own to be placed at the disposal of 58 Brigade... 56 Brigade to move forward another Battalion to replace [it]’.⁸⁵

The twin benefits provided by a comprehensive communication network and the efficient use of reserves was a major step forward in the operational performance of brigades. If a smooth and reliable system of communication existed forward of brigade headquarters, brigadiers were given enhanced tactical flexibility, being provided with the means to deploy reserves at an opportune time. Successive companies leapfrogging from one objective to the next were ensured the support of a reserve company to assist in consolidation or deal with local counterattacks. Thus, during 19th Division’s attack, the left brigade ‘attacked with 3 companies and 1 in reserve... each leapfrogging on the first objective to attack the second’.⁸⁶ These arrangements, designed to sustain tempo and provide for consolidation, were a further step in the tactical development of brigade command.

⁸³ TNA, WO 95/2055, 19th Div. WD, Message Log – 19th Division to 58 Brigade, 11.40am, 20 September.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, Message Log – B.H.20, 58 Brigade to 19th Division 1.05pm, 20 September.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, Message Log – G.C75, Urgent Operational Priority, Divisional HQ to 56, 57, 58 Brigade HQs, 1.10pm, 20 September 1917’.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, appendix 20, ‘Narrative of Operations’.

4.7: The attack of 23rd Division, 20 September 1917

Morland's X Corps's attack on 20 September highlighted the degree of responsibility devolved to brigade command. As John Lee has argued, the exchange between Major-General J.M. Babington, GOC 23rd Division and Morland demonstrates 'that the British generals were far more tactically aware than their critics gave them credit for'.⁸⁷ On 11 September Babington, in response to a Corps memorandum, confirmed that he was aware of the threat of enemy counterattacks but intended leaving the details to his brigade commanders. Thus:

I have impressed on the Brigadiers concerned the necessity of having their reserves suitably positioned to meet any counter-attacks, but I submit that the actual time when their reserves should move be left to the G.O.C concerned.⁸⁸

This confirms that while divisional command retained executive control over the conduct of the battle, brigade command was given enhanced flexibility. This is evident in the dispositions of 68 and 69 Brigades on 20 September whose arrangements were 'carried out without a hitch' although complicated

by the necessity to ensure that at least one Company of the 8/Yorks was available soon after zero as Brigade Reserve... and that the force detailed for attack... should take their place into the forward area in sufficient time and by progressive stages without confusion through the "bottlenecks" which were the only means of ingress.⁸⁹

Thus, arrangements undertaken by 69 Brigade's staff were designed to moderate the difficulties encountered by the narrowness of the brigade frontage with

the advance [being] arranged in two waves... the principle of allotting one battalion to clear its own area and consolidate in depth [being] found to work

⁸⁷ J. Lee, 'Command and Control in Battle: British Divisions on the Menin Road Ridge, 20 September 1917' in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, p.132.

⁸⁸ TNA, WO 95/2169, 23rd Div. WD, S.G.180/6/34, 11 September 1917.

⁸⁹ TNA, WO 95/2183, 69 Brigade WD, 'Report of Operations, 18-25 September 1917'.

well... in reducing the risk of confusion as there was when more than one battalion attacked the same objective.⁹⁰

Whilst these measures provided an element of flexibility the benefits derived from the deployment of the Reserve Brigade were multi-faceted, with two battalions of 70 Brigade being 'suitably placed to resist a counterattack and where some cover is available [to ensure] that they are not shaken and remain as fresh as possible'.⁹¹ These measures accorded with Morland's instructions that 'although he did not wish to interfere with GOsC and Brigades in making their dispositions', he stressed that 'the actions of the Brigades should be in the form of an immediate counterattack'.⁹²

Suitable arrangements for the disposition of the battalions were accomplished by the judicious employment of the brigade LOs assisted by personnel from the Reserve Brigade. Having spent 'four days in the line and undertaken a large amount of patrolling and two raids' the reserve brigade's staff were conversant with the brigade sector.⁹³ To establish close liaison between the two assault brigades Brigadier-General H. Gordon, GOC 70 Brigade requested that 'accommodation be found at 68 and 69 Brigades Headquarters for 1 officer and 4 Scouts... who would be sent at 7pm preceding "Attack Day" and if desired to be sent forward with the battalions'.⁹⁴

The deployment of 68 Brigade's reserves influenced the course of the attack in serving a dual tactical purpose. The reserve company of 12/Durham Light Infantry 'followed the 11/Northumberland Fusiliers to await [brigade] orders and to form an advanced ammunition dump well forward of the enemy's barrage'. This company then

⁹⁰ TNA, WO 95/2169, 23rd Div. WD, 'Notes on Operations of 20 September 1917 – Tactical'.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, S.G.180/6/34, 11 September 1917.

⁹² *Ibid*, X Corps G.101/20/ 8, 10 September 1917 and X Corps G/101/20/15, 12 September 1917.

⁹³ TNA, WO 95/2186, 70 Brigade WD, 15-18 September 1917.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 70 Brigade No.2/2205, 7 September.

took part in further fighting, assisting in consolidation and the reinforcement of advanced parties. Throughout the day, subject to 'the constant and pressing demand for S.A.A.' Brigadier-General G.N. Colville, GOC 68 Brigade, organised a consistent flow of ammunition 'employing the personnel of the T.M.B. for carrying where it was urgently needed'.⁹⁵ The safe retention and timely deployment of reserves was a crucial factor in sustaining the tempo of an attack or repelling counterattacks. The constant flow of ammunition to forward dumps was essential to success. Both these measures were dependent upon the organisational efficiency of the brigade staff.

The degree of command and control provided at brigade headquarters remained conditional on the existence of adequate forward communications. To ameliorate any conceivable loss, the forward movement of battalion headquarters was strictly controlled by Colville. Whilst the COs were free 'to move temporarily to Forward Command Posts... Battalion HQs were not allowed to move permanently without the previous sanction of Brigade Headquarters'. By these means, the ultimate responsibility for the movement of headquarters remained with the brigadier, thus ensuring that he retained control on the movement of his battalions.

As the pace and complexity of operations escalated the role of the brigade staff was transformed, as the move from static to semi-mobile operations needed enhanced flexibility. This meant a more prominent role for staff in the forward areas. Following 23rd Division's action at Polygon Wood on 30 September, Brigadier-General H. Gordon, GOC 70 Brigade was swift to acknowledge the work of his staff, writing that

although the issue depends upon the determination and gallantry of the fighting troops and on the energy and initiative of their COs, yet a very heavy task falls upon the staff. The strain and responsibility of five days of continuous fighting is severe. Captain Grimwade and Captain Pyman, as Brigade Major and Staff

⁹⁵ TNA, WO 95/2181, 68 Brigade WD, 'Report of Operations of 68 Brigade, 19-21 September 1917'.

Captain, more than justified the high opinion I have of them. I cannot say too much of the ability and devotion to duty of the Brigade Major with little or no sleep he worked continuously and his cool judgement and quick grasp merit particular notice.⁹⁶

Similarly, Gordon considered that the manner in which the various phases of the battle had been handled by his COs had demonstrated 'a ready grasp of the situation... [using] their reserves in manner which proved their capability as leaders'. Similarly, credit was given to the runners and Brigade Signal Company for their contribution in maintaining communications to and from brigade headquarters. The close cooperation between the infantry and artillery also attracted Gordon's attention, the infantry being supported with great energy by Lieutenant-Colonel Butler (33rd Divisional Artillery Group) who provided 'sound advice and appreciation of the situation'.⁹⁷

Arrangements for brigade operations on 20 September were broadly consistent across X and IX Corps reflecting Second Army's approach to operations which gave a significant degree of flexibility to brigade commanders. This was particularly evident in the disposition of the reserves brigades from where brigadiers were able to order their deployment as and when it was necessary to repel counterattacks. The procedure conformed to the principles in *FSR1* that laid down 'sufficient troops were [to be] held in reserve for immediate counter-attack'.⁹⁸ The close cooperation established between the brigade staffs was reflected in the mutual support and assistance rendered across the division. These measures helped to influence the

⁹⁶ TNA, WO 95/2186, 70 Brigade WD, 'Report on period 27 September-to 3 October', 5 October 1917.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ British Library, Brigadier-General Aylmer Hunter-Weston Papers, 'Notes on some of the duties of the Brigadier when his troops are in the trenches', pp.93-94 and appendix 3, 'Notes by a General Officer at the Front', p.96.

development of brigade command as Second Army adjusted to the challenges imposed by German defence in depth.

4.8: The attack of 118 Brigade, 25 September 1917

The flexibility experienced by the brigades of 39th Division (X Corps) also merits evaluation in relation to their timely deployment of reserves. This was evident in 118 Brigade's (Brigadier-General E.H.C.P. Bellingham) attack on Tower Hamlets on 25 September. This operation was shaped by a reduction in the front and depth of the advance, designed to compensate for the difficulty in getting the artillery forward. Heavy hostile fire resulted in the loss of forward communications and affected Bellingham's efforts to reorganise his units after the initial advance. He reported that 'he had no idea what was happening with the... 1/1 Cambridgeshires'.⁹⁹ This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the battalion HQ, shared with 4/5 Black Watch's HQ, was under continuous shellfire, 'with six of the best signallers and runners killed during the morning'.¹⁰⁰ With cables cut, forcing the use of lamps to communicate at Advanced Brigade HQ, 'three hours was required for messages to pass from the Brigade Forward Station to company commanders... runners having to bolt from shell hole to shell hole'.¹⁰¹

Despite these difficulties, the disposition and timely deployment of battalion reserves provided Bellingham with tactical flexibility. The arrangements for the attack had conformed to the retention of reserves at each subordinate level 'the battalions attacking in 3 platoons in 3 waves, each Company having a platoon in reserve... and

⁹⁹ TNA, WO 95/2566, 39th Div. WD, appendix ix, 'Log of Messages, sheets No.15-16, 26 September 1917. Brigadier-General Sir E.H.C.P. Bellingham Bart., Royal Scots, DSO 20 October 1916, *London Gazette*, 3 March 1917, POW 28 March 1918.

¹⁰⁰ Riddell and Clayton, *The Cambridgeshires*, p.156; A.G. Wauchope, *A History of the Black Watch*, Vol.2 (London: Medici Society, 1926), p.87.

¹⁰¹ TNA, WO 95/2566, 39th Div. WD, appendix ix, 'Log of Messages, sheets No.15-16, 26 September 1917'.

each battalion one Company as Battalion Reserve'. Having been stiffened by the reserve company of 1/1 Cambridgeshires, the assault battalions reached their final objective only to be forced to give ground.¹⁰² At this point, with a further battalion (1/1 Hertfordshires) at his disposal, Bellingham established 'a better tactical line than the one shown on the objective [being] just below the Western edge of the Ridge'. Then, with communications partially restored, he was able to call upon the artillery and 'turn the guns onto... enemy movements' and break up three counterattacks.¹⁰³ With communications eventually re-established, tactical control was restored.

The experiences of 118 Brigade underlines the extent of tactical development at brigade level throughout 1916-1917. On reporting to 118 Brigade HQ in June 1916, Lieutenant-Colonel E. Riddell, 1/Cambridgeshires had discovered that in 39th Division there were 'no rules governing tactics' leaving commanders not knowing what course of action to pursue 'under variable circumstances'.¹⁰⁴ This failure to provide adequate instruction had been noted by the divisional commander as early as October 1915: 'Brigade Commanders found it difficult to systematise the training of their units owing to their divergent standards'.¹⁰⁵ However, prior to the Somme offensive the replacement of the divisional and brigade commanders was accompanied by a renewed emphasis upon training.¹⁰⁶ This was preceded by the appointment of additional staff, 118 Brigade receiving 'orderly officers, a grenade officer and the OC of the Brigade TMB'.¹⁰⁷ The Divisional School was reopened and courses for the training of instructors carried out weekly. As units steadily gained experience, the

¹⁰² TNA, WO 95/2589, 118 Brigade WD, appendix 151, 'History of Operations carried out between 16-28 September', 4 October 1917.

¹⁰³ TNA, WO 95/2566, 'Log of Messages, sheet 16, E.B.111, 26 September 1917'.

¹⁰⁴ Riddell and Clayton, *The Cambridgeshires*, p.32.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, WO 95/2563, 39th Div. WD, appendix V, Note 39/100/G, Training Programme, 2 October 1915.

¹⁰⁶ Becke, *Order of Divisions Part 3B*, p.92.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD, appendix 2, Brigade Ration Order 9, 16 March 1916.

syllabi of the Divisional Bombing, Signals and Machine-Gun Schools ensured that systemised training was undertaken 'on a uniform basis'.¹⁰⁸ The direct influence of the brigadiers was evident in the mutual support exercised between brigades. For example, GOC 118 Brigade gave a lecture on the use of the machine gun to the COs and Company OCs of both his own and 117 Brigade.¹⁰⁹ As Robbins has demonstrated 'poor training was probably the single most serious weakness of the British Army'.¹¹⁰ The experiences of 39th Division suggest that by the second half of 1917 this failing had been rectified by the implementation of appropriate training and instruction at brigade level.

4.9: Tactical evaluation

In the aftermath of operations on 20 September a series of questionnaires were issued to brigade commanders to elicit information and suggestions from their experiences. This procedure, consistent throughout Second Army, was an element of the BEF's learning process and the organisational, logistic and tactical development of brigade command. 23rd Division's brigadiers's comments ranged from observations on the artillery support to localised issues related to communications. For example, Brigadier-General T.S. Lambert, GOC 69 Brigade suggested that given the little support provided by the tanks, they would have been 'more useful as carriers'. When asked his preference for the form of the barrage, he replied

that it would be one formed of ground bursts of Howitzers without big lateral spreads of shell fragments, if such a thing could be invented... [for] it's very difficult to gage [sic] the shrapnel from Field guns when the front bursts are all

¹⁰⁸ TNA, WO 95/2563, 39th Div. WD, 'Summary for May'.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, WO 95/ 2584, 117 Brigade WD, Lecture given by GOC 118 Brigade on Machine-Gun Training', April 1916.

¹¹⁰ Robbins, *British Generalship*, p.136.

in the air and the shells are passing very close over the heads of the advancing infantry.¹¹¹

With regards to local issues, he suggested that as black was a difficult colour to distinguish, telephone cables should be covered with coloured material to assist the signallers in detecting breaks.¹¹² As evidence that lessons were disseminated across a wide network, it is noteworthy that 69 Brigade was provided with notes on 4th Australian Division's experiences at Polygon Wood, prior to its deployment in the same sector on 1 October. These emphasised the effective employment of small platoon tactics in 'dealing with pillboxes that were holding out' on the brigade front and the need to provide a gap between successive lines to deal with enemy counterattacks.¹¹³

The responses to the questionnaire were collated and issued to all subordinate commanders from division level down, in the form of a Second Army memorandum. The recommendations, in accordance with enhanced devaluation at company and platoon levels, stressed training in open warfare and reinforcing 'the initiative and power of Junior NCOs and Privates'. The value of laying out tapes to guide troops to points such as the Brigade Forward Stations and Battalion Advanced Headquarters was underlined.¹¹⁴ A further memorandum, following the renewal of the attack on 25 September, reinforced all these measures and stressed 'how experience had shown

¹¹¹ TNA, WO 95/2183, 68 Brigade WD, 'Responses to 23rd Division S.G.181/1/1, 23 September' 1 October 1917.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ TNA, WO 95/2183, 23rd Div. WD, 'Notes on experiences of recent fighting on 26-28 September sent in by 4th Australian Division in advance', 1st Anzac G.130/162 to X Corps, 30 September 1917.

¹¹⁴ TNA, WO 95/275, Second Army WD. January – October 1917, G.784, 'Comments on Operations on 20 September 1917', 28 September 1917.

the necessity that all Commanding Officers should be ready at any moment to form a defensive flank or fill a gap with their Reserves'.¹¹⁵

There was no standard approach to learning in the British armies; rather there was an ever-changing network of a fleeting nature. Innovations and lessons were identified and acted upon different ways. Irrespective of time and place, individual formations used the best means at their disposal to obtain the ends they desired. Individuals able to interpret and make sense of their experiences were able to share new operational knowledge through social interaction. As Fox has demonstrated, the army recognised these realities and possessed 'a heightened awareness of the relationship between the sharing of knowledge and the promotion of learning and innovation'.¹¹⁶ A snapshot of 23rd Divisions' operations highlights the rapid exchange of knowledge and experience that comprised horizontal learning at brigade level. Through brigade command's response to Second Army's evaluation, its role as a facilitator of organisational and tactical development was corroborated.

4.10: Conclusion

This chapter has examined brigade operations conducted during two major offensives of 1917. The case studies focused on X and IX Corps to determine the extent that Second Army's meticulous approach to preparation influenced operational performance at brigade level. The chapter examined three spheres of influence exercised through the multiple roles of brigade command: preparation, training and command and control. There are four principal conclusions.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 'Further Notes on Operations 20-26 September', 5 October 1917.

¹¹⁶ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p.101.

First, the meticulous preparations undertaken prior to an attack included the primacy of reconnaissance at brigade level. The benefits derived from this procedure were shown to have translated into actions designed to mitigate hostile terrain. The establishment of a comprehensive intelligence network, supplemented by advanced technological measures, harvested a wealth of intelligence on the enemy and the topography of the battlefield. Based upon this information, appropriate formations for attack were more than likely to be shaped by the irregularities of the brigade frontage and the disposition of the enemy's defence-in-depth.

Second, it has been demonstrated that where possible systematic brigade training schemes took precedence over the provision of large working parties. Subsequently, through a consistent process of operational evaluation, lessons deduced from the training were disseminated and incorporated into future SS pamphlets. This input by brigade staff included organisational and tactical matters, with a specific focus upon platoon and specialist training in accordance with the guidance laid down in *SS143*.¹¹⁷ This manual emphasised flexible self-contained fighting units. The basic ideas of *SS143* were then reinforced by *SS185* which, amongst other measures, contained new sections on practicing rapid counterattacks, as laid down in *FSR1*.¹¹⁸ During subsequent operations an instant call upon reserves, as befitted his traditional role, provided the brigadier with a significant degree of tactical flexibility. The deployment of reserves, however, was constrained by the vulnerability of communications, the alternatives to telephones being unreliable. Any disruption was likely to deny brigade staff the means to call upon artillery support to sustain tempo or exploit windows of opportunity.

¹¹⁷ *SS143 Instructions for the Training of Platoons in Offensive Action* (February 1917).

¹¹⁸ *SS185 Assault Training* (September 1917).

The third conclusion concerns the degree of responsibility devolved to brigade level. X Corps' brigadiers had a significant degree of tactical control based upon their interpretation of local circumstances. Whilst the divisional commanders retained executive control, the dispositions and actions of the brigades were dependent upon the initiative and tactical acuity of the brigadiers. This approach, designed to enhance the tempo of an attack, reflected the capability of brigadiers to respond to the transition from static warfare to more flexible operations.

A fourth conclusion concerns a transformation in the role of the brigade staff as the pace and complexity of operations increased. This transformation was consistent across Second Army's X and IX Corps and reflected in operational planning and organisation. This approach reflected what Simkins argued were the conditions that fostered 'the devolved command that permitted more mobile operations a year later'.¹¹⁹ The brigade staffs of both corps' benefited from a style of command that encouraged consultation and open dialogue with the opinions and observations of staff invited. They benefited from shared intelligence and mutual support. As agents of change, brigade staff provided a valuable contribution to the BEF's operational and tactical development.

Second Army's operations were preceded by Fifth Army's assault at Langemarck (16-18 August 1917). The next chapter examines this phase of the offensive to compare Fifth Army's brigades' operations with those undertaken by Second Army on the Menin Road.

¹¹⁹ Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer' in Beckett and Corvi, *Haig's Generals*, p.159.

Chapter 5

Fifth Army: Brigade Operations at Third Ypres, 1917

5.1: Introduction

This chapter examines the operations of Fifth Army's XIV and XVIII Corps on 31 July, and those of II and XIV Corps on 16 August 1917. The operational and logistic arrangements for these two phases of Third Ypres were significantly different. The aim of this chapter will be to establish the extent that brigade operations were shaped by these differing circumstances. Three questions were posed. First, to what degree did planning and preparations differ between the two phases of the battle? Second, how was brigade command able to respond to the unfavourable circumstances that defined the second phase? Third, to what extent did these responses reflect the BEF's capacity for learning and adaptation? There are two case studies: the operations of 39th and 51st (Highland) Divisions (XVIII Corps) on 31 July, and 8th and 56th (1/London) Divisions (II Corps) and 20th (Light) Division (XIV Corps) on 16 August 1917.

Although the opening of the offensive on 31 July did not fully realise all of Gough's expectations, it achieved partial success. Cavan's XIV Corps and Maxse's XVIII Corps, with carefully rehearsed infantry tactics and tank support advanced almost as far as Gravenstafel. Lieutenant-General H.E. Watt's XIX Corps on the right of II Corps made the greatest advance of the day although suffering heavy casualties. Overall it was demonstrated that 'a set-piece attack devised within an appreciable lead

time could deliver results'.¹ In contrast, the resumption of operations on 10 August left little time for effective artillery preparation, which contributed to a shallow advance in exchange for 2,200 casualties. As Prior and Wilson have argued, 'the only prospect opened up by the favourable aspects of the fighting on 31 July was a limited geographical advantage'.² However, rather than concentrating on clearing the Gheluvelt Plateau, Gough switched his attention back to the northern sector on 16 August. The attack was inadequately prepared, had ineffective artillery support and was delivered by understrength divisions over waterlogged terrain. Similar conditions shaped the operations at Langemarck (16-18 August 1917).

5.2: Fifth Army - Brigade Training

Before establishing the factors that shaped Fifth Army's operations, the scope and composition of brigade training within the formation will be examined. The organisation and monitoring of instruction in brigade command was a primary developmental factor as formations adapted to the tactical challenges imposed by the enemy's defence-in-depth. Rigorous training programmes were used throughout all four corps of Fifth Army. Guidance laid down in *SS152* stated that 'a commander will train the troops that they lead into action... a principle which must never be departed from'.³ How well this training was accomplished depended upon the commander's approach. The training of each division was carried out under the direct guidance of the divisional commander and supervised by the corps and army. The programmes of instruction were overseen by junior officers and NCOs.

¹ Beckett, Bowman and Connelly, *The British Army*, p.331.

² R. Prior and T. Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p.96.

³ *SS152 Instruction for Training within Schools at GHQ, Army and Corps Level*, 5.

Having previously neglected the creation of a structured training regime during 1915-early 1916, the introduction by GHQ of an influential series of publications was designed to provide a further means to encourage the growth of tactical uniformity. The issue of *SS135*, in December 1916, laid down adequate and appropriate training schemes. It fell to brigade staff to ensure that these schemes were organised and monitored, and lessons disseminated accordingly. Thus, COs were consistently provided with the manpower to reform their companies and platoons as the fighting efficiency of the brigade was maintained.

The training undertaken by 20th Division (XIV Corps) while rebuilding their brigades prior to Third Ypres was representative of this process. In accordance with GHQ directives 20th Division instructions stated ‘that *SS143* and *SS135*... are to be taken as orders for the purpose of obtaining uniformity and organisation in all units [original emphasis].⁴ This guidance was supplemented by the issue of successive pamphlets including *SS156* and *SS161* in addition to special guidance in the deployment of Lewis guns and the training of specialist bombers.⁵ All training procedures were open to consultation between the brigadiers, their COs and the second-in-command or Adjutant, with steps taken to ensure an ample supply of ‘pamphlets, FSR1 and Infantry Training Manuals’.⁶ Drawing upon the division’s past experiences, a three week training period commenced with platoon training in strict accordance with *SS143*, ‘the new handbook on the subject’.⁷ This training, lasting eight days, reflected the emergence of the platoon attack as a vital milestone in tactics, with ‘all Brigade Commanders ensuring that their platoons [were] properly organised...

⁴ TNA, WO 95/2096, 20th Div. WD, ‘Brigade Exercise’, 23 June 1917.

⁵ *SS156 Notes on Recent Operations Compiled by GS Fourth Army* (April 1917); *SS161 Instructions for Battle* (May 1917); *SS122 Some Notes on Lewis Guns and Machine Guns* (September 1916).

⁶ TNA, WO 95/2124, 61 Brigade WD, No. G/61/319, agenda for brigade conference.

⁷ TNA, WO 95/2118, 60 Brigade WD, 27 June 1917, see also appendix 1, Programme of Training, 2 July 1917.

and that each speciality section [was] expert in their own particular branch'. Arrangements were carefully timetabled. Mindful of providing sufficient rest for the infantry, the divisional commander suggested that 'without wishing to tie the hands of the brigadiers... as regards the hours of work' a maximum of four hours should be devoted to training with the remainder of the day devoted to recreational activities. Appealing to the competitive spirit of the battalions and promoting a sense of *esprit de corps* and regimental tradition, at the end of this period 'the best platoon of the Brigade was called upon to give a demonstration... chiefly of "fire and movement"' for the benefit of the Brigade officers.⁸ In accordance with a process of tactical appraisal, at the end of each day battalion commanders, drawing upon the comments of their company and platoon leaders, were instructed to submit 'the usual report... of the day's training' to brigade headquarters.⁹

A similar systematic approach was implemented for company training, as 'company and platoon commanders alone could keep their hand on the pulse of battle'.¹⁰ This lasted for four days and was based upon the principles laid down in *SS144*, with battalions liable to be called upon by the divisional commander to carry out a simple tactical manoeuvre as part of an inspection.¹¹ For brigade staff, training in the shape of 'Skeleton Exercises and Staff Rides' under divisional orders consisted of 'working out a solution step by step and discussing it with other brigade staff on the ground'. On other occasions, brigadiers were instructed to 'bring out their COs and work on the same exercise in greater detail... [and] if the ground selected was conveniently placed for further explanation, the COs of the Battalions will complete the

⁸ TNA, WO 95/2124, 61 Brigade WD, 'Notes on 20th Division Training, (3)', 25 June 1917.

