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**British 8th Infantry Division on the Western Front,
1914-18**

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen an increasingly sophisticated debate take place with regard to the armies on the Western Front during the Great War. Some argue that the British and Imperial armies underwent a 'learning curve' coupled with an increasingly lavish supply of munitions, which meant that during the last three months of fighting the BEF was able to defeat the German Army as its ability to conduct operations was faster than the enemy's ability to react.

This thesis argues that 8th Division, a war-raised formation made up of units recalled from overseas, became a much more effective and sophisticated organisation by the war's end. It further argues that the formation did not use one solution to problems but adopted a sophisticated approach dependent on the tactical situation. This is supported by using original sources including war diaries, after-action reports and the post-war correspondence with the British official historian.

From its first acquaintance with the peculiar nature of trench-warfare following its arrival in France in late 1914, 8th Division undertook a series of operations that attempted to break the deadlock. Incorrect lessons were learnt, culminating in failure on the Somme in 1916. The Division became ineffective and required rejuvenation. This was accomplished by a new command team. Involvement in the semi-open warfare during the advance to the Hindenburg Line reinforced the efficiency of the Division. Thus, despite enduring torrid fighting at 3rd Ypres and during the German Spring offensives of 1918, by the 'advance to victory' of late 1918, 8th Division was able to operate at a tempo far higher than it had achieved before.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the British 8th Infantry Division on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. The study is set in the context of the dominant historiography of the last thirty years – that the BEF's operations on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918 were subject to a 'learning curve', whereby it learned in a progressive fashion how to fight a skilled enemy. The learning process involved post-battle analysis, dissemination of 'lessons learned' and revised training. These activities meant that the BEF was far more effective at the end of the war than it had been at the beginning. The questions asked about 8th Division's operational effectiveness are informed by this debate, but also seek to illuminate and carry the debate forward by an examination of 8th Division at various phases of its wartime experiences.

The academic study of the British Army's experience on the Western Front in the Great War has been bedevilled by a plethora of vastly different interpretations, many of which have been uncomplimentary to its leadership and sparing in praise of its achievements. From the 1930s the historiography was coloured by the literature produced by and about the 'hostilities only' poets, writers and memoirists.¹ The seeds sown by them found fertile ground in a climate where veterans had become embittered by the post-war miseries caused by British economic decline.² This air of disillusionment was augmented by the memoirs of David Lloyd George, who was

¹ See, for example, Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929); Wilfred Owen, *Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920); Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber, 1930).

² See Rudyard Kipling's comments, quoted in Keith Grieves, 'Making Sense of the Great War: Regimental Histories 1918-1923', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, LXIX, No. 277 (Spring 1991), pp.6-15

vituperative in his assessments of the British commanders.³ How representative were they of the millions who served in the British Army between 1914 and 1918? It is worth noting that one battalion officer, who served with 8th Division in 1918 wrote long afterwards that their perspective was not his nor of the majority of his generation.⁴

The attacks on the BEF's commanders' conduct of operations were continued from a different direction by *particularists* having their own axe to grind. The apostles of armoured warfare, such as J.F.C. Fuller, castigated the high command, Haig in particular, for failing to use tanks more widely. It was in their interest to represent that there were few, if any, developments in British command and tactical methodology in contrast to the cascade of ideas that issued forth from them, however impractical.

The advocates of colonial superiority contrasted the success of the Dominion forces, the Australians especially, against the *lumpensoldieritat* of the British formations on the Western Front. The successes of the Anzacs were increasingly seen to be as much as an indictment of the lack of initiative and dash displayed by the British as well as a celebration of antipodean achievements

Above all, the inability of the British to achieve a decisive breakthrough until August 1918 was contrasted with the successful German use of storm troop tactics, especially between March and May 1918. The proponents of German excellence, often

³ D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1933).

⁴ Hubert Essame, *The Battle for Europe* (London: Batsford, 1972), p. 2.

Americans, have portrayed, for example, British junior leaders as ‘...enthusiastic but tactically incompetent schoolboys...’⁵

The views of those who disparage the British Army between 1914 and 1918 have in recent years been countered by what has been called the ‘revisionist’ school. Though the earlier efforts of historians such as Cyril Falls had often been disregarded, an increasing number of historians challenged the hostile view of the British Army’s achievements. A change came with the release of the war diaries and reports held by the UK national archives, the Public Record Office, in the late 1960s. The modern study of the tactical and operational development of the British Army in the First World War was led by Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham’s *Fire-Power*.⁶ This study examined the methods whereby artillery and tactical airpower became the dominant systems on the battlefield and the response of the British Army to these developments. Jonathan Bailey has argued that the combination of firepower and improved command led to a revolution in military affairs [RMA] that is still the basis for modern war fighting.⁷ Paddy Griffith has shown how innovative the BEF was in attack and how the ideas were disseminated, especially by the use of the *SS* series of training pamphlets and, very importantly, how tactical decision making was devolved to increasingly lower levels of rank and responsibility.⁸ One of the most important recent works has been Andy Simpson’s examination of Corps command. He argues that British use of the broad principles of fire and movement, that the commander at the front was the appropriate decision maker, put forward in the pre-war *Field Service*

⁵ Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics* (New York: Praeger), p. 175.

⁶ S. Bidwell & D. Graham, *Fire Power – British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904 – 1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004).

⁷ Jonathan Bailey, *The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare* [The Occasional, no. 22] (Camberley, Surrey: Strategic & Combat Studies Institute, 1996).

⁸ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916 – 18* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).

Regulations, Part 1 (Operations), henceforth referred to as *FSR, Part 1*, was much more flexible than a prescriptive doctrine. He argues that it could be used, and was used, as a guide for the many faceted worldwide operations of the British Empire in the 1914-18 War. *FSR, Part 1* was extremely versatile, adaptable to the introduction of new weapon systems, such as the tank, and new methods of operating such as the all-arms combined battle. Furthermore, by 1918 the BEF had greatly accelerated the tempo of operations, which did not allow the German Army time to rest and recover or react effectively.⁹

Peter Simkins, formerly Senior Historian at the Imperial War Museum, has been to the fore among those who have characterised the development of the BEF's war fighting as a 'learning curve', which culminated in what has become known as the 'Hundred Days', the series of victories that commenced on 8 August 1918 and concluded with the Armistice on 11 November 1918.¹⁰ The use of the phrase 'learning curve' sometimes gives rise to the impression that the experience of the BEF was a smooth upward progression of improvement to final victory. It should, perhaps, rather be regarded as an easy to remember label that covers what was a very complicated process. Units and formations, even whole arms such as artillery, improved at vastly different rates. Progress was not always forwards and quite often incorrect lessons were learned and the methods and systems put in place had to be re-examined and lessons learned afresh. An important book that examines what

⁹ Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2006).

¹⁰ See Peter Simkins, 'At The Sharp End': The Experience of the 12th (Eastern) Division in the Hundred Days, August – November 1918 (unpublished paper given at Suffolk Branch, Western Front Association seminar, 16 March 2008, Ipswich); "'Building Blocks": Aspects of Command and Control at Brigade level in the BEF's Offensive Operations, 1916-1918" in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front The British Army's Experience 1914-18* (Spellmount: Staplehurst, 2004); "'Co-stars or Supporting Cast?": British Divisions in the 'Hundred days', 1918', in Paddy Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1996).

happened in a number of infantry units is Mark Connelly's study of the various battalions, Regular, Territorial or war-raised New Army, of the Buffs, the East Kent Regiment, where he shows that there was not one indivisible experience.¹¹ Christopher Duffy, in his examination of how the German Army viewed the British during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, says:

*... A curve is by definition something smooth, whereas the progression in the Great War was more of a series of steps, some of which led downwards. It was, if anything, a learning or re-learning **process**. More generally, to relate the experience to a learning curve is to imprison the historian in an artificial framework of reference to compare with the notion of a 'Military Revolution' which distorted the study of early modern history for decades from the 1950s. The distinctive character of individual actions and campaigns can thereby be overlooked...*¹²

The books and articles of the revisionist historians have been supplemented by research within the universities. The range of research carried out covers much of the experience of the BEF between 1914 and 1918. There have been examinations of the technical arms, for example, Sanders Marble's PhD thesis on the role of artillery within the BEF.¹³ He argued that the senior artillery officers preferred to work within the system to support rather than take control. Throughout the war, as well as becoming very proficient technically in fields such as locating the enemy artillery and communications, control became centralised at increasingly higher levels. This contrasts with the situation in the infantry where control of firepower became increasingly decentralised.¹⁴

¹¹ Mark Connelly, *Steady The Buffs! A Regiment, a Region, and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹² Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes The British and The Somme 1916* (London: Phoenix, 2007), p. 323.

¹³ Sanders Marble, 'The Infantry cannot do with a gun less': *The Place of the Artillery in the British Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918* [internet] (DOI 0-231-50219-2. Gutenberg<e>, Columbia University Press. 2003. [last accessed <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/mas01/masack.html>, 02/12/2009]

¹⁴ See Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 21-2.

Studies of formations at divisional or brigade level have tended to concentrate on Territorial or New Army formations. For example, Kathryn Snowden examined the tactical evolution of 21st Division, a New Army formation, from 1916-18.¹⁵ She supports the idea that the process was not a smooth progression. The actions at Broodseinde could be viewed as retrograde but could also be seen as an attempt to deal with the conditions imposed by the ground and the German use of concrete pill-boxes. Matthew Brosnan examined 56th (London) Division, a Territorial Army formation.¹⁶ He argued that there was a curve upward though at times it was uneven. He argues that it was the Territorial ethos that allowed the Division to do relatively well at Gommecourt on 1 July 1916 and assimilate non-Londoners in 1918 and perform effectively after so doing. Derek Clayton has examined another Territorial division, 49th (West Riding) Division.¹⁷ He compared three actions carried out by the Division at different times when the variables, such as type of action i.e. attacks on prepared German positions with artillery support, were as similar as possible. Importantly, the time between each was such that tactical, logistical and weapon-system changes would have been different for all three operations examined. He concluded that the evidence supported unequivocally that there was a learning curve, certainly where 48th (West Riding) Division were concerned.

Mark Cook has examined the New Army 38th (Welsh) Division.¹⁸ He argues that more sophisticated tactics and operational flexibility caused improved performance

¹⁵ Kathryn Snowden, 'British 21st Division on the Western Front 1914-1918 A Case Study in Tactical Evolution' (MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2001)

¹⁶ Matthew Brosnan, 'The Tactical Development of the 56th (London) Division on the Western Front, 1916-18' (MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2005).

¹⁷ Derek Clayton, 'The British 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division on the Western Front 1916-18 – To what extent do the Division's experiences validate the concept of the Learning Curve?' (MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2006).

¹⁸ Mark Cook, 'Evaluating the Learning Curve: the 38th (Welsh) Division on the Western Front 1916-1918' (M Phil Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2005).

rather than the ‘professionalization’ of a New Army formation, viewed as the creation of a Welsh political clique that did not share the Regular Army’s values and ethos. Success came also as a result of the tempo of operations accelerating so that the enemy in 1918 had no respite.

Penny Richardson has examined the fortunes of 31st Division in 1918.¹⁹ This New Army formation had a bad press, especially when it was compared with the Guards units transferred to the formation in early 1918. She says, however, that when the statistics are examined the Division did no worse and in cases better than its contemporaries who were considered to be more elite at the time. She attributes this not only to a change of command, when a long-serving GOC was overdue replacement, but also to the introduction of new tactical systems and methods.

The idea of the learning curve has also been examined using a different approach. If lessons were learned then they would have to be synthesised and disseminated. Research into the training systems used by the BEF includes Alistair Geddes’ study of Arthur Solly-Flood and the establishment of the GHQ Training Directorate.²⁰ It shows that there was an attempt to establish a coherent training system and that if there was ‘slippage’ that was only to be expected in an organisation the size of the BEF. Ian Riley has examined training at divisional level, with a case study of 55th (West Lancashire) Division under Major-General Hugh Jeudwine.²¹ He has argued that Jeudwine may not have had original ideas but he was prepared to synthesise the ideas

¹⁹ Penny Richardson, “‘Thirty-Worst’: The poor reputation of 31st Infantry Division and its experiences during the fighting of 1918” (MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2009).

²⁰ Alistair Geddes, ‘Solly-Flood, GHQ and Tactical Training in the BEF, 1916-1918’ (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 2007).

²¹ Ian Riley, ‘The Formation of the 55th (West Lancashire) Division and the Development of Training and of the Divisional Infantry School during 1916 and 1917’ (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 2009).

of others and put theory into practice in a systematic manner. Though these systems were overtaken by the development of Corps and Army schools they examine a point on the path taken by the BEF to move forward training and tactical development. That these developments did not take place in a vacuum has been further examined by Dave Molineux's study of the need to put in place a 3-section platoon structure owing to the manpower shortages in the summer of 1918.²² This new organisation led to a plethora of tactical experimentation across the whole BEF in the summer of 1918.

The concept of 'learning curve' has been criticised explicitly by Tim Travers, who portrayed the British high command as unwilling fully to accept the changes that modern war required, especially technology, and that there was an unwillingness to accept modern weapon systems such as the tank.²³ This view was sometimes held by those who served in the war, notably Colonel W.N. Nicholson, who complained that 'right up to the end of the war there were New Army divisions that knew as little administration as the 17th Division before the Battle of the Somme'.²⁴ Nicholson was critical of the laboured nature of the BEF's 'Great Advance', contrasting it to an admiring account of the German Army's initiative, adaptability and speed of response. These strictures have been reinforced in the work of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, whose study of Sir Henry Rawlinson found no consistent pattern of learning or of understanding,²⁵ an argument they later extended to the rest of the BEF in their accounts of the Somme and Third Ypres.²⁶

²² Dave Molineux, 'The Effect of Platoon Structure on Tactical Development in the BEF: June to November 1918' (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 2009).

²³ T. Travers, *The Killing Ground* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2003) and T. Travers, *How the War was Won* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2005).

²⁴ W.N. Nicholson, *Behind the Lines* (London: J. Cape, 1939), p. 212.

²⁵ Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

²⁶ Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005) and *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996; 2002).

Recent scholarship thus stresses the varied experiences of different formations and shows that there was not one simple route travelled but instead a multiplicity of routes. The experience of a unit or formation was dependent on so many variables that it is difficult to distinguish a common pattern except that progress was wished for and sometimes achieved. This is fully reflected in the history of the 8th Division.

Sources

Published Sources

The initial accounts made soon after the end of the War were the narratives contained in the histories of units and formations. These remembered the fallen and commemorated the acts of the living. Within these subjects there were further sub-themes. Keith Grieves has stated that the histories of New Army Service battalions, in particular, were written as a way of concluding the final chapter of the unit's existence, together with the laying up of the colours, a final parade before the civic dignitaries and the foundation of an Old Comrades Association.²⁷ Together with Territorial units, the war-created New Army units' histories helped their former members make sense of the experiences they had undergone which if terrible were certainly abnormal compare to anything they had undergone previously.

The regular units 'quickly appreciated the value of siting their most recent military experiences in the context of their tradition or "illustrious past"...'.²⁸ This demonstration of their continued ethos contrasted with the New Army or even Territorial histories. The regular army histories were more 'top-down' in that they

²⁷ Grieves, "Making Sense of the Great War", p. 9

²⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

were written from the officers' perspective and the other ranks formed a khaki backdrop to the officers' experiences. An emphasis on the continuity of the old Regular Army ethos tended to disregard the fact that the BEF of 1918 was not only far larger than the original BEF of 1914 but also far different in composition and capabilities. Furthermore, the regular army career officers did what was necessary to maintain their hold on the Army after the war.²⁹ Treating the experiences of 1914-18 as a unique experience or even as an aberration fitted this purpose.

The series of official British histories dealing with the Western Front was published between 1922 and 1948. The series was edited by Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, a Regular Royal Engineers officer. The official histories also ignored the unit histories written just after the war. Again they were written with the officers' perspective as its primary focus as it was intended as a chronological record, to provide material for Staff College lectures. John Keegan has written that, in so doing, it has, '...achieved the remarkable feat of writing an exhaustive account of one of the world's greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all...'³⁰ The disregard of the unit histories written in the immediate post-war period missed what could be valuable source material. These could have provided the evidence:

...readily available on the vulnerability of detached posts, co-ordinating units in wooded areas and the problems of moving from trench to mobile warfare. Many of these commentaries remained unexplored and the lessons of the Great War were less than systematically gathered for future use...³¹

²⁹See the post war experiences of war-time Guards officers such as Harold Macmillan's contemporaries, Oliver Lyttleton and Harry Crookshank in Simon Ball, *The Guardsmen: Harold Macmillan, Three Friends and the World They Made* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 77.

³⁰ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Allen Lane, 1984), p. 31. The Australian official histories are in marked contrast. Edited by C.E.W Bean, their aim was to celebrate Australian efforts, especially of the citizens who volunteered. . Thus they possess detailed footnotes on a very large number of the participants, giving their details, including their pre-war occupation, district and state. See, for example, footnotes 134-142 in C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914 – 18. Volume V. The Australian Imperial Force in France during the main German Offensive 1918* (Sydney, Australia: Angus & Robertson, 1939), p. 636.

³¹ Grieves, 'Making Sense of the Great War', p.11.

Grievés makes a further observation that from about 1923, following an article he wrote for the *Army Quarterly* in July of that year, the methods of Everard Wyrall came to dominate the writing of unit and formation histories. He advocated accounts that did not include what he called ‘destructive comments’ nor were higher formations to be criticised. The result was, as Grievés says:

*...a dispassionate, sometimes mechanistic strand of writing emerged, particularly in divisional histories...*³²

8th Division’s history was published in 1926, using as co-authors, Lieutenant-Colonel Boraston,³³ a pre-war barrister who had been Field-Marshal Haig’s private secretary after the war, and Captain Cyril E.O. Bax,³⁴ also a pre-war barrister. Boraston and Bax were chosen because they had no connection with 8th Division. The history they wrote would be seen, therefore, as unbiased.³⁵ It followed the pattern advocated by Wyrall, having very little included from the perspective of the other ranks. A study of 8th Division’s official history does not dispel the belief that it followed the pattern advocated by Wyrall. On the other hand, Boraston was a trained barrister and had an MA in modern history from Merton College, Oxford.³⁶ Though not controversial, the

³² Ibid, p.13.

³³ Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Boraston & Captain Cyril E.O. Bax, *The Eighth Division in War, 1914 – 1918* (London: The Medici Society, 1926).

³⁴ I cannot find out anything about Bax except he also was a member of the Inner Temple and in early 1915 he became a junior officer in the 9th Middlesex (sourced from an on-line facsimile of a booklet, John Charles Darling, *Inner Templars Who Volunteered and Served in the Great War* (London: publisher not known, possibly 1916-1919) at <http://www.archive.org/details/innertemplarswho00inne>, (last accessed 12/12/2009). The 1/9th Middlesex served in India and then Mesopotamia. The archive for the Inner Temple gives his full name as Cyril Ernest Orlando Bax and he was admitted to the Inner Temple on 6 October 1909. See

<http://www.innertemple.org.uk/archive/itad/date.asp?surname=Bax&firstname=Cyril&sort=byname&date1=1547&date2=1920&submit=Search> (last accessed 12/12/2009). It is possible that he was also a military contemporary of Boraston who was also a 2nd lieutenant in early 1915. In 1930 he was a professional legal clerk in the Ministry of Health. See <http://www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/33594/pages/2158/page.pdf> (last accessed 12/12/2009),

³⁵ This is referred to specifically in the preface, Boraston & Bax, *Eighth Division*, p. ix.

³⁶ John Herbert Boraston (1885-1969) His father was Sir John Boraston, Principal Agent for the Unionist Party. Graduate in Modern History, Merton College 1906. Awarded MA 1908. Called to the

history appears to be solidly based on documentary and personal testimony. Being published in 1922 when many members of the divisional higher command were not only still alive but often still in the Army it is not surprising that the history followed the official line.

Unpublished Sources

During the Great War each substantial unit kept a war diary.³⁷ Within the BEF this covered the whole organisation from battalion through brigade, division, corps and army up to GHQ. Within an infantry division this included the brigade and divisional general staff branches, which are the sections responsible for operations, and the other staff branches, the Commander, Royal Artillery (CRA), the Commander, Royal Engineers (CRE), the Assistant-Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General (AA&QMG), responsible for personnel and stores matters, the Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) and so on. In the infantry, the lowest level that kept a war diary was the battalion. Some arms and services, such as machine-gun companies and divisional signals companies, maintained war diaries at a lower level.

The war diary, as well as a record of events, included associated items such as warning orders from higher formations, memoranda, plans and maps and, very importantly, the after-action reports. The British Army demanded reports and returns

Bar (Inner Temple) 1909. 2nd Lieut. 2/7th London Battery RFA (TF) 1915. Haig's private secretary (with the rank of Lieut.-Colonel) December 1918- February 1920; editor of Haig's despatches; co-author of *Haig's Command*. Acted as Haig's private secretary in connection with military matters until latter's death. Member of British Legion committee re Haig's statue. Member of the Bar Council in the 1930's. Local councillor for Lincoln's Fields. Recalled to the Army in 1939, member of 21st Army Group War Crimes Investigation team, north-west Europe, 1944-46. (Sourced from *The Times* Archive for various dates 1900 to 1969. See <http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/tol/archive/> (last accessed 10/12/2009).

³⁷ Within the UK National Archives [henceforth referred to as TNA PRO] these are held in the WO95 series. However some are held in the WO154 series. The latter contains material considered sensitive such as provost diaries. See Ian F. W. Beckett, *The First World War: The Essential Guide to Sources in the UK National Archives* (Richmond, Surrey: Public Record Office, 2001).

on every activity. After each action a report had to be compiled for return to higher command concerning what had occurred and the lessons learnt.³⁸

With regard to after action reports the historian has to be aware of an element of reflection upon the part of the compiler whether done consciously or unconsciously. It would require a reporter or writer possessing the utmost objectivity, having a superabundance of self awareness, to be able to write a report where faults or errors committed by themselves or by organisations are not at least mitigated or avoided. However, any patent untruth or omission in a report would be counterbalanced by other reports or anecdotal accounts. Moreover, it would be in the writer/compiler's interest to create as accurate a record as possible as part of the unit's learning process and to guard against misrepresentations by other units.

Regarding 8th Division, it is noteworthy that, especially as the war progressed, less and less extraneous material is included in the war diary; for example, the minutes of divisional conferences. The reasons for this are not known. It could be that the material has been lost or the material was not considered vital enough to be kept or the activity referred to did not take place as often as before.

The war diaries do not provide all the required information. They could be very brief, especially when the unit had been involved in prolonged action and casualties were heavy, resulting in vital narrative being lost. What is often not present, certainly for actions later in the war, is the personal account. However, to some extent these are provided by the sources gathered by the section of the Cabinet Office responsible for

³⁸ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 186-7

the series of British official histories.³⁹ This series of sources does have drawbacks. There are no accounts from any participant who was not an officer. The individual contributor may have had a particular viewpoint he wanted to make or, perhaps, denigrate.⁴⁰ For example, in his correspondence with the Official Historian, Alan Hanbury-Sparrow, 2nd Royal Berkshires, who was on 1 July 1916 a staff officer at 8th Division Headquarters (HQ), stated that the reasons for 8th Division's lack of success on the Somme was down to lack of 'go' and that success was only achieved after the inculcation of regular army discipline by the new GOC, Major-General William Heneker, after he took up command of the Division in December 1916.⁴¹ Furthermore, it must be noted that some of the accounts and comments were not asked for until some time after the war, often well into the 1930s.

Personal Accounts and Diaries

Personal accounts include unpublished papers, such as those lodged with the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) or regimental archives, or published works. The latter includes personal narratives and those included in the post-war regimental histories.

Though keeping a diary in the field was an offence against military discipline, many did keep them or wrote up accounts afterwards, often based on letters home or other contemporary records. Though censorship was in place, more unexpurgated accounts than the official despatch were sent home, in the main by officers, to family using friends or colleagues going home on leave. After the war, many recorded the events

³⁹ These are the CAB 45 series of documents in the UK National Archives, formerly the Public Record Office [henceforth TNA PRO], Kew, Surrey.

⁴⁰ See Travers, *The Killing Ground*, pp. 203-17.

⁴¹ See manuscript in TNA PRO: CAB 45/134, duplicated in typescript in TNA PRO: CAB45/189

they had seen for their own benefit or that of family or to commemorate comrades who had been killed or died.

With all types of personal account and memoir, a critical perspective has to be kept. The time elapsed since the events described, the origins of the sources used and, again, how objective is the writer, are all matters to be borne in mind. One major problem with examining the views held by people who were members of an organisation is that they often write with one eye on their posterity. John Keegan has perceptively commented that there is a danger in relying on a reconstruction of events based

*...solely or largely on the evidence of those whose reputations may gain or lose by the account they give: even if it is only a warrior's self-esteem which he feels to be at stake...*⁴²

Regimental or formation histories will almost always expand on the achievements of the unit or formation that is the subject of their story. Conversely, they will deal lightly, if at all, with any failure. If failure is depicted in any way, it is usually in the most flattering or positive light, due to no fault or failings on the part on the subject but because they were let down by other units, formations or even allies. However, there are occasions when an account contained within the official history of a unit illuminates the events that took place, giving an insight that was not available before.

Richard Holmes has also commented that modern perceptions of the experience of the British Army on the Western Front have been reinforced by the accounts of the participants when interviewed long after the event,

⁴² John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Allen Lane [Penguin], 1984), pp. 29-30

...they became Veterans, General Issue, neatly packed with what we want to hear, exploding at the touch of a tape-recorder button or the snap of a TV documentarist's clapper-board. Up to my neck in muck and bullets; rats as big as footballs; the sergeant-major was a right bastard; all my mates were killed. And sometimes, just sometimes, they tell us this because they have heard it themselves...⁴³

Following on from this, another problem with the use of the most modern interviews with veterans of the Great War, those carried out from the nineteen seventies onwards, is that these were with participants in an event that had taken place at least sixty years before. By this time, there were very few survivors who held rank above that of captain. For example, in Martin Middlebrook's seminal book, *The First Day on The Somme*,⁴⁴ first published in 1971, the author listed by formation those 526 participants who had provided oral or written testimony. As well as their names, unit and place of residence also given are their ranks at the time of the battle. From 8th Division, there were some twenty-seven accounts. The most senior rank held on 1 July 1916 was that of captain. During the time under consideration, however successful their subsequent careers, the most responsible position that would have been held by those interviewees holding that rank would have been company commander or company second in command or unit adjutant. If on a brigade or divisional staff, they might have been a General Staff Officer (Operations/Intelligence) Grade 3, responsible for local operations and co-ordination, or a Staff Captain responsible for supply and administration. They were not usually in a position, except as an onlooker or message communicator, to comment on the higher direction of a brigade let alone an infantry division. Any attempt to reconstruct or examine what happened to such a formation at the time has to rely on the most contemporaneous material available.

⁴³ Holmes, *Tommy*, p. xxiii

⁴⁴ Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916* (London: Allen Lane Pelican, 1971; Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1975), pp. 342-52, especially p. 343 regarding 8th Division.

It is by using as many of the sources that are available that the modern military historian can provide a valid analysis of events that are now almost a hundred years old.

The Infantry Division

During the Great War, and up until comparatively recently, the division was the smallest formation in an army that was made up of all arms and services. It was at the top end of the true tactical spectrum. It was an army in miniature. In the British Army, it was usually commanded by a Major-General. The use of the word 'general' as part of the title is important. John Masters, a regular Indian army officer of Gurkhas, commented after World War Two:

...A general is so called because he is in 'general command' of troops, that is he commands troops of all arms and services; the smallest formation which permanently embodies all arms is the division, commanded by a major-general...⁴⁵

During the Great War, commanders of infantry brigades had the rank of Brigadier-General. In the inter-war period, this was replaced with the title colonel-commandant and then brigadier for the reasons outlined above. They were not in command of troops of all arms but of one arm or service only.

Field-Marshal Viscount Slim, 'Bill' Slim of the Burma campaign in World War Two, wrote:

...It is good fun commanding a division anywhere. It is one of the four best commands in the service – a platoon, a battalion, a division and an army. [...] A division, because it is the smallest formation that is a complete orchestra of war and the largest in which every man can know you...⁴⁶

⁴⁵ John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay: A Personal Narrative* (London: Odhams, 1961).

⁴⁶ Viscount William John Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (paperback edition London: Corgi, 1971), p. 14

An infantry division on the Western Front in the Great War was made up of units from all arms, such as infantry, artillery, engineers, and services such as medical, ordnance and supply and transport. At times it even had its own mounted contingent. As the war continued, specialist units of machine gunners and trench mortars were added. Its importance lay in the fact that in the British Army of the time it was seen as the basic tactical unit of all arms.⁴⁷

John Bourne has written:

*.. At full strength an infantry division consisted of approximately 18,000 officers and men, nearly as many British troops as Wellington commanded at Waterloo. It represented the key level of 'middle management' in an increasingly large, complicated organisation..."*⁴⁸

There were some sixty divisions when the BEF was at its height in France and Flanders.⁴⁹ Not every division had a history written and none after the inter-war period. As the main tactical vehicle of the British Army during the Great War that level of formation is worth revisiting. It was the infantry that took the shock of battle and were the most numerous arm (and suffered the heaviest casualties). Though by 1918 the BEF was operating an all-arms battle, which was a true revolution in military affairs, '...after the generals had planned and the armies have mustered, the artillery have spoken and the armour has manoeuvred, it is the man with a rifle in his hand who actually occupies the enemy land...'⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Simpson, 'British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914- 1918', p. 114, and Terraine, *Smoke and the Fire*, p. 98

⁴⁸ J.M. Bourne, 'Major-General W.C. G. Heneker: A Divisional Commander of the Great War', in Matthew Hughes & Matthew Seligmann, eds., *Leadership in Conflict 1914 – 1918* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000), p. 54

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ian Hogg, 'Introduction', in John Weeks, *Infantry Weapons* (London: Pan/Ballantine, 1972), p. 6.

8th Division operated on the Western Front from 7 November 1914 to the end of hostilities on 11 November 1918. During that time it took part in thirteen battles or series of actions. Its total casualties were 2,927 officers and 60, 931 men.⁵¹

The reason for selecting 8th Division is that it was an infantry formation, the arm that carried out most of the fighting. It served on the Western Front for exactly four years, arriving in the theatre of operations on 7 November 1914 and operating there until 11 November 1918. At first, it was made up almost entirely of regular units that at the outbreak of war were serving overseas. Having said that, on its arrival there was much that had to extemporised and improvised. All this had to take place while it was in contact with the enemy.

In the whole of its four-year sojourn on the Western Front, 8th Division had only three commanders. Its first, Major-General F.J. 'Joey' Davies, raised then took the Division to war and commanded it during the first major offensive operations carried out by the BEF on the Western Front. The next GOC, Major-General H.H. Hudson, commanded the Division for the rest of 1915 and for almost all of 1916. The third and last GOC, Major-General W.G.C. Heneker, commanded the Division from late 1916 until the end of the fighting. Therefore, a major part of 8th Division's command and control can be said to be the remit of just these three commanders.

8th Division is worth examining for other reasons though it is not as well known as other British divisions, such as 18th Division. It is certainly not as well known as the formations of the Australian and Canadian forces. If it is referred to, it is for its role in

⁵¹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division in War*, pp. 295-6.

the battle of Neuve Chapelle and for the disaster it suffered on 1 July 1916. These two battles do not tell the whole picture of 8th Division's experiences during its war on the Western Front.

As shown earlier in this Introduction, most recent academic studies have concentrated on the examination of formations from 1916 onwards. The formations examined have been in the main Territorial or New Army. Though war-raised, 8th Division was a Regular division. As well as Neuve Chapelle, the BEF's first major offensive of the war, 8th Division took part in the next major offensive, at Aubers Ridge in May 1915 and carried out a diversionary operation at Bois Grenier during the battle of Loos in September 1915.

8th Division was one of the infantry divisions that attacked on the morning of 1 July 1916, a day that has come to dominate British perceptions of the Great War. It was then sent to Artois to recuperate. It returned to the Somme in October 1916 and once more participated in operations there. During 1917 it took part in the pursuit of the Germans to their new fixed defences, the so-called Hindenburg Line. In the summer, it took part in two of the major assaults during the Third Battle of Ypres.

In 1918 8th Division acted as part of the BEF's 'fire brigade' during the German Michael offensive and suffered grievously. It was rebuilt only to face a renewed German assault at Villers Bretonneux at the end of April. It was then 'wiped-out' on the Chemin de Dames in May, having been sent there to recuperate. It was then rebuilt again to participate in the 'Advance to Victory' during the summer and autumn of 1918.

In a doctoral thesis of 80,000 words it is not possible to examine in detail every action or incident in which 8th Division participated. 8th Division's experiences on the Western Front are so varied that in many instances it is difficult to compare operations in which it participated. For example, the 1915 battles were affected by the problems caused by the massive expansion in Britain's military responsibilities being unmatched by its capabilities. Similarly, the operations on 1 July 1916 are different in character from those of 1917. The situation in 1918 was in many ways the antithesis of what had taken place before. The major operations 8th Division was engaged in for the first part of 1918 were defensive in nature. This was a complete contrast to its previous three years on the Western Front when all of its operations were offensive.

What is desired is to demonstrate how 8th Division attempted to carry out its tasks as ordered by higher command and how successful it was. Just as important, is to show whether the Division learned anything from its efforts and if these lessons learned were put into practice in future operations. 8th Division's transition to war and the trench operations over the winter of 1914 are examined in detail because the questions and difficulties encountered were to be the same until the end of the period of static positional warfare that has been labelled 'trench warfare'.

Some rigour is used in selecting operations to be examined in detail. It has been decided to examine its first three main offensive operations of 1915 because there is a logical progression. Though the first two, at Neuve Chapelle and at Fromelles/Aubers Ridge, were part of operations being conducted at Army and Corps levels the role of

8th Division in each was able to be examined in isolation. Bois Grenier, being a diversionary effort, was particularly suitable for examination.

1 July 1916 has been selected because 8th Division's operations took place over a relatively small geographical area and within the space of one day, though its preparation took many months. The later operations on 8th Division's return to the Somme in October 1916 were also worthy of examination because again the Division took part in highly localised attacks in a small geographical area in a prescribed time frame.

From the later operations of 8th Division, the same criteria for selection have been used. However, an additional factor is that the operations selected demonstrate whether 8th Division had the capacity to adapt to new circumstances. Therefore, the Division's participation in the operations at the time of the German retreat in the spring of 1917 is selected because for the first time it was confronted with semi-open warfare. Again, the Division's operations were capable of being examined in isolation. However, because they took place over a month, these later operations are not examined in the same way as the action at Bouchavesnes on 4 March 1917, which acted as a preamble to the German withdrawal. Again, Bouchavesnes is suitable as it took place in a prescribed geographical area over a limited time period.

It was decided that 8th Division's operations in the Ypres area would not to be examined in detail because the methods used were those used previously only on a larger scale, what Andy Simpson terms, "...the stereotyping of attacks..."⁵² More

⁵² Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p. xxvi.

importantly, much of what happened was outside the control of 8th Division. There was little that 8th Division could have done by its own efforts that would have altered the outcome of operations.

8th Division's defensive operations in 1918 are problematic. The operations following the German assault of 21 March 1918 were by their very nature disjointed. 8th Division entered a battle, which was very fluid and where the area the Division was fighting in changed literally every day. Therefore, the operations could not be examined in the same way as the assaults at Neuve Chapelle, Fromelles and 1 July 1916. For these operations, events have been selected that illustrated the situation facing the Division and how they were dealt with.