⁹ TNA, WO 95/2113, 59 Brigade WD, Z1/ 294, 1 July and Z1/334, 5 July 1917.

¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/2096, 20th Div. WD, 20th Division Instruction No.2, 12 July 1917, with reference to Fifth Army No.S.G.671/1, 7 June 1917 received at 20th Division HQ 1 July 1917.

¹¹ *SS144 The Normal Formation for the Attack* (February 1917).

scheme by working it with [the] troops'.¹² This approach ensured consistency across XIV Corps, with exercises designed to test the tactical skill of brigade commanders repeated at battalion and company levels. However, the ongoing transformation of tactical doctrine and the reconstitution of brigades contributed to a constant reorganisation of training programmes. Brigadier-General R.C. Browne-Clayton, GOC 59 Brigade, for example, had difficulty in implementing 'a cut and dried programme for the week ahead' as called for by the divisional commander. The continuous arrival of new drafts meant that 'as training progressed, new facts as to the standard of training of the men continued to crop up necessitating changes in programmes'.¹³ To assist him Browne-Clayton drew on the experiences of the Canadians at Vimy Ridge during the Arras offensive. These consisted of 'many points which will be helpful to all concerned... and must be brought to the attention of all platoon commanders in the form of a lecture'.¹⁴ Evidence of similar cooperation can be found in training undertaken within II Corps, where the brigades of 56th Division were given 'demonstrations by the Canadians on how to maximise the use of Lewis guns to supplement the training of the combined use of platoon weapons'.¹⁵

In preparation for the offensive, all contingencies were taken into consideration and the probable supporting role of 20th Division with 'Brigade exercises... practiced with a view to gaining experience and discussing the best methods of pushing out battle patrols against a disorganised enemy'. As it was considered by Major-General T.G. Matheson, GOC 20th Division that 'the unexpected in war is more often than not the exception' all units of the division were expected to have a good working

¹² TNA, WO 95/2124, 61 Brigade, WD, 'Notes on 20th Division Training (7 and 7a)', 25 June 1917.

¹³ *Ibid*, G.277, 27 July 1917.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 59 Infantry Brigade, Instruction No.2, Z1/418/96, 'The Notes on Operations by the Canadians on Vimy Ridge', 9 July 1917.

¹⁵ TNA, WO 95/2947, 167 Brigade WD, 'Training', 25 July 1917.

knowledge of the initial stages of the offensive.¹⁶ This knowledge included understanding all available means of communication. An exercise was devised by divisional staff to develop close cooperation between the brigades and the contact aircraft of No. 3 Squadron R.F.C. Although R.F.C. personnel were prepared to assist in the organisation, 'it was understood that Brigades were responsible for the training of their men in contact aeroplane work'.¹⁷ Comprehensive schemes designed to standardise the training of battalion signallers were implemented in brigade areas, using 'a skeleton Brigade Headquarters and a detachment of the Brigade Signal Section'.¹⁸ Each brigade was instructed 'to make full use of their affiliated Field Company with particular attention to be paid to wiring and trench construction... the essence of rapid wiring lying with the organisation of the wiring parties'.¹⁹

This systematic approach to brigade training ensured that all efforts were maximised to mitigate the challenges faced by the battalions on the offensive. Despite a severely strained training system, evidence from across Fifth Army reflected increasing uniformity. For example, in accordance with Maxse's, emphasis upon the training of troops, 51st (Highland) Division (XVIII Corps) was given six weeks of training 'perfected down to the minutest detail'.²⁰ As Brigadier-General H. Pelham Burn, GOC 152 Brigade explained, the facilities available for training included

a full-sized practice course, ample time at our disposal and the care and trouble taken by the Battalion COs and others... [leaving] little doubt as to the ultimate issue of the fight. The value of training was revealed time and time again... in the way in which MG's [sic] in concrete emplacements were engaged by Lewis Guns, Rifle Grenades and riflemen.²¹

¹⁶ TNA, WO 95/2096, 20th Div. WD, Instructions No.2, 12 July 1917.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 20th Div. WD, appendix c, 10 July 1917.

¹⁸ TNA, WO 95/2113, 59 Brigade WD, Z1 386/1, 11 July and Z1 429/60, 15 July 1917.

¹⁹ TNA, WO 95/2096, 20th Div. WD, 'Notes on 20th Division Training (9)', 25 June 1917.

²⁰ Bewsher, *The 51st Division* p.197.

²¹ TNA, WO 95/2862, 152 Brigade WD, appendix O, S.G.158, 'Report on Operations 31 July', 10 August.

Practice attacks in breadth and width were carried out alongside units of 153 Brigade and supplemented by exercises designed to maximise the promotion of combined infantry -tank tactics.²²

Implementing comprehensive training was one of the many roles of the brigadier and his staff. This cyclical task, ensuring that officers and ORs possessed individual skills and were up to date with tactics, was a crucial component in the development of brigade command. Training, discipline and leadership provided by the brigadier and his COs enhanced the capabilities and confidence of the brigade. Although the late arrival of new drafts reduced the time available for training, it is reasonable to assume that most of the brigades of XIV Corps deployed on 31 July and 16 August had been adequately trained.

5.3: XIV Corps - Brigade Operations, 31 July 1917

In accordance with Fifth Army's directive, the attacking formations had ample time to prepare for the set-piece offensive of 31 July. XIV and XVIII Corps' were instructed that 'as far as possible plans must be thought out well beforehand and subject to our own preparation being sufficient, there must be no delay in putting them into execution'.²³ Foremost amongst these measures was brigade reconnaissance and intelligence gathering. Building on an existing programme of 'incessant raiding... to impress on all ranks their superiority over the enemy and to simultaneously lower the German moral', numerous raids and patrols penetrated the enemy lines.²⁴ For example, 1(Guards) Brigade's incursions into the German lines were intended to

²² TNA, WO 95/2872, 153 Brigade WD, 13 July 1917. Brigadier-General A.F. Gordon.

²³ TNA, WO 95/1193, Guards Div. WD, Fifth Army S.G.657/49, 30 June 1917.

²⁴ *Ibid*, XIV Corps Operations, Instruction No.2, 12 June 1917.

address 'the necessity for all officers and NCOs getting to know the country east of the Canal [sic]'. These raids established that 'the enemy held the front line weekly [sic] and it was comparatively easy to get across the Canal'.²⁵ The British built up comprehensive knowledge of the topography and disposition of the German lines in the Boesinghe sector, which offered 'admirable opportunities' for reconnaissance; this was aided by the distribution of 'numberless maps and aeroplane photographs... to assist Officers and NCOs in their study of the ground'.²⁶ Upon the commencement of the preliminary bombardment on 16 July, instructions were issued for a 'daily reconnaissance of the wire on the Brigade front carried out by an Artillery Officer and an Infantry Officer specially detailed by Brigade Headquarters'.²⁷

As the ultimate role of 1(Guards) Brigade remained unsettled, in order to provide transparent planning, no preliminary orders were issued 'as it was thought that continued orders and counter orders would only meddle and dishearten all concerned'.²⁸ On 8 July, however, preliminary instructions were issued prior to the brigade coming out of the line for a period of training. Thus 'when the Brigade came out... every Unit knew the outline of its Role, the plan of communication trenches and the landmarks of most of the ground... and as events turned out these instructions had to be altered very little'. All units were conversant with their forming up areas and the tracks to them 'the preparations being well advanced and most of the details thought out'.²⁹

²⁵ TNA, WO 95/1214, 1(Guards) Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations carried out by First Guards Brigade, July 1917'.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Valuable as these opportunities proved, they came at a cost. Being consistently exposed to German observation, brigade reconnaissance duties resulted in the loss of 239 officers, NCOs and ORs in total.

²⁷ TNA, WO 95/1218, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, 2(Guards) Brigade Instruction No. 4, 8 July 1917.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Notes of a Divisional Conference, 10 June 1917.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Narrative of Operations carried out by First Guards Brigade, July 1917'.

The overall arrangements for the attack of XIV Corps were dependent on three preconditions essential for operational success. The first was thorough reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, and the second was the provision of sufficient artillery support. Much time and attention were paid to these arrangements. The advance of the Guards brigades was covered by a creeping barrage provided by six brigades R.F.A. and a standing barrage by the heavy artillery of XIV Corps. The whole scheme, finalised with few subsequent amendments on 27 July, was supplemented by a machine-gun barrage provided by all three Guards Brigades and 88th Machine-Gun Companies.³⁰ Having anticipated the difficulties likely to be encountered in the assembly and advance of his battalions, Brigadier-General J. Ponsonby, GOC 2(Guards) Brigade asked divisional headquarters for counter-battery fire. This was swiftly arranged, with 'extraordinary heavy fire consisting of a barrage of gas shells being brought to bear upon all German Battery positions for 5 hours' suppressing most of the enemy guns.³¹

The third precondition for operational success was the establishment and maintenance of secure communications. Brigade arrangements were based upon the issue down to company level of the guidance provided in 'Communications within the Brigade in a Trench to Trench Attack'.³² Arrangements for 1(Guards) Brigade consisted of four Brigade Forward Stations (BFS). Each was provided with a telephone through which any unit could communicate. At BFS 1 a Visual Station was established in direct contact with the Central Divisional Station, while BFS 2 contained a trench wireless. This enabled the movement forward of Brigade HQ 'arriving at Abris Wood

³⁰ TNA, WO 95/1218, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, appendix 12, 2(Guards) Brigade Orders (Provisional), 19 July and 2.G.B. No.1221 G, Action of No. 5 Machine Gun Company, 8 July 1917.

³¹ *Ibid*, appendix 11, 'Report on Operations of Second Guards Brigade', 9 August 1917.

³² TNA, WO 95/1214, 1(Guards) Brigade WD, 1(Guards) Brigade, No.1152, 14 June 1917.

where communications with the leading Battalions had already been established... by telephone under the direction of the Brigade Signals Officer who had gone forward in advance'. Prior to zero/ all battalions were provided with pigeons 'some to be used exclusively for communication with the French'.³³

Despite these comprehensive arrangements, the communications were erratic. While for 2(Guards) Brigade 'the signal section worked without a hitch and communications with the Battalions were throughout the whole action not interrupted for one moment' the experience of 1(Guards) Brigade was entirely different.³⁴ The routine destruction of telegraph and telephone lines left brigade staff's 'communications with Divisional Headquarters... precarious... [with] the Brigade Visual Station proving of the utmost value'.³⁵ It is clear from such experiences that the BEF's communication system during Third Ypres was inadequate and inhibited efficient command and control. The development of a sustainable communications system was, as Hall has demonstrated, 'a long and painful process of trial and error, which included almost as many failures as successes'.³⁶ The development of communication systems at brigade level corresponded to this irregular pattern.

Planning within XIV Corps for 31 July was in accordance with that for a large set-piece offensive. The arrangements embodied three crucial preconditions necessary for operational success: thorough reconnaissance, sufficient artillery support and the establishment of a robust communication network. The benefits of these measures were reflected in the improved administrative and organisational work of brigade staff. Careful reconnaissance led to the relatively safe assembly of assault

³³ *Ibid*, appendix D, 1(Guards) Brigade OO No. 133, Communications.

³⁴ TNA, WO 95/1218, 2(Guards) Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Events 31 July 1917'.

³⁵ TNA, WO 95/1214, 1(Guards) Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations of 1(Guards) Brigade June-August 1917'.

³⁶ Hall, *Communications*, p.302.

troops, and the choice of an appropriate attack formation. proved robust as most of the German guns were temporarily suppressed by vigorous counter-battery fire.

5.4: XVIII Corps - Brigade Operations, 31 July 1917

The arrangements for XVIII Corps' attack on 31 July benefited from similar arrangements that conformed to Maxse's doctrine of systematic organisation.³⁷ As Pelham Burn wrote upon reflecting on his brigade's preparations 'it is not far from the point to say that the modern battle is won or lost before Zero'.³⁸ Arrangements for 152 Brigade's attack capitalised upon accurate reconnaissance which had identified landmarks to be avoided with 'the intention... to get off the map and thus avoid hostile fire [and] reduce casualties'. The strength of waves was based on 'one man for every 2.5-3 yards of frontage, with one platoon or a half platoon detailed to capture each farm building'. Great stress was placed upon logistics, with brigade staff ensuring the establishment of a large supply dump 1,000 yards behind the line, sub-divided into small sections. This was supplemented by the formation of a additional dump created on the afternoon of Z Day, 1,500 yards in advance of the front line. The success of these arrangements 'was such that units carried with them sufficient S.A.A. and Rifle Grenades to deal with all situations... all stores from the Brigade dump being used for forming a forward dump'.³⁹

51st Division's front, overlooked by enemy positions, caused great difficulties for the brigade staff in 'eliminating all likely causes of delay'. Acting upon a thorough knowledge of the brigade areas and tracks to and from the front line, the march forward was 'rehearsed in the dark by bodies of troops both with respirators and without so

³⁷ See for example, IWM, Maxse Papers, 17/2, Maxse to Montgomery 31 July 1916.

³⁸ TNA, WO 95/2862, 152 Brigade WD, appendix G (3), 21 August 1917.

³⁹ *Ibid* and appendix O, Index to 152 Brigade History of Operations 31 July-1 August 1917 – Dumps.

that it could be ensured that sufficient time was allowed for the operations when selecting zero hour'.⁴⁰ Although the assembly area was crowded, with 39 platoons on a frontage of 700 yards, it was considered that because it avoided another position where 'the hostile barrage invariably fell... the risk was justified'.⁴¹

To illustrate the value of thorough preparation and the influence of brigade staff, the attack of Brigadier-General M.L. Hornby's 117 Brigade of 39th Division has been examined.⁴² Despite 'the promiscuous shelling of the communication trenches' the assembly was carried out without incident, fresh troops having been brought forward two or three days previously. Assaulting troops were moved by a circuitous track, so avoiding the inevitable shelling of identifiable forward trenches.⁴³ The attack formation was equally well planned, the rapid advance of the troops behind the barrage 'reducing the minimum distances between Units'.⁴⁴ This ensured that the rearmost waves were clear of the front line when the enemy barrage came down at zero plus eight minutes.

Hornby's ability to respond to successive counterattacks was rooted in a relatively secure communications network. This was achieved by two parties of 117 Brigade Signal Company going 'forward behind the fourth wave of the attack' ensuring that although one party failed to maintain a secure line forward, the second party was able to establish a link with the Brigade Forward Station (BFS). Thus 'touch [was] never... lost throughout the day with the situation on the front line'. In addition to the Signals Section, the BFS was manned 'by the Brigade Intelligence Officer and four

⁴⁰ Bewsher, *The 51st Division*, p.264.

⁴¹ TNA, WO 95/2862, 152 Brigade WD, appendix O, Index to 152 Brigade History of Operations 31 July-1 August 1917 – Assembly.

⁴² See Map 8, p.318.

⁴³ TNA, WO 95/2585, 117 Brigade WD, appendix "I", Diagrams Y and Z and WO 95/2566, 39th Div. WD, 'Operations of 39th Division on 31 July 1917'.

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 95/2585, appendix 7, 'Report of 117 Brigade Operations on 31 July 1917', 10 August 1917.

trained patrols of Scouts who kept [Hornby] constantly informed of the situation and registered the batteries of both the Field and Heavy Artillery'.⁴⁵ The move forward of Hornby's HQ at zero-hour plus 3 thus conformed with the principles laid down in *FSR1* and endorsed by Fourth Army Notes stressing a rapid response to changing circumstances.⁴⁶ For example, upon reports filtering through that 118 Brigade was threatened by a counter-attack, sufficient reserves, accompanied by a sub-section of 117 Brigade MGC, were sent forward 'taking with them wire and supplies of S.A.A.' to assist in consolidating the forward positions.⁴⁷

Communications for the brigades of 51st Division also remained relatively robust. A secure link was maintained by telephone between brigade and battalion headquarters, its establishment assisted by a novel form of transport. This consisted of a cable-tank which, immediately after the advance, transported the signal gear to a pre-arranged dump, enabling a cable to be rapidly run out to battalion headquarters.⁴⁸ Ultimately, although wireless communication was established from 152 Brigade HQ to 'the Divisional Advanced Report Centre and the Left Brigade Headquarters', as Pelham Burn concluded, 'the telephone and runner (well versed in map reading skills) are the two means of communication on which reliance can be placed, while the pigeon is a usual adjunct'.⁴⁹

The brigades of 51st Division generally had good communications, with 'little trouble [being] experienced'.⁵⁰ Equally comprehensive measures were established in

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, appendix 9, 'Report on Signal Communication for 117 Brigade during the attack on the Steenbeek on July 31 and the following 5 days', 12 August 1917.

⁴⁶ *FSR1*, Chapter VII, 104 (5), p.139 and LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd Papers 7/3, 'Preliminary Notes on Tactical Lessons of Recent Operations', p.3, 10 August 1917.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ TNA, WO 95/2846, 51st Div. WD, 'Operations of 51st (Highland) Brigade N.E. of Ypres, July 31-August 1, 1917', p.18, Summary - Tanks, report on Tank G.12 (Cable).

⁴⁹ TNA, WO 95/2862, 152 Brigade WD, '152 Infantry Brigade History of Operations, 31 July-1 August 1917'.

⁵⁰ Bewsher, *The 51st Division*, p.214.

39th Division. These allowed Brigadier-General E.H.C.P. Bellingham, GOC 118 Brigade, to provide direct information to the C.R.A. However, Bellingham's experience highlighted the dangers of the establishment of an Advanced Brigade Headquarters (ABHQ): it was exposed 'to the severity of the hostile barrage' which forced a withdrawal to 116 Brigade HQ during which the BIO was mortally wounded.⁵¹ The dangers associated with ABHQs, as operations transitioned from static to mobile, was a constant problem; in March 1918 that of 118 Brigade was overrun with Bellingham and his brigade major taken prisoner.⁵²

Whilst the brigades of XVIII Corps had secure signal arrangements, not all corps were so fortunate. For example, 55th Division (XIX Corps) having suffered the loss of its telegraphic and visual apparatus, found that the flow of information provided by runners was disrupted by a deterioration in the ground conditions. On 164 Brigade's front the extensive distance from BHQ to the Advanced Forward Station (AFS) diminished Brigadier-General C.I. Stockwell's ability to exercise effective tactical control. Even by pushing out the AFS to 'a distance of 3,000 yards as the crow flies [it] meant that messages under the most favourable conditions which prevailed during the day took about 1 to 2 hours' to reach BHQ.⁵³ It is clear from the experiences of 164 Brigade that whilst the BEF's communication system was reaching a highly developed state, the ability to support operations varied according to the disposition of brigades, the state of the terrain and the depth of attacks.

The establishment of a relatively secure network of communications by XVIII Corps was matched by efficiently organised logistics. As Bewsher wrote:

⁵¹ TNA, WO 95/2566, 39th Div. WD, 11.10am, 31 July 1917 and WO 95/2588, 118 Brigade WD.

⁵² TNA, WO 95/2589, 118 Brigade WD,

⁵³ TNA, WO 95/2903, 55th (West Lancashire) Div. WD, Action of 164 Brigade, 'Report on Operations, Ypres, July 29 to August 4, 1917', (34).

In each phase of the operations the infantry advance was closely followed by other arms of the service in exact accordance with the prearranged plans, with the result that before nightfall the whole of the captured area had been powerfully organised.⁵⁴

These views accorded with Pelham Burn's, who considered that 'the success of the action was such that units carried with them sufficient S.A.A. and Grenades to deal with all situations'.⁵⁵ The organisation entailed at divisional and brigade level was impressive, with ammunition, sandbags and miscellaneous signalling equipment being transported within three hours of zero hour and the next day's rations being delivered to the front line by 7pm. This, as GOC 39th Division observed, was 'an instance of the advantage of beginning quickly and in daylight during the comparatively undisturbed hours behind the fighting line that follows an attack'.⁵⁶

Overall, XVIII Corps' attack was delivered under relatively favourable circumstances. The benefits for brigade operations were manifold: thorough preparation, limited objectives, the deployment of fresh troops, the suppression of enemy batteries and the establishment of a comprehensive network of communications. These operations demonstrate the preconditions necessary to maintain tactical control at brigade level. First, a massive amount of preparatory work ensured that an operational infrastructure was firmly established. Systematic training schemes enhanced the fighting efficiency of the brigade. This included the training of signal personnel and the provision of a supporting infrastructure, such as the establishment of sufficiently manned AFSs. The deployment of a Senior Artillery Liaison Officer at brigade headquarters was supplemented by 'Artillery FOs going

⁵⁴ Bewsher, *The 51st Division*, p.213.

⁵⁵ TNA, WO 95/2846, 152 Brigade WD, '152 Infantry Brigade History of Operations, 31 July-1 August 1917, Dumps' and 152 Infantry Brigade Instructions for Operations, Section XIII, Location of Distribution of Stores in Dumps.

⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/2566, 39th Div. WD, 'Operations of 39th Division on 31 July 1917'.

forward with the attacking troops... Battalion COs being able to apply to them for any additional Artillery Support required'.⁵⁷ To compensate for the loss of cable communications, an array of alternative signalling apparatus was employed supported by Brigade Liaison and Brigade Intelligence Officers. These measures reflect a steady and constant rate of development at brigade level. The pragmatic approach of brigade staffs in providing a wide range of solutions, informed by running large-scale operations under combat conditions, were a mark of their professionalism and efficiency.

The second precondition for operational success was effective counter-battery fire to suppress the enemy artillery, as evident in 117 Brigade's attack. Counter-battery work, combined with carefully rehearsed infantry tactics and tank support, enabled the tempo of the attack to be sustained during the critical first phase. The third factor influencing the outcome of operations was the setting of limited objectives that remained within the effective range of the communications available. The lack of suitably limited objectives remained a consistent stumbling block which continued to prejudice operations. The brigadier's sphere of influence was determined by the successful achievement of these preconditions: where they were met his tactical influence was enhanced, but where they were absent, it was diminished.

5.5: II Corps-Brigade Operations, 16 August 1917

The logical consequences of the renewal of the offensive on 10 August should have resulted in a further postponement.⁵⁸ Instead, after two days of heavy rain, a further attack was conducted on 16 August. In contrast to the preparations for 31 July, this assault was hastily prepared. Whilst on the left XIV Corps advanced well, in the

⁵⁷ TNA, WO 95/2585, 117 Brigade WD, 117 Brigade OO No.151, 23 July 1917.

⁵⁸ For this argument see for example Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele*, pp.104-5.

centre XVIII Corps achieved only a partial success, XIX Corps advanced hardly at all and II Corps' attack proved fruitless. Where thorough artillery preparation supported the infantry advance, success was achieved. Where difficulties were encountered in bringing forward sufficient artillery pieces, success proved elusive. This chapter will compare the operations of II Corps's brigades which were shaped by unfavourable circumstances, with those of XIV Corps which achieved an element of success.

II Corps's attack was delivered by 56th and 8th Divisions, with 18th Division's 53rd Brigade forming a southern defensive flank.⁵⁹ The difficulties faced by Brigadier-General G.H. B. Freeth's 167 Brigade of 56th Division highlight the problems caused by insufficient time for reconnaissance and exposure to German observation.⁶⁰ The brigade's preliminary arrangements left 'no time to get objectives into the heads of officers, NCOs and men... the assembly being carried out with some difficulty in consequence'. As regards neighbouring formations, there was little evidence of mutual assistance; no information was forthcoming from 75 Brigade when relieved by 167 Brigade 'as they had been in the sector for only 24 hours and the guides did not know their way about'.⁶¹ Enemy observation of the front line also complicated the movements of battalions and increased the workload of brigade staff. In response, Freeth arranged for the relief of the fatigued 3/London and replaced them with 1/London and 8/Middlesex during the night of 14/15 August 'to reduce movement on the night of the attack'. This however, left the two replacement battalions with 'only 24

⁵⁹ See Map 9, p.319.

⁶⁰ 56th Division was handed over to II Corps on 6 August from VI Corps Third Army.

⁶¹ TNA, WO 95/2947, 167 Brigade WD, G.A.896, 'Report on Brigade Conference', 19 August 1917 and 'Operations carried out by 167 Brigade, 12-17 August 1917'.

hours to study the ground, a matter of great difficulty at any time owing to continuous shelling'.⁶²

A lack of time and cooperation also influenced the arrangements for the supply of S.A.A., the previous occupants of the line having failed to ensure adequate provision. Some attempts were made to establish a forward dump in a secure location on the morning of the attack, but this was not achieved until 9.45am. Messages sent from brigade to battalion HQs, notifying them of the dump's location failed to materialise and the shortage of ammunition contributed towards the failure of the attack. Similar negligence contributed to a lack of communication, as 'no arrangements for signal communication in advance of Brigade HQ were taken over when this Brigade went into the line'.⁶³

The brigades detailed for the attack were also understrength because of battle casualties and sickness, the CO of the 8/Norfolks considering that his battalion would not 'be fit to carry out an attack'.⁶⁴ Representations were duly made to the BGGs, II Corps, by Brigadier-General H. Higginson, GOC 53rd Brigade stating that 'the battalions of the 53rd Brigade were not fit enough to carry out an attack'.⁶⁵ In response, a relief battalion (4/Londons) from 168 Brigade was placed under Higginson's orders.⁶⁶ However, the CO of this battalion was wounded on his arrival at the front line leaving 'his Second-in-Command [to go forward] the next day thus leaving his Battalion with barely 24 hours to make all the necessary reconnaissance and preparations'.⁶⁷

⁶² *Ibid*, 'Operations carried out by 167 Brigade, 12-17 August 1917', the 3/Londons had suffered considerable casualties and had been in the line for three consecutive days.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 'Report on Brigade Conference', 19 August 1917.