The action at Villers Bretonneux has been examined in detail because it was the first ever operation 8th Division carried out where it operated in a prepared defensive position with a defence plan already in place. Also the action is worthy of examination because it was the first action carried out by 8th Division after a new defensive doctrine had been adopted by the BEF in late 1917 and early 1918.

The defence of the Chemin de Dames in May 1918 has not been selected for a detailed examination for a number of reasons. Firstly, 8th Division's planning and preparation were heavily prescribed by the French higher command in the area. Secondly, the destruction wrought among the formations and units of the Division were such that very few records survive and little analysis can satisfactorily be attempted.

Finally, the role of 8th Division in the last phase of the war, what has been called the Advance to Victory, in the last hundred days of the war, has been examined in detail. Though 8th Division did not carry out any major assaults, the systems of tactics and devolved control used were those developed by the BEF in the previous two years. The aim of an examination of one of the attacks in October is to contrast 8th Division's methods from those of 1915 and 1916 in particular.

CHAPTER 1

1914 – A NEW WAY OF WAR

This chapter examines the experience of 8th Division from its formation, after the outbreak of war, and then its deployment on the Western Front. It shows that its initial experiences had not been foreseen nor was the division completely organised or trained for its role.

The British Expeditionary Force that went to France and Belgium in 1914 was different from the great armies of continental Europe in that it was professional and long service in character.¹ There were also tactical differences. The French believed in using artillery to allow the infantry to occupy the ground.² The British Army's tactics were based on the doctrine of 'fire and movement'. The assault would be made after a fire-fight had suppressed the enemy fire and the move forward would be covered by 'fire and movement'.³ However, as Travers and Bidwell and Graham have argued, the view held by officers like N.R. McMahon that the volume of aimed fire was the most important factor became subdued by the view that the human factor, morale and the will to move forward in the face of enemy firepower, was the deciding element.⁴ Training at formation level was not practised as much as it could have been. In the UK, as Mark Connelly has said, this was often due to competing demands, such

¹ Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Death of an Army* (London: Woodward Editions, 1998. First published London, Harrap, 1967), p. 43.

² Mark Connelly, *Steady the Buffs! A Regiment, A Region & the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 41.

³ Edward M. Spiers, 'The Regular Army in 1914', in Ian F.W. Beckett & Keith Simpson, eds., *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Select, 2004; first published Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 47.

⁴ See Travers, *The Killing Ground*, p. 67 and Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower*, pp. 31-2.

as aid to the civil powers.⁵ John Baynes has commented that for the units of 8th Division, posted to the garrisons of Empire, such training was not possible owing to the unsuitability of postings such as Malta, with its lack of space, or because of the heat.⁶ Above all, there was a lack of anticipation that there would be large-scale trench warfare making it impossible for flanks to be turned.⁷

The historiography of 1914 is, perhaps, less well developed than that of the war's later years. It has been dominated by elegiac, romantic and – possibly exaggerated – accounts of the BEF's professional expertise and strategic impact.⁸ Recent scholarly accounts, notably by Nikolas Gardner⁹ and Ian F.W. Beckett,¹⁰ have done much to undermine the traditional accounts. Gardner's criticisms of the weaknesses of command and control in the BEF and Beckett's downsizing of the BEF's contribution, even in a battle like 1st Ypres, are certainly reflected in the experience of 8th Division in 1914.

* * * *

8th Division was that wartime peculiarity, a war-raised Regular Army division. The opening campaign, in August 1914 had shown that all available troops would be needed if the British Army was to take its place effectively on the battlefields of

⁵ Connelly, *Steady the Buffs!*, p. 45.

⁶ John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of men and Courage: The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle 1915* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), p. 48.

⁷ Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, pp. 62-3.

⁸ See, for example, David Ascoli, *The Mons Star: The British Expeditionary Force, 5th Aug.-22nd Nov. 1914* (London: Harrap, 1981), Kate Caffrey, *Farewell Leicester Square: The Old Contemptibles, 12 August-19 November 1914* (London: Deutsch, 1980) and Tim Carew, *The Vanished Army* (London: Corgi, 1971).

⁹ Nikolas Gardner, *Trial by Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (Westport, CT. & London: Praeger, 2003).

¹⁰ Ian F.W. Beckett, *Ypres. The First Battle 1914* (Harlow: Longman, 2006).

Europe.¹¹ The Division's formation was, therefore, extempore. The need for the Division to be raised had not figured in pre-war planning. For example, its divisional number had already been allocated to one of the new formations of Kitchener's Army.¹²

8th Division's infantry units were found from the overseas garrisons and stations of the British Empire (see Table 1.1). Worthy of remark is the fact that many of the battalions had been in what were called 'hot-weather' postings. They had little time to acclimatise on their hurried return to Europe. One sergeant from 2nd Rifle Brigade, after the battalion's return to England, was sent to Deptford in London to draw stores and wagons. He wrote that the soldiers were unused to the cold and this was made worse because they still wearing the cotton drill uniforms they had worn in India.¹³

Though its infantry battalions were found from the garrisons of the British Empire, the artillery and supporting troops were the result of wartime improvisation. They were a mixture of regular army units, moved sideways from other formations, or units of the Territorial Force. Units of the latter were being posted overseas, especially to India, to release regular units for service in Europe. Therefore, a number of the support units of the formed pre-war Territorial divisions (which mirrored the regular army in organisation if not in equipment) were surplus to requirements. Two of the field ambulances of the Division, 25 and 26 Field Ambulances, were from the outset

¹¹ Correlli Barnett states that by the end of 1914, the British Army had lost 89,000 officers and men. See *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970: A Military, Political and Social Survey* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 377.

¹² Martin Middlebrook, *Your Country Needs You* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2000), p. 46 and Beckett & Simpson, *A Nation in Arms*, Appendix 1, p. 235.

¹³ Imperial War Museum, London [henceforth IWM], Department of Documents: J.W. Riddell Papers, Ref. 77/73/1.

provided by the Territorial Force.¹⁴ The Field Engineer companies were regular army units but the signals company had to be raised as a wartime improvisation.

Infantry Bn.	8th Division Inf. Bde.	Pre-war posting
2nd Battalion Devonshires	23 Infantry Brigade	Cairo, Egypt
2nd Battalion West Yorkshires	23 Infantry Brigade	Malta
2nd Battalion Scottish Rifles	23 Infantry Brigade	Malta
2nd Battalion Middlesex	23 Infantry Brigade	Malta
1st Battalion Worcestershires	24 Infantry Brigade	Cairo, Egypt
2nd Battalion East Lancashires	24 Infantry Brigade	Wynberg, S. Africa
1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters	24 Infantry Brigade	Bombay, India
2nd Battalion Northamptonshires	24 Infantry Brigade	Alexandria, Egypt
2nd Battalion Lincolnshires	25 Infantry Brigade	Bermuda
2nd Battalion Royal Berkshires	25 Infantry Brigade	Jhansi, India
1st Battalion Royal Irish Rifles	25 Infantry Brigade	Aden
2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade	25 Infantry Brigade	Kuldana, India

Table 1.1: Pre-war Postings of 8th Division's Infantry Battalions¹⁵

8th Division's three infantry brigades, unlike the original six divisions of the BEF, had not worked together nor had they practiced recently for major European war. Their pre-war roles were being an imperial *gendarmarie* or guards to the dockyards and coaling stations of the Royal Navy.

¹⁴ Middlebrook, *Your Country Needs You*, p. 104

¹⁵ Terry Cave, *The Regular Army – 1914 [Military Fact Sheet No. 1]* (London: The Western Front Association, 1983)

India was traditionally seen as an excellent training ground for soldiers, especially in the harsh arena of the tribal areas of the north-west. Even here 8th Division was unfortunate. The units from India had not been tested on recent active operations on the North-West Frontier. They had served their time in stations such as Bombay or Jhansi. They were not alone. 2nd Lincolnshires arrived from the balmy shores of Bermuda, having previously been guarding the Royal Navy's HMS *Malabar* base.

Furthermore, though, as units serving overseas, the infantry battalions were meant to be kept up to full strength, reservists did rejoin and had to be assimilated. Their ways were different from those of the units they rejoined. R. Archer-Houblon, of the division's artillery, commented that in 8th Division was "...a battalion of the Berkshire Regiment, my father's old regiment, many of whose reservists at this time wore beards, and as they were mostly big men, and their beards were neat ones like those the old-fashioned gamekeeper used to wear, they looked exceedingly well..."¹⁶ The battalions needed time together. However, time was one commodity they did not have.

An infantry division had its own integral artillery. This was under the command of a brigadier-general. He was the divisional commander's chief advisor on artillery matters, the Commander Royal Artillery.¹⁷ As the commander of the main firepower assets possessed by the formation, he was vital in the planning of any operation, offensive or defensive.

¹⁶ Liddle Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds [henceforth Liddle Collection]; R. Archer-Houblon, Personal Papers, ref. GS 0040.

¹⁷ Often known as the 'CRA'.

As can be seen from the table [Table 1.2 below], 8th Division's artillery was initially made up of one Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) brigade, two Royal Field Artillery (RFA) field brigades, and a Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) heavy brigade. The division's artillery was weaker than that of the six initial divisions of the BEF by having an establishment of only 56 artillery pieces compared to the 76 guns establishment of the latter. The firepower available to the division was weaker in other ways as well. It had to use a RHA brigade of 13-pounder guns, instead of the usual RFA field brigade of 18-pounder guns.¹⁸ The horse artillery guns were originally designed for use with 1st Cavalry Division or the independent mounted brigades. They were designed to operate with fast moving cavalry units and not to provide the fire support for an infantry formation. Secondly, the placement of the RHA brigade equipped with 13-pounder guns meant there was no third RFA brigade armed with howitzers.¹⁹ Howitzers are designed for plunging, indirect fire, being able to land projectiles behind covering obstacles. They were the ideal weapon for trench warfare. Instead, 8th Division, and the other war-raised Regular divisions (7th Division, 27th Division, 28th Division and 29th Division) were initially given two extemporised batteries of four 4.7-inch guns. These were the so-called 'Cow guns' of the Boer War, former naval guns on poor carriages. They were seen as inadequate at the time, being nicknamed 'strict neutrality' for their inaccuracy, spreading shells onto friend or foe alike without discrimination.²⁰

¹⁸ The 13-pounder gun was a 3-inch gun firing a 12½-pound shell to a maximum range of 6,100 yards at a velocity of 1,658 feet per second. The 18-pounder gun was a 3.3-inch gun firing a 18½-pound shell to a maximum range of 6,200 yards at a velocity of 1,590 feet per second. See Official, *Field Service Pocket Book, 1914 Edition* (London: HMSO, 1914. Reprinted: Newton Abbot, Devon: David and Charles, 1971), p160 and Ian V. Hogg, *The Guns 1914-18* (London: Pan Books, 1973), p19.

¹⁹ These were usually 4.5-inch howitzers. They fired a 35-pound shell to a maximum range of 7,200 yards. See details given in *Field Service Pocket Book 1914*, p. 160.

²⁰ See Cave, *Gunners*, Appendix C

Unit	Sub-Unit	Pre-war posting
V Brigade, RHA (18 x 13 Pdr. Guns)	'G' Battery (6 x 13 Pdr. Guns)	Ipswich
	'O' Battery (6 x 13 Pdr. Guns)	Ipswich
	'Z' Battery (6 x 13 Pdr. Guns)	Formed from RHA sections with the original BEF
	Ammunition Column	War raised
XXXIII Brigade, RFA (18 x 18 Pdr. Guns)	32 Battery (6 x 18 Pdr. Guns)	Exeter
	33 Battery (6 x 18 Pdr. Guns)	Exeter
	36 Battery (6 x 13 Pdr. Guns)	Exeter
	Ammunition Column	War raised
XLV Brigade, RFA (18 x 18 pdr Pdr. Guns)	1 Battery (6 x 18 Pdr. Guns)	Leeds
	3 Battery (6 x 18 Pdr. Guns)	Leeds
	5 Battery (6 x 18 Pdr. Guns)	Leeds
	Ammunition Column	War raised
Heavy Artillery Brigade, RGA (8 x 4.7in. guns)	118 Battery (4 x 4.7" guns)	Raised at Woolwich after the outbreak of war.
	119 Battery (4 x 4.7" guns)	Raised at Woolwich after the outbreak of war.
Divisional Ammunition Column		War raised

Table 1.2: Pre-war Postings of 8th Division's Artillery Units²¹

The 4.7-inch guns also replaced the four gun 60-pounder battery, manned by the RGA, which were embodied in the original six divisions of the BEF. The 60-pounder guns were designed to be an improvement on the old 4.7-inch guns. Their function

²¹ Colonel Terry Cave, *The Gunners: British Divisional Artillery 1914 [Military Fact Sheet No. 4]* (London: The Western Front Association, 1989), Appendices A & B

was to attack and suppress enemy artillery fire. Therefore, the division's heavy artillery fell between two stools. It could not provide howitzer support nor was it efficient at providing fire that could suppress enemy artillery.

Many of the problems faced by all armies in the Great War were caused by the new predominance of artillery. It was an imperfect product of industrial technology created by the Industrial Revolution.²² The efforts to establish the best command and control systems from rudimentary beginnings were long and expensive in men and material.²³ 8th Division was more handicapped than its predecessors because of the *ad hoc* nature of its establishment. The improvisation of its main method of fire application was indicative of the problems that would beset the formation and the BEF as a whole for the first three years of the war.

Concentration

The headquarters of 8th Division was established at the Polygon Hotel in Southampton on 19 September 1914.²⁴ The choice of Southampton made sense, as it was the main receiving area for units returning from overseas. The first General Officer Commanding (GOC) was Major-General F.J. Davies.²⁵ His posting immediately prior to taking up command was Director of Staff Duties at the War Office. In this post, he had been responsible for procedures and processes in connection with staff work.

²² Shelford Bidwell, *Gunners at War: A Tactical Study of the Royal Artillery in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arrow Books, 1972), p. 38

²³ Jonathan Bailey, 'British Artillery in the Great War', in Paddy Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (Ilford; Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 34-49

²⁴ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 1

²⁵ Francis John ('Joey') Davies (1864-1948): Worcestershire Militia; Grenadier Guards; GSO1 1 Division, 1908-9; GOC 1 (Guards) Brigade, 1909-10; BGGs Aldershot Command, 1910-13; Director Staff Duties, War Office, 1913-14; GOC 8th Division, 1914-15; GOC VIII Corps (Gallipoli), Aug 1915-Jan 1916; GOC IX Corps, Apr-Jun 1916; Military Secretary, War Office, Jun 1916-; retired 1926.

23 Infantry Brigade was the first to form on 25 September, as its component units were the nearest to the United Kingdom, three battalions being previously stationed in Malta and the fourth in Egypt. It assembled at Baddesley Common, north of Southampton. About 2 October, 23 Infantry Brigade and the Divisional HQ moved to Hursley Park near Winchester, where the Division was ordered to concentrate. The divisional war diary stated:

*During October units arrived from various stations abroad and were exercised in Company, Battalion and Brigade training – a Divisional Signals Exercise was held on 27th and a Divisional Route March on 29th. The arrival of the E. Lancs. Regt. on 30th completed the Division...*²⁶

The divisional history underlined the urgency of the preparations being undertaken.

*...The process of assimilation was greatly assisted by the fact that officers and men were for the most part Regulars; yet even so all ranks necessarily felt the lack of opportunity for the combined training so urgently required if a division is to become something more than a mere agglomeration of units...*²⁷

The Division, however, benefited in one way for not being in the original formations sent to France in August 1914. It was decided that, together with 7th Division,²⁸ the Division would form IV Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Rawlinson.²⁹ Rawlinson was sent to England so that 8th Division would have the benefits of Rawlinson's experiences at the Front before they embarked for France.

²⁶ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, September 1914 – March 1915'.

²⁷ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 1-2

²⁸ 7th Division had already been sent to Belgium, initially to assist in the ill-fated Antwerp Expedition, and then to hold the line at the First Battle of Ypres, where it suffered heavy casualties.

²⁹ Sir Henry Seymour Rawlinson Bt., (1864-1925): KRRC, then Coldstream Guards; GOC IV Corps, 1914; GOC Fourth Army, 1916-17; British Representative Supreme Allied War Council, 1918; GOC Fourth Army 1918, GOC-in-C India.

Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, in their book *Command on the Western Front*,³⁰ comment that while in the United Kingdom Rawlinson did not neglect what, in modern terms, would be called ‘networking’. He met Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, HM King George V and Lord Roberts. This is not the full picture, however. Rawlinson’s diary entry for October 30 stated:

*...To Winchester to see 8 Divn. – I found them carrying out a night s[ur]prise attack which was a good chance of seeing what they are made off – The material in men and horses is certainly excellent but they are far from ready to come over to France for many battns. which come from abroad are very soft, still dressed in khaki drill, and very inadequately trained – I really must have at least another fortnight to deal with them and try to put some view of teaching into them...*³¹

Rawlinson, as befitted an innovative former Commandant of the Staff College, used whatever methods he could in the short time available so that 8th Division could be as well prepared as possible. Among the methods used was the production of a pamphlet for issue to all officers, entitled, *Lecture delivered by Brig-General R.A.K. Montgomery, C.B., D.S.O., At the Camp of the 8th Division, near Winchester, on the 30th October, 1914.*³² It is noteworthy for its use of a question and answer format as well as the traditional didactic style.

In the pamphlet, both Rawlinson and Montgomery emphasised the need to put forward trenches on reverse slopes and that the ranges involved for small arms are far

³⁰ Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 14

³¹ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, 30 October 1914, 1/1 *et seq.*

³² Copy in the papers of Captain (later Major) Alldridge, the Quartermaster of 2nd Rifle Brigade for the whole of its service in France & Flanders between 1914 and 1918. He was a very well admired and respected officer who had risen from the ranks, like almost all Quartermasters. He became advisor and confidant to many of the battalion’s commanders (see his obituary in *The Rifle Brigade Chronicle*, 1948). J. H. Alldridge, Papers, IWM, reference 79/23/1.

shorter than previously envisaged.³³ Also emphasised was the necessity for very close co-operation between the infantry and the artillery and the benefits of aerial observation. There was also reference to Germans adopting the guise of British soldiers and the cutting of signal cables at night by ‘enemy saboteurs’, perhaps an irrational regard to the ‘Spy Mania’ scare that existed before the war and carried on in its early years.

Rawlinson did not neglect the need to put new ideas into practice. One of the days he spent with 8th Division, Monday 2 November 1914, was spent exercising the divisional artillery in aerial co-operation. Rawlinson wrote in his diary,

...Today, Monday, I came over here to practice aeroplane observations at LARKHILL.³⁴ I got hold of wireless operators, theodolites, 4 aeroplanes and all the Battery staff of the 8 Div. as well as Batt[er]y of H[eavy] Arty but it was such a poisonous day that we found the aeroplanes disappeared in the cloud at an elevation of 600 feet so we had to cancel it + pray that the weather might be kinder to us tomorrow. I am sure that given a reasonably fine day we shall be able to do good work experimentally as well as giving the 8 Div. gunners some practice in carrying out aerial observation...³⁵

Rawlinson’s diary for Wednesday 4 November stated:

...After carrying out some very interesting experiments with aeroplanes, wireless and theodolites and the gunners of 8th Division on the LARKHILL RANGES, I returned to London by 6pm. We find that the wireless installation put together by Divisional signallers weighed only some 3 lbs and gave out quite good signals – we also took excellent observations on the aeroplanes with theodolites and No. 3 directors which gave us quite accurate ranges...³⁶

³³ The Army’s last major experience of substantial war fighting had been on the veldt of South Africa where much of the musketry had been at long range.

³⁴ The Royal Artillery’s main practice area on Salisbury Plain. Later the home of the Royal School of Artillery.

³⁵ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, 2 November 1914

³⁶ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, 4 November 1914

There were other difficulties in arranging the smooth passage of 8th Division to the Front. Rawlinson commented:

*...I fear that I shall have some difficulty in getting the 8 Divn over to France [...] the idea that the Germans mean to land troops in this country – There is a strong feeling amongst all the authorities that the attempt will be made – K [Kitchener]³⁷ thinks so and his colleagues in the Cabinet are inclined to agree with him but I doubt if they are right unless they have some sort of evidence from Berlin which I have not heard of...*³⁸

Rawlinson thought that such a venture was too risky for the Germans, that they didn't have the spare manpower. He went onto write:

*...However, England is in a state of nerves. The Terriers [the Territorial Force] are not yet fit to fight a general action and the 'K' armies³⁹, though full of the best intentions, are untrained, unarmed and without munitions. With the facts as they are I fear they will insist on keeping the 8 Div. the only regular troops in England, unless wise and less nervous counsels prevail...*⁴⁰

Rawlinson need not have worried. Only two days after Rawlinson wrote of his fears, in a letter to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff,⁴¹ Kitchener added a postscript, "...The 8th Division should embark for France. QMG [the Quarter-Master General]⁴² has been told..."⁴³ It was only four days after the 2nd East Lancashires had joined the division, having returned from South Africa.

The first units to embark on 4 November were 2nd West Yorkshires, 2nd Scottish Rifles from 23 Infantry Brigade, 1st Nottinghamshire & Derbyshire (more usually

³⁷ Kitchener was referred to by many as 'K' or 'K of K', a reference to his being in the popular press 'Kitchener of Khartoum' owing to his deeds in the Sudan in the 1880s and 1890s.

³⁸ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, 2 November 1914

³⁹ The Territorial Force was raised following Haldane's reforms and was initially intended for Home Defence. 'K' s armies were the 'New Armies' raised following Kitchener's appeal for volunteers after the start of the war.

⁴⁰ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, 2 November 1914

⁴¹ The Chief of the Imperial General Staff [CIGS], at this time General Archibald Murray, who had been invalided from his post as Chief of Staff of the BEF, was meant to be the chief military advisor to the government. However, the post of CIGS was ignored and misunderstood by Kitchener. See *The Military Correspondence of Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, December 1915 – February 1918* (ed. by David R. Woodward) [henceforth *Robertson Selected Correspondence*] (London: The Bodley Head [for the Army Records Society], 1989), pp. 10-13.

⁴² The Quarter-Master General was responsible for the supplying, housing & movements of the Army.

⁴³ TNA: PRO WO32/5278 'Letter to CIGS', dated 4 November 1914, Asquith – Kitchener Correspondence File.

referred to as the Sherwood Foresters), 2nd Northamptonshires of 24 Infantry Brigade and 2nd Rifle Brigade from 25 Infantry Brigade. The remainder of the Division sailed the next day.

Filling in the Gaps

8th Division's disembarkation in France at Le Havre did not go as smoothly as it could have done. The Divisional war diary noted:

...On arrival at HAVRE the Division proceeded to Rest Camps about 6 miles from the town – owing to the inadequate arrangements for unloading horses and heavy volumes at some of the wharfs the disembarkation of units in many cases was slow...⁴⁴

The Division was not fully disembarked until 7 November. The same day, the divisional commander and other members of the headquarters' staff were sent to reconnoitre their area of operations. They motored there visiting the GHQ of the BEF on the way. The first area of operations was south of Ypres and north of Armentières.

Initially, 8th Division did not carry out its initial tours of duty as a unified, cohesive formation. On the Division's arrival in France, the situation faced by the Allies was grave. The situation of the BEF around Ypres was even more so. Since 20 October the Germans had attacked the British trenches in the Ypres salient with such effect that most battalions were reduced to shadows of their former selves.⁴⁵

The area south of Ypres, around Messines and Ploegsteert, had been filled by the Cavalry Corps. The British cavalry, having learned the lessons of the South African

⁴⁴ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, September 1914 – March 1915'

⁴⁵ By the end of the Battle of First Ypres, 1 Infantry Division had been reduced to 68 officers and 2776 other ranks from a total establishment of 18,000. See Field-Marshal Lord (Michael) Carver, *The Seven Ages of the British Army* (1984; London: Grafton Books, 1986), p. 194

wars, were far more competent than their continental counterparts at acting in the dismounted role as infantry.⁴⁶ Even so, cavalry units were no substitute for infantry. The numbers that a cavalry regiment could deploy were far less than an infantry battalion even when the former was at full strength. A cavalry regiment had a strength of 21 officers and 523 other ranks. Its equivalent infantry battalion could field 30 officers and 977 other ranks.⁴⁷ Moreover, the rifle strength of a cavalry unit was further depleted by the need to use soldiers as horse holders. A temporary expedient would have been to permanently dismount the cavalry and this was done later in the war with a number of units e.g. the Dismounted Cavalry Division. However, at this stage of the war this was not seen as necessary. In fact, it was not seen as appropriate as by doing so would have deprived the BEF of its arm of manoeuvre. The first deployment of 8th Division units was, therefore, to bolster the area of line thinly held by the cavalry.

The deployment of 8th Division units was carried out with some speed. 2nd Devonshires and 2nd West Yorkshires, from 23 Infantry Brigade, marched to Neuve Eglise where they came under the command of the Cavalry Corps. On 12 November, the rest of the Brigade, brigade HQ, under the command of Brigadier-General R.J. Pinney, and the remaining two battalions, 2nd Scottish Rifles and 2nd Middlesex, marched to Steenwerck, also coming under the control of the Cavalry Corps. 8th Division was fortunate that its initial deployment was relatively quiet, coinciding with the ending of the last major German assault on Ypres.

⁴⁶ For a succinct exposition of the doctrine of British cavalry, see Stephen Badsey, 'Cavalry and the Development of the Breakthrough Doctrine', in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, ed. by Paddy Griffith (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 138-74. For the situation in 1914, see especially pp. 145-7.

⁴⁷ *FSPB 1914*, pp. 8-9

However, this was only apparent with the benefit of hindsight. The situation remained unclear and caused much concern to the BEF and its commanders.

Adapting to a New Kind of War

As 8th Division adapted to service on the continent of Europe, some preoccupations had not changed throughout the whole history of the British Army. Within a day of its arrival in France, the routine orders of 23 Infantry Brigade stated the following:

...Neuf Berquin, 11th November 1914.

BILLETS.

1. The following orders are to be strictly adhered to in billets: -

(a). All troops are forbidden to purchase any alcoholic liquor from the inhabitants: similarly the inhabitants have been ordered to by the civil authorities not to sell any liquor to the troops.

(b). All troops must be in the immediate vicinity of their billets by 6 p.m. and must be indoors by 8 p.m. ...⁴⁸

Much that became routine to 8th Division and the rest of the BEF during the course of the War had to be learnt by trial and error during that first winter. One particular problem for the Division was that almost all of the infantry units had very recently returned to Europe from garrisons and stations that were in the balmy or even tropical parts of the British Empire. As has been said previously, the Division had little time to acclimatise. Because of this, sickness became a problem. The aggregation of units from many parts of the World meant that there was no 'herd-immunity'. This meant that until a great majority of people serving with the Division became used to the others' illnesses, resistance to disease was lower.^{49, 50}

⁴⁸ TNA: PRO WO95/1707 '23 Infantry Brigade War Diary: November 1914 – May 1915'

⁴⁹ This situation is found in universities especially in the Autumn Term where 'freshers' in particular are susceptible until immunity is built up.

⁵⁰ For the most common illnesses, see the online article by Dr David Payne in <http://www.westernfront.co.uk/thegreatwar/articles/research/trenchdiseases.htm> (last accessed: 12.40 hrs, 10 June 2006).

The problem of low resistance to sickness was made worse by the conditions in which the troops found themselves. The operational area occupied by 8th Division was low lying and prone to flooding. In the Flanders area of north-eastern France and Belgium the water table is never far below the surface. This made trench digging difficult and almost all ground works flooded. The war diary of the Assistant Director of Medical Services [ADMS], the officer in charge of the Division's medical and first-aid services, stated:

...1st Dec. 1914. LA GORGUE. There were 900 men in the 3 Fd. Ambulances today – most of these cases were men suffering from oedema of the feet with symptoms of neuritis. Pain along the course of the nerves of the foot and some loss of sensation. These conditions are due apparently to the conditions under which the men live in the trenches and to a certain extent to the conditions obtaining in their billets. The men often cannot take off their boots during their stay in the trenches and while they are in reserve in their billets they must sleep in their boots [...] It appears that the brushwood so placed in the floor of the trenches sinks into the wet clay and it is not possible to make the floor of the trench dry [...] the issue of large boots is a difficulty as sufficient boots of a large type are not available. Vaseline is issued for application to the feet but drying and massage of the feet is essential first of all [...] a system of foot bathing with warm water and soap. Disinfection and cleaning of underclothing and delousing of service jackets, trousers and cardigan jackets of the men with hot fumigating bins has been started. The men coming from the trenches are given a warm bath, their inside clothing disinfected and their outer clothing freed from [unclear]. It is estimated that this will be done for all the men once a fortnight [...]

10 pm 2nd Dec '14 LA GORGUE [...] there is a consensus of opinion among medical officers that the tight fitting boot made of unyielding hard leather and worn continuously for days in the wet cold trenches is the principal cause of all the trouble [...]

“9 pm 3.12.14 LA GORGUE. The admission for swollen and tender feet today number 86 – 232 cases were evacuated. The majority of these cases were ‘feet’ cases...”

“9 pm 4-12-14 LA GORGUE. The number of admissions up to noon today were 228 – 189 of these were swollen and tender feet. 90 were evacuated leaving 741 in the Fd. Ambs. ...⁵¹

Having more than 900 cases at one time meant that the available rifle strength of the division was much reduced. This trend was prevalent in the whole BEF at this time.⁵² Among other illnesses diagnosed were scarlet fever, diphtheria and cerebro-spinal meningitis.

Many of the health problems were caused by the well-manured soil of north-west Europe which meant that bacteria were ever present.⁵³ The equivalent regarding wounds was the high incidence of tetanus and the closely related gas-gangrene. However, the campaigns of the British Army in the far flung reaches of the Empire and beyond, had taught the importance of sanitation and hygiene. The problems caused by disease in the Crimean and Boer Wars had underlined that these were facets of military planning that could not be ignored. The *Field Service Pocket Book* of 1914 stated:

...The importance of prevention of disease in field service cannot be over-estimated. Neglect of sanitary measures inevitably results in great loss of life, and disease may assume such proportions as to paralyse the efficiency of a force. It is the duty of both officers and men to comply strictly with orders

⁵¹ TNA: PRO WO95/1687 ‘ADMS 8th Division War Diary: November 1914 – March 1919’

⁵² In January 1915 the two corps of British First Army averaged 2,144 officers and men daily absent sick and Second Army about the same. See Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds & Captain G.C. Wynne, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1915, Volume I: Winter 1914-15: Battle of Neuve Chapelle: Battle of Ypres* [henceforth *British Official History 1915, Vol. I*] (Reprint edition London: Imperial War Museum, 1985), p. 28, fn. 1

⁵³ Geoffrey Noon, ‘The Treatment of Casualties in the Great War’, in Griffith (ed), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War*, pp. 93-6. Dr Noon comments that tetanus was only very rarely seen outside the Western Front.

*relating to the preservation of health. To keep himself healthy and fit is a duty that every soldier owes to his country, his comrades and himself...*⁵⁴

8th Division took steps to improve the environment in which it lived and fought so that as many ranks as possible were able to carry out their main task, that of fighting the enemy. This was probably due in no small way to the fact that, immediately prior to the Division's formation, all its infantry units had served overseas. The requirements and exigencies of field service were more prominent in the minds of these units than in those whose pre-war postings had been the more salubrious climes of Tidworth or the Curragh. Thus a divisional conference on 15 January 1915 recorded, "...G.Os.C. [General Officers Commanding] Inf. Bdes. will enquire as to the provision of mustard to put in the water, for bathing men's feet..."⁵⁵

The war diary of the divisional assistant adjutant and quarter-master general (usually referred to as the AA&QMG) records that on 3 December 1914 a conference on sanitation took place attended by the Division's GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel Montgomery, the Assistant Director of Medical Services [ADMS], Colonel Meek, the Mayors of Estaires and La Gorgue and members of the local Comité d'Hygiène.⁵⁶ The British stated that the local sanitation system was a cause for concern. The French local authorities replied that the situation was greatly exacerbated by the lack of labour and resources brought about by the war. The outcome was that efforts were to be made to prevent refuse being thrown into ditches or watercourses, certain latrines were to be emptied, when necessary specified houses were to be disinfected. The

⁵⁴ *FSPB 1914*, p. 51

⁵⁵ TNA: PRO WO95/1680 '8th Division War Diary', Conference at Divisional HQ, ref. G.90.k, 13 January 1915

⁵⁶ TNA: PRO WO95/1680 'AA&QMG 8th Division War Diary: September 1914 – December 1915'

British would provide plans for an incinerator and a suction pump at Armentières would be requisitioned.

On 26 January 1915 8th Division, in a report to IV Corps,⁵⁷ gave the details of the divisional baths set up in the bleaching section of a linen factory at La Gorgue. The vats of the bleaching section were used for the baths and disinfecting the underclothing. The men's outer clothing was ironed to kill the lice and the underclothing was handed in for washing and a clean set were provided in exchange. Serviceable clothing was repaired and readied for re-issue.

The bath personnel consisted of one RAMC officer, one subdivision of one of the Field Ambulances,⁵⁸ two French male civilians acting as engineer and machinist, one French woman superintendent and 120 French women working in the laundry. It is worth noting that the costs included 42 Francs per week (roughly, in 1914 values, £1.13.05½ in predecimal sterling or £1.66 in decimal sterling)⁵⁹ to pay for coffee for the women. A possible cause of friction was commented on:

*...An accurate estimate of costs cannot be given until it is decided how much is to be paid to Messers. Honnart & Bloeme, who own the factory, for rent, use of machinery, lighting &c. The bills for these items have, in accordance with your instructions, been forwarded to the Claims Commission at Boulogne for adjustment. It is probable that the amounts entered on these bills will be considerable reduced as some of the charges are obviously exorbitant...*⁶⁰

The baths could deal with about 8 parties of 100 men per day. These, in the main, came from the infantry and meant that each battalion had its turn every three weeks.

⁵⁷ TNA: PRO WO95/1680 See 'Report HQ 8th Division no.116/1(A)', 26 January 1915

⁵⁸ The establishment of a Field Ambulance was divided into 3 sections – A, B & C. 'A' section was the HQ section and had 4 officers and 77 men. 'B' & 'C' sections consisted of 3 officers and 73 men each. Presumably, the subdivision referred to was made up of the officer and one third of the relevant section, i.e. approximately 24 men. See *FSPB 1914*, p. 9

⁵⁹ *FSPB 1914*, p. 267

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO WO95/1680 See 'Report HQ 8th Division no.116/1(A)', 26 January 1915

The report commented that the baths were, "...having a very salutary effect on the health and spirits of the men..."⁶¹

Consequently, if the numbers of men suffering from sickness was considered too high then probing questions were asked. A divisional conference on 3 February 1915 decided:

...G.O.C. 23 Inf. Bde. will enquire into cause of large numbers of sick in 2nd Bn. Middlesex Regt.

G.O.C. 24th Inf. Bde. will enquire why more men go sick from bad feet in 'A' Lines than anywhere else.