⁶⁴ TNA, WO 95/2035, 53 Brigade WD, appendix xix, 'Narrative of Operations, August 9-18, 1917, 13 August'.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 14 August 1917.

⁶⁶ TNA, WO 95/2947, Amendment No.1 to 56th Division OO No.113, 14 August 1917.

⁶⁷ TNA, WO 95/2035, 'Narrative of Operations'.

The situation was further complicated by Gough's intervention, when it was decided, 16 hours before zero-hour, to alter the starting line of the barrage and the jumping off lines for the first waves of the attack.⁶⁸ This decision was intended to compensate for the irregularity of the attack frontage caused by 56th (1/London) Division's lack of progress on 8th Division's right flank. This situation, as Major-General W.C.G. Heneker, GOC 8th Division observed, threatened the progress of his own brigades and he was 'convinced that the Division on [his] right should be thrown forward and that... the [8th Division] held back until good progress has been made on [the] right'.⁶⁹ His request for a change of plan was however refused by Gough who 'for various reasons... considered [it was not] desirable to postpone the main attack and the II Corps attack will be carried out as ordered in II Corps OO No.117 at 12th August 1917'.⁷⁰ Gough's decision ignored the expert opinion of 'the man on the spot' and had a direct bearing upon the attack of 25 Brigade.

By response, to mitigate the effect of enfilade fire, the brigadiers of 8th Division were instructed to 'bear the question of defensive flanks in mind... as the configuration of the ground renders it more likely that [one] will be necessary'.⁷¹ For additional support, Brigadier-General C. Coffin V.C., GOC 25 Brigade was given a call upon the brigade reserve... from zero onwards in forming a defensive flank at his discretion'.⁷² Theoretically this arrangement provided him with a degree of flexibility and ensured that he retained the capability of deploying sufficient reserves to compensate for the irregularity of the brigade frontages. Conversely, Gough's intervention in overriding the

⁶⁸ TNA, WO 95/2035, 53 Brigade WD.

⁶⁹ TNA, WO 95/1677, 8th Division WD, 8th Division G.93/196 with reference to II Corps OO No.117, 12 August 1917.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, II Corps G.T.3396, 13 August with reference to No. G.93/196 of 12 August 1917.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, Instruction No.34, G.93/204, 12 August 1917.

⁷² *Ibid*, Instruction No.34, G.93/196, 13 August 1917.

advice of his divisional commander influenced the course of brigade operations 'as the doubts which the Divisional Commander had expressed in the memorandum already referred to, proved only too well founded'.⁷³ In the event, deprived of artillery support, exhausted and thinned in numbers, the rout of 25 Brigade was stemmed by Coffin's direct intervention. Having gone forward to reconnoitre the position, rally the line and establish a composite force, the enemy was checked. There can be no doubt, as in the similar circumstances that occurred on 31 July where Coffin gained his V.C., that 'his courage and coolness... had a very high moral effect on his troops and on more than one occasion turned the scale by his personal intervention'.⁷⁴

In contrast to the lack of assistance given to the brigades of 8th Division, more suitable arrangements were implemented upon their relief by 47th (London) Division. For example, instructions were issued to the GOsC of 23 and 25 Brigades 'to meet with GOC 141 Brigade to suggest how he should hold the Divisional front with 2 battalions in line and 2 in support'. Brigade staff were also instructed 'to provide guides to show the incoming COs and Company officers the routes to reconnaissance... as recommended by the Brigadiers'.⁷⁵ Arguably, the constant movement of battalions in and out of brigade sectors attributed to a lack of consistency in procedures and arrangements as much as failings upon the part of brigade staff.

The attack of II Corps on 16 August was generally shaped by hurried preparations, unfavourable ground, inadequate artillery support and the employment of battle-weary troops. These inadequate measures contradicted the note of caution expressed by Major-General Sir J. Davidson, head of GHQ's Operational Branch. who

⁷³ Boraston and Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p.145.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.150; TNA, WO 95/1727, 25 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations 16 August 1917'.

⁷⁵ TNA, WO 95/1677, No.G.93/216, 17 August 1917.

considered that 'we know from experience that hurried preparations and the use of part-worn troops are generally the cause of failure and that failure involves a waste of valuable time and personnel'.⁷⁶ These fears were endorsed by Haig, who advised Gough to wait for fine weather and the opportunity 'to enable our guns to get the upper hand and to dry the ground'.⁷⁷ Throughout however, Gough failed to abide by the principles of careful preparation and sufficient logistic support. In such cases, 'operations [were] doomed to fail if [the] artillery could not suppress the defence and the ground was impassable'.⁷⁸ As in the latter stages of the Somme and Arras battles, the assaults tested the patience and morale of officers and men as brigade staff endeavoured to mitigate the consequences of operational mismanagement.

With direct criticism of higher command bearing the risk of censure or even dismissal, the observations provided by brigadiers were generally confined to recommendations based upon tactical analysis. Recrimination came later. For example, Brigadier-General P.V.P. Stone, GOC 17 Brigade, 24th Division (II Corps), considered that the preparations for the offensive had been thorough but condemned the failure of 'the Operational Staff to realise the limitations of the human element... remaining [instead] tied to their offices and maps'.⁷⁹ Having endured the strain of command in battle conditions, Stone would have been acutely aware of his obligations to provide loyalty and support to his brigade. As John Buchan wrote with reference to Brigadier-General C.G. Rawling, 62 Brigade, 21st Division 'there is nothing that men

⁷⁶ *OH 1917*, Vol.2, appendix xix, 'Memorandum on the Situation on II Corps front by GHQ (Operations), 1 August 1917, p.448.

⁷⁷ TNA, WO 256/21, Haig Diary, 1 August 1917.

⁷⁸ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p.101.

⁷⁹ Norwich Regimental Museum Archive, Brigadier-General P.V.P. Stone Papers, 9a, pp.17-24, 'On a Change of Mentality Required by the Staff when Dealing with the Men who Actually Carry Out Their Orders in Battle', a transcript of a lecture given by Stone to 5/Norfolks in 1921.

appreciate more than the knowledge that their commander values their lives and will not needlessly sacrifice them'.⁸⁰

The operations of II Corps's brigades on 16 August lacked the preconditions for operational success: realistic objectives, careful preparation, the suppression of enemy fire, secure communications and efficient logistic support. Initially, since counter-battery fire failed to suppress German artillery on the Gheluvelt plateau, II Corps' back area was under heavy bombardment. This resulted in heavy casualties and disruption in supply and replenishment of forward dumps. These conditions, combined with poor weather and tough enemy defences, meant that the attack was delivered under the most unfavourable circumstances, as the operations of 167 Brigade, 56th Division demonstrated.

In his tactical analysis of operations, Brigadier-General Freeth identified two factors that influenced 167 Brigade's attack. These reflected the universal challenges in adapting to the German system of defence-in-depth. First, he considered that the objectives had been too distant; and second, that objectives should be selected for tactical reasons and 'not to establish ourselves on imaginary lines'. Otherwise, he believed that in many cases 'we are sacrificing men to gain a continuous coloured line, whereas much of the ground would automatically become ours by concentrating our attacks on tactical points'.⁸¹ With the distant objectives for 16 August set at 1,500 yards, double those aimed for on 10 August and delivered from a narrower frontage (250 instead of 400 yards), the difficulties of tactical control were magnified. Similar views were voiced by other brigadiers. For example, Stone condemned what he

⁸⁰ J. Buchan, *These for Remembrance: Memoirs of Friends Killed in the Great War* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1987), p.37.

⁸¹ TNA, WO 95/2947, 167 Brigade WD, GA.912, ref to 56th Division G.2/457 of 20 August 1917.

perceived as the linear mentality that consumed Fifth Army and was evident at Ypres 'where attacks were an example of considering a strategical objective when a tactical success was possible'.⁸²

It is clear from Freeth's observations that the shape of his brigade's attack did not reflect the challenges imposed by the German defences and the capability of British infantry to sustain the tempo of an attack over a long distance. Similarly, Brigadier-General E.S. De E. Coke, 169 Brigade raised some fundamental problems. He considered that having made good progress for the first 300 yards on 16 August, the outer zone of the German defences proved 'a strong and troubling position' that needed 'to be specially dealt with'.⁸³ At this point, with the infantry fatigued and disorganised, the enemy delivered a counterattack. As Coke observed, with reference to the lack of surprise, 'evidently the enemy now expects us to attack a comparatively distant objective, which has been... clearly indicated by our preliminary bombardment and he makes his arrangements accordingly'.⁸⁴ A further factor was the failure of Higginson's weakened 53rd Brigade to establish a defensive flank. This exposed 167 and 169 Brigades to extensive machine gun fire from a pillbox at the corner of Inverness Copse, which through 'a misunderstanding [in] the preparatory shelling by 4.4-inch howitzers' had failed to neutralise the strongpoint.⁸⁵ The views expressed by these brigadiers, based on their analysis of operations, reflected their confidence, and their capability of finding solutions to the challenges posed by the enemy's defences.

However, there were only limited opportunities for II Corps' brigade staff to respond to these difficulties. Owing to the entire absence of forward telephone

⁸² Stone Papers, 'On a Change of Mentality', p.2.

⁸³ TNA, WO 95/2934, 56th Div. WD, 'Information gained by 169 Brigade after the fighting of 16 August 1917'.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, G.2/457.

⁸⁵ *OH 1917*, Vol.2, pp.191-2; TNA, WO 95/2035, 53 Brigade WD, appendix 703, 'Narrative of Operations August 15'.

communication on 167 Brigade's front, 'information was very slow in coming through and the first intimation received at 5.30am that the attack had commenced favourably was from 25 Infantry Brigade on the left'.⁸⁶ The loss of visual and telegraphic communication through shellfire was exacerbated by a shortage of replacement equipment. For most of the day, communications remained restricted to runners, 'but in most circumstances they took at least three quarters of an hour to reach Advanced Brigade Headquarters'.⁸⁷ The shortage of logistic support meant that the establishment of forward dumps was neglected, with few trackways available to bring forward ammunition. Because the opportunities for brigades to influence the course of the attack were limited, this diminished their capability of deploying reserves at opportune moments. So, because orders to deploy a reserve company and a machine gun party to fill a gap in the line went astray, the company remained immobile. The effectiveness of what few machine guns were available was limited by the shortage of ammunition, only 40 boxes having been brought forward.⁸⁸

Thus, the reasons for 56th Division's failure on 16 August were deeply rooted. Apart from the consequences of attacking over unfavourable ground, brigade operations were shaped by over-ambitious objectives, inadequate logistic support and uncoordinated planning. These problems were exacerbated by failures of communications. Thus, brigade commanders were deprived of the means of tactical control and assault troops of the benefits of thorough arrangements.

Four conclusions emerge from this analysis of the operations conducted by 8th Division's 23 and 25 Brigades. Each has a direct bearing on the operational

⁸⁶ TNA, WO 95/2947, 167 Brigade WD, 'Operations by 167 Brigade from 12-17 August 1917', 28 August 1917.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ TNA, WO 95/1732, 25 Brigade Machine Gun Company WD, 'Account of Operations at Ypres on 15-16 [sic] 1917'.

performance of brigade command. The first concerns the broad parameters that defined brigade operations on II Corps' front. It has been demonstrated that earlier operations benefitted from Jacob's systematic approach to operational and logistic planning. This was true on the Somme and prior to operations at Irles in March 1917 when he persuaded Gough that a postponement was necessary to facilitate the movement of supplies and ammunition. Similarly, at Third Ypres, Jacob's influence as a corps commander assisted in the temporary delay of operations in response to the onset of unfavourable weather. However, the operations of 16 August were subject to Gough's insistence on conducting another hurried attack using tactics 'inappropriate for the circumstances'.⁸⁹ This attack was made on a broad front following two days of heavy rain leaving the divisions of Fifth Army largely paralysed by the condition of the ground. On II Corps' front, the German artillery was not suppressed, and the British infantry lacked sufficient artillery support. In consequence, opportunities to build and maintain the tempo of attack were limited, which in turn diminished the performance of the brigades. With the preconditions for success neglected, the operations demonstrate that the BEF's operational and tactical development was far from smooth.

The second conclusion concerns the fighting efficiency of the brigades of 8th Division. Like those of 56th Division's brigades, their attacks were hampered by poor preparation, insufficient logistic support and the short time available for making good the losses of on 31 July. Nevertheless, a total of 48 officers and 2,213 other ranks were absorbed into the three brigades of 8th Division between 2 and 16 August.⁹⁰ This

⁸⁹ G.D. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2002 [2001]), p. 207.

⁹⁰ TNA, WO 95/1677, 8th Div. WD; WO 95/1727, 25 Brigade WD; Boraston and Bax, *The Eighth Division*, p.141.

task, whilst increasing the workload of brigade staff, was accomplished despite the need to replace no less than eight commanding officers.

A third conclusion concerns the position and staffing of 23 and 25 Brigade Headquarters. With greater emphasis placed upon the role of staff officers in forward areas, the establishment of ABHQs reflected the importance of accurate knowledge of brigade sectors as highlighted by previous operational analysis. In the case of 23 and 25 Brigades, these forward positions, staffed by the Brigadier, Brigade Major, Brigade Signals Officer and a Senior LO Artillery Officer, offered ready opportunities for direct intervention, as demonstrated by the influence exercised by Coffin.

The fourth conclusion relates to the capability of the brigade staff to respond to changing circumstances given the vulnerability of communications. Regarding the artillery support, Brigadier-General Grogan of 23 Brigade considered that it was 'excellent, the S.O.S. calls on the whole principally replied to'. The problem arose however 'in laying down the exact line of fire owing to the exact position of the troops being unknown during most of the day'.⁹¹ This was blamed on the ineffectiveness of the green Very Lights used to call for assistance. Only one aircraft was sent up by II Corps to look for enemy counterattacks and S.O.S. signals calling for artillery support. It reported 'few of the former and none of the latter, though the day was a clear one'.⁹² In consequence 'hostile counterattacks were deployed by the time the S.O.S. barrages were put down'.⁹³ In summarising these difficulties, Major-General Heneker

⁹¹ TNA, WO 95/1710, 23 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations undertaken by the 23rd Infantry Brigade on 16 August 1917'.

⁹² A. Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie: The Life of General Sir Hubert Gough* (London: Hart-Davis, 1975), pp. 223-4.

⁹³ TNA, WO 95/1732, 25 Brigade Machine Gun Company WD, 'Account of Operations at Ypres'.

considered that 'with the artillery at our disposal no counterattack could make any progress provided information could be sent to the batteries in time'.⁹⁴

The meritocratic rise of experienced staff with confidence, courage and tactical proficiency reflected the transformation of brigade command and the brigadier's role. The commanders of 23 and 25 Brigades were representative of this process, although differing in their command style and strength of character.⁹⁵ Grogan, for example, looked to Brigade Major P.C. Vellacott for guidance, while remaining in awe of Heneker as a divisional commander who retained a reputation 'for breathing fire and slaughter'. Indeed, Grogan's staff captain considered Vellacott to be 'the central figure in the Mess' and that

Grogan was secretly a bit afraid of Vellacott... who was quicker and better trained and with very strong views of how a Brigade should be run... not having the kind of mind to control troops in action [as Coffyn had] [sic] and kept forward because he thought it encouraged the troops... as it did'.⁹⁶

Grogan implemented various steps to break down the average regimental officer's disapproval of the staff by arranging dinners 'with all colonels, seconds in command and Adjutants... in turn at the Brigade Mess'. This integration reflected Maxse's plea that a system of communication should be adopted to eradicate the term 'brass hat... in the minds of both staff and regimental officers'.⁹⁷

A significantly different approach was taken by Coffin of 25 Brigade, who was considered by Lieutenant P.A. Ledward, the Staff Captain of 23 Brigade, as 'rather ascetic and deadly serious... never entertaining... [but with] his whole mind being

⁹⁴ TNA, WO 95/1677, 8th Div. WD, 'Account of Operations 16 August 1917'.

⁹⁵ *London Gazette* 25 July 1918, Brigadier-General G.W. St. G. Grogan V.C.; *London Gazette* 14 September 1917, Brigadier-General C. Coffin V.C.

⁹⁶ IWM, Lieutenant P.A. Ledward Papers, 20750, 76/120/1, pp.43-44. Staff Captain 23 Brigade, 8th Division.

⁹⁷ IWM, Maxse Papers, File 15, Reel 6, 'Notes of Conference, 4 August 1915' and 'Notes on Divisional Commanders Tour' 18-22 October 1915.

concentrated on fighting'. In his efforts to protect his men from unnecessary risk 'he never hesitated in opposing an operation which he thought devoid of strategical and tactical value'. Clearly undaunted by Heneker's reputation, upon being informed that it was brigade command's responsibility to keep in touch with divisional headquarters, Coffin responded that it was his responsibility to 'keep in touch with the troops... and it is the task of the Divisional staff to keep in touch with me' [authors emphasis]. During three subsequent operations his brigade made no attempt to keep in touch with the Division [but] always with... the Battalions'. Similarly, in relation to Heneker's policy of continuous raids and minor operations, Coffyn 'would not have hesitated in opposing an operation which he thought devoid of strategical and tactical value and the opinions he would have expressed would have pricked the bubble of General Heneker'. Thus, a combination of moral integrity and physical courage served to place 'Coffyn [sic] in a different class from the other senior officers of the VIII Division'.⁹⁸

The level of affinity between the brigades of 8th Division is interesting from the perspective of unit cohesion. While 23 and 25 Brigades maintained a degree of 'friendly rivalry', the former had 'no respect for the 24 Brigade... as they had poor Brigadiers... their Staff Officers were not remarkable and our feeling towards them [was] tolerant and patronising'. Neither was their staff deemed efficient enough to undertake even the most minor of operations 'in case they bungled it'.⁹⁹ If indeed the division suffered from a lack of unit cohesion and inefficiency, it is difficult to understand, given his reputation as a martinet, why Heneker was unable or unwilling to stamp his authority on the situation. It is equally difficult to pinpoint the source of the enmity directed at Brigadier-General H.W. Cobham. It could be construed that he had

⁹⁸ IWM, Ledward Papers 76/120/1, pp.44-45 and pp.53-4 with reference to a brigadier's conference September 1917.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, pp.24 and 43, September 1917.

simply failed to match the exacting standards expected of his divisional commander. As 8th Division's GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel E.H.L. 'Moses' Beddington wrote in January 1917, it was impossible 'to put the Division right without new leaders, yet we could not report badly about the present ones'.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, within three months of Heneker's appointment as divisional commander, all three brigadiers had been replaced. Of the new appointments, Cobham had recently experienced a period of rest following his battalion's operations on the Ancre, it being felt that 'the hard work that he had done... had affected [his] health'.¹⁰¹ Following four months as GOC 24 Brigade, he received on 23 May an appreciation from Fourth Army HQ for 'the 'good services rendered during the past 7 months'.¹⁰² Furthermore, there is no evidence within the war diaries of any contravention of procedures or specific failings of the brigade on 31 July where the attack was delivered 'over an extraordinarily difficult piece of ground'.¹⁰³ Subsequently however, having returned from a third period of leave in ten months, Cobham was recommended for home leave under the six month rule. This move would suggest that he was in dire need of further rest and recuperation. This in turn may have generated an opportunity for Heneker to appoint one of his own COs, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Haig, 2/Royal Berkshire, as GOC 24 Brigade. In the event, Cobham returned to duty on the Western Front in late August 1918 to command 175 Brigade, 58th (2nd/1st London) Division during the Hundred Days. As a retired Indian Army cavalryman of 50 years of age, he would by this time have been one of the oldest brigadier-commanders serving on the Western Front.

¹⁰⁰ LHCMA, Lieutenant-Colonel E.H.L. Beddington, 'My Life' (1960), pp.106.

¹⁰¹ Stanley, *89th Brigade*, p.178.

¹⁰² TNA, WO 95/1717, 24 Brigade WD, G.S. 698, 23 May 1917.

¹⁰³ Boraston and Bax, *Eighth Division*, pp.128-9.

The premium placed upon the accurate knowledge of the battlefield and the transition towards increasingly mobile operations necessitated a more prominent role for brigade staff. However, the attack on 16 August underlined the parameters which defined their tactical influence. This was primarily due to delays in the transmission of messages and intelligence, with runners providing the sole means of communication forward of brigade headquarters. Despite the establishment of Advanced Report Centres where it was suggested that brigade staff officers could obtain information 'from wounded officers and men', opportunities to implement a rapid tactical response to enemy counterattacks were limited.¹⁰⁴

5.6: XIV Corps: Brigade Operations - 16 August 1917

The assault by XIV Corps, which, combined with that of XVIII Corps, formed the northern defensive flank, was undertaken in more favourable conditions than those shaping the brigade operations of II Corps. These conditions were attributable to various factors: the weakened strength of the German defences, a 'systematic bombardment by HA of all Strong Points which may interfere with the crossing of the Steenbeek', and efficient organisational planning within the back areas: 'with many miles of new tram lines laid, so that nearly every battery had a line running to within a hundred yards of the gun positions and a large number of ammunition dumps formed'.¹⁰⁵ Great emphasis was placed on the gathering of intelligence and the divisions of both corps were satisfied that the enemy trenches 'were badly enfiladed by our artillery fire and seriously weakened as a defensive line'.¹⁰⁶ Whilst significant

¹⁰⁴ *SS135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action* (1916), pp.40-1.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, WO 95/2097, 20th Div. WD, 20th Division OO No.197, 12 August 1917 and G.961, 'Report on Operations carried out by 20th (Light) Division August 6 -19, 1917' (for the number of guns employed for the attack see *OH 1917*, Vol.2, p.200, fn.1); Inglefield, *The Twentieth Division*, p.145.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, WO 95/2761, 145 Brigade WD, 48th Division, 'Notes on the Enemy's Defences of the Sector Opposite to the 48th Division from August 14th to August 27th, 1917'. For the strength of the German forces see, *OH 1917*, Vol.2, p.200, fn.2.

casualties from enemy shellfire were sustained during the days preceding the attack, before zero hour, 'destructive and counter-battery shoots carried out continuously' and German batteries were neutralised.¹⁰⁷ This was achieved, despite rain and poor visibility, by 'artillery moving forward for their new tasks' assisted by the construction of roads, tracks and a light railway.¹⁰⁸

The work accomplished during this period was extensive as demonstrated by the brigades of 20th Division. With little work having been done when they relieved 38th (Welsh) Division, better weather 'enabled [the division] to push on [with] communications and prepare new battery positions whilst extending the... [Light] Railway'. With 59 Brigade holding the line, both 60 and 61 Brigades furnished large working parties daily, on an average of two battalions and one battalion, respectively.¹⁰⁹ Great emphasis was placed upon the establishment of communications. With the assistance of the Divisional Signal Company, forward of brigade headquarters one main route on each brigade front was laid. In 61 Brigade on the day prior to the attack 'a party of linemen went forward at dawn and laid 2 lines between BHQ and the Brigade Forward Station... with lateral communication established with Brigades on the Right and Left'. These lines were supplemented 'by visual wireless and amplifiers, so arranged to form alternate routes as necessity arose, with breakdown parties placed at intervals along all routes'.¹¹⁰ Brigade staff ensured that there were opportunities for 'battalion LOs [Liaison Officers] to meet their counterparts in flank battalions'.¹¹¹ These measures ensured that communications

¹⁰⁷ For casualties from shellfire see, TNA, WO 95/913, XIV Corps WD, 'General Staff Summary for week ending 17th August 1917'

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 'XIV Corps General Staff Summary for week ending 10 August 1917'.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, WO 95/2097, 20th Div. WD, G.961, 'Report on Operations carried out by 20th (Light) Division August 6-19, 1917'.

¹¹⁰ Inglefield, *The Twentieth Division*, p.152.

¹¹¹ TNA, WO 95/2119, 60 Brigade WD, appendix vii, Instruction No.6, 12 August 1917.

were 'maintained for the whole time between Brigade Headquarters and Brigade Forward Station', although contact with the Provisional Forward Station 'required the concentration of all linesmen available on this stretch'.¹¹²

29th Division's attack benefited from similar advantages. Unlike on 20th Division's front, working parties were kept to a minimum as the ground for the division's attack did not require lengthy preparatory measures. This allowed two brigades to remain at rest simultaneously, leaving troops fresh for the attack.¹¹³ There was ample time for rigorous training programmes. 88 Brigade for example, identified weaknesses in the training of company commanders who unable to 'deal with simple situations', and in the organisational ability of platoon and section commanders. As 'the way in which [practice attacks] were carried out were not satisfactory they were done again'.¹¹⁴ Evidently, the training proved successful as

the most satisfactory feature of the day's operation was the manner in which the lessons taught in training were applied by all ranks without hesitation and with the greatest intelligence. The action of the Right Companies... [providing] the best example when junior Company Commanders on the spot took the responsibility of working outside their own limits to help the advance of the Brigade on the right.¹¹⁵

In the attack formation, brigade staff ensured that 'each battalion on the right of the Right brigade... [had] a "liaison detachment" consisting of half a company and two machine guns echeloned in the rear of their right flanks to fill any gaps that occur on the right flanks'.¹¹⁶ This emphasis on unit cohesion was reflected in the close

¹¹² TNA, WO 95/2124, 61 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations 16 August 1917-Communications'.