*All Brigadiers will satisfy themselves that proper precautions are being taken about men's feet. Boots should be taken off once a day and feet rubbed etc...*⁶²

Military Engineering

The Division's role was to do more than just survive in the face of foul weather and poor health. It was in France to prevent any further German advance and, when the time came, repel the invaders and push them back to whence they had come. As trenches flooded and collapsed, other expedients were tried. The 8th Division war diary for 1 and 2 January 1915 stated:

...1st Jan^y ESTAIRES [...] water in trenches has increased and rendered short lengths of trench untenable in several places. Where this is the case breastworks are being constructed immediately in rear, & it is intended to continue them along the whole front as labour becomes available [...]

2nd Quiet day – work progressing on new breastworks & communication trenches - parties from Yeomanry, cyclists & R.A. working with R.E. every night. Saps are being pushed out when possible but several have filled with water & work cannot be continued on them at present.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² TNA: PRO WO95/1671 8th Division War Diary 'Conference at Div. HQrs, ref. G.118.k', 3 February 1915

Sites have been selected for small closed works as 'points d'appui' in rear of the trenches & work on them has begun. Similar works will be constructed along the second (G.H.Q.) line by civilian labour...⁶³

The 'points d'appui' were strong points were to act as 'islands of resistance' in case of a German attack.

On 22 January 1915, IV Corps sent an instruction for strong points capable of holding one or two companies to be constructed in the rear of the second defence line that ran between Croix Barbée and Fleurbaix. These were not to be purpose built redoubts but were to consist of fortified houses, short lengths of fire trench and machine gun emplacements all grouped together and entirely surrounded by an efficient system of wire. However, recognition was given to the peculiar nature of the rear area at this time. Regard had to be shown to the French inhabitants who still lived close to the battle area.

...3. If it is necessary to make loopholes in the walls of inhabited houses, notice should, if possible, be given to the inhabitants through the Liaison Officers, so that they may have time to take down pictures from the walls, and remove articles that are likely to be damaged in the carrying out of the work. There is no objection to the loopholes being filled up with straw or other material which can be easily removed. In this way, the least amount of discomfort will be caused to the inhabitants.

It is of no use loopholing walls that are not bullet proof, unless a parapet is built up against them on the outside⁶⁴ to the height of the bottom of the loophole...⁶⁵

⁶³ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations'

⁶⁴ The copy in the 8th Division war diary has the word 'inside' annotated by the word outside in the text (which is underscored). It is apparent that consideration was being given to the need to conceal these new defensive preparations until they were required.

⁶⁵ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, September 1914 – March 1915'

The references to the need to cause the least inconvenience to the inhabitants, allowing them to remove pictures from walls before putting in loopholes, seem to belong to the warfare of a bygone era. It is reminiscent of the courtesies extended to the French inhabitants of south-west France after the advance over the Pyrenees by Wellington's army in 1814. Within months, with the advent of what became known as 'frightfulness', such as the use of poison-gas and flame-throwers leading on to unrestricted submarine warfare and the sheer scale of mass industrial warfare, such considerations vanished as the farms and villages on and behind the front line themselves vanished, becoming nothing more than pulverised piles of stone, brick and splinters.

Peter Chasseaud has noted that the development of these strong points were labelled by 8th Division in a sequence such as *A1a, A1b, B1, C1* etc, which corresponded to the lettered 'Sections' or 'Lines' into which the divisional area had been divided.⁶⁶ This was an indication that it was becoming clear the realisation had grown that trench warfare needed to be organised and dealt with far more systematically than mobile warfare.

Warfare, especially modern warfare, is a terrifying mind-numbing experience where it is possible for the human senses to be overwhelmed by the noise, effects of blast and confusion. Much military training is devoted to teaching drills so that actions are carried out automatically without the need for thought. As an adjunct to this, labelling activities and places in a series of systematically organised categories allows the user

⁶⁶ Peter Chasseaud, *Rats Alley: Trench Names of the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2006), p. 3.

to impart information in a concise manner readily understood by other members of the same organisation when required.⁶⁷

The labelling of strong-points and trench lines led to another method of regulating tactics, of putting in place a more efficient system of operation. Planning for further German assaults, the divisional conference of 3 February 1915 asked that arrangements had to be put in place so the infantry could communicate with the artillery and vice versa. The brigade commanders and CRA were to ensure that operators were efficient and the equipment was properly cared for. The OC 8 Div. Signals Company was to, "...prepare a map showing system of communication and telephone wires connecting Infantry with Artillery..."⁶⁸

All avenues were explored, including signal lamps and "...Communication by rocket discussed – General Holland [CRA]⁶⁹ to be asked to find out if some distinctive rockets can be obtained from Messrs Brock..."⁷⁰

The next divisional conference on 8 February 1915 put in place the SOS signals to be used by the infantry when calling for immediate assistance from the artillery. At night rockets were to be used, though it is unclear whether at this time different colours were used for each sector. However, by June 1915 each brigade had its own colour,

⁶⁷ See John Keegan *The Face of Battle* (London: Allen Lane [Penguin], 1984), pp. 19-20

⁶⁸ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 8th Division War Diary 'Conference at Div. HQrs, ref. G.118.k', 3 February 1915

⁶⁹ Brigadier-General (later Lieutenant-General Sir) Arthur Edward Aveling Holland (1882-1927): CRA 8th Division, 1914-15; BGRA VII Corps, 1915; GOC 1st Division, 1915-16; MGRA Third Army, 1916-17; GOC I Corps, 1917-19.

⁷⁰ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 8th Division War Diary 'Conference at Div. HQrs, ref. G.118.k', 3 February 1915.

Brock was the very well known firework manufacturer. A member of the family, Frank Arthur Brock, had a distinguished wartime career as an inventor of pyrotechnical equipment. He was killed on the Zeebrugge Raid, 23 April 1918. See J.M. Bourne, *Who's Who in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 38-9

which was changed frequently.⁷¹ The intention behind this was two fold. Firstly, in order that the enemy could not know which units were in position and secondly, so that the enemy could not use the British colours to cause confusion and perhaps call a barrage down on their opponents in No-Man's Land.

For telephone calls: "...The letters 'S.O.S.' to be employed, followed by the letter of the section and the number of the sub-section – For instance, 'S.O.S.A.1' implies 'Artillery support is required at once on trenches in front of No. 1 sub-section of 'A' Lines; 'S.O.S. A.2', the same for trenches in front of No. 2 sub-section of 'A' Lines and so on..."⁷² Thus, the systematic labelling of features had logically led onto a logical system for the infantry to call for assistance from the artillery.

At the same divisional conference, it is possible that there was some pessimism abroad as it discussed measures that should be in place if the Germans captured the new defensive works. Whether it was genuinely believed that a German attack would force the Allies to give ground or it was an example of thorough planning and preparation, covering all eventualities just in case the most unlikely scenario came to pass is not known.

...2. *Breastworks.*

Breastworks constructed immediately in the rear of the trench line will have their flanks drawn back, but the gorge⁷³ is not to be closed, in order that the back may be fired into in case of our withdrawing from them.

⁷¹ TNA: PRO WO95/1672 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations: April – July 1915', Conference at Div. HQ, ref. G.131.k', 16 June 1915

⁷² TNA: PRO WO95/1672 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations: April – July 1915', Conference at Div. HQ, ref. G.131.k', 8 February 1915.

⁷³ Military engineering term: the face of a work least prepared to receive frontal fire. See *FSPB 1914*, p. x. In most case these would be at the rear, facing away from the most likely avenue of approach by an enemy.

*Care must be taken to prevent old trenches, or bomb proofs, in rear, giving cover to the enemy, in case of our withdrawing from the front line...*⁷⁴

From the start the infantry brigades complained that they had insufficient numbers to build and man the new points d'appui as well as man and maintain the front line trenches. The GOC 8th Division ruled one section per supporting work was sufficient.⁷⁵

The new system of trench-warfare became an engineer's war in other ways. Supply problems were caused by poor roads and waterlogged trenches. The movement of bulk supplies, such as small-arms ammunition, food and, increasingly, engineer stores such as timber and sandbags, was difficult. The Army's usual remedy of using horsed wagons or pack-trains of mules and horses became increasingly impractical close to the front line, due to the water-logged ground as well as enemy fire. The Assistant Adjutant & Quarter Master-General (AA&QMG)⁷⁶ of 8th Division noted a solution used by the local inhabitants. The 8th Division history stated: "...to the division belongs the credit of the utilisation of wooden trench tramways for the supply of troops in line. The idea originated with Lieutenant-Colonel H.M. de F. Montgomery DSO [...] having observed similar tramways in use for agricultural purposes on farms in the neighbourhood, he had realised the military use to which they might be put. Later the practice spread to all armies on the Western Front..."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ TNA: PRO WO95/1672 '8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations: April – July 1915', Conference at Div. HQ, ref. G.131.k', 8 February 1915

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ The AA&QMG, holding the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, was the chief staff officer responsible for the administration and supply services of a division. Supposedly equal to, but usually subordinate, to the GSO1, the division's chief policy and operations officer. For the functions of the three branches of the staff see pp 25-7, *FSPB 1914*, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 8.

The war diary of the AA&QMG 8th Division has an entry from 23 February 1915 which gives details of the light railway:

...ESTAIRES (cont'd). [...] First section of the TILLELOY light railway to trenches completed - this section was laid in the 23rd Bde Area. Particulars as follows: -

Construction. Made in lengths of 5 metres. Each section to from $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to a mile – 4 trollies for each section. Capacity. Each trolley carries two days rations for a company. Method of Employment. Trolleys run at intervals of about 100 yds – 3 men go with each trolley – Note – Curves in the line to be avoided.

Cost. Trollies – 66 francs each.

Permanent Way. 1.50 francs per metre run...⁷⁸

By June 1916 a divisional conference recorded that “...The C.R.E. will consider the construction of additional tramlines to the trenches. The G.O.C. considers there should be one for each battalion in the trenches...”⁷⁹

For the divisional artillery, they found operating in the wet flat landscape vastly different to the mountains and hills of the North-West Frontier of India or the kopjes of South Africa. Any observation available was from buildings, which were increasingly destroyed by both sides as means to deal with artillery observation posts and sniping. The artillery had to resort to shooting using map and compass, not the most efficient method, as would become apparent during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle.

The artillery found the new war consumed more and more men, guns ammunition and equipment. Telephones became essential. On 30 November 1914 the war diary of the

⁷⁸ TNA: PRO WO95/1680 ‘AA&QMG 8th Division War Diary’

⁷⁹ TNA: PRO WO95/1672 ‘8th Division War Diary’

CRA 8th Division recorded "...The necessity for an increase in the amount of telephone instruments, stores, and cable for the present type of warfare has been very apparent. This is particularly so in the case of the 4.7" and other heavy guns who are necessarily distributed to obtain the utmost value from their long range..."⁸⁰

Officers had to resort to purchasing their own equipment and having shipped to France and Flanders. In a summary of events for December 1914, the war diary of the CRA 8th Division recorded "...The necessity of a supply of telephones being included in the equipment of Divisional Artillery Headquarters is very evident. Those privately purchased and brought out have proved invaluable..."⁸¹

Telephones were required not simply for communication between the different arms e.g. artillery and infantry, but within units as well. The divisional conference on 13 January 1915 stated, in what must have been a hopeful tone, "...The O.C. Div. Signals Coy. was directed to ascertain whether any telephones returned to store by other Divisions are available for communication between Os.C. [Officers Commanding] Battalions and their Companies..."⁸²

New Weapons and New Methods

The main problems were not only the weather and the flat wet landscape but also operating against a proficient enemy who employed all means to disrupt and destroy. This especially included the use of aerial observation.⁸³

⁸⁰ TNA: PRO WO95/1683 'CRA 8th Division war diary: November 1914 – December 1915', 30 November 1914

⁸¹ TNA: PRO WO95/1683 'Summary December 1914, CRA 8th Division War Diary'

⁸² TNA: PRO WO95/1671 '8th Division War Diary', 'Conference at Div. HQ, ref. G.90.k', 13 January 1915

⁸³ Ibid. For example on 16 December a note in the CRA's war diary remarked that the German's had

Operating routines had to change drastically. “...The positions selected are those concealed from aerial observation by trees etc. The guns themselves are not actually dug in but extensive dugouts and shell recesses are prepared for each detachment – All personnel are accommodated in billets. All movement is carried out by night owing to risk of aerial observation...”⁸⁴

Everything the British Army required for trench warfare had to be extemporised. The BEF lacked the weapons, equipment and tactics for this new type of warfare. The German Army, having realised that it would have to besiege the large forts of Belgium and France if the Schlieffen Plan was to move as quickly as had been envisaged, had prepared for that eventuality. They had the stocks of mortars, heavy artillery and grenades that they believed would be required. The leap from siege warfare to trench warfare was a very short one indeed.

Historically, the best weapons that could project missiles over intervening obstacles into enemy fortresses or trenches were mortars and howitzers. Howitzers, being artillery, were under the control of the artillery. It was soon realised that the infantry needed their own fire support weapon, deployed nearer the front line and under the control of the infantry and, therefore, more able to respond quickly to calls for fire-support. The ideal weapon was the mortar. The modern mortar differed from artillery in that, instead of a breech highly engineered to resist great stresses, the propulsion system was a simple charge in the base of the bomb exploded by a fixed firing pin in the bottom of the tube or barrel. It was relatively inaccurate and short ranged because

used a man-lifting kite. See TNA: PRO WO95/1683. CRA 8th Division war diary: November 1914–December 1915.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 30 November 1914

the barrel was not rifled but it was capable of high rates of fire. However, the BEF did not possess any mortars at the outbreak of war. The need for such a weapon system became even more urgent as the British saw the advantages possessed by the Germans with their equivalent *minenwerfer*. After many attempts to improvise solutions, including catapults, the Stokes mortar was adopted but this was not until November 1915.⁸⁵

Hand held grenades also had to be improvised. The grenade became a very important weapon in trench warfare as it allowed the individual infantryman to throw a bomb into an enemy trench or position. Initially, grenades were made by the divisional engineers using gun cotton in an old jam-tin ignited using a lit fuse.⁸⁶ The lack of standardisation and the need to develop solutions while in contact with the enemy was to cause 8th Division many problems. The introduction of the grenade did hasten one innovation. This was the formation of specialists in order to use the new weapon. This took place at two levels. At an individual level, specially trained men became the main user of the weapon. At a group or tactical level, special squads were formed instructed in their use and also to act as experts and guides to others.

For example, on 16 January 1915, 23 Infantry Brigade formed a Brigade Grenadier Company. Each of the four battalions was to provide one officer, four NCOs and twenty-eight men. The NCOs and men were to be found equally from each of the four companies in each battalion, one NCO and seven men per company. Four of the seven men were to be found from soldiers who had not already been instructed in bomb-throwing. All the others were to be already trained bombers. At least four trained

⁸⁵ *British Official History 1915, Vol. I*, pp. 6-9, and pp 369-70, Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), pp. 369-70

⁸⁶ See Holmes, *Tommy*, pp. 385-9

bombers were to be left with each company for duty in the trenches. As more men were trained, they were to be replaced with other men suitable for training.⁸⁷ Thus the training was to be spread among the whole unit not just to be the prerogative of an elite body. However, while undergoing training, all members were excused all other duties. Membership of the grenade company was distinguished by a specialist “Grenadiers” badge, an early demonstration of what became a plethora of ‘trade’ badges and unit and formation signs.⁸⁸ However, the initial establishment was under the proviso that when the Brigade’s employment and deployment was such that there was no bombing envisaged, the personnel would rejoin their battalions. The Brigade Grenadier Company would reform as soon as trench warfare recommenced. It is unclear whether the proposal indicated that the belief was held that trench warfare would be a temporary aberration or that periods spent in the trenches would be not only be of a short duration, but such intervals would be few and far between.

Another feature of the new grenadier squads also showed that the system had not necessarily been thought through. The Brigade Machine Gun Officer was to act as chief instructor. He was, therefore, to act as trainer and advisor for the two most recently introduced non-standard weapon systems used at battalion and brigade level. The phrase ‘non-standard’ is used to label weapon systems that were not used by the ordinary rank and file but which had to be operated by soldiers who were trained to become specialists. However, both weapon systems were not complimentary to the other.

⁸⁷ TNA: PRO WO95/1707 ‘23 Infantry Brigade War Diary’

⁸⁸ See D.S.V. Fosten, R.J. Marrion, G.A. Embleton, *The British Army 1914-18* (London: Osprey Men-At-Arms series, no. 81, 1978) and Mike Chappell, *British Battle Insignia (I): 1914-18* (London: Osprey Men-At-Arms series, no. 182, 1986)

The machine gun in use at the time would be nowadays more correctly termed a heavy-machine gun. The British models were based on the designs of Sir Hiram Maxim.⁸⁹ They were water cooled and required crews to serve them with water and ammunition, both of which were consumed at a prodigious rate. They were best deployed in concentrated support, firing interlocking fields of fire or providing indirect fire to keep an area free of enemy movement. Therefore, by and large, and increasingly so as the war progressed, the heavy machine gun was deployed behind the front lines as a support weapon for offence and defence. However, as will be seen later, the front line units were given a new rapid-fire support weapon in the form of the light machine gun, portable by one man.⁹⁰

The grenade was a front-line weapon having the range of a man's throwing arm, and could not be used behind the forward line of troops whether these were in the front line trench or more forward taking part in an advance or raid.

Tasking the Brigade Machine Gun Officer to train, administer and advise on the tactical employment of these two mutually exclusive systems, therefore, meant a conflict in roles and doctrine. This was only to be resolved with the establishment of specialist bombing officers.

One feature of the establishment of the grenade company showed that one of the main influences on the old pre-war Regular establishment that of financial stringency was

⁸⁹ The heavy machine guns were eventually removed from the infantry and formed into a new Machine Gun Corps in October 1915. See David Ascoli, *A Companion to the British Army: 1660 – 1983* (London: Book Club Associates, 1983), p. 144

⁹⁰ This was the Lewis gun. Distribution to infantry battalions began in late 1915 and establishment numbers steadily increased until there were at least two per platoon in some infantry battalions by the summer of 1918. See Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics on the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916 – 18* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 128-34

still prevalent. On the 17 January 1915 the Commanding officer of 2nd Devonshires, Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, asked the Brigade-Major,⁹¹ 23 Infantry Brigade, "...Reference Grenadier Company. The undermentioned N.C.O. has been detailed as the Coy Sergt Major [Company Sergeant Major] No 9930 Sergt Dr [Drummer] E.G. Edmonds I presume he will be granted local and temporary rank as a Sergt Major..."⁹²

The status of Sergeant Edmonds evidently exercised the staff at 23 Brigade headquarters. It was the subject of a memorandum from Brigadier-General Pinney, GOC 23 Brigade, to HQ 8th Division later the same day. The memorandum gave further information to the effect that the NCO appointed would not only be CSM but also act as Quarter-Master Sergeant. This meant that the soldier appointed would not only be responsible for the administration of the squad's personnel through discipline and acting as an advisor to the officer commanding, the normal role of a sergeant-major, but also for its supplies, stores and feeding. This was a role usual carried out by a second senior NCO, the Company Quarter-Master Serjeant (CQMS). In manuscript, above Pinney's signature, was an endorsement, "...I also recommend he be paid for his extra duty..."⁹³

However, the steely hand of pre-war financial constraints appeared to have the upper hand at 8th Division HQ. Colonel Montgomery, the AA&QMG, wrote the following instruction at the bottom of the memo: "...23rd Inf. Bde. The Maj General [GOC 8th Division] approves of this NCO being given unpaid acting rank of Coy Sergt Major

⁹¹ The senior staff officer at a brigade headquarters. He was responsible for the operations and personnel work.

⁹² TNA: PRO WO95/1707 '23 Infantry Brigade War Diary: November 1914 – May 1915'

⁹³ Ibid.

while employed on this duty. (Signed) H M de F Montgomery Col AA&QMG
19/1...’’⁹⁴

The correspondence between 23 Infantry Brigade and 8th Division also gave details of the proposed tests that trained bombers had to pass. The bombers had to cut and light the slow fuses of the bombs. They also had to be able to estimate the time of burning. Each man had approximately six dummy bombs to practice with and then be able to throw accurately eight out of ten bombs at a distance of about twenty-five yards. Brigadier-General Pinney commented on the proposed tests that a night throw was not necessary as it would be difficult to judge accuracy and shortening the fuse time could cause hurried and inaccurate throwing. He also stated that the bombers should not have to carry a rifle as this would make throwing most awkward.

The British took time to adapt to the new conditions.⁹⁵ There was a constant need to react in the face of new weapons and tactics used against the BEF, if not 8th Division itself. On 29 April 1915, a new routine order was issued by Major H.L. Alexander, the Divisional DAQMG, concerning masks to be used in case of a German gas attack against the Division. The report stated that there were three types of mask including one developed by the division. There were detailed instructions on how they were to be used, including what actions were to be carried out on receipt of the equipment, even before warning of a gas attack had been received.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds held the view that the British never realised that what took place from 1915 to 1918 was in effect a siege and what was required was the application of the hard earned lessons of historic sieges. See *British Official History 1915, Vol. I*, pp. 152-3

⁹⁶ TNA: PRO WO95/1680 ‘AA&QMG 8th Division War Diary’, 8th Division No.1053 (Q), 29 April 1915

The British Army was now participating in its first involvement in a European conflict since the Crimean War. The old certainties and routines had to change.

Lieutenant-Colonel R.B. Stephens, CO 2nd Rifle Brigade, 25 Infantry Brigade, wrote on 1 January 1915 to his wife about problems with the granting of leave:

...This is to be a discontented letter...we've been badly treated over the leave business. We didn't ask for leave and I didn't want it. But yesterday came an order that we were to submit the names of 5 officers for leave who would go at once. These we did and of course people wrote home and said they were coming. Then last night we were told that the GOC didn't approve and didn't want any body to go without extra pressing reasons. Naturally this has fairly upset everyone and we've been arguing acrimoniously all morning...In the course of the argument we were almost told that it was unsoldierly to want leave already. That was most unfair and I resent it a great deal because we were never asked and wouldn't have dreamt of doing so...⁹⁷

It might seem petulant of the officers of 8th Division to be concerned about leave.

They had been in France just under two months compared to the original members of the BEF, who had not only been out since August, more than double that span of time.

The latter had in that time suffered the purgatories of Mons, Le Cateau, the Aisne and First Ypres. However, all 8th Division's infantry battalions had been on foreign stations when war broke out. In many cases, families had not been seen for some time especially when the unit had been posted to one of the less salubrious garrisons of the British Empire, such as Aden.

There were many losses to German snipers, especially among officers. The enemy, with their tradition of the *jagd* or hunter, from the outset used sniping aggressively in order to cow the opposition. Routines had to be learnt that minimised the chances of loss. A moment's lack of thought could prove fatal. Lieutenant-Colonel Stephens

⁹⁷ National Army Museum (henceforth NAM), Chelsea, London: Papers of General Sir Reginald Byng Stephens. Letter dated 1 January 1915, reference 2000-12-501-190, reference 2000-12-501.

wrote to his wife after Brigadier-General John Edmond ‘Johnnie’ Gough,⁹⁸ chief of staff at I Corps, was fatally wounded when visiting his old battalion, 2nd Rifle Brigade, on 21 February 1915:

*...my dear I feel it is my fault. I asked him to come and see the Battⁿ. I went to meet him and brought him what I thought was the safest way. He said he wanted to look at the ridge in front of us and we stopped a moment on the road side. It was then he was shot. Oh my darling I am so sad about it. I ought to have known better I suppose. But it’s a road we use everyday and all day. It was very quiet and I wasn’t dreaming of danger. Oh my dear I can’t forgive myself...*⁹⁹

Raids

The British Army did not allow the enemy to foster the belief that they could do as they pleased the other side of the British front line or even the far side of the defensive barbed wire, sparse as it may have been at the time. There were a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, there were practical reasons. From the very earliest days of trench warfare there was a continual daily loss of officers and men even when engaged only in what became known as ‘trench routine’. These were due to enemy snipers, trench mortars and machine guns as well as artillery. Offensive action, by killing or subduing the enemy, was required to attempt to stem the enemy action that caused these casualties and inflict loss on the enemy.

⁹⁸ Brigadier-General John Edmond Gough (1871-1915) (brother of General Sir Hubert Gough): RMC Sandhurst; commissioned Rifle Brigade; Boer War [Siege of Ladysmith], brevet-Major; Somaliland, awarded VC, 1903; Staff College, 1904; GSO1 Aldershot Command, 1914; Chief of Staff I Corps [GOC General Sir D. Haig], 1914; Chief of Staff 1 Army [GOC General Sir D. Haig]; died of wounds 22 February 1915, buried Estaires Communal Cemetery.

⁹⁹ NAM, Stephens’ papers, reference 2000-12-501-217, letter n.d. (circa 21/02/1915).

Secondly, British senior officers were concerned that troops, when engaged in trench warfare, would lose the offensive spirit and be less inclined to fight the enemy.¹⁰⁰

There was a widespread belief that trench-warfare with its lack of movement would cause troops to become torpid and lethargic. An entry in the minutes of a divisional conference in June 1915 recorded: "...The G.O.C. emphasised the necessity for active sniping and patrolling in defence of the line, to maintain moral superiority over the enemy's infantry and the mastery of the ground between the trenches..."¹⁰¹ Raids, being offensive operations, were seen as a means of achieving this.

Thirdly, troops at all levels, from individuals up to units and formations, required training in the planning, operation and administrations of offensives. This had always been a constituent part of the Army's training cycle. Initially, units concentrated on skills of the individual soldier, such as musketry and signalling. The training cycle then went up the various command levels - section, platoon, company, battalion - ending with formation manoeuvres at brigade and division level

Owing to the depletion of pre-war officers, experienced warrant officers, NCOs and that highly-skilled man-at-arms, the long-service pre-war regular other-rank, new systems of operation had to be put in place that reflected the peculiarly novel conditions on the Western Front.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914 – 1918: The Live and Let Live System* (1980; London: Pan Books, 2000), pp. 43-4. This concern was shared by the French and German High Commands. See also Mark Connelly, *Steady the Buffs!*, especially Chapter 4, pp. 76-92, which deals specifically with the policy concerning raiding.

¹⁰¹ TNA: PRO WO95/1672 '8th Division War Diary', '8th Division Conference at Div HQ 16 June 1915 (ref. G.131.K)'

Therefore, a new level of tactics was introduced. This was the use of the raid. The raid was embedded into operational schemes above the level of the patrol and below that of the full-scale attack designed to permanently occupy enemy positions.

A raid can be defined as an offensive operation taking place in the enemy trenches designed to inflict loss of men or material on the enemy but which does not include an attempt to permanently occupy any territory which was held by the enemy at the commencement of the operation. In modern parlance, it could be described as ‘shoot and scoot’ or, as it was described by contemporaries, ‘smack and back’.¹⁰²

The British Official History states that 8th Division initiated the first raid made by the BEF in the Great War: “...The first recorded ‘raid’ – although earlier patrol work closely approached the nature of a raid – appears to be that carried out on the night of the 3rd/4th February 1915 by Lieutenant F.C. Roberts, with 25 men of 1st Worcestershires (24th Brigade, 8th Division), under the instructions of Major E.C.F. Wodehouse, commanding the battalion...”¹⁰³

The after-action report forwarded to IV Corps HQ on 6 February after the action reported:

*...When within eight yards of the enemy’s trench, two sentries fired and shouted the alarm, but they were too late and the party encircled the sap-head and completely surprised the occupants of the adjacent trench, who were found asleep – five men to a traverse. About 20 Germans were bayoneted and the party immediately returned to their lines; the whole operation not occupying not more than 4 to 5 minutes...*¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, p. 70

¹⁰³ *British Official History 1915, Vol. I*, p. 32, fn. 1

¹⁰⁴ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 ‘8th Division War Diary’, Report to IV Corps, ref. G.53 (K), 06 January 1915

This operation was a particularly cold-blooded affair, as it would appear that all the Germans bayoneted were asleep at the time. Roberts was awarded an immediate DSO. This was a very rare award for such a low-ranking officer. Its award in such a case was seen to tantamount to being awarded a VC.

However, the 8th Division History states that an operation carried out by the 2nd Lincolnshire on 23 November 1914 was the first embryonic raid carried out by the Division. The raiding party consisted of Lieutenant E.H. Impey and eight men. The object was to attack a length of enemy trench being used to enfilade a bend in the British front line. Some novel methods were used to camouflage their khaki uniforms, "...Draped, with attention to practical rather than artistic effect, in white sheets and ladies' nightdresses, the party advanced over the snow-covered ground..."¹⁰⁵ Having disturbed the Germans, the party, lying out in No-Man's land, was able to fire at the pursuing enemy without loss being concealed by their improvised camouflage.

Within days, other units followed suit. The Division's first Victoria Cross was won by Lieutenant Philip Neame of the Royal Engineers in part for participation in a raid on 27 November 1914. Its objective was to demolish a German defensive position at what became known as the Moated Grange at Neuve Chapelle.

As well as operations intended to inflict casualties on the enemy, raids were also vital for intelligence gathering. Raids were used for snatching prisoners for unit identification. If a prisoner wasn't captured then other means of identification such as shoulder straps bearing regimental numbers were taken off bodies.

¹⁰⁵ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 8

Training and rehearsal for the raid became a feature of the planning for the proposed operations. A part of the divisional conference on 13 January was dedicated to experiments with barbed-wire cutting.

...Wire cutting experiments were described by G.O.C., 25th Inf. Bde.

The Major-General Commanding gave the following instructions.

(a) Wire entanglements to be put up near Reserve Bilets and practice to be carried out on wire cutting.

(b) Men to be trained in each platoon. Further instruction on this subject will be issued.

(c) Steps to be taken by D.A.D.O.S. to provide hedging gloves on the same scale as wire cutters...¹⁰⁶

At this stage of the war, wire cutting by hand was seen as the method of cutting all barbed-wire whether in raids or major assaults. Within two months this view was to change.

Raiding was seen as different to patrolling, which was a long established practice in military operations. The types of patrol operated depended on circumstances. Covering or standing patrols lay out in No-Man's Land, protecting other parties engaged in trench digging, repair or wiring or covering areas vulnerable to an enemy approach. Reconnaissance patrols attempted to find out what the enemy were up to using guile and stealth e.g. by capturing a prisoner without alerting other enemy in the area. The task of fighting patrols was to disrupt enemy patrols, denying the enemy any knowledge of what the British were up to, and to make the enemy hesitate to venture forward of their trenches. This division of tasks did not mean that the one type of patrol could not turn into another type due to circumstances. For example, if a

¹⁰⁶ TNA: PRO WO95/1671 '8th Division War Diary', Conference at Div. HQ ref. G.131.k, 8 February 1915

reconnaissance patrol could not avoid contact with the enemy then it could very easily turn into a fighting patrol.

Raids differed from patrols, as the former always attempted to enter the enemy trenches even if it was to be for a very short duration. Patrols operated in No-Man's land, between the British and the German trenches. As far as the higher command of the BEF was concerned, all operations were designed to give the British control of 'No-Man's land', to make the enemy conform to the British will.

As raids developed, they required all the constituent components of an attack but on a smaller scale. From the selection of the objective, the issuing of warning orders, the coordination with adjacent units and supporting weapons, such as artillery, and setting of timings, the raid became an offensive writ small. An important role of the raid was that it was seen as playing a vital role in what became known as 'battle inoculation', that is 'hardening' troops to the events, sounds and sights of violent action. It gave confidence to the troops taking part and helped train staff in planning, especially the ever-problematic simultaneous activity.¹⁰⁷ Raids have been criticised for causing excessive casualties. However, as Mark Connelly has written,

...Overall, the balance sheet might just be read in favour of raids for they undoubtedly forced officers and men to stretch themselves, consider their own actions, the reactions of the enemy, and the nature of their own and others' weapons. In static positional warfare raiding was the only way to test and sharpen infantry skills short of major offensive operations...¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ See Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, p. 196. Simultaneous activity was the process whereby units or even individuals carried out different tasks so that they would be completed in such a time and manner that the next phase of operations or planning could proceed without delay. One Territorial Army battalion commander in the 1980s gave, during a TEWT [a Tactical Exercise Without Troops], a robust illustration of this, using the example of a private soldier in a rush to get away on leave, putting his washing in the NAAFI launderette, while sorting out his travel pass and ordering his taxi. Author's own knowledge.

¹⁰⁸ Connelly, *Steady the Buffs*, pp. 90-1.

* * * *

It is apparent that 8th Division, being an extemporised war-raised formation, had problems that would be faced by the later 'New Army' divisions. It was not organised or equipped, especially with heavier artillery, as well as the divisions that formed the original BEF. Other equipment, such as telephone systems, had to be improvised. Environmental conditions that led to 'trench feet' and frostbite had to be dealt with. At the same time, 8th Division was in contact with an energetic and efficient enemy. Therefore, new tactics such as the construction of strongpoints and the use of raids had to be developed.

CHAPTER 2

1915 – FALTERING STEPS

1915 showed that neither side was able to establish clearly how military victory was to be achieved. This chapter examines 8th Division's experiences at the flawed success of Neuve Chapelle and the battles that the division was later involved in.

The operations that the BEF took part in during the spring and summer of 1915 were the first large-scale British offensive actions during the war. As such, they were examined closely at the time and have been since by modern historians. Prior and Wilson argue that Rawlinson misread the reasons why initial success at Neuve Chapelle was followed by failure. Subsequent assaults would have less effective fire support because the degrading of command and control after the initial 'break-in' was not recognised.¹ Jonathan Bailey has shown that the misunderstood 'solution' was that neutralisation of the enemy was more effective than his destruction and permitted further operations to take place on ground that had not been turned into a shelled morass.² Paul Harris and Sanders Marble have argued that the BEF was divided into a number of differing schools of thought, with Rawlinson and Du Cane arguing for a doctrine of 'bite and hold', capturing ground of tactical significance and forcing the Germans to destroy themselves in a series of counter attacks, while others still thought 'breakthrough' was possible, a view that led to Haig's failure at Aubers Ridge, where he tried to do too much with too little.³ This is, perhaps, the dominant motif of the BEF's experiences in 1915. These experiences were certainly shared by 8th Division.

¹ Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp. 69-70.

² Jonathan Bailey, 'British Artillery in the Great War', pp 28-9.

³ Paul Harris and Sanders Marble, 'British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915-1917', *War in History* 2008 15 (1), pp 18-31.

* * * *

Neuve Chapelle

Following the end of the initial phase of the war both sides, the Germans on the one hand and the French and the British on the other, took stock of where they stood and what options were available to them.

The German Empire's gamble, known as the Schlieffen Plan, had failed to win the war in one outright knockout blow by the end of 1914. However, it was not an absolute failure. At its end, the German Army occupied almost the whole of Belgium and a major portion of north-eastern France. This included the industrial areas around Lille and the coalfields of Artois. For the Germans there were great benefits in holding on to their gains on the Western Front while assisting their Austro-Hungarian allies to weaken the Russians who were already reeling from their defeats in East Prussia and Poland and who were now facing a Turkish campaign in the Carpathians.

For the powers of the Entente, the opening campaigns had been a desperate struggle to prevent a German breakthrough to the Channel ports after they had failed to capture Paris. The 'Miracle of the Marne' had demonstrated the failure of the German strategy. However, the fighting of 1914 cost the French army almost a quarter of its mobilised strength and almost half of its regular army officer corps⁴. However, for the French the overriding objective still was to remove the enemy invader from their soil.

Casualties in the British Regular Army had been almost as grievous. By the end of

⁴ Holmes, *Tommy*, p. 30.