¹¹³ TNA, WO 95/ 2282, 29th Div. WD, 'Report on the Operations of 29th Division on 16 August 1917'.

¹¹⁴ TNA, WO 95/2307, 88 Brigade WD, 23 July 1917 and 'Remarks by the GOC 29th Division on the Tactical Exercise carried out by the 88 Infantry Brigade on 23 July 1917'.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations carried out by 88 Infantry Brigade on 16 August 1917'.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 88 Brigade OO No.95, 14 August 1917.

cooperation with the 2nd French Division 'made by General Lucas [GOC 87 Brigade] and Colonel Welch [CO 1/K.O.S.B.] and was rewarded with excellent results'.¹¹⁷

A sustainable and efficient infrastructure was created in XIV Corps' back area prior to the attack. Although hampered by deteriorating ground conditions, the suppression of the enemy artillery enabled work to continue 'the silence of the guns being a great contrast to the continual shelling of 1916'.¹¹⁸ The operational and logistic benefits to brigade operations were manifold. Equally, the benefits of efficient staff work were evident, revealing a growing confidence in leadership and initiative. The organisation by brigade staff in concentrating the units of 60 and 61 Brigades on the east bank of the Steenbeek, under intermittent artillery and machine gun fire, was considered by Major-General W. Douglas Smith, GOC 20th Division 'a most difficult manoeuvre that reflects the greatest credit on Brigadiers and COs'. At divisional headquarters where administration was carefully arranged and every Staff Officer was assigned an understudy, the work proceeded 'with no hitches... and no accumulation of work'.¹¹⁹

The situation described is important in relation to the development of brigade command. Efficient administrative and operational procedures reduced the amount of staff work for future operations and encouraged greater responsibility at brigade level. Thus, it was laid down that 'in order to avoid unnecessary repetition it is proposed in the future operations to adhere to the following Instructions which have already been issued in connection with the operations which concluded on 16 August'. With instructions issued from time to time, as details became known 'it became incumbent

¹¹⁷ S. Gillon, *The Story of the 29th Division* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1925), p.128.

¹¹⁸ Inglefield, *The Twentieth Division*, p.146.

¹¹⁹ TNA, WO 95/2097, 20th Div. WD, No.G.840, 'Notes on Operations' in response to XIV Corps No. G.25/5, 16 August 1917, 25 August 1917.

upon 'B.Gs.C and other commanders to issue such parts of these as are necessary to their units as and when they are received'.¹²⁰

Douglas Smith concluded 'this period may be summed up as follows: all preliminary preparations were made and the way paved for the attack by the 60th and 61st Infantry Brigades [and] by the forcing of the Steenbeek by the 59th Infantry Brigade'. The attack was supported by thorough artillery support, the barrage proving 'accurate and beautifully timed [falling] like a curtain'.¹²¹ Notwithstanding the difficult ground, this proved beneficial to the brigade attacks. Well-drilled infantry was able to bring to bear their Stokes mortars and Lewis guns where appropriate and all objectives were taken.

As ever, good communications enabled brigadiers to deploy their reserves swiftly in response to specific threats. For example, having received a message through 61 Brigade HQ that a contact aircraft had reported a concentration of enemy units, GOC 60 Brigade was able to deploy a section of his machine gun company and enough reserves to form a defensive flank.¹²² Thanks to the excellent work of the F.O.O.s, 'the S.O.S. was sent in at once and [the] guns responded immediately'.¹²³ Similarly, Brigadier-General W.E. Banbury, GOC 61 Brigade was able to deploy his reserves and a battalion of 38th (Welsh) Division placed at his disposal to implement a counter-attack to regain lost ground. Communication forward of brigade headquarters was maintained and through close liaison 'the Left flank was in touch with the Brigade on the Left [29th Division's 88 Brigade]'. Similarly, 'O.C. [sic]

¹²⁰ *Ibid*,

20th Division Instruction No.2 (2nd Series), 10 September 1917.

¹²¹ Inglefield, *The Twentieth Division*, p.159.

¹²² TNA, WO 95/2119, 60 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations of 60 Infantry Brigade on 16 August'.

¹²³ *The King's Royal Rifle Chronicle 1917*, p.153.

7/Somerset Light Infantry... personally reported his observations of the movements of the battalions of 60 Brigade on the Right'.¹²⁴

The operations of XIV Corps' brigades underlined the benefits of thorough preparation, sufficient logistic support, the suppression of enemy fire and the maintenance of communication. These were preconditions for success, and the means for brigadiers to exercise tactical influence. Heavy losses were incurred but given that the attacks were delivered over appalling ground, against an area heavily fortified in great depth, the success achieved by the brigades of XIV Corps was remarkable.

5.7: Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to compare brigade operations during two phases of Third Ypres. The case studies focused upon operations by different corps to establish whether the preconditions that shaped brigade operational performance were constant. Where operations were thoroughly prepared, had effective logistic support, and where enemy fire was suppressed, brigades' performed well. Conversely, where the preparations, methods of attack and logistic support were not commensurate with the scale of the objectives, operations faltered after the initial advance. In all operations the ability of the brigade commander to control his formation rested upon the establishment of a secure and rapid system of communications up and down the chain of command. However, whilst the BEF's communication system benefited from a variety of sophisticated technological developments, its ability to support large scale objectives remained limited. Given this constraint, the scope for

¹²⁴ TNA, WO 95/2124, 61 Brigade WD, 'Operations of 61 Infantry Brigade at Langemarck on August 16, 1917'.

effective tactical control at brigade level relied on the incremental development of signal communication.

Whilst the shape and outcome of operations were influenced by these factors, the evolution of brigade command was also driven by its capability for flexibility and adaptation. Despite the transformation and expansion of its role, brigade staff were still able to learn, adapt and remain focused on defeating the enemy. This reflected the broader learning process experienced of the BEF and was manifested in several ways at brigade level. In adapting to the conditions of modern warfare, the role of the brigade staff was transformed. To acquire a detailed knowledge of the battlefield required personal reconnaissance and innovative methods of intelligence gathering. Close liaison and mutual support between brigades generated the transfer and assimilation of knowledge and experience. Moreover, as confidence grew at the tactical level, commanders and staff played a key role in training and the dissemination of new methods of attack. Based upon his brigade's capability in adapting to German in-depth defences, the brigadier's operational analysis proved a vital contribution to the BEF's tactical evolution.

The evolution of brigade command throughout 1917 was broadly defined by two fundamental factors: the BEF's capability to adapt to modern warfare and the meritocratic promotion of experienced and courageous brigade staff. The battles of Arras, Messines, Third Ypres and Cambrai demonstrated that the BEF had learnt from the Somme offensive and had applied those lessons to tactics. Whilst this progression was far from smooth, where operations had favourable preconditions, success was achievable. Success demanded a high degree of flexibility, knowledge and efficiency at all levels of command. The appointment of staff tempered by combat experience and capable of coping with the complexities of modern warfare, was a benchmark in

brigade development. As opportunities arose for officers to move up the career ladder, the administrative and operational efficiency of brigade staff was transformed. Teams of experienced and proficient brigade staff were created, although these teams could be just as easily dismantled through casualties or the transfer of officers. The next chapter will examine the progression of brigade development in 1918 in the context of a new generation of brigade staff and their influence on operations during the Hundred Days.

Chapter 6

Fourth and Second Armies: Brigade Operations in 1918

6.1: Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the development of brigade command during the BEF's offensive operations of 1918. Two research questions were posed. First, to what degree did brigade command benefit from Fourth Army's superior material, and from effective logistic support and combined arms tactics?¹ Second, to what extent did the transition from static to mobile operations affect the tactical role of brigade command? As in previous chapters, this piece examines key operations undertaken by Fourth and Second Armies.

The broad factors that shaped brigade operations during the Battle of Amiens in August 1918 may be summarised as follows. First, the impressive efforts of the munitions industries enabled the replacement of equipment lost during the German advances earlier in 1918. Indeed, British infantry brigades now deployed more firepower than before, as portable machine guns, rifle grenades and trench mortars were available in unprecedented numbers. Moreover the British infantry were supported by a battalion of Mark V tanks, which were far more reliable than 1916 models.² Six corps squadrons of the 15th Wing, Royal Air Force were deployed to

¹ For fire-based combined arms tactics, see J. Bailey, 'The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare' Occasional Paper No.22, Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, (1996).

² A.A. Montgomery, *The Story of the Fourth Army in the Battle of the Hundred Days, August 8th to November 11th* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), p.23. A total of ten battalions of heavy tanks were available for the combined forces: four of these to the Canadian Corps, four to the Australian Corps, one to the III Corps and one left in reserve.

provide air support and 'to keep the formations with which they were working supplied with information regarding the progress of the attack'.³ The accuracy of artillery fire was greatly improved, as the techniques of sound ranging and flash spotting were able to plot precisely the position of German batteries.⁴ All guns were taken out of the line prior to the attack, tested for wear and adjusted accordingly to ensure that barrages proceeded accurately and at the designated rate. These methods of artillery location obviated the necessity for lengthy preliminary bombardments, thus enabling the crucial element of surprise to return to the battlefield. The deployment of multiple arms and auxiliary support during the Hundred Days, constituted a combined arms system where each weapon supported the other.

Different schools of thought exist about the BEF's ability to employ all its arms evenly in 1918. Jonathan Bailey argued for the 'the birth of [the] "modern style of warfare": the advent of three-dimensional conflict, including air support, with artillery indirect fire as the foundation of planning at a tactical, operational and strategic level of war'.⁵ Prior and Wilson, on the other hand, argued that a coherent all-arms approach remained susceptible to a breakdown in any of its key elements – for example when tanks broke down or poor visibility limited the effectiveness of air support.⁶ For example, the difficulty of sustaining tank operations is illustrated by figures compiled by the Tank Corps, where from 430 tanks deployed on 8 August, only 38 remained functioning on 11 August. As Paul Harris contended, this decline was only partly due to enemy action with 'considerable parts of total tank strength... being temporarily lost

³ *Ibid*, p.24.

⁴ See Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp.154-155.

⁵ Bailey, 'The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare', pp.13-21.

⁶ Prior and Wilson, *Command*, pp.289, 309, 319-320. For similar views see Robbins, *British Generalship*, p.137.

through mechanical breakdown and crew sickness'.⁷ A third point of view, followed here, holds that 'different combinations of arms had to be used to meet rapidly changing circumstances' and that the sophistication and flexibility of the British army was able to meet ever evolving challenges.⁸ As the rate of the infantry advance increased, the army's ability to bring forward artillery in sufficient numbers 'choose a new position against time and "shoot themselves in"' proved difficult.⁹ However, an emphasis upon fire and movement was reflected in the sophistication and flexibility of the BEF's combined-arms tactics. A careful use of terrain, combined with the deployment of Lewis guns, rifle grenades and concentrated rifle fire, enabled 'many strong points and machine-gun nests to be dealt with at slight expense'.¹⁰ Certainly, where Fourth Army was concerned, tanks were 'only used in very small numbers, just when the Germans put up a stout resistance', whilst no tanks were used in Second Army.¹¹ In summary, where sufficient arms were employed, the benefit to brigade operations was substantial. It was the brigadier's responsibility to ensure that the arms available were employed to the maximum tactical advantage.

The second broad factor benefiting brigade operations at Amiens was the BEF's doctrine, which was based on the lessons of 1916-17. Underpinned by sustainability and the maintenance of tempo, the problem of tactical penetration was resolved through the implementation of limited set-piece attacks, concentrated against narrow sectors of the front line rather than dissipating them along a broad front.

⁷ J.P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military Thought and Armoured Forces, 1903-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.179.

⁸ J.P. Harris, *Amiens to the Armistice: The BEF in the Hundred Days Campaign 8 August-11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998), fn. 64 to p.227.

⁹ W.H.F. Weber, 'A Field Artillery Group in the General Advance' in *The Journal of the Royal Artillery*, Volume XLIX, 1922-3, p.349.

¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/1515, 57 Division WD, 20 August-3 September 1918.

¹¹ CCC. Rawlinson Papers, Rawlinson Diary, 24 October 1918. For the implementation of an all-arms approach in Third Army see Boff, *Winning and Losing*.

Preparations for the offensive went 'smoothly and with a remarkable degree of secrecy in an exercise of logistical and administrative complexity'.¹² By these measures the freedom of the enemy reserves was limited and the attackers' tempo maintained, although as frequently occurred on the second day of an offensive, Fourth Army was slow in renewing its attack. Nevertheless, Fourth Army's tactics 'unlocked the static front at Amiens and made the possibility of conducting mobile operations a reality'.¹³ As the advance progressed, whilst Fourth Army continued to set general objectives the detail was left 'to be filled in by subordinate formations and units'.¹⁴ This marked the advent of semi-mobile and mobile operations. Before evaluating the brigade operations of this period, it is necessary to establish the definition of these terms.

As opposed to static warfare, the ability to conduct mobile operations rested upon the promotion of operational tempo. Tempo incorporates 'the capacity of a force to transition from one operational posture to another'.¹⁵ The side with the higher tempo is better able to react to changing circumstances and maintain an increasing rate of pressure on the enemy. Tempo in modern military jargon is determined by the combination of seven elements:

- . physical mobility
- . tactical rate of advance
- . reliability of information
- . command control and communication
- . time to complete moves

¹² Harris, *Douglas Haig*, p.489.

¹³ Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, p.242.

¹⁴ Harris, *Amiens*, p.148.

¹⁵ Boff, *Winning and Losing*, p.6.

- . pattern of combat support
- . pattern of service (logistic) support¹⁶

The rate of tempo, or advance of the forward units, depends upon the degree to which these criteria are met and implemented in the form of semi-mobile or mobile operations (open warfare). As Boff has contended, the maintenance of momentum on the Western Front 'required working around the logistical constraints of a modern army [and] the command difficulties caused by poor battlefield communications'.¹⁷ In accordance with the devolved style of command practiced within Fourth Army, subordinate commanders were left to find solutions to these problems.¹⁸

The quantitative advantages, in the form of manpower and material resources provided to the BEF, combined with its doctrinal appraisal, were two broad factors that shaped the course of operations and ultimately the evolution of brigade command. A third influential factor reflected the reconstruction of the British army command. By August 1918, brigade commanders who had proved themselves unable to embrace fresh battlefield tactics and run large-scale operations had been replaced by a new generation of commanders. This exchange was achieved through a robust process of meritocratic promotion. The criterion for advancement rested upon an officer's capability to adapt and cope with the complexities of modern operations whilst achieving parity in performance. This chapter examines the extent to which brigade commanders rose to these challenges.

6.2: The Battle of Amiens: 8-12 August 1918

¹⁶ *Army Doctrine Publication Volume 1: Operations (Army Code 71565)*, (1994), pp.3-19.

¹⁷ Boff, *Winning and Losing*, p.7.

¹⁸ For Fourth Army's style of command see Simpson, *Directing Operations*, especially pp.169-175.

Brigade operations at the Battle of Amiens benefited from two preconditions necessary for operational success. First, the available firepower doubled to close on 2,000 tubes prior to the opening of the offensive. This equated to a field gun or howitzer every 29 yards of the front, which far surpassed the 530 German pieces identified by the British.¹⁹ The magnitude of the artillery's firepower was matched by its accuracy, and convenient artillery barrage lines were designed to conform to the infantry start lines. Drawing upon previous lessons, the absence of a preliminary bombardment helped to achieve operational surprise, which complemented by the weight of fire generated.

Second, Fourth Army had an overwhelming advantage in manpower of some 441,000 troops. Of these, the Canadian divisions were much stronger than the British or Australian.²⁰ Fourth Army's intelligence initially established that it confronted six German divisions of 37,000 men defending weak and relatively vulnerable positions. However, the Germans still had substantial reserves available and it was believed that they would be able to destroy at least eight further divisions by the evening of 11 August.²¹ This figure proved to be an underestimate. Although the BEF of 1918 is often assumed as a 'conscript army', evidence indicates that 40% of the British divisions consisted of men who had enlisted before the introduction of compulsion.²²

The third precondition for operational success was reliable communications. The transition from static to semi-mobile warfare raised a host of problems. No single technological fix was available to solve the problems of communication during mobile

¹⁹ Royal Artillery Institution Woolwich, Major-General C.E.D. Budworth, MGRA Fourth Army 1916-1918, Budworth Papers, 'Fourth Army Artillery in the Battle of Amiens, August 8, 1918', section 1.

²⁰ For the total strength of Fourth Army see *OH 1918*, Vol.4, p.22 and *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920* (London: HMSO, 1922).

²¹ Montgomery, *Fourth Army*, pp.16-17.

²² A. Hines, *Refilling Haig's Armies: The Replacement of Casualties of British Infantry Casualties on the Western Front 1916-1918* (Solihull: Helion, 2018), p.298.

operations. One solution, as Hall has argued, was that the BEF was able to reduce the impact of a breakdown of communications 'through the much more effective approach of limited objective, set-piece attacks' instead of attempting a decisive breakthrough.²³ It was envisaged that these measures, would reduce the distance between command posts and so the tempo of operations could be maintained.

The provision of sufficient logistic and combat support at Amiens undoubtedly provided brigade command with the means to sustain an initial advance. However, the increased distances between command posts aggravated the problems posed by poor communications. This had serious implications for brigade command's ability to control its formation. Further, the exposure of brigade staff in advanced positions should not be underestimated. For example, Brigadier-General L.W. De V. Sadleir-Jackson, GOC 54 Brigade 'was wounded... having pushed into the front line, the better to control the situation'.²⁴ Casualty figures for the Hundred Days show an attrition rate of 14.9% amongst brigadiers from First, Second, Third and Fourth Armies, of which four were killed and sixteen wounded. In comparison, during the German Spring offensive of 1918 the attrition rate equalled 16.1%, with seven brigadiers killed and ten wounded.²⁵ These losses confirm the necessity for brigade staff to be sufficiently forward to ascertain the position in the front line and to act upon their own initiative.

6.3: III Corps: Brigade Operations

An analysis of operations conducted by the brigades of Lieutenant-General Sir R.H.K. Butler's III Corps serves a two-fold purpose.²⁶ First, to examine the extent to

²³ Hall, *Communications*, p.295.

²⁴ Anon, *The 54th Infantry Brigade 1914-1918: Some Records of Battle and Laughter in France* (printed for private circulation, 1919: (reprint) The Naval and Military Press, nd), p.174.

²⁵ Casualty figures taken from Davies and Maddocks, *Bloody Red Tabs* and relevant brigade diaries.

²⁶ Due to sickness, Butler was temporarily replaced by Lieutenant -General Sir A.J. Godley between 11 August and 10 September.

which brigade benefited from Fourth Army's operational arrangements. Second, to evaluate the tactical response of brigade command to an initial disruption to the operational timetable and to stout enemy resistance. The operations of 18th (Eastern) Division's 54 Brigade, 12th (Eastern) Division's 36 Brigade and those of 58th (2/1 London) Division have been chosen to explore these factors.

Overall, the superiority of well-trained Dominion troops over the German resistance and the dominance of artillery support benefited the advance of the Australian and Canadian Corps on 8 August. The attack of III Corps north of the Somme, designed to provide flank protection for the Australian Corps south of the river, was less successful. Initially disrupted by a German attack on 6 August, the casualties inflicted on 54 Brigade resulted in it being replaced by 36 Brigade. Despite short notice and a lack of reconnaissance, 36 Brigade's attack over unknown ground proved a success, 'the Brigade [before relief] being ascertained... to have held all its objectives'.²⁷ In relation to this success and in accordance with the compression of battle procedures, Brigadier-General C.S. Owen considered that the operation demonstrated that 'it was possible to carry out a successful attack at very short notice and with very short instructions from Divisional and Brigade Commanders'.²⁸ From an organisational perspective, the success reflects the efficiency of the brigade staff and their response to the increased tempo of operations and the short timeframe in which to make suitable arrangements. From the perspective of command and control, the operation underlined the extent to which responsibility was devolved down to the most appropriate level in response to the increased tempo. Both of these factors reflected

²⁷ TNA, WO 95/1855, 36 Brigade WD, 9 August 1918.

²⁸ *Ibid*, appendix 9, 'Narrative of Operations between 8-12 August 1918'.

the transformation of brigade command through their ability to adapt to flexible operations.

The foremost advantage enjoyed by 58th Division's attack was a sophisticated artillery scheme, with barrage lines shaped according to the configuration of brigade frontages and intermediate objectives. For example, 174 Brigade's frontage was described as 'typical of the Somme area with gentle slopes cut by fairly deep Ravines running obliquely to the line of advance with numerous copses ... known to be full of Machine Guns'.²⁹ Thus, the bottom of the valleys which could not be reached by the 18-pdrs 'were dealt with by a Howitzer barrage moving from Valley to Valley to harmonise with the Creeping Barrage'. Predicted fire was the order of the day. The complete artillery surprise was largely due to the proper use of survey techniques and accurate maps in providing the line of fire to the batteries. The work of flash-spotters and sound-rangers of the Field Survey Battalions were indispensable to the implementation of the creeping barrages.³⁰ The attack was delivered with no artillery support, in an attempt to achieve an element of surprise, coordinated with Stokes Mortar Batteries and machine gun sections attached to each battalion, with two other sections remaining under GOC Brigade.³¹ Although the two sections of tanks detailed for the attack failed to arrive at zero-hour, their eventual assistance proved valuable in destroying machine gun nests.³² The impact of these measures provided 174 Brigade with the flexibility and support to sustain the initial tempo of its attack.

²⁹ TNA, WO 95/3004, 174 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations of 174 Brigade 8 August 1918'.

³⁰ P. Chasseaud, *Artillery's Astrologers: A History of British Survey and Mapping on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Lewes: Mapbooks, 1999), especially pp.448-455.

³¹ TNA, WO 95/3004, 174 Brigade WD, Forthcoming Operations: 174 Infantry Brigade Instruction No.2, Artillery.

³² *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations August 6-10, 1918: The First Assault'

Whilst the combination of arms proved beneficial for battalions, the influence exercised by brigade command was limited. This was due to the heavy mist and smoke that blanketed the battlefield and prevented the use of visual methods in the absence of telegraphic and telephonic communications. As Brigadier-General A. Maxwell, GOC 174 Brigade wrote 'it cannot be precisely stated at what time the objectives were reached' only that leadership and initiative was displayed 'by the Officers and NCOs dealt with the unexpected situations'.³³ These observations give weight to the view that the brigadier's influence was dependent on the maintenance of communications during protracted advances and on local conditions on the battlefield.

Despite the technological benefits offered by more flexible and sophisticated communication systems, the onset of semi-mobile operations raised the problem of how to bridge the gap between front-line troops and their commanders at the rear. This problem was exacerbated by the increased distances between command posts and imposed vastly different demands on commanders. For example, having established a principal trunk route forward from its battle headquarters to a distant Advanced Brigade Exchange, 174 Brigade's communications were limited to 'a single line and was very slow'.³⁴ Similarly, the staff of 175 Brigade found it 'extremely difficult to keep line communication through the constant change of Headquarters and breakage caused by tanks'. These difficulties were compounded by 'the broken nature of the country [which] did not always lend itself to Visual Signalling'.³⁵ As for the lack of wireless sets, Brigadier-General H.W. Cobham, GOC 175 Brigade considered that,

³³ *Ibid*, 'The First Assault and Conclusions'.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 'Report on Signal Communications during Operations 8-12 August 1918'.

³⁵ TNA, WO 95/3008, 175 Brigade WD, appendix B, 'General Remarks and Lessons Learnt'.

despite the constraints of the battlefield that reduced their efficiency 'in future all brigades should be supplied with sets' from the beginning of operations.³⁶

The difficulties of communication were significantly eased by carefully chosen command headquarters and by close liaison. In 18th Division's 55 Brigade, touch was maintained by the establishment of adjacent command posts comprising 'Brigade, all battalions and the Trench Mortar Battery... so that all COs concerned were constantly in touch with the situation'.³⁷ These measures proved valuable as the commanders of 35 and 53 Brigades, having been informed of their heavy losses, were able to offer assistance to 'the battle-worn 55 Brigade'.³⁸ Additionally, Brigade Observation Posts were placed as far forward as possible and with adequate protection which 'proved... invaluable... particularly during the attack of 58th and 12th Divisions on the 9th'. From these positions, the FOOs were able to draw down artillery fire 'upon parties of the enemy as they "trundled" down into the valley'.³⁹

The measures taken by Fourth Army reflected the attempt to bridge the communication gap and enhance the tactical influence of subordinate commanders. The brigades were instructed to 'move as close together as possible and along a prearranged route so that Signals only have to maintain one forward route'.⁴⁰ The progressive advance of brigade headquarters, the establishment of forward observation posts and the close liaison with flank brigades reflected a compliance with these instructions. Similar measures were implemented in Second Army. For example, the brigade headquarters of 30th Division were instructed 'to follow a definite route

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ TNA, WO 95/2048, 55 Brigade WD, 'Action of 55 Brigade in the Battle of Amiens of 8 August 1918'.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Lessons Learnt and Points Brought out During the period 8-10 August 1918'.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Action of 55 Brigade'.

⁴⁰ IWM, Fourth Army Records, Vol.64, 'Lessons Learnt during Recent Operations', 14 November 1918.

each day' so that they were 'more or less forecasting the probable route' on a daily basis.⁴¹

In terms of tactically innovative attacks, the capture of Chipilly on 9 August highlights the mutual cooperation that existed between the brigades of Fourth Army. Despite an initial disruption to III Corps' operational schedule caused by the German attack on 6 August, the efficient brigade staff work of 58th Division's 173 and 175 Brigades, in close co-operation with 12th Division and 131st American Regiment resulted in the capture of the village. The objective, a heavily defended spur extending into an acute southern bend of the Somme, was protected by two lines of machine gun emplacements below its western edge.⁴² The capture of these positions involved a complex attack that encircled the village; this entailed the assembly and movement of six battalions of 175 Brigade with two detached from 174 Brigade and 12th Division. Despite the brigadier relinquishing his command due to illness, the battalions were at the assembly positions within three hours before 'moving up to the starting off-line'.⁴³

Similar arrangements were implemented by the brigade staff of 173 Brigade. Here the difficult manoeuvre of "side-slipping" to establish the forming up line, whilst withdrawing the fighting patrols was accomplished successfully. The initial attack of 173 Brigade was held up by heavy machine gun fire but was carried forward 'just in the nick of time' by the arrival of the 131st American Regiment. Significantly, in relation to the tactics of encirclement, the success was 'greatly assisted by the action of the

⁴¹ TNA, WO 95/2338, 90 Brigade WD, 15 October 1918.

⁴² See Map 10, p.319.

⁴³ TNA, WO 95/3008, 175 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations 8-12 August 1918' and 175 Brigade OO No. 130, 9 August 1918.

10/Londons (175 Brigade) who pushed round the South and East of Chipilly and got on to the flank of the enemy machine guns'.⁴⁴

The initial attack of III Corps demonstrated the benefits of a sophisticated combined-arms approach. In relation to command and control, the establishment of carefully positioned brigade forward observation posts, combined with close liaison, illustrated the benefits of mutual support. Despite an initial failure to reach their second objective on 9 August, the attack by 173 and 175 Brigades demonstrated their tactical capability in adapting to the disposition of the enemy defences. The rapid assembly of the brigades was testament to the efficiency of brigade and battalion staffs alike in proving that it was possible to carry out a successful attack at short notice. The implementation of these measures highlighted the confidence and professionalism of the brigade staffs and reflected the organisational and tactical transformation of brigade command.

6.4: III Corps: Brigade Operations at Albert, 20-26 August 1918

The higher tempo of operations undertaken during this phase of the offensive was reflected in the flexibility and adaptation exercised by brigade command. First, the planning and execution of operations in a short time span necessitated a compression of standard battle procedures. Second, in accordance with the pre-war principles of *FSR1*, command was devolved to the lowest appropriate level, and the onus was on local commanders to respond swiftly. This necessitated sound judgement and thorough awareness of the situation. Third, where tactical lessons were learnt, they needed to be quickly disseminated and incorporated into brigade training. These

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 95/3000, 173 Brigade WD, appendix G, 'Rough Narrative of Events August 8-9, 1918'.

measures were successfully accomplished by brigades during III Corps's operations at Albert.

As shown above, a brigadier's awareness of and response to the situation on his brigade sector was fundamental to operational success: in the case of defensive operations, they were critical to the brigade's very survival. As the pace of technological innovation progressed, this role was aided by reference to topographical maps and air reconnaissance in addition to the gathering of fresh intelligence by patrols. Prior to 18th Division's attack on 22 August, the staff of 55 Brigade, having collated all available information covering the enemy, issued 'a separate Instruction in the form of a tracing... as of 12 noon 20 August' with reference to 'Corps Topographical Sheets of 14.8.18 and 19.8.18'.⁴⁵ From this information Brigadier-General E.A. Wood was able to plan for an attack on Albert whilst making specific arrangements to repulse threatened counterattacks. Thus, he considered

that any hostile attacks of a magnitude involving the use of the Brigade Reserve may owing to the present topographical considerations be expected to come from a South East direction. As very few bridges at present exist over the Ancre and they are being watched continuously, the counterattack troops may expect to receive fair warning of any hostile attempts to advance and also early information of the attack. The high ground in E. 2 and 7 is the most probable first objective for an enemy attack on the Brigade front.⁴⁶

Based upon these assumptions all officers of the counterattack battalion were instructed 'to make themselves thoroughly acquainted with the ground and the gaps in the wire' with the OC being instructed to 'exercise his troops in forming up for an imaginary counterattack to regain the high ground'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ TNA, WO 95/2048, 55 Brigade WD, appendix 17, 55 Infantry Brigade Instruction No.1 and Instruction No.2, 20 August.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, appendix 15, Preliminary Instructions for Brigade Counterattack Troops, 18 August 1918.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

The attack also reflected the value placed upon liaison between arms, with the headquarters of 47th Division's 235 and 236 Brigades R.F.A. being attached to 55 Brigade HQ.⁴⁸ This arrangement enabled Wood to direct artillery on 'any enemy problem [on his front] holding up the advance of the 7/Buffs and direct[ing] fire onto any good target afforded'.⁴⁹ The brigade staff 'work[ed] at a very high speed' on operational orders, with the first conference held at 6pm on 19 August and the last at 10am on 21 August, by which time 'the Brigade Commander's plan of action was absolutely settled'. After moving his headquarters forward during the evening, Wood was then able to watch the progress of events and direct operations... whilst in close touch with the battalions'.⁵⁰

By contrast, the circumstances shaping the attack of 47th Division's 142 Brigade were less favourable. As the divisional history states, the attack was delivered under the false assumption that 'the enemy's resistance would not be severe and that his reserves were dissipated'.⁵¹ However, in the face of a determined counter-attack and rapidly changing circumstances, the brigade was left with insufficient artillery support. Initially, the line held by 142 Brigade contravened the directive laid down by III Corps in regard to the manpower required to hold a brigade front. This stated that 'where troops have to maintain pressure it is advisable to reduce the brigade frontage to 2,000 yards – the maximum a brigade staff can control'.⁵² However, the 142 Brigade 'held a line of 3,600 yards with 600 exhausted men'.⁵³

⁴⁸ TNA, WO 95/2717, 256 Brigade R.F.A. WD, 20 August 1918.

⁴⁹ TNA, WO 95/2048, 55 Brigade WD, 55 Brigade Instruction No.5, 21 August 1918.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, '55 Infantry Brigade in Counter Offensive: From Albert to Montaubon'.

⁵¹ A.H. Maude (ed.), *The 47th (London) Division 1914-1918* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1922), p.188.

⁵² LHCMA, Butler Papers, 69/10/1, 'Report on Operations of III Corps, August-October 1918', p.53.

⁵³ TNA, WO 95/2742, 142 Brigade WD, 'Preliminary Report on Operations of 22 August 1918'.

Other factors contributing to the brigade's difficulties stemmed from the unreliability of the tanks detailed for the attack and logistic problems caused by the transition to semi-mobile operations. Although in demand, the tank's lack of mechanical reliability meant that they were by no means a panacea for success. In this case the six machines detailed for the attack needed mechanical maintenance, leaving only one supply tank to replenish the brigade's forward S.A.A. dumps. Doubtful of 142 Brigade's capacity to repel an expected counterattack, Brigadier-General R. McDouall requested a further artillery barrage. This was denied because 'the targets already given to the Divisional Artillery' had consumed all available ammunition, highlighting the problems encountered in sustaining an adequate level of logistical support.⁵⁴ With the failure to suppress the enemy fire, the brigade headquarters was then 'incessantly shelled making contact by telephone for more than a few minutes at a time either forward or backward impossible'.⁵⁵ The experiences of 142 Brigade demonstrate that the key components of the BEF's combined arms system of warfare, the infantry, artillery and auxiliary arms, were not infallible.

Correcting the errors that contravened the principles of open warfare, exposed in the transformation from static operations, was a pivotal role for the brigadiers. Brigadier-General C.E. Corkran wrote extensively upon these problems in 173 Brigade's war diaries.⁵⁶ His observations were related to his assertion that the principles of open warfare had been neglected at Billon Wood during operations on 25 August. His comments drew upon the principles laid down in *FSR1* and the tactical lessons incorporated in *Notes From Recent Fighting No. 4*. This recently issued

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/3000, 173 Brigade WD. At the age of 43 Corkran was appointed GOC 5 Brigade, 2nd Division and then transferred to 3 Brigade, Guards Division a year later. He assumed command of 173 Brigade, 58th (1/2 London) Division in July 1918.

pamphlet stated that 'in [the present] warfare it is neither possible for Divisions and Brigades to carry out their functions with the facilities and the deliberation which have come to be looked upon as trench warfare'.⁵⁷ Corkran's principal concern was 'the lack of application of the principles of protection... where whole platoons were observed to advance into the open in "lumps" against close range M.G. and rifle fire (300 yards) and to suffer accordingly'. This he blamed upon the inexperience of platoon and section commanders. The solution was to impress upon them the necessity 'for every body of troops being preceded by ground scouts to reconnoitre ahead and to the flanks to avoid a surprise attack'.⁵⁸ Immediate arrangements were made to address this weakness with specific company and platoon training concentrated upon the employment of patrols and the exercise of 'fire and movement' with the support of Lewis Guns. Regular lectures to junior officers reinforced these principles, with an emphasis upon communication drill, reconnaissance and liaison.

While the artillery counter-battery support on 25 August had proved satisfactory, Corkran considered that 'the liaison with the Heavy Artillery left much to be desired'. As regular calls for artillery support had been wanting in accuracy, he suggested 'that at least one Heavy Artillery officer could be spared to assist the forward infantry in the identification' of enemy positions and the calibre of their guns. To establish a secure line of communication, he also suggested that

as in the present type of fighting the main bulk of the enemy fire is directed... on to the forward troops... our communications rearward from about 1,000 yards from the front line are seldom interfered with. This fact should enable an artillery line could be maintained as far as Battalion Headquarters while it could be maintained up to Brigade Advanced Command Post which, whenever

⁵⁷ IWM, Williams Papers, 77/189/4, *Notes From Recent Fighting No. 4: Staff Duties, 13 April 1918.*

⁵⁸ TNA, WO 95/3000, 173 Brigade WD, appendix K, 'Report on Operations of 173 Brigade 22-28 August and 1 September 1918, Part 2, General Remarks', p.9, 5 September 1918,

possible is selected at a point where the greater part of the Brigade Front can be observed.⁵⁹

These recommendations were an attempt to maintain operational tempo, as was Corkran's argument for placing the guns under Corps control to provide 'perfect liaison [with the] command of a weapon so essential to the fighting infantry... [being] decentralised'.⁶⁰

While, as John Bourne has contended, Corkran's appointment to a second-line TF brigade may be considered as 'something as a come down for a Guards officer', his extensive combat experience was important in informing the training of inexperienced junior officers in the tactics of open warfare.⁶¹ Corkran was not alone in bringing tactical proficiency to a TF formation. For example, Brigadier-General H.W. Cobham's 175 Brigade provided the nucleus of 58th Division's advanced guard at Peronne on 30 August, the organisation and adoption of a mobile, combined-arms attack reflecting his experience and professionalism.⁶² As Simkins has argued, 'the apparent ease with which a second-line Territorial infantry division could adapt' to the conditions of open warfare 'is indicative of the greater degree of sophistication possessed by most front-line units'.⁶³ Despite having served only a brief period with their respective brigades, Corkran and Cobham established their leadership credentials very rapidly, instilling into their new formations the confidence,

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.11.

⁶¹ www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/warstudies/research/projects/lionsdonkeys/b.aspx -retrieved 18 February 2016.

⁶² *OH 1918*, Vol.4, p.139; TNA, WO 95/3008, 175 Brigade WD.

⁶³ Simkins, "' Building Blocks'" in Sheffield and Todman, *Command and Control*, p.164.

professionalism and tactical flair acquired from their extensive front line and/or staff experience.

The role of brigade command during the offensive operations of August 1918 can be viewed from two perspectives. The first is defined by the benefits provided by the BEF's material strength: firepower, supported sophisticated logistic infrastructure; combined arms and communications, which, although prone to significant difficulties, were far more robust and flexible than before. The second perspective highlights the leadership qualities, professionalism and efficiency of the brigade staff, expressed through decentralisation and flexibility which allowed brigadiers to adapt and respond to increased tempo. The establishment of progressively advanced brigade headquarters and report centres provided the local commander with the means to sustain tactical control. Clearly the massive firepower and efficient logistic support provided by Fourth Army was beneficial to brigade command. However, as the experiences of 142 Brigade demonstrated, these benefits were not consistent across all brigades. This suggests a continuing unevenness in the BEF's learning process and the evolution of brigade command.

6.5: IX Corps: Brigade Operations at Epehy, the St. Quentin Canal and the Beaurevoir Line, 18 September-10 October 1918

The renewal of operations on 18 September was designed to place Fourth Army within striking distance of the Main Hindenburg System.⁶⁴ In brigades, as the tempo of operations gathered pace, command decisions devolved to the lowest appropriate level with the 'fighting carried out chiefly by the junior officers of the

⁶⁴ For General Sir Henry Rawlinson's analysis of the German defensive system see TNA, WO 95/438, Rawlinson to GHQ, No.265 (G), 11 September 1918.

battalions'.⁶⁵ These changes reflected the change from static to open warfare that had transformed the role of brigade staff. The compression of standard battle procedures, the use of verbal orders and increased distances between command headquarters required that staff be fully aware of the forward situation and 'retain touch with units belonging to their own formations or with other units on their flanks'.⁶⁶ Moreover, an emphasis on flexibility and the establishment of advanced brigade posts led to increased casualties amongst brigade staff. To evaluate the impact of enhanced tempo upon the role of brigade command, the advance of Fourth Army's IX Corps towards the Hindenburg Line, its crossing of the St. Quentin Canal and the breach of the Beaurevoir Line have been examined.

Fourth Army's attack on 18 September involved a total of eight divisions from III, IX, and Australian Corps. Of these divisions, five had been in action continuously since 8 August, with those of III and IX Corps being particularly weakened.⁶⁷ In all probability, Fourth Army could muster 40,000 troops of whom 27,000 would have been initially deployed. If these figures are correct, 'Fourth Army had a large manpower advantage on its front'.⁶⁸ It was calculated that 'the Fourth Army was opposed by seven divisions... and that the strength in rifles in the line probably did not exceed 12,000'.⁶⁹ The British firepower advantage exceeded even that of their superiority in manpower. This enabled two-thirds of the artillery to focus upon counter-battery work and points of resistance. These two factors were preconditions for operational success. However, as tanks were in short supply, only 20 were detailed to Fourth

⁶⁵ H.R. Cummings, *A Brigadier in France 1917-1918* (Uckfield: Naval and Military Press, 2001 [1922]), p.147.

⁶⁶ TNA, WO 158/70, *Notes on Recent Fighting*.

⁶⁷ Prior and Wilson, *Command*, p.351.

⁶⁸ Harris, *Amiens*, pp.176 and 320, fn.82.

⁶⁹ Montgomery, *Fourth Army*, p.121. This calculation proved to be approximately correct. There were in fact eight divisions opposing Fourth Army on 18 September.

Army: eight supported III Corps, four IX Corps, and eight the Australian Corps. They were to assist the infantry over a 20,000-yard front and not beyond the first objective. By compensation, machine gun barrages were employed by all corps, except in IX Corps 'as no one at Fourth Army HQ [saw fit] to draw the corps commander's attention to this tactic'.⁷⁰ This omission can be ascribed to inconsistency in Fourth Army's planning and a lack of uniformity in the implementation of combined arms. The absence of a machine-gun barrage and the variable numbers of tanks available for each corps are indicative of some of the irregularities in the provision of brigade support.

The operations of 6th Division (IX Corps) began with a difficult assembly, 18 Brigade having failed to secure the "jumping off" positions and 71 Brigade receiving no reports upon the disposition 'of its units prior to zero hour'.⁷¹ These difficulties were compounded by the division's 4,000-yard line of advance, devoid of cover and exposed to enfilade fire from both sides of a valley. With the four tanks detailed for the attack failing to arrive and in the absence of a machine-gun barrage, the advance stalled and

by evening the different events of the day [and] the difficulty of keeping direction had completely mixed up the units of the 16th Brigade so much that immediate unravelling seemed almost impossible and the senior officers at various points had to collect the troops and take command of them. ⁷²

This situation highlights the difficulties experienced by brigade command during an extended advance as operations transitioned from static to mobile and responsibility was devolved to battalion, platoon and section levels. Brigadier-General H.A. Walker,

⁷⁰ Prior and Wilson, *Command*, p.353.

⁷¹ TNA, WO 95/1620, 71 Brigade WD, 71 Brigade OO. No.352 issued at 2.45am 17 September and war diary 18 September 5.30am.

⁷² R.S.H. Moody, *Historical Records of the Buffs: East Kent Regiment* (London: Medici Society, 1922), p.404.

GOC 16 Brigade recognised that the attack was 'a soldier's battle', and his responsibilities confined to 'relieving tired troops, collecting reserves, issuing orders for consolidation and ascertaining the position of the troops on the flanks'.⁷³

The attack of 16 Brigade also highlighted the difficulties associated with the compression of standard battle procedures. As Major-General T.S. Lambert, GOC 32nd Division laid down, to maintain the tempo of successive attacks 'where orders arrive late... on no account must the issue be delayed'.⁷⁴ Consequently, staff officers attending divisional conferences were expected 'to be in possession of a full knowledge of their local situation'. Furthermore, it was stressed that 'owing to the great distances separating units and formations and the shortness of time it [was] very rarely that decisions once made at conference could be altered'.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, as Walker stressed, from the perspective of the brigadier, the issue of a warning order was crucial to avoid the

regrettable results [that occurred] on the 19th [where] on the other hand a warning order for a minor operation with 3 Infantry Brigade on the 24th allowed of the attack being delivered to time although troops only learnt of zero hour some 10 minutes before the advance.⁷⁶

In contrast to 16 Brigade's attack, the assembly of 1st Division's 2 Brigade on 24 September was accomplished without difficulty. This was attributable to thorough reconnaissance which had pinpointed the batteries 'from which the enemy were inclined to keep up harassing fire' and which were 'kept quiet by the Artillery throughout

⁷³ TNA, WO 95/1607, 16 Brigade WD, appendix V, No.38/310, 'Narrative of Operations of 16 Brigade, 18-22 September 1918', 4 October 1918.

⁷⁴ TNA, WO 95/2372, 32 Division WD, appendix 36, No.G.S.1857/16/2, 'Some Lessons from Recent Fighting 8-11 August and 18 August-12 September', 12 September 1918.

⁷⁵ *Ibid* (4).

⁷⁶ TNA, WO 95/1607, 16 Brigade WD, appendix V, No.G.O.38/310, 'Narrative of Operations of 16 Brigade 18-22 September', 4 October 1918.

the night'.⁷⁷ With sufficient knowledge of the brigade frontage, Brigadier-General G.C. Kelly was able to place his reserve battalion so as to take maximum advantage of the ground 'in taking over successive tactical points as they were gained... and to remain ready to re-act [sic] should a counter-attack be delivered'. The movements of brigade and artillery headquarters were an object lesson in liaison. Immediately upon 2 Brigade taking the first objective, the 39 Field Artillery Brigade HQ moved forward with their guns to establish a satisfactory 'liaison between the Infantry and the Artillery Brigades and the battalions'; so satisfactory in fact 'that a counter-attack was stopped almost before it had developed'.⁷⁸

From the contrasting experiences of 2 and 16 Brigades it is evident that the transition from static to mobile operations was far from smooth. The potential for success depended upon sufficient logistic support, whilst the variable configuration of brigade frontages shaped operations. The higher tempo of operations necessitated the compression of battle procedures, in contrast to the complex operational orders of earlier campaigns. The ability of brigade command to respond to rapidly changing circumstances depended upon the competence of the individual brigadier and the collective experience and tactical proficiency of its staff. This entailed the implementation of sophisticated tactics and the establishment of close liaison between all arms. However, in maintaining touch, the forward movement of brigade headquarters proved increasingly dangerous. All three brigadiers of 1st Division became casualties in the space of 14 days. Brigadier-General W.B. Thornton, GOC 1 Brigade was wounded on 22 September and Brigadier-General G.C. Kelly, GOC 2 Brigade having 'handled his brigade under heavy fire' and repulsed several

⁷⁷ TNA, WO 95/1268, 2 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations 24 September and the succeeding days'.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

counterattacks was wounded by shellfire on 26 September.⁷⁹ GOC 3 Brigade was killed alongside his brigade major on 4 October whilst reconnoitring a new position, whilst Walker of 16 Brigade was wounded on 16 October. In total, four brigadiers were killed and eighteen either wounded or gassed within the five Armies during the Hundred Days.

As Fourth Army's advance continued, lessons were drawn from operations to form the basis of brigade field exercises. For example, the staff of 2 Brigade, accompanied by officers of the R.F.A., conducted an exercise in open countryside in mid-October; riding over recently captured ground, 'the appropriate lessons were deduced from their experiences'. This was a return to the pre-war practice of staff rides designed to train officers in the tactical and strategic significance of terrain, and contingency planning.⁸⁰

The crossing of the St. Quentin Canal and operations against the Beaurevoir Line by IX Corps were notable for the level of responsibility devolved upon brigade command. The operations were designed to compensate for the loss of communications, virtually inevitable in semi-mobile operations, and maintain the tempo of the attack through flexibility and decentralised command. The relative speed of the advance meant that it was possible to provide only a limited system of telegraph and telephone lines, so commanders were forced to resort to alternative methods. However, of these 'the environment that lay beyond Brigade Headquarters was still not conducive to the widespread and effective use of wireless technology' while the use of visual communication was invariably impaired by poor visibility.⁸¹

⁷⁹ TNA, WO 95/1268, 2 Brigade WD, 26 September 1918.

⁸⁰ TNA, WO 95/1268, 2 Brigade WD, 25 October 1918.

⁸¹ Hill, *Communications*, p.279.

Major-General G.F. Boyd's plan for 46th (North Midland) Division's crossing of the canal was specifically designed to compensate for the loss of communication by enhancing the responsibility devolved to his brigade and battalion commanders. Boyd's instructions were clear, that he retained the right to commit 138 and 139 Brigades in the event of an unsuccessful attack by 137 Brigade. In the event of a loss of communication with his subordinates, brigade and battalion commanders holding back would be deemed to be in flagrant breach of orders. It was therefore impressed upon 138 and 139 Brigades that they must have their headquarters placed to allow direct observation and that

should it appear at any time that the 137 Brigade having crossed the CANAL are being outfought through lack of support, these battalions on their own initiative and without waiting for orders will advance across the CANAL to reinforce [137 Brigade] [original emphases].⁸²

The company commanders of 138 Brigade, detailed to provide protection from the western bank, were therefore instructed to provide regular reports to battalion headquarters from which an officer 'provided with a horse' liaised with brigade headquarters.⁸³ Ultimately, in a rapid response to 137 Brigade's success, the 5/Lincolnshire and 5/Leicestershire of 138 Brigade moved forward within three hours of notification. Within four hours, with the first objective taken, company commanders were able to 'make arrangements with their respective section of Tanks for an attack on the final objective'.⁸⁴ 46th Division's measures proved successful in mitigating the loss of communications and ensuring that the tempo of operations was sustained. In

⁸² TNA, WO 95/2666, 46th (North Midland) Division WD, Instruction No.6, G.114/10, 'Minutes from Conference held at 137 Brigade HQ, 26 September', 27 September 1918.

⁸³ TNA, WO 95/2689, 138 Brigade WD, Instruction No.2 and 'Further Instructions No.1 regarding 138 Brigade OO No.251, 28 September 1918.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 'Report on Attack at St. Quentin Canal on 29 September 1918'.

the event, no visual contact was possible due to the fog and smoke and 'communication with the Battalions was impossible owing to incessant cutting of lines'.⁸⁵

After the initial assault and having passed through 46th Division, the brigades of 32nd Division benefited from the progressive movement of brigade headquarters. As the advance progressed, an Advanced Brigade Report Centre (ABRC), acting as a Transmitting Station, 'moved forward to a pre-arranged position [with] each successive bound made in a similar manner'. With telephone communication established, the brigade staff were also able to call upon the use of a wireless loop set, although in compliance with the compression of battle procedure were restricted 'to no more than 12 words'.⁸⁶ A junior brigade officer was detailed to maintain contact between "C" Company, 32 Bn. M.G. Corps and 97 T.M. Battery'.⁸⁷ To sustaining the tempo of the attack, neither 'Tanks nor Infantry should wait for one another... until the situation [approximated] to Open Warfare': this approximation was soon to be realised.⁸⁸

The subsequent operations of 16 Brigade against the Beaulieu Line on 8 October were considered by Walker 'more in the nature of open warfare than any operations... since 1914'.⁸⁹ In response to the difficulties in accommodating the battalions of 16 and 71 Brigades upon a restricted frontage Walker devised a plan 'to reduce the distance which 1/Bufs would have to side slip after relief and left a greater strength for forming a defensive flank'.⁹⁰ This plan conformed to the line of the brigade

⁸⁵ TNA, WO 95/2684, 137 Brigade WD, G.17, 'Report on Operations', p.4, 1 October 1918.

⁸⁶ TNA, WO 95/2401, 97 Brigade WD, appendix 32, 32 Division Instruction Series "A" No.G.S.1928/9/9 and Communications.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, Liaison Officers, 28 September.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 97 Brigade Battle Instructions Series "A" 4/144/1, 28 September 1918 and 32 Division, G.S.928/9/4, No.3. 'Tanks'.