1914, the British Army lost 16,756 men killed, 46, 019 wounded and another 25, 541 missing or taken prisoner.⁵ During the Battle of First Ypres, that is between 14 October and 30 November 1914, 614 British officers and 6,794 other ranks were killed and 1,754 officers and 43,735 other ranks were wounded. These were almost all Regular Army soldiers.^{6, 7}

The British Army was now faced with the need to raise a great extemporised force. Kitchener called for volunteers on 7 August 1914. By the end of 1914 some 1,186,357 had enlisted.⁸ However, these 'new armies' would need months to train and equip, let alone become efficient enough to face the enemy. The battles of 1915 would have to be carried out by that diminishing asset, the remnants of the regular pre-war army, aided by the Territorials (the first formed Territorial Force division to arrive in the BEF's area of operations was the 46th [North Midland] Division in February 1915).⁹

Talks took place between the French and the British about plans to attack on the Western Front.¹⁰ It was considered particularly important by the French to strike at railways that ran laterally behind the German lines. A particular weak point was seen to be in the area of the Plain of Douai, which is west of Lille, between La Bassée in the north and Arras in the south. Therefore, the French proposed a series of operations commencing with an offensive there. However, a conflict arose in the councils of the

⁵ Figures for the Regular Army only taken from War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire in the Great War* (London: HMSO, 1922), *Table (iii) – Approximate Casualties by Months in the Expeditionary Force, France*, p. 253.

⁶ Figures taken from Field-Marshal Lord (Michael) Carver, *Britain's Army in the Twentieth Century* (paperback edition London: Pan Books, 1999) p. 37.

⁷ The first Territorial Force infantry battalion to arrive in France in October 1914 was 14th Battalion, the London Regiment, more usually known by its subsidiary title, the London Scottish.

⁸ Figures taken from *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire* (London: HMSO, London, 1922), p. 364, quoted in Peter Simkins, 'Soldiers and Civilians: Billeting in Britain and France', in Beckett & Simpson, *A Nation in Arms*, p. 136.

⁹ See *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, pp. 27 & 65.

¹⁰ See *ibid*, Chapter IV, pp. 59-73.

British government. Though the French, for the reasons outlined above, saw the Western Front as the main theatre of operations, among the British, others wished to strike at the enemy elsewhere. There were a number of reasons for this.

Russia's situation was viewed as particularly parlous. There was a desire to support them and strike at the Turks. One option considered was to force the Dardanelles between the Aegean and Black Seas so that supplies could be sent directly to a Russian warm water port and at the same time force Turkey into leaving the war. In order, to support the operation in the Dardanelles, the last uncommitted Regular army infantry division, 29th Division, was switched to the Near East. The replacement formations, 46th (North Midland) Territorial Infantry Division and 1st Canadian Infantry Division, were considered too inexperienced to take the line. As a result, the BEF stated that they could not relieve the French IX Corps. In turn the French stated that unless IX Corps was relieved their Tenth Army could not take the offensive together with the BEF. It is quite probable that after the British failures to take the offensive after First Ypres, the French considered that their ally could not mount a competent assault and the BEF would be suitable only to assist in the defence of the Allied trench-line. As the British Official History stated:

...The failure of the British to accomplish anything in the "December Battle" in Flanders had undoubtedly impressed the French very unfavourably, and it is more than probable that they did not think the Field-Marshal [French, C-in-C BEF] was in earnest. Until the Battle of Neuve Chapelle was fought there is small doubt but that they were of the opinion that the BEF might be helpful to hold the line and act defensively, but would be of little use to drive the

*Germans out of France...*¹¹

As a result of the views held by the French, at the end of February 1915, General Sir Douglas Haig,¹² commander of First Army, informed his commander-in-chief, Field-Marshal Sir John French,¹³ that the British assault would have to be considered to be an operation independent of the French.¹⁴

Planning and Preparation

Since its capture by the Germans in October 1914, the salient that included the village of Neuve Chapelle had been a thorn in the side of the British forces opposite. As the 8th Division official history commented:

*...Its houses were at this date still mostly intact and were full of snipers. The troops in 'A' Lines on the right of the divisional front had a particularly bad time of it, for the German snipers were able to shoot straight into our trenches. Aided by German shelling from the Aubers ridge and 'overs' from our line further East, they contrived to make the sub-sector a most uncomfortable and unhealthy one...*¹⁵

Initially, the planning to re-take the village was purely an 8th Division matter. However, this was overtaken by planning of First Army for the assault that was to be made in conformity with the proposed Franco-British offensive in early 1915. As has been said earlier, the area of Neuve Chapelle/Aubers Ridge was chosen as the site of

¹¹ Ibid, p73,.

¹² Douglas Haig, dob 19/06/1861, 7 Hussars, then 17 Lancers, India, S. Africa, War Office, GOC Aldershot District, GOC 1 Corps 1914, GOC First Army 1914-15, GOC-in-C BEF France & Belgium 1915-18, created Earl Haig 1919, worked for ex-servicemen, dod 29/01/1928.

¹³ John Denton Pinkstone French, born 1852, joined Royal navy as midshipman 1868. Joined Suffolk artillery militia 1870. 8th Hussars 1874. Gordon Relief Expedition 1884-5, CO 19 Hussars 1888, Appointed AAG War Office 18995 (rank of colonel), S. Africa (Natal & relief of Kimberley), GOC Aldershot District 1902-7, Inspector-general of Forces 1907 (rank of General), Field-Marshal 1913, resigned appointment due to Curragh incident 1914, C-in-C BEF August 1914 – December 1915, C-in-C Home Forces 1916 (created viscount), Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland 1918-21, created Earl French of Ypres 1922, died 1923.

¹⁴ *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p. 73

¹⁵ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 16.

the British offensive as if it was successful it would allow an advance across the Plain of Douai towards Lille and the vital German railways. However, because of the waterlogged condition of the ground, an offensive could not take place until March at the earliest.

As a participant in a First Army operation, the amount of trench line held by 8th Division was decreased. To the north of the village the front line was taken over by units of 7th Division, also in IV Corps. The southern flank, the area known as 'A' lines, at right angle to the main front line, was taken over by units of the Indian Corps.

For the infantry battalions in 8th Division, the first warning orders came on 2 March 1915.¹⁶ The procedure of formulating operation orders, the transmission of warning orders to subordinate units and the organisation of detailed administrative tasks now commenced. The system was designed to bring order to a procedure that lent itself to being chaotic. The systematic use of warning orders, detailed order planning and simultaneous activity is still that used by the British Army today. The use of aide-memoires, using specific headings such as *Ground, Situation, Mission, Execution, Service Support* meant that the orders and resultant tasks were carried out in a logical and well understood sequence. That this was understood before the 1914-1918 war is shown by the relevant chapter in the *Field Service Pocket Book*.¹⁷

The 8th Division history gives a flavour of the activities that took place before the assault.

...Then there were the infantry places of assembly to be got ready,

¹⁶ John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of men and Courage: The Second Scottish Rifles at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle 1915* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), pp. 57-60.

¹⁷ See *FSPB 1914*, Chapter III, especially pp. 55-9.

*emplacements to be built for machine guns and trench mortars, and extra communication trenches to be dug. Provision was made for supplies of food, water and ammunition to be available close to the front. Engineer depots were formed in the Rue Bacquerot and Rue Tilleloy and additional stores were placed in readiness in dug-outs just in rear of the forward trench lines. Colonel Montgomery's wooden tramways proved invaluable in this all-important matter of supply and were run up close in the rear of 'B' lines [the name applied to the sector still held by 8 Division]; extra lengths of rails being prepared and stored well forward, so that the tramways could be continued to Neuve Chapelle as soon as the progress of the attack permitted. Apart from all this new work, those parts of our old front line trenches which had been abandoned when the water forced the division to take to breastworks had now to be reclaimed...*¹⁸

Among the provisions made was the building of wooden bridges to allow the flooded trenches to be crossed safely. Others were provided to cross the German trenches.¹⁹

A major part of in the impending assault was the organisation of the artillery. The artillery was given four tasks.

*...first, to destroy the enemy fire and front trenches; second, to protect the flanks; third, to form a curtain of fire behind the enemy's front trenches to prevent him reinforcing them and fourth, to neutralise the enemy guns and machine guns...*²⁰

*The 8th Division's artillery, with additional artillery from 7th Infantry Division and 2nd Indian Cavalry Division of the Indian Corps, were initially formed into 'A' and 'B' Groups and a Horse Artillery group...*²¹

The CRA 8th Division stated in his after action report that before the battle, as the positions that were to be used by the incoming batteries had been chosen in outline before, telephone lines had been put in place already. It was decided to form the artillery into groups of two or three brigades so orders were issued from HQ RA to

¹⁸ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹ H.H. Storey, *The History of the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), Volume 2 1910 – 1933* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1961), p. 5.

²⁰ General Sir Martin Farndale, *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery: Western Front 1914-18* (London: The Royal Artillery Institute, 1986), p. 86.

²¹ TNA PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, entry for 4 March 1915.

groups only. “...The communications were arranged with this in mind. Direct Artillery lines were provided to Group H.Q. with alternative artillery lines in most cases...”²²

Consequently, the artillery plan was notable for an innovation that was to become more widespread as the war progressed. The artillery came under the control of a centralised gunner command and control organisation imposed above the divisional level. Brigadier-General Holland, CRA 8th Division, became in effect the *de facto* IV Corps artillery commander for at least the first phase of the operation. There was an indication that this was on an ‘ad hoc’ basis as there was still the artillery advisor at IV Corps HQ, Brigadier-General A.H. Hussey. However, at this stage of the war, the latter had no command powers.²³ Sir Martin Farndale commented that the planning was carried out by the five CRAs of the 8th, Lahore, Meerut Divisions and the two Heavy Groups:

*It is remarkable that they felt that this could be done without an overall Artillery Commander. There was, in fact, some friction and it [...] showed the need for Artillery Commanders at Corps and Army level.*²⁴

The establishment of this enhanced role for Holland was a portent of things to come. It meant that control and command of artillery was exercised by professional gunners who understood artillery problems and their solutions. There was a major drawback with a separate organisation for artillery command. It could lead to a divergence in planning especially as the formation commander usually was not a gunner and was not fully conversant with the abilities and limitations of his major weapon system.

²² Ibid, ‘Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March’, dated 21 March 1915.

²³ See Bidwell, *Gunners at War*, pp. 46-7 and Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 151-2.

²⁴ Farndale, *History of the Royal Artillery*, p.86.

The enemy defences were described as a series of breastworks, which was a defence work built above the ground,²⁵ with in front an apron of two rows of barbed wire built around knife rests²⁶ variously between six and fifteen feet in depth. There was also a quantity of low wire on short posts.²⁷ Neuve Chapelle village had not been put into any state of defence. There was no mention of any defensive positions echeloned behind the front trench. From 5 March 1915, the artillery began to register on the enemy positions, including artillery batteries. On 8 March a table of tasks was issued to the artillery.²⁸ It is noteworthy that 7 Siege Brigade only arrived from England on 9 March. The CRA 8th Division's war diary noted:

...LA GORGUE 9.3.15 / [...] The 7th Siege Brigade arrived from England, the 81st battery at 4 am and the 59th battery at 9 am. Batteries detrained and got into position at about a quarter mile North by East of F of LA FLINQUE and near the H of PONT du HEM respectively – Some registration by both batteries was carried out during the day...²⁹

Therefore, a major artillery unit was in place less than twenty-four hours before the commencement of the assault. It was the unit's first time in France with all the commensurate problems that entailed. It had no time to acclimatise to conditions let alone allow its officers to reconnoitre the ground it was to fight over. The unit also had no time to establish links with the other artillery units let alone the infantry it was there to support.

²⁵ The Germans in the area suffered as much as the British from the difficulties caused by having to fight in an area where the ground was flat and inundated with water.

²⁶ See Official, *Notes On Trench Warfare For Infantry Officers – Revised Diagrams* (London: HMSO, December 1916. Facsimile reprint London: IWM, 2003), Figure 33.

²⁷ *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p91.

²⁸ CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, entry for 08 March 1915.

²⁹ *Ibid*, entry for 9 March 1915.

The artillery timetable envisaged a short bombardment of twenty-five to thirty-five minutes for the first phase. The howitzers of the siege batteries were to demolish the trenches while the field artillery covered the flank trenches and various roads in the area. In the second phase, the artillery was then to lift from the German front line trenches to the village of Neuve Chapelle itself while also forming a barrier beyond to prevent German reinforcements reaching the front.

In the initial planning of the operation, Brigadier-General Holland, CRA 8th Division, submitted a memorandum on the use of artillery. It appeared that he proposed to task a number of batteries to deal with the enemy artillery not because of the probable threat they posed to the British infantry as they were crossing No-Man's Land or when consolidating in the captured ground but because they presented a threat to the observation posts of the British artillery:

...In telling off certain batteries to deal solely with the Enemy's artillery, I have been greatly influenced by the fact that we have only a limited number of observing stations which can see the portion of the lines to be attacked. These houses are in view of the Enemy's artillery which occupies favourable positions on the AUBERS ridge; and if this artillery is left to run free it will undoubtedly render a proportion of our observation stations untenable and so decrease materially the efficacy of the fire of all our batteries, besides worrying the batteries themselves and our Infantry. I will now reconnoitre daily to get new observing stations which will be unregistered by the enemy and which will be able to observe the area of the German line to be attacked....³⁰

So it would appear that at this stage of the planning process Holland was concerned about the enemy artillery as a threat to the British artillery's ability to operate not as an enemy weapon system that could hinder or halt the infantry's assault on the village and the subsequent move onto the ridge.

³⁰ 8th Division war diary, ref. TNA: PRO WO95/1671, report, ref. G.156.K, dated 20 February 1915, signed by Brigadier-General Holland, 8th Division CRA.

When the fire plan was put in place, a total of six batteries of 4.7-inch guns were put on counter battery work together with, what appears to be, only one 8-inch gun and one 60-pounder gun. Also used for counter-battery work were those carried on an armoured train, i.e. one 6-inch gun and two 4.7-inch guns. By this time the 4.7-inch guns were very ineffective, especially with regard to their ammunition. This meant that they could not be depended to place their shells where they were meant to go. They were not very efficient as a means of suppressing enemy artillery. This demonstrates one deficiency in the initial planning of the operation. IV Corps was made up of two of the most recently arrived regular divisions in France. With regards to infantry, 8th Division had the greatest component of pre-war regulars. 7th Division had also been brought up to strength. With regard to their integral artillery, as stated above, from the start their establishment had been especially weak in medium artillery, the type of gun that was required to fight the German artillery.

Following an examination of the problem by IV Corps staff,³¹ it was decided that a short hurricane bombardment would be more effective in killing or stunning the German defenders as the same number of shells delivered over a longer time. It would appear thus that counter-battery work did not appear high on the artillery planners' scheme of things. What has to be remembered is that the operation could only be planned using the resources available. The planners did not suffer from an embarrassment of riches. It must be presumed that they had to alter constantly the allocation of resources as requirements changed.

³¹ See TNA: PRO, IV Corps war diary and narrative of events: January – February 1915, reference WO95/707, '*Artillery Problem of Neuve Chapelle*'.

When the second phase began, the infantry were to assault. This consisted of two brigades from 8th Division, 25 Brigade on the right and 23 Brigade on the left of area of assault, facing Neuve Chapelle village from the west. Below them, the Garwhal Brigade of the Meerut Division was to assault from the Port Arthur area in the 'A' Lines sector, almost at right angles to the brigades of 8th Division. Following the breach of the German lines, a general advance by both corps would take place onto Aubers Ridge. To follow up an advance would be made by the Cavalry Corps and the Indian Cavalry Corps into the green fields beyond.

The attack was 8th Division's first major offensive of the war. Despite the haemorrhage of casualties over the winter, the division was still recognisably a regular army formation and not just in name only. The Division was composed of long service regular soldiers who took pride in their skill-at-arms and were closely knit after years of service overseas.³² Its qualities were now to be tested to the full.

The Initial Assault

Though minor in scale and duration compared to bombardments later in the war, the initial bombardment at Neuve Chapelle was noted as something quite remarkable by those present. The regimental history of 2nd Northamptonshires, one of the battalions of 24 Brigade that was to follow up the initial assault, described the ferocity of the artillery fire:

...The noise was terrible- 'like a thousand express trains roaring through a tunnel', as one narrator puts it. The German line immediately disappeared in clouds of black and yellow smoke, from which leaped up now and then great clods of earth, broken planks and fragments of Huns- 'our guns simply blew everything to pieces'. The excitement among the troops was great. No

³² See Baynes, *Morale*, for a very perceptive examination of the morale of one of 8th Division's battalions, 2nd Scottish Rifles (The Cameronians). It cannot be supposed that among the units of 8th Division that were involved in the battle, 2nd Scottish Rifles were alone in having high morale.

*bombardment such as this had ever been witnessed before...*³³

The regimental history of the Lincolnshire Regiment stated, in more detail:

*...In a few minutes the hostile entanglements, which varied from six to fifteen yards in depth and consisted of two to three rows of 'knife rests' with strands of thick barbed wire wound round the frames and pulled tight between them, were blown to bits, with the exception of a stretch of four hundred yards on the left. The German front-line trenches were practically obliterated, killed and wounded being buried beneath the debris or flung about, horribly mutilated...*³⁴

Following the initial bombardment that took place between 07.30 and 08.05, the infantry of 25 and 23 Infantry Brigades left their assembly trenches and advanced towards the German front line trench. Officers in the leading ranks had been provided with flags to indicate their position. On the right, the 2nd Lincolnshires and 2nd Royal Berkshires were almost completely successful, achieving their objectives without much loss and taking many prisoners. The 2nd Rifle Brigade had captured Neuve-Chapelle and was making progress beyond it. The 1st Royal Irish Rifles had also made good progress on the left flank of 25 Brigade though it had suffered severe casualties from enemy machine gun fire from the left flank.