⁸⁹ TNA, WO 95/1607, 16 Brigade WD, 'Account of Operations of 16 Infantry Brigade, 6-9 October 1918'.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, appendix c, 'Narrative of Active Operations undertaken by 16 Infantry Brigade from 5- 10 October 1918 inclusive'.

front and reflected the necessity of maintaining the tempo of operations. In the event, with the attack postponed for 24 hours, minor modifications were made in response to the arrival of 'two companies from a battalion of 18 Brigade, assisted by three Whippet Tanks to mop up centres of resistance' and 'troops of 139 Brigade co-operating to the extent of trying to capture a certain nest of machine guns'. Having altered his plan accordingly, Walker later recorded that 'the difficulties to be expected... were considerably lessened'.⁹¹

46th Division's operations represented a significant progression in the organisational and tactical evolution of brigade command during the Hundred Days. Careful preparation, mutual support and the implementation of a cohesive combined-arms attack contributed to operational success. An emphasis upon devolved command, ameliorating loss of communications and reinforced by the principles of *FSR1*, provided brigadiers with enhanced tactical flexibility. Moreover, as Walker's experiences demonstrate, brigadiers were able to respond confidently to the various difficulties posed by the transition from static to mobile operations.

6.6: Second Army: II, X and XIX Corps: Brigade Operations, 28 September-25 October 1918

The opening of the Flanders offensive on 28 September, on a 16-mile front running from Ypres to the River Lys, marked the Second Army's first major engagement of the Hundred Days. In comparison to Fourth Army, its four corps were not generously equipped, lacking tanks and limited to 444 heavy guns and eight Field Artillery brigades.⁹² As Harris contended, 'only the weakness of the German forces to

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *OH 1918*, Vol.5, appendix 2, Skeleton Order of Battle of the British Armies in France, 27 September 1918, pp. 621-622.

Second Army's front made this seem adequate', although the five understrength divisions of the German Fourth Army possessed excellent observation over the entire Second Army area.⁹³ In addition much had been done to organise the enemy defences and 'utilise for defence in depth the pill-boxes, dug-outs and wire of the earlier periods'.⁹⁴ In its favour, the Second Army benefited from 'Plumer's penchant for teamwork and consultation that did much to foster... devolved command'.⁹⁵ To evaluate brigade operations on Second Army's northern front, those conducted by II, X and XIX Corps have been examined with a focus upon the preconditions for operational success: the establishment of communications, sufficient artillery support and flexibility. The brigadiers's role in training and his contribution to the tactical debate have also been assessed to gauge brigade command's administrative and operational development.

That Second Army's reputation for meticulous planning was not unfounded is evident in the arrangements for the opening of the offensive. Capitalizing upon their knowledge of the area, brigade, battalion and company commanders, in groups of 60 'were taken each day to Cassel [Second Army HQ] by [GOC 35th Division] and with the help of MGGs Second Army and GSO3 explained the ground on a large-scale model which all these officers knew by previous experience'. All officers were then able to discuss their mutual cooperation and

practically played out a war game of their participation in the attack [it being] certain that this was responsible in a great degree for the smoothness with which the operations were subsequently carried out.⁹⁶

⁹³ Harris, *Amiens*, p.199.

⁹⁴ *OH 1918*, Vol.5, p.64.

⁹⁵ Simkins, 'Herbert Plumer' in Beckett and Corvi, *Haig's Generals*, p.159.

⁹⁶ TNA, WO 95/2470, 35th Division WD, 'Report on Operations of 35 Division'.

Second Army had some experienced brigadiers: Brigadier-General J.W. Sandilands, GOC 104 Brigade and Brigadier-General J.H.W. Pollard, GOC 106 Brigade, 35th Division (XIX Corps) had served on Second Army's front for 27 and 16 months, respectively.⁹⁷ This level of experience proved a valuable asset in providing a comprehensive knowledge of the front line. Conversely, 21 brigades were allocated new brigadiers from January-October 1918. Of these, nine appointments were made during the Hundred Days including that of Brigadier-General J.L. Jack whose 28 Brigade, 9th Division, was formed on 11 September 1918. Most brigadiers were predominately men who had been Regular officers in August 1914 and reflected the profile of the experienced pre-war army officer imbued with determination and courage. For example, upon receiving a Bar to his D.S.O., Brigadier-General Hon. A.G.A. Hore-Ruthven V.C. GOC 26 Brigade, 9th Division, was considered to have

commanded his brigade with conspicuous gallantry and judgement through the operations east of Ypres from 28 September-27 October 1918... On 20 October he went forward among the attacking troops at a critical juncture and inspired them to the final effort, whereby the high ground of great tactical value was captured.⁹⁸

Few brigadiers originated from a civilian background. On 29 September, when the BEF broke through the Hindenburg Line, from 189 brigade commanders, only six originated from the TF. Where officers were from a civilian background however, such as Brigadier-General B. Freyberg V.C. GOC 88 Brigade, 29th Division, they demonstrated that they were equally 'capable of transferring their own professional talents into a military context'.⁹⁹ A notable feature of the September 1918 British brigadiers was their age. As the attrition of officers took its toll and older commanders

⁹⁷ Davson, *History of the 35th Division*, p.31.

⁹⁸ *London Gazette* (Supplement), 9 December 1919. Hore-Ruthven's V.C. was awarded during the Sudan Campaign of 1898.

⁹⁹ Simkins, *Command and Control*, p.154.

were replaced by younger battle-hardened veterans, the average age of 120 brigadiers equated to an average of 42 years.¹⁰⁰

Maintenance of tempo during brigade operations was determined by two factors: first, the ability of the artillery to move forward in successive bounds, following the infantry: and second, the ability of the brigadier to retain a substantial degree of tactical control. The arrangements for 9th (Scottish) Division's (II Corps) attack on 28 September satisfied both these criteria. Initially, 'the issuing of "Instructions" previous to a battle of this description where much care in detail was essential... proved invaluable'.¹⁰¹ The divisional fire-plan was designed to support assaults on four successive objectives and combined a creeping barrage of 18-pdrs joining up with a standing barrage put down by II Corps H.A. Each bound was marked by a three minute pause and 'at dawn two thirds of the guns [resorted] to using smoke shells'.¹⁰² To assist brigade staff in maintaining communication, a telegraph route forward of brigade headquarters to an 'earmarked' ABRC was supplemented by visual and wireless apparatus.¹⁰³ In maintaining close cooperation between flank formations, an "International" platoon was formed of members of the 8/Black Watch and the 17th Belgian Regiment on the left.¹⁰⁴

Throughout the attack communications worked, with valuable information from contact aircraft being transmitted down the chain of command from II Corps HQ., whilst a telephone cable 'enabled [28 Brigade] to maintain communication at each progressive point with Divisional HQ and to some extent with the battalions'.¹⁰⁵ Thus,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.154.

¹⁰¹ TNA, 95/1764, 26 Brigade WD, 'The Battle of Ypres', 28 September.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 9th Division Artillery and Infantry Plan, OO No.304, 23 September 1918.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 26 Brigade Battle Instructions No.2, 23 September 1918.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 'Liaison on Flanks'.

¹⁰⁵ Terraine, *General Jack*, p.273.

Brigadier-General J.L. Jack, GOC 28 Brigade was able to report that 'I have just seen the Camerons supported by the Black Watch and the Seaforths leave for their second objective. All in very good heart. Casualties slight'.¹⁰⁶ Then, having considered that he was 'much too far back for keeping touch with one's command' and having sought permission from the divisional commander, he moved his headquarters forward to within 350 yards of the front line. Thus, through successive moves he had a hold on operations, while overseeing the renewed advance of his battalions on the following morning.¹⁰⁷ Inevitably the progressive advance of brigade headquarters exposed its staff to increased danger. Moving forward with his battalions, Brigadier-General G.R.H. Cheape, GOC 86 Brigade, 29th Division, and Captain McFee his Assistant Brigade Major, were caught in their own barrage. Nevertheless, they succeeded in capturing 16 prisoners and the brigadier 'shot down an enemy aeroplane with his rifle'.¹⁰⁸ As their experiences demonstrate, open warfare provided ample opportunities for brigade staff to participate in an attack.

Throughout the attack of 9th (Scottish) and 35th Division's, operational orders remained brief and subject to alteration according to circumstances. As Sandilands explained

should the enemy... become demoralised and in full retreat it may be necessary to push forward at once in pursuit... achieved by the initiative of the man on the spot [and] the lifts off the area being shot over by the Heavy Artillery permit[ting] of this being done.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ TNA, WO 95/1742, 9th (Scottish) Division WD, Message Log, GOC 28 Brigade to 9th Division HQ, 10.32am 28 September.

¹⁰⁷ Terraine, *General Jack*, p.274 and H.H. Story, *History of the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) 1910-1933* (published for the regiment, 1961), pp.329-30.

¹⁰⁸ TNA, WO 95/2299, 86 Brigade WD, 'Report of Operations 28 September-2 October'. See also Gillon, *The Story of the 29th*, pp.206-208.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 'Report of Operations of 28 September – 2 October'. See also S. Gillon, *the Story of the 29th Division* (London: Nelson, 1925), pp.206-208.

Similarly, Brigadier-General R.L. Adlercron, GOC 124 Brigade, 41st Division, with his brigade held at an hour's notice, stated that

the Operations in which the Brigade had recently taken part were in spite of the short notice... satisfactory. He proceeded to point out that in the future short notice of all operations must be expected and all training must be made with this end in view.¹¹⁰

Consequently, the brigade's scheme of training reflected flexibility and that 'for the probable kind of fighting in which the Brigade could be engaged... [being] at very short notice and on any one of 4 or 5 different positions'. If it became impossible to issue written orders it was decided that 'skeleton orders... would be framed comprising the boundaries, bounds and objectives' and shown to the battalion commanders by 'the Brigadier Commander and the Staff on the ground'.¹¹¹

To reinforce the tactics adopted for the advance, a training exercise was carried out by the 11/Queens of 123 Brigade at XIX Corps School. This comprised a practice attack on a strongpoint and was observed by the brigade staff and COs of 124 Brigade. It was then arranged 'that units of 124 Brigade would carry out in succession a similar exercise over the same ground as the Brigade Operation of the 19th inst.'.¹¹² This exercise reflects the army's drive for uniformity in training based upon SS152 and reflected two beliefs: that training in a unit was the commanding officer's responsibility, and that special instructors were to be employed at dedicated corps schools. The exchange of experience and knowledge between the two staffs illustrated the search

¹¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/2642, 124 Brigade WD, Proceedings of Conference held at 124th Infantry Brigade Headquarters at 11.30am on 14th September 1918'.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Demonstration of a Battalion taking part in the pursuit of a retreating enemy: Brigade Instruction Scheme Outline, 21 September 1918 and 124 Brigade Training OO No.2, 23 September 1918.

for uniformity and that brigade commanders were willing to ask for advice from those with recognised experience. ¹¹³

The benefits of brigade training were reflected in the operations of 29th Division (II Corps) where, on 28 September, troops of Brigadier-General G.R.H. Cheape's 86 Brigade "dribbled" forward under cover of Trench Mortars, Lewis Guns, Rifle Grenades and rifle fire, outflanking the centres of resistance'.¹¹⁴ In 86 Brigade, section officers of the Machine Gun Corps were 'encouraged to use their own initiative' whilst the Stokes Mortars proved invaluable in overcoming hostile points of resistance'. Here also the persistent problem of maintaining the direction of attack, given the inexperience of the troops 'who had never advanced under a H.E. barrage before' was solved by the Brigade Intelligence Officer. Advancing with several observers 'on a compass bearing in the centre of the Brigade Front each with red patches on their backs and carrying a large red flag', the momentum and direction of the attack was maintained.¹¹⁵

Cheape considered that 'an officer from the Divisional Staff should be with the Reserve Battalion so that control of the situation may be exercised from the Divisional point of view'. This suggestion was intended to save 'valuable time on ascertaining the situation of the flank brigades and having to decide future action at field conferences'. It was also suggested that to conform with the rapid advance of Second Army, 'the Staff of Corps and Divisions should keep in touch with the situation and not endeavour to function from many miles in the rear'.¹¹⁶ These arrangements, in response to the

¹¹³ *SS152 Instructions for the Training of the British Armies in France (Provisional)* (June 1917 and January 1918) and *SS152 Instructions for Training in Schools at GHQ, Army and Corps Level*.

¹¹⁴ TNA, WO 95/2299, 86 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations 28 September- 2 October'.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Lessons Learnt, (g) and (h).

transition to open warfare, reflected brigade command's adaptability and contribution to the tactical debate.

Whilst a pre-condition for operational success, Second Army's provision of brigade artillery support was inconsistent. This was attributable to two factors. First, the number of artillery batteries and field brigades available for infantry support varied. Second, with the advance outpacing the range of the artillery, problems were encountered in getting guns forward. These factors merit further consideration. Three consecutive operations conducted by the brigades of 35th Division during October were shaped by the variable provision of artillery support. For example, the swift attack of 104 Brigade on 28 September faltered in the face of fierce resistance when '17/Lancashire were left out of the range of the Field Guns'.¹¹⁷ The batteries were delayed and

hastening forward to support the second advance of the 106th Brigade were unable to do so except by bursts of [indiscriminate] fire... so that the 17/Royal Scots and the 19/Highland L.I. made good their objectives... with practically no artillery support.¹¹⁸

According to the 35th Division's historian, the difficulties of making headway were also attributable to 'the battery commander [being] unable to arrange any reliable system of communication... the pill boxes and isolated houses [having] to be assaulted without effective covering fire'.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the brigade advanced eight miles.

In contrast, 104 Brigade's attack on 14 October benefited from 'a proportion of the Field Artillery covering the Brigade front moving forward with rapidity'. To

¹¹⁷ TNA, WO 95/2483, 104 Brigade WD, 28 September 1918.

¹¹⁸ Davson, *The History of the 35th Division*, pp.259-60. As I could not locate 35th Division's war diary for October and 104 Brigade diaries lacked the relevant artillery instructions, I have drawn upon Lieutenant-Colonel Davson's detailed narrative as CO 159th R.F.A.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.267.

compensate for the brigade attacking obliquely to the general line of advance, two field gun batteries, accompanied by howitzers, moved forward at zero-hour, to be joined later by the remainder of the field artillery. Thus:

as the barrage started the two detached batteries and the howitzers moved forward with the infantry to carry on the barrage beyond the line reached by the 119th A.F.A. Brigade. The remainder of the artillery advanced as soon as the limit of range was reached. In this way the barrage was continuous... As soon as the original barrage was finished the remainder of the batteries limbered up and between 8.15 and 10am were in action.¹²⁰

Aided by these arrangements, 17/Lancashire Fusiliers was able to reach its objective 4,500 yards distant and upon the resumption of operations the following morning 'all objectives were gained at an early hour'.¹²¹ On 20 October difficulties were again encountered in bringing forward the heavy artillery, the operation being supported by sections of field guns attached to each battalion.¹²² This situation was rectified on 31 October when '6-inch Howitzers were brought up to within 1,500 yards of the enemy machine-guns'.¹²³

In assessing the value of devolved responsibility, the existence of sufficient artillery support determined whether brigadiers chose to exploit the advance or consolidate their positions. In setting his brigade's objectives for 14 October, GOC 9th (Scottish) Division laid down that 'the method of advance would depend upon the tactical situation'. Thus, his orders stated that

if GOC 28 Brigade considers that a further advance can be made without the artillery being moved forward, he will continue the advance and 26 Brigade will continue to be responsible for his left flank. If he considers it cannot be made, he will consolidate. The Divisional Commander will then decide if the advance

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pp.269-270.

¹²¹ TNA, WO 95/2483, 104 Brigade WD, 14-15 October 1918.

¹²² *Ibid*, 20 October 1918.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 30-31 October 1918 and 104 Brigade OO No.230, 30 October 1918.

is to be continued after sufficient artillery has been forwarded and if so by which Brigade.¹²⁴

Having taken the decision to renew the attack, Jack's brigade was subsequently 'checked by the enemy's strong resistance' but resumed next morning.¹²⁵

Flexibility and decentralisation were at the core of brigade command. This was conveyed in the instructions issued by 34th Division (X Corps) for the deployment of artillery. Thus:

the attachment of Brigades of Field Artillery... in each Infantry Brigade Group [are provided] for close and immediate Artillery Support for the advancing Infantry and to prevent checks... under the command of GOC Brigade [accompanied] by an Artillery Brigade Commander to act as his adviser.¹²⁶

Divisional command gave guidance to assist brigadiers in the employment of field guns. This stated that 'sections can be pushed forward with the Battalions to cover the advance against any particular locality or to take advantage of fleeting opportunities'. Whilst it was advised that 'guns should engage any hostile guns located' it was stressed that 'their locality should be immediately sent to Divisional Headquarters to enable the HA to engage'. Any call upon artillery support made by battalions or companies through brigade headquarters 'were to be supplemented by sending an officer or NCO to the nearest guns in action'. The attention of the brigade staff was also drawn to *Training Leaflet No.5*, 'the present form of warfare giving splendid opportunities for practicing the very excellent methods laid down in this pamphlet'.¹²⁷

What effect did the tempo of operations during the Hundred Days have on a brigadier's tactical influence? To some degree it dwindled, as the advance outpaced

¹²⁴ TNA, WO 95/1774, 28 Brigade WD, appendix 40, 9th (Scottish) Division OO.318, 12 October 1918.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 14 October, 10.30pm, 9th Division OO 278 'Advance will be resumed at 09.00 15th October.

¹²⁶ TNA, WO 95/2437, 34th Division WD, appendix A30, 21 October 1918.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, Instruction No.14, 21 October 1918.

communications. In other respects, the ability to call on a wide range of assets, including heavy artillery, the field artillery brigades and Trench Mortar Batteries reinforced the firepower at a brigadier's disposal. The role of the field commander was reassessed in the light of the move to mobile operations, with the attention of officers 'down to Section and fire-unit commanders' drawn to the enduring pre-war principles of *FSR1*.¹²⁸

Initially, as Simpson has demonstrated, 'during set piece operations corps took greater control than during open warfare, when as much as possible was delegated to divisions'.¹²⁹ This demonstrated the flexibility of the BEF's command structure, as well as the value placed upon the 'man on the spot' by which the tempo of operations was sustained. The situation was summarised by Major-General C.L. Nicholson, GOC 34th Division, who stated that

the transition to mobile warfare necessitates a certain re-arrangement of ideas on the part of all commanders. *FSR1* is still the true guide for all troops leading and it is essential that all commanders down to Section and line-unit commanders should study it.¹³⁰

The position of command headquarters was critical. 34th Division's GOC drew attention to *FSR1* which stated that 'subordinate commanders should take up positions [depending upon the size of the force he commands] where they can obtain a good view of the area in which their commands are operating and which admit of easy communication with their immediate superior'.¹³¹ Accordingly, Nicholson laid down that

the Headquarters of Infantry and Artillery Brigades should be further forward than is the case in trench warfare... located with reference to the troops

¹²⁸ TNA, WO 95/2437, 34th Division WD, appendix A30, 34th Division Instructions No.14, 6 October 1918.

¹²⁹ Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p.175.

¹³⁰ TNA, WO 95/2437, appendix A30, 21 October 1918.

¹³¹ *FSR1*, Chapter 7, 107 (5), p.139.

engaged and the position of the reserves so that he can influence the progress and action of the fight by the use of his reserves and auxiliary weapons. Only by this means can a Commander ensure that the effective co-operation of the different arms at his disposal and retain control... and impress his own personality upon the course of events.¹³²

By stressing the need for flexibility, *FSR1* provided guidance to help commanders to adapt to circumstances. The premature move of brigade headquarters was deprecated:

Headquarters must not move too frequently as this rendered Signal Communication impossible. Brigade Headquarters should wait longer in one position and make one big bound rather than to keep on moving short distances.¹³³

Any move required the establishment of an Advanced Report Centre and secure lines of communication. For example, after establishing its battle headquarters on 13 October, 102 Brigade delayed its move forward until the capture of the final objective at 10.00am on 14 October. Having then established a forward headquarters, the brigadier was able to respond to the threat of an enemy counterattack on his right flank with 'one Company of 1/1 Hertford passed to the control of OC 1/4 Cheshires... and 2 Companies of the Battalion moved forward to occupy our original front line'. Despite this advanced position 'the thick mist and smoke... greatly hampered the task of getting back accurate information... while the length of the signal communication likewise delayed the sending of information to the rear and communicating with the flank brigades'.¹³⁴ This problem was alleviated in part by the attachment of Liaison Officers to the battalions and to the flank brigade headquarters. With reference to

¹³² TNA, WO 95/2437, appendix A30.

¹³³ TNA, WO 95/2618, 41st Division WD, appendix 2, 'Proceedings of Divisional Conference held at Advanced divisional Headquarters at 11.45am 4 October 1918'.

¹³⁴ TNA, WO 95/2461, 102 Brigade WD, 'Narrative of Operations October 14-15, 1918'.

FSR1, divisional orders also stressed that 'GOC Brigade and the Brigade Major or CO and Adjutant must not be absent from their HQ together'.¹³⁵

As this thesis has demonstrated, the optimum position for brigade headquarters was debated throughout the war on the Western Front. The benefits of a forward position were neutralised by poor communications and increased exposure. These problems were never entirely overcome. However, in general the measures adopted throughout the Hundred Days were testament to the lessons of previous offensives, with commanders maximising the use of the communications technology available to them.

The final advance of the brigades of Second Army was characterised by improvisation and flexibility. This was evident in the preparations undertaken by 31st Division's 91 Brigade (XV Corps) where Brigadier-General S.C. Taylor personally 'reconnoitred and selected alternative positions in case the Brigade was called upon to support either forward Brigade'.¹³⁶ This information was later used in the sophisticated arrangements for capturing Soyers Farm on 18 September. The attack entailed the brigade working in close cooperation with GOC 31st Division HA who provided 'a barrage pivoted on the Farm... moving fanwise and thus ensuring that the Farm and Enclosures remained under fire until the attacking forces had reached a position well in the rear of it'.¹³⁷ All arrangements and orders, having been verbally established at a brigade conference 36 hours before the attack, reached battalion headquarters 12 hours before zero. The benefits to brigade operations were two-fold. The first was the support provided by one of the two divisional artillery brigades which

¹³⁵ TNA, WO 95/2618, 41st Division WD, appendix 2, Proceedings of Divisional Conference held at Advanced Divisional Headquarters at 11.45am 5 October 1918. *FSR1*, Chapter 2, 8, (3), p.22.

¹³⁶ TNA, WO 95/2360, 91 Brigade WD, 7 September 1918.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations of 91 Brigade', 21 September 1918.

advanced with the assault to allow closer all-arms protection. The second benefit reflected the compression of battle procedure that necessitated verbal or concise written orders in response to the rapid tempo of operations. As evidence of the heightened risk to brigadiers in forward positions, Taylor was fatally wounded on 1 October.

A similar degree of flexibility was evident in the advance of 9th Division's 28 Brigade (II Corps) on the Steenen-Stampkot Ridge. The position of the brigade on 14 October was summed up by Brigadier-General J.L. Jack:

Beyond this crest the field artillery barrage, now at the limit of its range, can support us no further; and although an advance battery or tow can gallop up almost immediately, a long pause in the operations is necessary to prepare the next attack...¹³⁸

To compensate for this delay, divisional orders stated that the method of advance would depend upon the tactical situation with responsibility devolved upon the brigadier:

[If] GOC 28 Brigade considers that a further advance can be made without further artillery to be moved forward, he will continue and 26 Brigade will continue to be responsible for his left flank. If he considers an advance cannot be made, he will consolidate his position.¹³⁹

If, after careful reconnaissance, he believed, that the situation did not warrant a further advance, the responsibility would then pass back to the divisional commander who 'would decide if the advance can be continued after sufficient artillery had been moved forward and if so by which Brigade'.¹⁴⁰ In the event, Jack 'cantered forward' to

¹³⁸ Terraine, *General Jack*, p.283.

¹³⁹ TNA, WO 95/1774, 28 Brigade WD, appendix 40, 9th Division OO.318.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

encourage his companies who he considered as 'showing too little vigour... and even seized a Lewis gun [himself] to shoot, although the range was rather long'. The arrival of the 50th and 51st Field Artillery Brigades enabled him to continue his attack and secure all objectives before the enemy were reinforced, forcing the halting of the advance.¹⁴¹ As evidence of the importance of brigadiers moving forward with their battalions, 9th Division's historian recorded that 'Brigadier-Generals Hore-Ruthven, Croft and Jack were never far away from the hottest encounters and the ready judgement of these experienced officers was of the utmost value to the GOC'.¹⁴²

Flexibility was equally prevalent in X Corps's adaption to open warfare. 34th Division's written operational orders laid down that 'under certain circumstances' it would be necessary for either one or two brigades to take over the line 'as soon as the situation permits as early as tomorrow morning 2 October' with 101 Brigade and 34th Battalion MGC 'positioned ready to move at an hour's notice'. In the event

verbal orders were given from the GOC Division to G.Os.C commanding [sic]. Infantry Brigades and C.R.A. at the Divisional Report Centre for brigades to be prepared either to advance through 35th and 41st Divisions or to relieve them.¹⁴³

Flexibility was evident too in barrage arrangements: 'the exact timings of ... lifts [being] liable to change and... would only be notified when fully settled'.¹⁴⁴ Brigade commanders were also provided with a Field Artillery Brigade for the express purpose of 'providing close and immediate Artillery Support and prevent checks' with attention drawn to Training Leaflet *No.5: The Action of Artillery in CLOSE Support of Assaulting*

¹⁴¹ Terraine, *General Jack*, 14 October 1918, pp.283-4.

¹⁴² J. Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division* (London: Murray, 1921), p.381.

¹⁴³ TNA, WO 95/2437, 34th Div. WD, appendix a.i. 34 Division OO No.272, 1 October and diary entry 2 October 1918.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, appendix A10, Operational instructions No.1, 10 October.

Battalions' [original emphasis]. All measures complied with the principles of *FSR1* which was considered by the divisional commander as 'still the true guide' and that one all commanders down to platoon and fire-units were advised to study.¹⁴⁵ The divisional guidance focused upon the positioning of Brigade and Artillery HQs further forward to provide the commander 'with control over the movement of all his units' and located where 'he could influence the progress and action of the fight by use of reserves and auxiliary arms'.¹⁴⁶

Evidently the flexibility embodied within divisional instructions proved successful as demonstrated by the attack of 101 Brigade where upon being informed of an enemy counterattack, the brigadier was able despatch his reserves swiftly and effectively.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, the tempo of operations was assisted by the close cooperation between brigades. On 24 October, having attended a divisional conference at 10.00am, Brigadier-General W.J. Woodcock, GOC 101 Brigade issued an order arranging for the cooperation of 102 Brigade in assisting with the attack of 41st Division's 123 Brigade. Consequently, all arrangements, the issue of operational orders and the assembly of the reserves were completed by 11pm.¹⁴⁸

Enhanced flexibility was evident too in 30th Division where 'it... appeared that the intention of the Higher Commanders was to give [the division] a more free hand in the pace of the advance, it was considered expedient to form 3 brigade groups'.¹⁴⁹ Each brigade group was a mobile and cohesive fighting unit. Thus, Brigadier-General G.A. Stevens' 90 Brigade (Stevens' Group) was comprised of 'Brigade Headquarters,

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, appendix A30, GS Instruction No.14, 23 October.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, appendix A33, GS Instruction No.15, 23 October 1918.

¹⁴⁷ TNA, WO 95/2461, 101 Brigade WD, appendix 25 'Summary of Operations October 12-28, 1918', p.8, 19 October.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 101 Brigade OO No.265, 24 October 1918.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, WO 95/2314, 30th Div. WD, 17 October 1918.

3 Infantry Battalions, 1 L.T.M.B., 1 Brigade R.F.A. with 6th Newton T.M. Battery, two companies of Machine Guns, 1 Section R.E., 1 Cable Laying Signal Section R.E., 1 Field Ambulance, 1 Train Company and Cyclists'.¹⁵⁰ Close cooperation between arms was facilitated by the COs of 90th T.M.B. and the Field Artillery Group being attached to Advanced Brigade Headquarters.

30th Division's advance reflected what its commander, Major-General W. De L. Williams, considered was 'the correct interpretation of the old maxim of "fire and movement"' or the 'simple principle of war'.¹⁵¹ The operations of 90 Brigade between 16-20 October, were shaped by 'the detailing of the day's advance into a series of well-marked objectives [which were] found to work well and thus laid down in Brigade orders were found to be just about right in distance'.¹⁵² Given achievable objectives (including the crossing of the River Lys), sufficient fire-power and adequate logistic support, operational tempo could be maintained. Crucially, the Divisional and Brigade Signal Companies provided a secure forward line of communication 'with all Infantry Brigade Headquarters established along a cable route... in spite of many changes in Divisional Headquarters'.¹⁵³ The six progressive movements of Stevens' brigade headquarters, over a period of four days, allowed it to respond rapidly to a fluid situation. This was illustrated by the timely issue of warning orders in response to three changes in divisional orders in the space of three and a half hours. Again, on 19 October, following a divisional warning order stating that 'Goodman's [21st] Brigade Group was detailed to pass through [90 Brigade] next morning' Stevens was able to

¹⁵⁰ TNA, WO 95/2338, 90 Brigade WD, 19 October 1918.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 30 Division HQ to 2/London Scottish, 20 October 1918.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 90 Brigade WD, 16 October 1918.

¹⁵³ TNA, WO 95/2314, 30th Div. WD, 20 October 1918.

organise a further attack 'to reach the objective for the day and hand over a clear situation'.¹⁵⁴

From the perspective of divisional HQ, however, the brigades's progress was too slow. The excessive caution demonstrated by the battalions was criticised as 'a relic of trench warfare'¹⁵⁵ with units showing 'a reluctance on their part to make use of their weapons to give the necessary volume of fire to carry them along'.¹⁵⁶ This may have been because of the emphasis on consolidation of ground won, rather than the exploitation of success, which was characteristic of trench warfare. Or, as the battalions were experienced, up to strength and had good morale, the problem may simply have been that the officers and men were tired. As Stevens explained, 90 Brigade had 'been in action practically continuously since August 15... fighting almost the whole time'.¹⁵⁷

The operations conducted by the brigades of Second Army during the final advance were characterised by semi- and ultimately open warfare. They benefited from the army's sophisticated logistic infrastructure and the implementation of an all-arms approach. Brigade command's response in the transition to open warfare reflected the army's aptitude for institutional and operational change. At brigade level, this transformation was enabled by the tactical and organisational skills of a new generation of brigade staff which had emerged through a meritocratic approach to promotion.

¹⁵⁴ TNA, WO 95/2338, 90 Brigade WD, 19 October 1918 and 90 Brigade OO No.208 and OO No.209, 19 October 1918.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 'Report on Operations of 19 October'.

¹⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/2314, 30th Div. WD, 20 October 1918.

¹⁵⁷ TNA, WO 95/2338, 90 Brigade WD, 'Report on Operations of 19 October'.

6.7: Conclusion

The organisational, tactical and technological developments within the BEF during 1918 represented the culmination of a learning process. However, whilst some areas of the BEF had become highly sophisticated, inconsistencies remained in the provision of sufficient firepower, the use of combined-arms tactics and the maintenance of tempo through devolved command. The lack of consistent training and variable approaches to command suggests that the British army faced significant obstacles to coherent learning. This diversity was reflected in brigade operations conducted by Fourth and Second Armies.

Three factors shaped the development of brigade command during the Hundred Days. The first, at an operational level, applied to tempo. Rather than anticipating a breakthrough operation, attacks consisted of successive steps on selected intermediate objectives. These attacks were delivered on multiple axes across a wide front forcing the Germans to disperse their resources. Where sufficient artillery support was available, the attacks were carried out within artillery range 'as quickly as possible one after the other [and] as fast as the guns [could] get there'.¹⁵⁸ This support varied in strength within the brigades of Fourth and Second Armies.

Second, a range of external constraints shaped brigade's operational performance: these included the terrain, weather, the strength of German resistance and the availability of logistic support. Difficulties were encountered in maintaining protracted advances, with communications and the provision of artillery support affected. These problems required different solutions and a flexible approach in accordance with British army culture.

¹⁵⁸ LHCMA, Dill Papers, 1/8, Major-General Sir R. Stephens to Field-Marshal Sir John Dill, 6 March 1918.

The third factor was the emergence of new generation of brigade staff imbued with professionalism, combat experience and organisational abilities. Their pragmatic approach to problem-solving enabled them to adapt to different circumstances, provided that certain pre-conditions were present. Primarily, this involved decentralisation, which allowed brigade commanders to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. Where possible, sufficient artillery support and a secure communication network ensured that brigade staffs were able to exercise sufficient tactical influence during the German withdrawal. This thesis has examined in detail the training, planning, timing and the execution of brigade operations during 1916-1917. These elements came to fruition in the Hundred Days as the role of the brigade staff expanded in response to the increased tempo of operations.

The random nature of the transference of knowledge or innovation was an acute problem for the army. As Fox has argued, 'the failure to capture and disseminate knowledge was nothing new but in the case of a mass army, such loss could proliferate exponentially'.¹⁵⁹ In the opening months of the war, the army pursued an *ad hoc* approach to learning before recognising the need for a structured process of evaluation and a central repository for knowledge. This process was diverse constituting institutional and individual methods, both systematic and incidental. As part of this process, it was recognised that learning and innovation would benefit from the contributions of subordinate commanders. Brigade commanders provided a consistent and valuable contribution to operational and tactical debates. This process was manifested through an analysis of brigade operations and enriched by brigade

¹⁵⁹ Fox, *Learning to Fight*, p.57.

commanders' thorough knowledge of the topographical, logistic and tactical factors relevant to their sectors.

The contribution of brigade command to the learning process within the British armies was rooted in the establishment of a new generation of brigade staff imbued with tactical proficiency and management skills. However, the rate of progression and the integration of new tactics and weapons was inconsistent. For example, as Paddy Griffith argued, the integration of new weapons was impeded by 'the institutional and technical problems that were surely inevitable when a whole clutch of new technologies was being invented overnight and then instantly promoted to highest priorities'.¹⁶⁰ In sum, the argument that emerges from this study, with regard to tactical reform, suggests that the development of brigade command, in common with the wider BEF, was a long and painful process of trial and error. Nevertheless, by 1918 brigade command had assimilated and embraced a combination of new tactics and innovative technology in the pursuit of operational success.

¹⁶⁰ P. Griffith, 'The Extent of Tactical Reform in the British Army' in Griffith (ed.) *British Fighting Methods*, p.17.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the evolution of the infantry brigade command of the British armies on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918. Two primary research questions were posed. First, to what degree did brigade command's response to static warfare and its transition to mobile warfare reflect the British army's approach to learning and adaptation? Second, to what extent were these responses conditioned by the style of command of the corps under which a brigade served? The questions were designed to challenge the orthodox interpretation that the role and influence of the brigadier and his staff was unduly narrow. Instead, it has been demonstrated that their role was far broader and encompassed a range of activities that contributed to operational success (or failure). In this respect brigade command was a significant catalyst for organisational and tactical change within the BEF.

The thesis first established the universal factors that shaped operations and over which commanders had little or no influence. There were two broad constraints. The first was a consequence of the British army's need to support French strategy. This resulted in the BEF's operations being largely offensive, at a time when the defender consistently had a significant advantage. Operations were affected by irregular brigade frontages, the provision (or otherwise) of accurate artillery observation and varying degrees of hostile fire. A second, logistic constraint, was the product of the British government's unpreparedness for a continental war and lack of consideration for the social and economic implications of such a conflict. This was manifested in the inadequacy of the BEF's material resources and the shortage of trained manpower. By 1915, therefore, the parameters in which the BEF were to operate were established. First, it was the junior military partner. Second,

operationally, the BEF was unable to turn the enemy's flanks, so it had to conduct frontal assaults. Third the BEF suffered from shortages of materiel. Finally, the challenges of static warfare forced the BEF to determine how much of its pre-war approach to combat remained relevant and how much required revision.

In relation to the first research question, given the broad parameters in which brigade command operated, the response to trench warfare reflected the British army's capacity for flexibility and innovation, and willingness to reappraise pre-war concepts. The framework for organisational and tactical reappraisal was largely attributable to the enduring ethos of the Edwardian British army that produced officers that were capable of instigating significant changes. This ethos was perpetuated throughout the army by Regular officers who continued to dominate command positions. To impress upon citizen soldiers the enduring values of initiative and deference to 'the man on the spot', the army recalibrated its approach to learning and knowledge creation. The extent to which brigade command embraced this approach speaks volumes about the flexible nature of the British army.

The measures implemented by brigade staff in response to trench warfare substantiates their role as agents of organisational and tactical change. This process was manifested through various spheres of activity. Crucially, as 'the man on the spot' responsible for deciding which course of action to take, a brigadier required thorough knowledge of his sector in relation to his designated objectives. Therefore, the stress on reconnaissance and the capture and interpretation of information proved invaluable. The benefits of these procedures were manifold, translating into actions designed to mitigate the irregularity of brigade frontages and the disposition of the enemy defences. In accordance with the promotion of mutual support and shared experience, the intelligence derived from reconnaissance were supplemented by a

progressive increase in the transfer of information between brigades both within division and from without.

The fallibility of communications on the Western Front placed profound restrictions on the ability of commanders to sustain effective command and control during operations. Attempts to develop a reliable system of communications, the life blood of command and control, were neither constant nor incremental. This was as true at brigade level as at other levels. The maintenance of tactical control forward of BHQ remained a consistent problem in static warfare, which was exacerbated to some degree by the more mobile operations of 1918. The optimum position for BHQ therefore remained problematic. Whilst it was eventually accepted that brigadiers should move forward in response to the changing conditions of battle, this meant that staff and commanders were more vulnerable to hostile fire. A wide range of solutions were implemented to resolve the problem. Of these, the grouping of brigade headquarters close to each other in order to expedite shared information proved successful. Other measures adopted, in accordance with the increased tempo of operations, was the establishment of ABHQ's aligned upon a central axis of communications. With the expansion of brigade staff, a system of Brigade Intelligence and Liaison Officers was introduced to supplement the work of Divisional and Brigade Signals Companies. The adoption of these measures combined with a wide range of telegraphic, telephonic and visual equipment demonstrated the willingness of brigade command to embrace new and alternative forms of technology to bridge the communications gap.

The organisation and monitoring of brigade training schemes was one of the many multi-faceted roles of the brigade commander. A systematic approach to training ensured that maximum efforts were made to mitigate the challenges of combat.

Appropriate exercises were devised to ensure that officers and ORs had individual skills and were suitably conversant with tactical principles. Lessons were disseminated and acted upon accordingly. Similarly, where an appropriate supportive culture existed, brigade questionnaires were issued to COs and NCOs to elicit their views on operations. These responses were then discussed at brigade, divisional and corps conferences; this reflected a proactive approach to learning within the corps and a pragmatic method of problem-solving and adaptation to the diverse nature of the battlefield. In this respect, it can be argued that the lessons derived from combat at brigade level were a valuable contribution to the British army's tactical development. This process of learning and adaptation, although it varied in its rate of development from brigade to brigade, reflected the ethos of the British army and the value of flexibility, innovation and collaboration.

As the pre-war concepts of warfare were reshaped or modified to reflect the conditions of static warfare, weak and ineffective or just older brigadiers were replaced by experienced men promoted from battalion command who were willing and able to run large scale operations under combat conditions. The process of meritocratic promotion also created brigade staffs which were capable of running large-scale operations and undertaking multiple roles that demanded teamwork and efficiency. Sustaining a stable and efficient staff at brigade level, like all levels of command in the BEF, proved challenging. The significant rate of 'churn' amongst experienced officers was due to several factors. The presence of brigade officers in the front line contributed to attrition through death and injury. Equally, the transfer of staff to fill the vacuum of experienced officers and commanders throughout the BEF was detrimental to brigade efficiency and unit cohesion. Nevertheless, a pattern of renewal ensured that a fresh generation of brigade staff, imbued with combat and managerial experience, were able

to successfully embrace the BEF's tactical reappraisal and implement appropriate tactics.

Turning to the second research question, the organisational and tactical development of brigades differed significantly depending on the corps that it served in at any given time. This reflected three principal factors. First, the establishment of a stable staff structure at corps, divisional and brigade levels provided unit cohesion and organisational uniformity. This for example, was reflected in the qualities of XIII Corps' command staff, which was imbued with combat experience and managerial skills which provided a platform for a uniform rate of organisational and tactical development.

The second factor concerned the scale of an attack. Fundamentally, a corps's position on an Army front governed the extent to which the necessary pre-conditions for operational success were met. This factor was manifested in various ways: the ability to establish efficient infrastructure, the width of the corps frontage, opportunities for artillery registration and the disposition of the enemy defences. These issues determined the scope for preparation and reconnaissance, the ability to suppress the enemy batteries and the effectiveness of communications. Where the preparations, methods of attack and logistic support were inadequate, operations were jeopardised. This is illustrated by the varying levels of success achieved by the brigades of Fourth Army's XIII Corps on 1 and 23 July 1916 and of Fifth Army's XVIII and II Corps on 31 July and 16 August 1917

A third factor that shaped the course of brigade operations concerned command culture, specifically the degree of flexibility allowed to brigade commanders. Sometimes a significant responsibility was devolved to brigade level, when the

brigadier's local knowledge and tactical acumen was appreciated, and he was included in higher planning. For example, during II Corps's operations on the Ancre in 1916, recognising the irregularity of his front, GOC 118 Brigade had considerable freedom in deploying reserves. In other corps, the culture was different, and the local knowledge of the brigadier was side-lined. With few opportunities for tactical control, his role was chiefly confined to stabilising vulnerable situations and coping with the difficulties created by poor preparation and operational mismanagement.

By 1917, where pre-conditions for operational success were in place, a culture of flexibility gave brigade command more opportunity to exercise tactical control. This was evident in Second Army's operations on the Menin Road where planning and preparation was consistent across X and IX Corps. Brigades were given ample time to prepare and benefited from the recent experience of Fifth Army divisions. Greater flexibility was reflected in corps arrangements designed to cope with depth defences. Devolution of responsibility capitalised on initiative at brigade level and gave flexibility to deployment reserves rapidly in response counterattacks. These arrangements demonstrated the importance of devolved command and foreshadowed the mobile brigade operations of 1918.

The lack of uniformity in the battlefield performance of brigades, which reflected the corps in which brigades served, is illustrated by the operations of Fifth Army at Langemark on 16 August 1917. In XIV Corps, all the pre-conditions for success operations were met despite many difficulties. The prominent role of the brigade staffs helped to ensure that preparations were thorough and the training was appropriate. To keep up the tempo of the attack, battle procedure was compressed, and liaison both within and between adjacent brigades was emphasised. All this reflected the initiative and managerial skills of the brigade staff, and greatly assisted tactical control.

In contrast, II Corps took a quite different approach. The arrangements for the attack were woefully inadequate, and brigades suffered from insufficient artillery and logistic support, poor communications, unrealistic objectives and an acute man-power shortage. Gough's intervention and a late change of plans contravened the principles of *FSR1* by side-lining the brigadiers, despite their local knowledge of the tactical situation. With their tactical influence significantly diminished, brigadiers were limited to ameliorating the difficulties caused by operational mismanagement, by timely deployment of reserves or by their personal intervention in vulnerable situations. It is evident that as late as 1917 brigade command was significantly influenced by a range of broad factors over which commanders had little influence.

The response of brigade command to the semi-mobile and mobile offensive operations in 1918 was the peak of its development. Operations were affected by three principal factors that influenced brigade battlefield performance. First, the British army's doctrinal reappraisal stressed the implementation of set-piece attacks on narrow fronts. The second factor concerned the provision of effective logistics, overwhelming firepower and a sophisticated infrastructure. However, difficulties were encountered in bringing guns forward, with subsequent effect on brigade operations. Third, a robust process of meritocratic promotion created a corps of brigade officers able to handle the complexities of modern operations. In this respect, the response of brigade command to the transition to open warfare reflected the British army's aptitude for institutional and operational change.

In accordance with pre-war principles, the devolution of command to the lowest appropriate level was at the core of tactical development. This was based on the lessons of previous offensives. At brigade level, three principal factors were key. First, the tempo of operations necessitated a flexible approach to accommodate rapidly

changing circumstances and continue the advance. The method of advance was devolved upon the brigade commander by division. Brigades used various methods, including establishing autonomous brigade groups.

A second factor facilitating tactical control was the progressive movement forward of brigade headquarters, maximising use of the communications technology. Whilst to some degree tactical control diminished as the advance outpaced communications, brigade staff used whatever communications were available. Forward movement of BHQ was monitored by division with ABHQs established on a secure forward line of communication. A third contributory factor that gave a significant degree of flexibility at brigade level was the availability of firepower. This was reflected in barrage arrangements designed to conform with the irregularity of brigade frontages and in accordance with the strength of enemy resistance. The implementation of these measures, providing flexibility and control at a local level, demonstrated the tactical progression of brigade command, and was in accord with *FSR1* which stressed the value of devolved command.

The organisational and tactical evolution of infantry brigade command on the Western Front was, as that of the wider BEF, inconsistent and occasionally regressive. What brigades could do was limited, and they had little control over the broad parameters in which they operated. However, this thesis has demonstrated that with the establishment of the organisational, operational and logistic pre-conditions for success, brigade command was able and willing to respond to the challenges of static warfare and the transition to mobile operations. This process reflected the ethos of the pre-war British army officer class and its capacity for learning, adaptation and flexibility. These values were sustained and applied to effect through the creation of a new generation of brigadiers and brigade staff which had the intellectual capacity to

control large-scale operations. This process was a lasting testament to their professionalism and courage.

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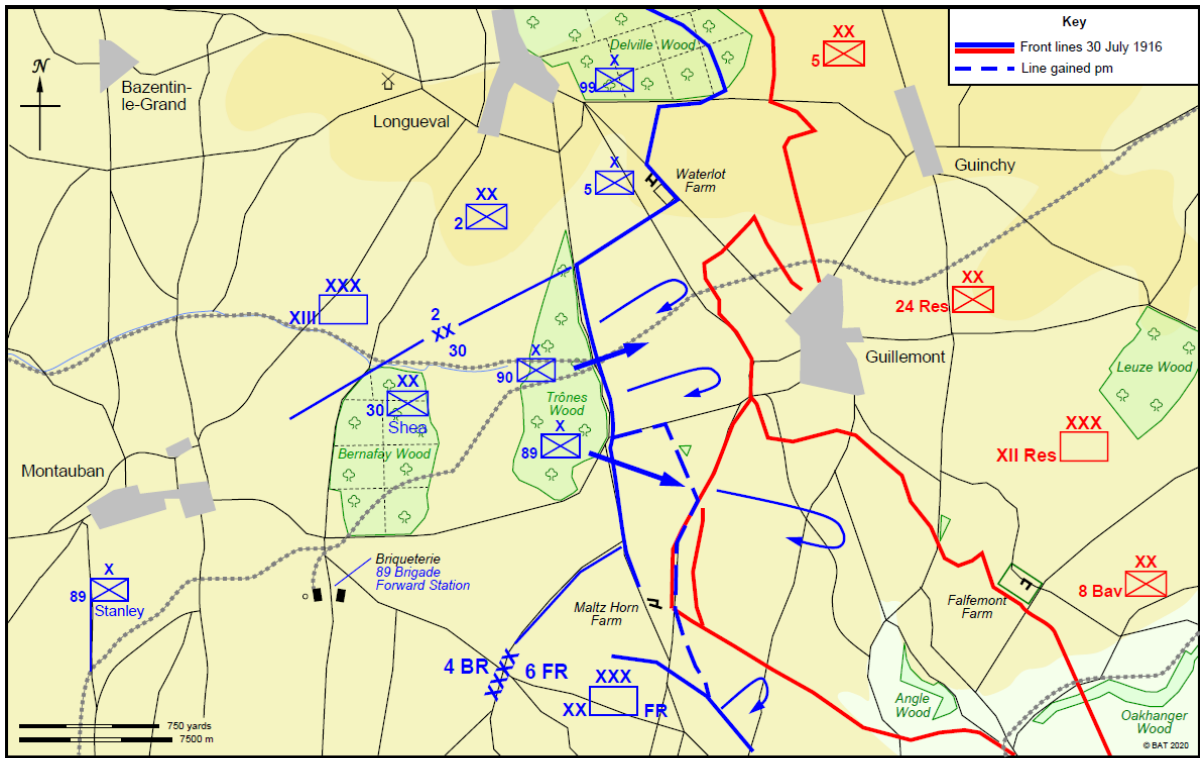
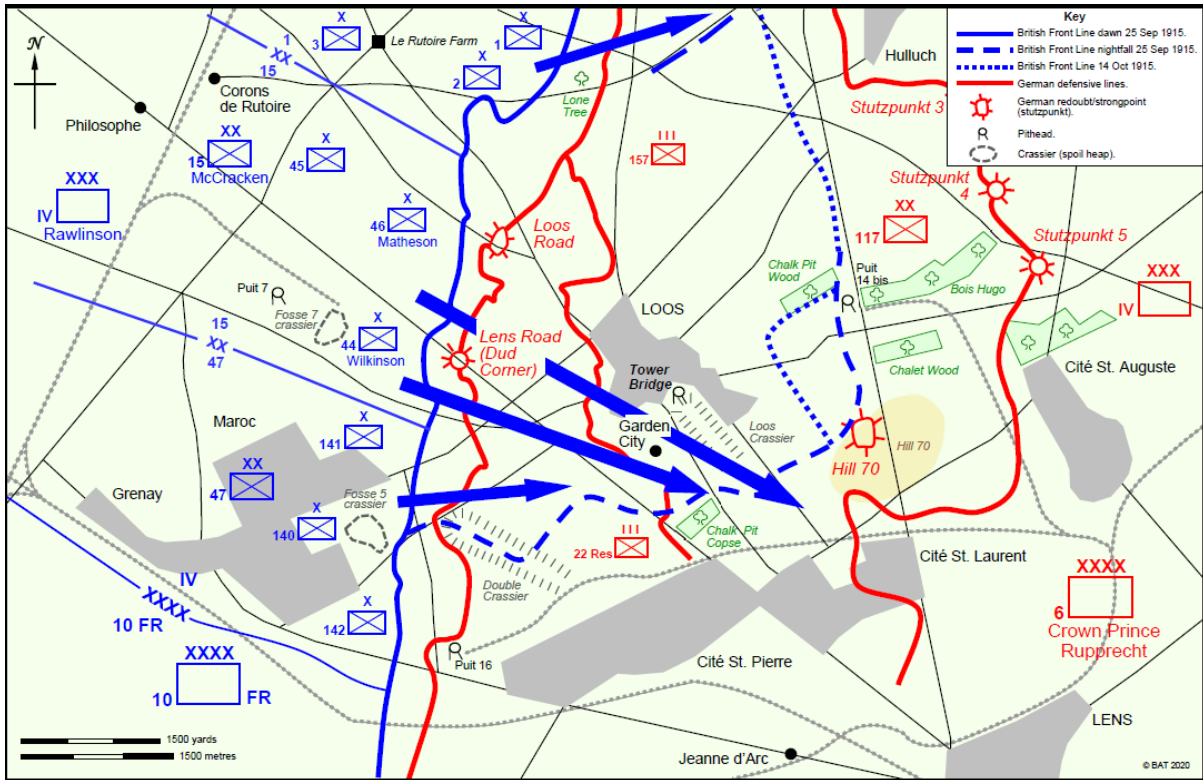
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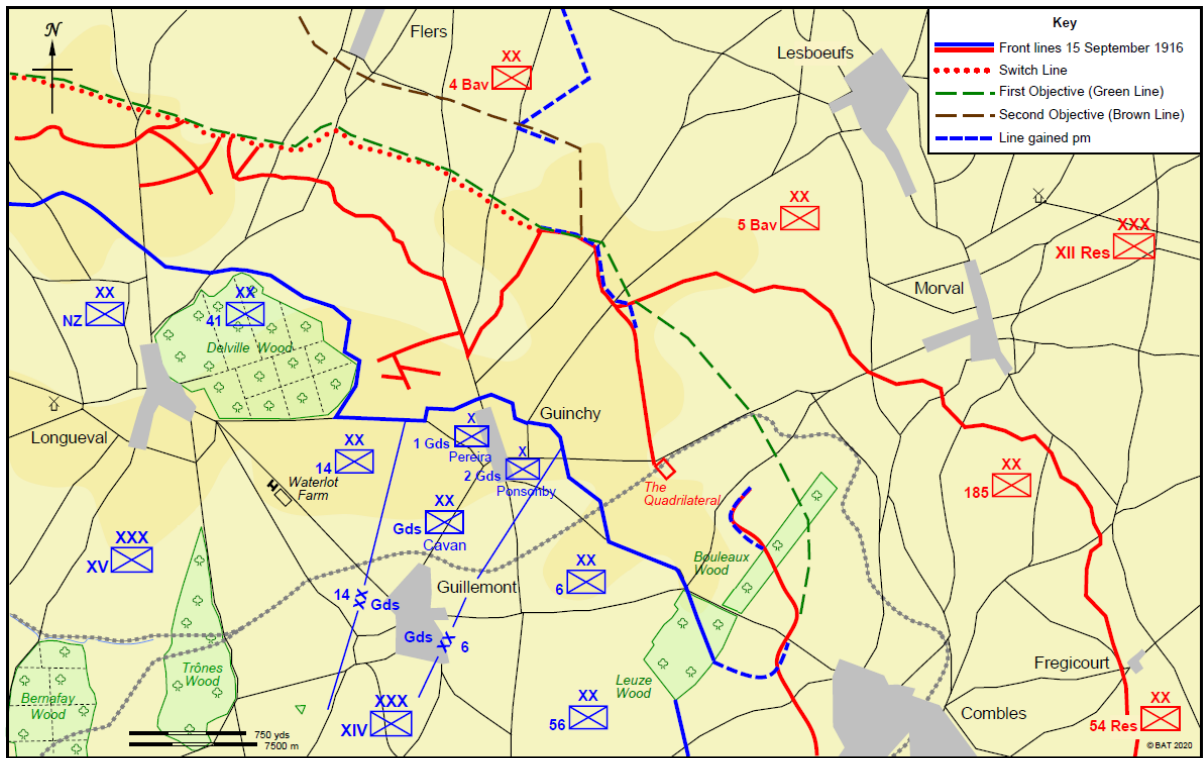
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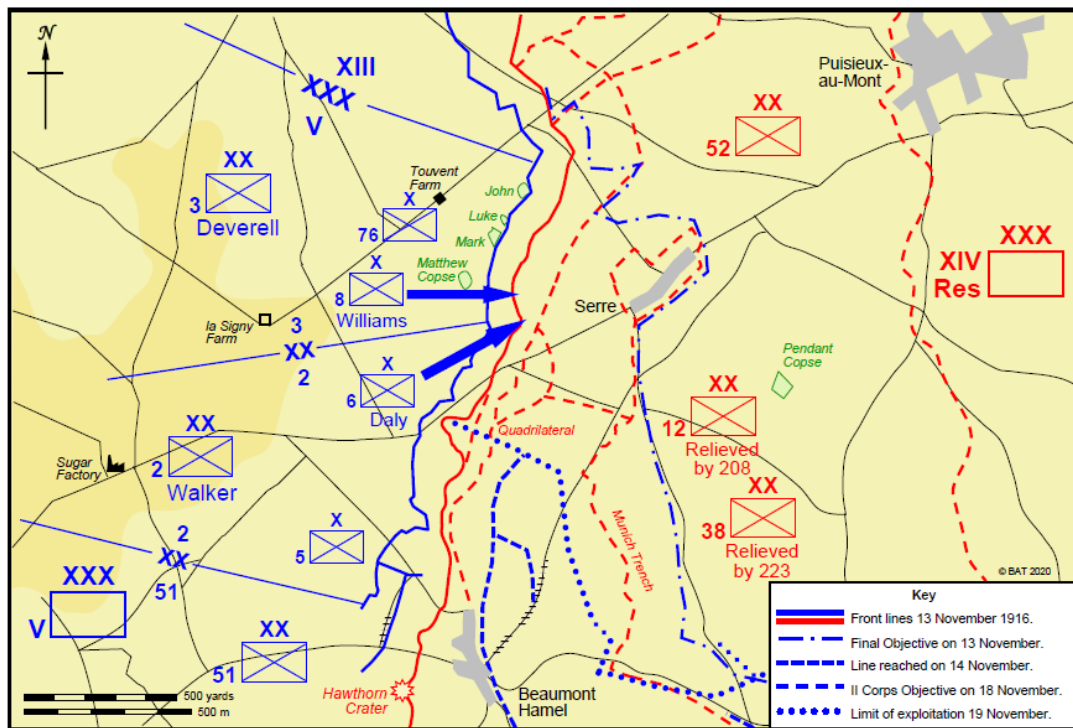
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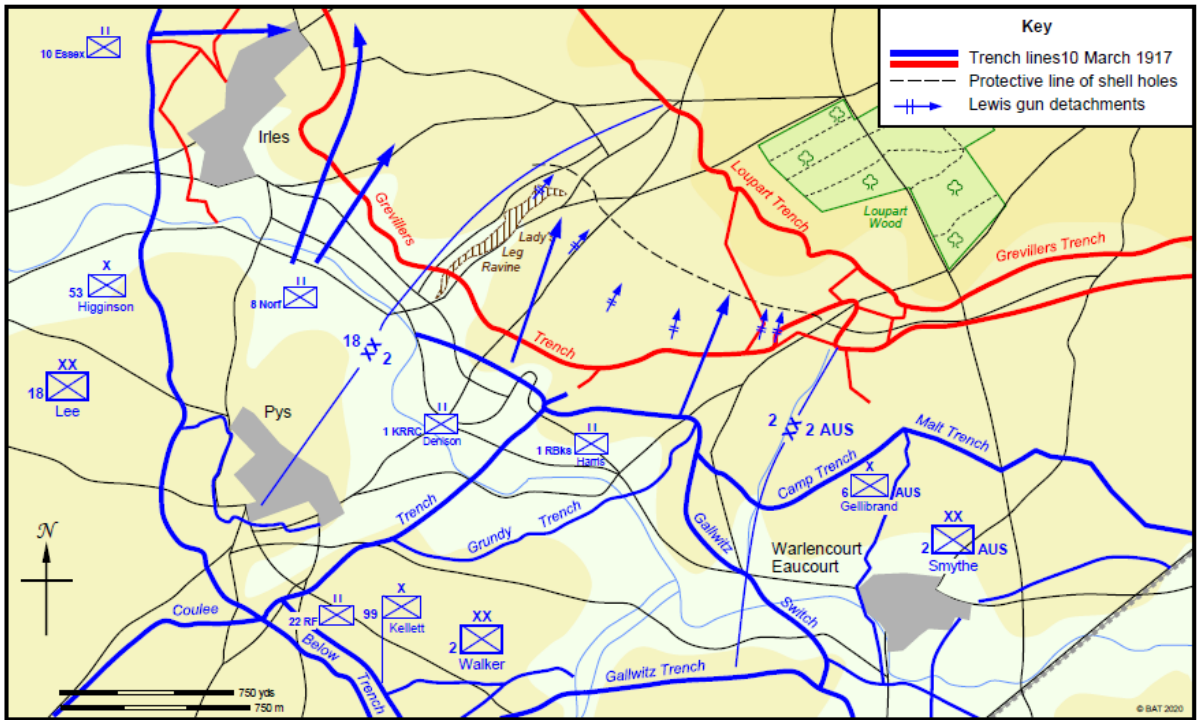




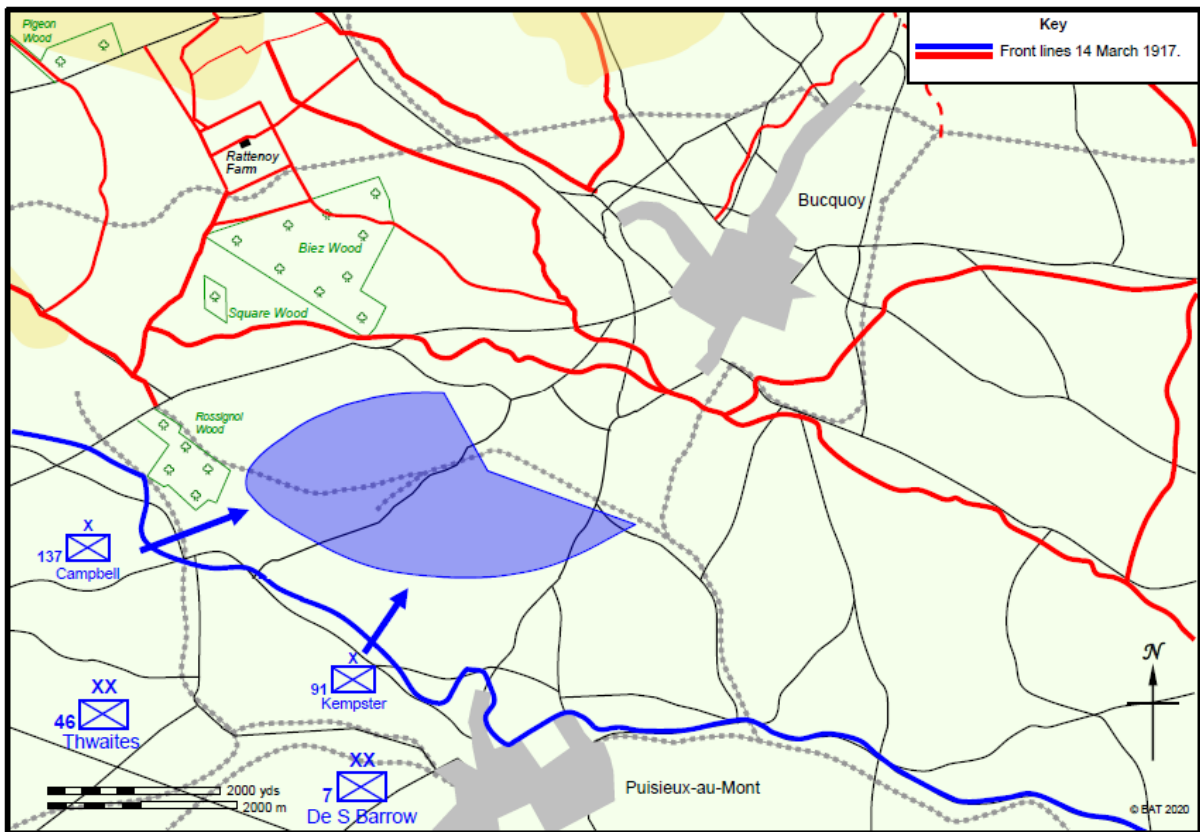
Map 3. Operations of 1 and 2 (Guards) Brigades, Guards Division, Flers-Coucelette: 15 September 1916



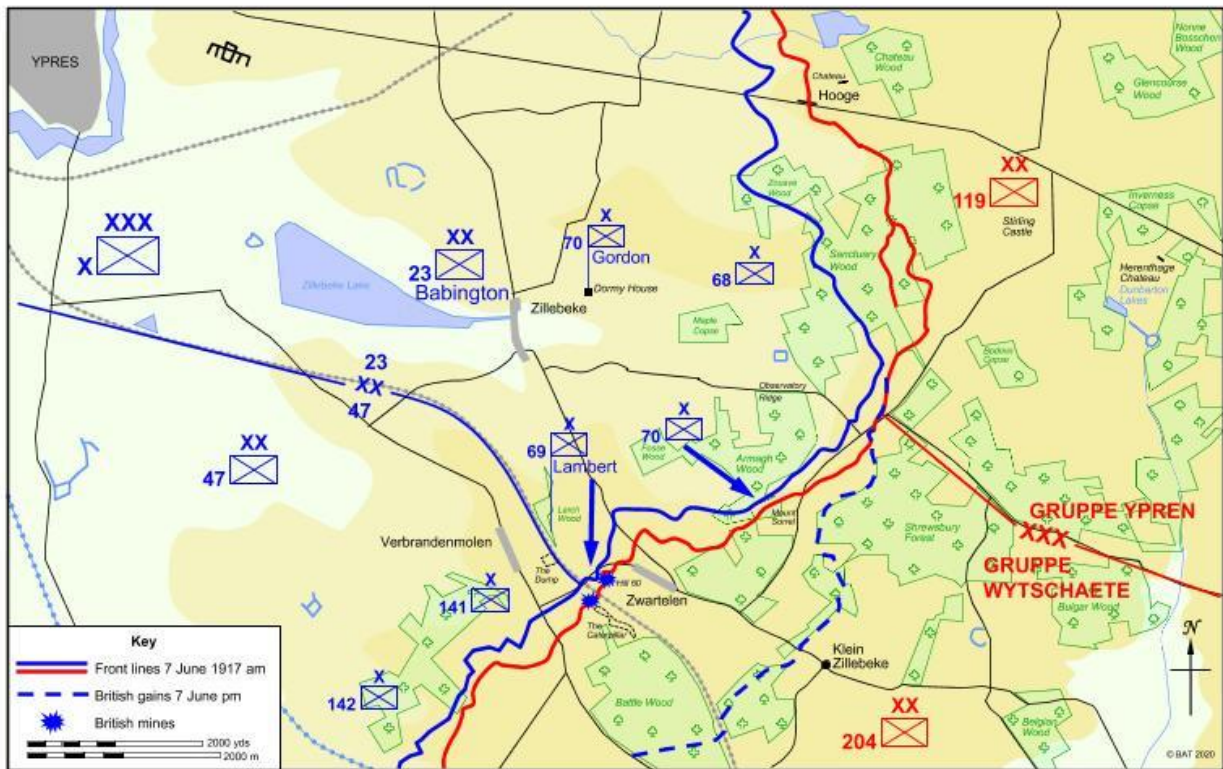
Map 4. Operations of 6 Brigade, 2nd Division and 8 Brigade, 3rd Division, Serre: 13 November 1916



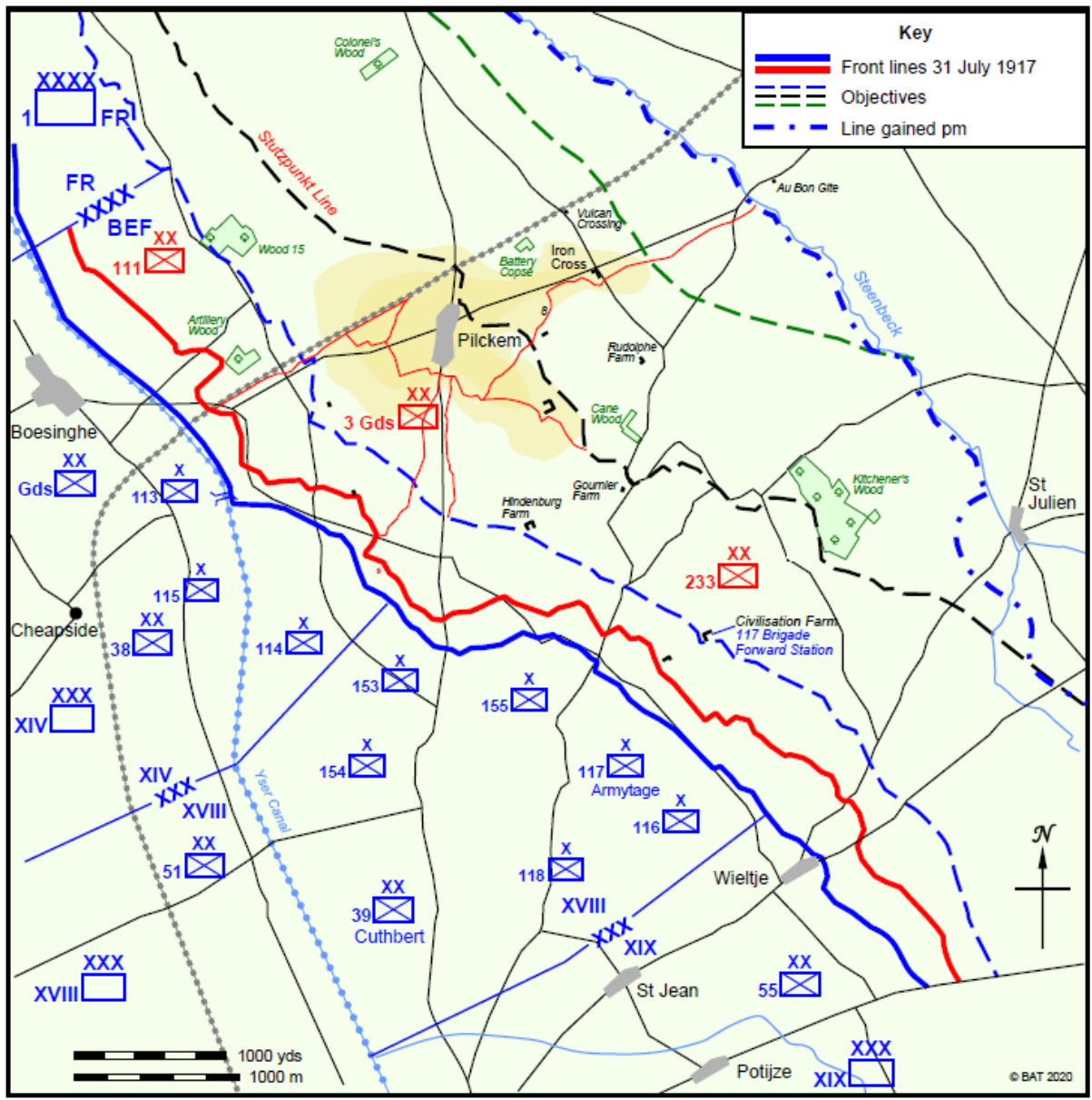
Map 5. Operations of 99 Brigade, 2nd Division and 53 Brigade, 18th (Eastern) Division, Irlès: 10 March 1917

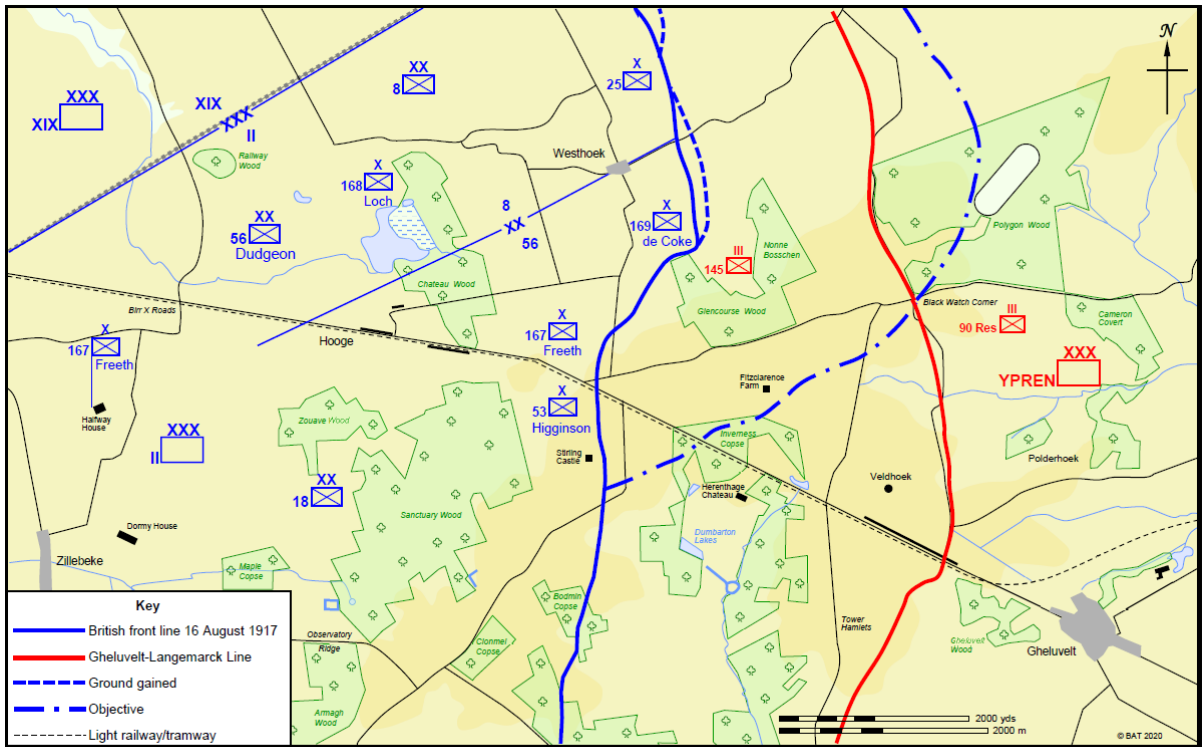


Map 6. Operations of 91 Brigade, 7th Division and 137 Brigade, 46th (North Midland) Division, Bucquoy: 14 March 1917

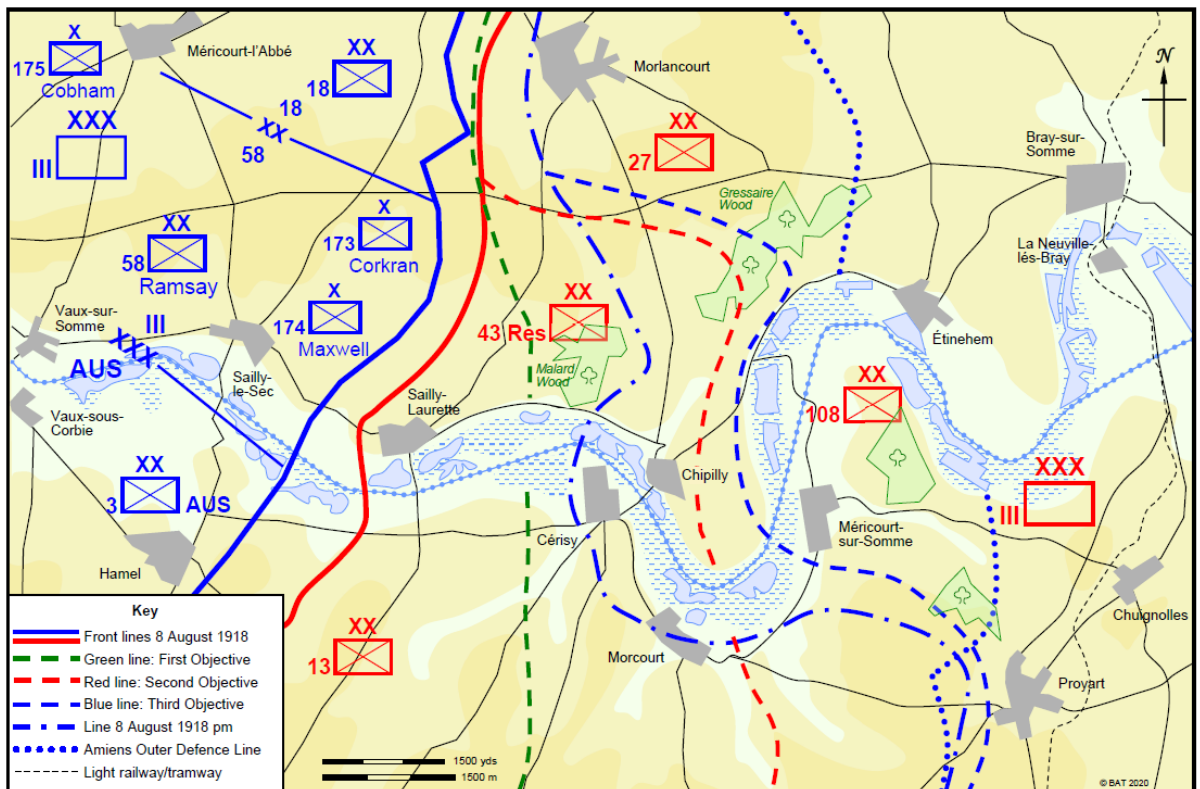


Map 7. Operations of 69 and 70 Brigades, 23rd Division, Messines: 7 June 1917





Map 9. Operations of 167 and 168 Brigades, 56th (1 London) Division and 53rd Brigade, Polygon Wood: 16 August 1917



Map 10. Operations of 58th (1/2 London) Division, Chipilly: 8 August 1918










General Key for All Maps

Formation/Unit National Designators

Red	German
Blue	Allied
AUS	Australian
Bav	Bavarian
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BR	British
FR	French
Gds	Guards (British or German)
NZ	New Zealand
Res	Reserve

British Regiments

Essex	Essex Regiment
KRRC	King's Royal Rifle Corps
Norf	Norfolk Regiment
RBks	Royal Berkshire Regiment
RF	Royal Fusiliers

XXXXX		— XXXXX —	Army Group to Brigade boundaries (number of crosses denotes which. All armies)
	Army Group	-----	Railway
XXXX		-----	Canal
	Army	-----	Light railway/tramway
XXX			Marsh/inundation
	Corps		
XX			
	Division		
X			
	Brigade		
III			
	Regiment (FR/GE)		
II			
	Battalion or Regiment (BR only)		
	Infantry		