Following the successful capture of the village, the Royal Engineer field companies, aided by the Territorials of 1/5th Black Watch,³⁵ dug communication trenches across the old 'No Mans Land'. They put the newly captured ground into a state of defence in order to resist the expected German counter attack. In this they were assisted by another artillery innovation. This was a standing barrage on the far side of the village

³³ Hughes (ed.), *The Northamptonshire Regiment, 1914-1918* (Facsimile reprint Uckfield, East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, 2005), p. 85.

³⁴ Major-General Charles Rudyard Simpson (ed.), *The History of the Lincolnshire Regiment 1914-1918* (London: The Medici Society, 1931. Facsimile reprint Uckfield, East Sussex: The Naval and Military Press, n.d.), p. 82.

³⁵ Attached to 8th Division since November 1914 to gain experience.

to keep the Germans out.³⁶

However, on the left, the wire was not cut and the German trenches were untouched. The units attacking here were both from 23 Brigade. On the far left, along the whole length of 2nd Middlesex' front and the left part of 2nd Scottish Rifles, who were on their right, suffered severe casualties as soon as they left their front line trenches. 2nd Middlesex had uncut wire in front of their whole position. As the regimental history said, "...Of the first wave of Middlesex men, few reached the German wire, but those tore in vain at the thick entanglements until their hands were torn and bleeding and their uniforms in rags..."³⁷

The same happened to the second and third waves. The 2nd Scottish Rifles also found the wire uncut. It is not clear what form the barbed wire obstacle was in front of 2nd Middlesex. In front of 2nd Scottish Rifles, it is known they were 'knife-rests'. These were wooden frames with wire fastened to them, so they formed barbed wire boxes. They were able to be removed with some effort.³⁸

The 8th Division post-action report, under the signature of the divisional commander, Major-General F.J. Davies, stated:

...the moment the men of the 2/Middlesex Regiment [...] attempted to leave their trenches they were mown down by rifle and machine gun fire both from the left flank and from the front, the enemy being entirely unshaken. The Battalion made three gallant attempts to assault, but each time was driven back with severe loss. Meanwhile the 2/Scottish Rifles on the right of the 2/Middlesex Regiment was also subjected to a severe flanking fire though in a lesser degree, but pressing

³⁶ *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p. 92.

³⁷ Everard Wyrall, *The Die-Hards in the Great War - A History of the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment), 1914-1919, Compiled from the Records etc. Volume One: 1914-1916* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1926; Uckfield, East Sussex: The Naval and Military Press, n.d.), p. 100.

³⁸ See Baynes, *Morale*, pp. 68-71.

on with great gallantry was able to reach the front line of German trenches [...] The Battalion had by this time suffered heavy losses (ten of the Officers now lie buried between the British and German trenches) and at once became engaged in a severe struggle with the enemy so that the ground captured was held with difficulty. The 2/Devonshire Regiment was ordered up in support and a report of the situation sent to Div H.Q. with a request for a further bombardment of the trenches.

This report was received at 9.40 a.m., and a further bombardment was at once ordered. The fire, which was carried out by batteries familiar with the ground, was extremely successful...³⁹

The comment about the successful fire-plan on the 23 Brigade front being carried out by artillery familiar with the ground is reinforced by the post-action report made on 21 March 1915 by the Division's CRA, Brigadier-General Holland. He stated that the failure of the initial bombardment was because the two 6-inch howitzer batteries responsible for fire on the area had, as mentioned previously, only arrived very late in the area of operations. In a detailed analysis, he wrote:

...The reason for the comparative failure of the first bombardment on this portion of the front trenches was that the portion under discussion was that portion allotted to the 2 - 6" Siege batteries which only joined this Division on the day previous to the bombardment.

The batteries arrived by train at 1 a.m. 9 a.m. on 9th March (i.e. the day previous to the attack) and got into position at 12 noon and 2 p.m. on the 9th March.

The officers (who were absolutely strange to the country) had to be taken to the observing station and shown the trenches. Telephone wires had to be laid and registration had to be carried out. The afternoon light was poor and as a result the front trenches were not well registered as they were very difficult to see.

Some points in rear were registered.

During the early morning of the 10th, every endeavour was made to register the front trenches by these batteries, but owing to bad light and, in one case to a telephone wire breaking down, this was not done!

The result was that the fire of these 6" batteries was just over and as the prisoners said did not do the enemy much harm.

The second bombardment which was carried out by batteries which knew the ground was reported by the prisoners as rendering it impossible to remain in the trenches.

It was necessary to use the 2 new batteries for the 1st bombardment as otherwise we would have had a weak bombardment along the whole line and

³⁹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, *Report on Operations at Neuve Chapelle*, dated 27 March 1915.

*would probably have been held up all along...*⁴⁰

The failure on the left flank had a number of unfortunate results. 2nd Middlesex and, to some extent, 2nd Scottish Rifles, were greatly diminished as effective infantry units (though they continued with real displays of the military virtues in continuing to attack and capture their objectives). As an illustration, the history of the Middlesex Regiment states that the losses of the unit were eight officers killed, eight wounded, seventy other ranks killed, two hundred and ninety nine wounded, and eighty nine missing and that in effect, "...A', 'B', and 'C' Companies were almost entirely wiped out..."⁴¹. This put pressure on the follow up units from 23 Brigade, 2nd Devonshires and 2nd West Yorkshires, which had to undergo some heavy fighting on the left flank.

Further confusion was caused by the belief that a feature known as the Orchard (labelled as Point 6 on contemporary maps) was a German strongpoint. Rawlinson ordered Davies to make sure that the feature was taken before a further advance could take place. However, in the interim, 2nd Devonshire followed by 2nd Middlesex had actually advanced to the Orchard, held up only by the British bombardment that had preceded the assault. The Orchard was found to be unoccupied though some accounts differ in whether it had actually been prepared for defence or not. The area was occupied about 1 p.m.⁴²

⁴⁰ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, '*Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March*', dated 21 March 1915.

⁴¹ Wyrall, *Die-Hards*, p. 102. For 2nd Scottish Rifles, see Baynes, *Morale*, pp. 68-80.

⁴² C.T. Atkinson, *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918* (2 vols.) (Exeter: Eland Brothers; London: Simpkin Marshall Hamilton Kent, 1926; Uckfield, East Sussex: the Naval & Military Press, n.d.), p. 71. The 8th Division Artillery Diary of Events has the capture being reported at 12.47 p.m. TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, '*Report on Operations 8th Division Artillery 10th-14th March 1915*', n.d., p. 4.

Rawlinson ordered 24 Brigade to assist on the left flank while 25 Brigade were to secure the feature known as the road triangle in the right sector. This meant that the formation that was to pass through the assaulting units had been diverted to assist in the assault itself. Notwithstanding this assistance, 23 Brigade had managed by itself, after being brought initially to a standstill and suffering heavy casualties, to achieve its objectives. The 1st Royal Irish Rifles had secured the road triangle by about 09.30 a.m. In fact, the most recent history of the 1st Royal Irish Rifles⁴³ states that the battalion had to halt and fall back as they were in advance of the next phase of supporting artillery fire.

Rawlinson had aggravated the delays that were now starting to accrue by this concentration of effort on the left flank. He had also lost sight of opportunities on the right sector. Prior and Wilson state that the fact that Rawlinson was not aware of the developments that had taken place in the front lines showed his relative impotence to affect the outcome of events.⁴⁴

It is generally agreed that there was a hiatus following the capture of the first objectives. However, the Germans had also put in a counter attack and it is worth noting that in the 8th Division artillery's Diary of Events at 01.55 p.m. it was reported that the Orchard (Point 6) was thought to be under threat of attack.⁴⁵

The advance was not resumed until 2.30 p.m. Participants and commentators have stated that this was the lost opportunity of the battle. Lieutenant-Colonel Stephens of

⁴³ James W. Taylor, *The 1st Royal Irish Rifles in the Great War* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 48.

⁴⁴ Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp. 47-49.

⁴⁵ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, 'Report on Operations 8th Division Artillery 10th-14th March 1915', n.d., p. 4.

2nd Rifle Brigade wrote to his wife afterwards:

...We had a great success at first and took the village of Neuve Chapelle and a load of Germans. It was a really good show and I'm very proud of the battalion. After that things went wrong. We wanted to go on and could have easily. We had a hole right through the lines and there was nothing in front of us. But the people on our right failed because their artillery could or didn't hit the enemy wire and consequently we were stopped and not allowed to proceed. That was on Thursday...⁴⁶

It is unclear whether Stephens means the stalled attack by 23 Brigade's 2nd Middlesex and 2nd Scottish Rifles on his left, or the attack by the Meerut Division in the Indian Corps, which was on his right. The Meerut Division's advance had been stopped not because the wire had not been cut but because a gap had opened in the first assault when the Garwhal Brigade had gone off course. Further delay was caused by the confusion caused by the ordering of a further bombardment when it was not required. Consequently, 1st Seaforth Highlanders of the follow-up Dehra Dun Brigade had temporarily suspended their attack.

However, G.C. Wynne, in his examination of German defensive tactics, wrote that a further unsupported attack would not have succeeded because the Germans had already thrown a thin but resilient cordon in front of the British line of advance.⁴⁷ This included a number of Maxim machine guns, the German equivalent to the Vickers heavy machine gun. With the assault having to cross the flat open land that lay on the other side of the village, it is very doubtful whether an attack could have succeeded that was not covered by artillery fire to suppress the defences.

The control of the artillery was meant to alter after the initial phase was considered to

⁴⁶ NAM: Papers of General Sir Reginald Byng Stephens, reference 2000-12-501-237, letter, dated 14 March 1915.

⁴⁷ G.C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), p. 34.

have been completed. In the original plan, all artillery in IV Corps was under the control of the CRA 8th Division, Brigadier-General A.E.A. Holland, for the first phase only. According to the Official History, as the second phase commenced, the artillery of 7th Division was to return to the direct control of its own CRA.⁴⁸ However, according to the 8th Division artillery's Diary of Events, some artillery units of 7th Division did not revert to the control of CRA 7th Division until the night of 10-11 March, and some others not until the night of 11-12 March. Conversely, some units of 8th Division's artillery did not return to the control of its own CRA until the night of 12-13 March.⁴⁹ The complexity of control was another added complication.

With the commencement of the second phase, 7th Division, which had been inactive on the left flank of 8th Division, was now to move forward in conjunction with the latter. However, owing to the confusion that reigns on any battlefield, added to the worsening weather, which was becoming increasingly cloudy, adding to the failing light, the actual advances did not start until approximately 4 p.m. In the meantime, the German defenders had worked extremely hard to strengthen the defences in front of the British. A trench was dug between the strongpoints already in place and machine guns emplaced within them.⁵⁰

Therefore, the attacks of both divisions were piecemeal and without proper artillery support. For a number of reasons, the observation post officers were able to see less and less and act even less effectively on what they could observe. Firstly, the light

⁴⁸ See *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p. 106.

⁴⁹ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, 'Report on Operations 8th Division Artillery 10th-14th March 1915', n.d., p. 8.

⁵⁰ See *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p. 105.

was failing. Secondly, the terrain over which the assaults were now taking place was flat boggy ground intersected by a number of water-filled drainage ditches or dykes. This meant that any intermediate features such as buildings or even hedges and trees obscured any view of what lay beyond. Thirdly, the casualties among the observation post officers and their attached signallers, together with the cutting by shellfire or wheeled transport, meant that communication with the gun lines had become far more tenuous.

The units from 8th Division were those of 24 Brigade, some of which had already been involved in fighting to support the two brigades in front of them involved in the initial assault. As the 8th Division history commented:

...The evening had brought rain, and with the rain early darkness. The attacking troops had suffered severe punishment in the course of their long and exposed advance, and in the crossing of the numerous intersecting dykes had been thrown into some confusion. The difficulties of command were further increased by the presence of units of the 7th Division which had crossed the front of the brigade and intermingled with its troops. Though gallant efforts were made in the growing darkness to organise a further attack, they were not successful, and eventually the brigade dug in for the night on the line it had already gained...⁵¹

Over the next two days, further attacks made very little progress. On 12 March a series of German counter-attacks were dealt with very severely but conversely no units of either IV Corps or the Indian Corps were able to make any sizeable gains comparable to those of the first morning, on 10 March. What small gains were made cost a very heavy price. From 10 to 12 March 1915, 8th Division's casualties, in dead wounded and missing, amounted to more than 4,800 men.⁵²

⁵¹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 24.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 29.

	Officers	Other Ranks
Killed	95	977
Wounded	119	3,046
Missing	4	614
Total	218	4,637

Table 2.1: 8th Division Casualties at Neuve Chapelle: 10 – 13 March 1915⁵³

8th Division's after action report, compiled on 27 March 1915, has a higher total for the casualties among other ranks than that given in the British Official History, though the figures for officer casualties tally [see Table 3.2 below]. The disparity might well be due to the delay in other ranks being reported missing. They may well have been accounted for later if they were in one of the medical units outside the Division's area of responsibility such as Casualty Clearing Stations or even in the Field Ambulance of another division. The war diary of the Division's AA&QMG, the officer responsible for personnel matters, recorded the following on 14 March 1915, the day after the battle finished:

...Casualty returns difficult to get out – owing to Brigades being still in Trenches. Fighting strength returns and verbal reports from Quartermasters prove most unreliable guides. Admissions to Field Ambulances are also misleading as far as Div. is concerned since men of all Divisions are included in their number. Officers' casualty list apart from 4/Cameron Highlanders completed by evening.

Assistant Provost Marshal had a 'drive' for stragglers, but none found...⁵⁴

In the sad narrative of statistics relating to British casualties in the Great War, there are none more poignant than those relating to the losses at Neuve Chapelle, in particular those of 8th Division. The Division's losses were far greater than any other participating formation. They were almost double those of 7th Division and more than double those of the whole Indian Corps that had fought hard. A battle that in some ways had been eagerly anticipated, that was seen as the first step on the way ahead,

⁵³ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, *Report on Operations at Neuve Chapelle*, dated 27 March 1915, p24.

⁵⁴ TNA: PRO, AA&QMG 8th Division war diary: September 1914 - December 1915, entry dated 14 March 1915.

and which had started so promisingly, had ended without the hoped for breakthrough and with appalling casualties.

Formation	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
7th Division	138	2,653	2,791
8th Division	218	4,596	4,814
<i>IV Corps total</i>	<i>356</i>	<i>7,249</i>	<i>7,605</i>
Meerut Division	103	2,250	2,353
Lahore Division	85	1,609	1,694
<i>Indian Corps total</i>	<i>188</i>	<i>3,859</i>	<i>4,047</i>
Total	544	11,108	11,652

Table 2.2: British casualties at Neuve Chapelle: 10 – 13 March 1915.⁵⁵

Analysis

The reasons why the Battle of Neuve Chapelle became at best a bloody local tactical gain and not the anticipated breakthrough after its initial success were analysed by the participants. The number of casualties caused questions to be asked. Almost before the battle ended, preliminary reports stated that Major-General Davies, GOC 8th Division, was at fault, as he had not brought up reserves quickly enough to push through Neuve Chapelle. Rawlinson wanted to sack Davies. However, the latter produced evidence that Rawlinson had ordered 24 Brigade, the reserve brigade, to assist in the initial assault phase, especially in the left sector and around the supposed strongpoint in the area of the Orchard.⁵⁶

The CRA 8th Division, Brigadier-General Holland, has already been quoted

⁵⁵ Constructed from casualty figures, *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p151.

⁵⁶ The 'Davies Affair', as it is called by Prior and Wilson, almost caused Rawlinson to be sent home in disgrace. This was known as 'being Stellenboched', by contemporaries. Stellenbosch is a small town in South Africa, a posting there being seen as a sign of a career in terminal decline by the regular officer corps of the British Army. The equivalent in the French Army was Limoges, hence 'à être Limoger' ('to be Limoge'd'). For an examination of the Davies Affair, see Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp70-1 and G. Sheffield & J. Bourne, eds, *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and letters 1914 – 1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), pp. 110-1.

concerning the failure of the left sector attack by 23 Brigade, especially the heavy losses of 2nd Middlesex and 2nd Scottish Rifles. He went onto say:

...I think the above facts [concerning the very recently arrived howitzer batteries] fully justify our request which was made when the operation was first contemplated that all batteries which were required to shell the German trenches should be in position at least 10 days so as to enable careful registration to be carried out.

This time was calculated so as to allow some days for bad weather, time for the batteries to get into their positions, and still to leave 4 clear days for registering, which in my opinion, is the very least in which accurate fire can be guaranteed in a flat country like this when all observation has to be done by means of long telephone lines...⁵⁷

It is clear that Holland believed the failure to allow enough time for proper registration for the artillery was the main cause for failure here. However, though terrible for the two battalions involved, this failure must be set against the success of the rest of the first phase of the assault. It is the failure of the subsequent assaults that required examination.

Davies concurred that, apart from the left sector failure already referred to, the artillery fire for the initial assault phase was entirely successful. He wrote in the Division's after action report:

...The artillery fire on the 10th March was nothing less than devastating in its effects: that it was so, is due to skilful placing of the batteries by the artillery commander and careful preparations made by the batteries themselves. It is to be noted that these preparations including registration, were carried out without apparently arousing the suspicions of the enemy

It is true that on the 11th and 12th March, the same effect was not produced, but I do not think the artillery can be justly blamed for this

The difficulties of observation inherent to the flatness and concealed nature of the country were greatly increased by the thickness of the weather, which made it impossible to ascertain precisely the position of the enemy's defences or to carry out accurate observation...⁵⁸

⁵⁷ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, 'Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March', dated 21 March 1915.

⁵⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, *Report on Operations at Neuve Chapelle*, dated 27 March 1915.

Davies stated, therefore, that he believed among the reasons the artillery could not repeat the success of the first phase was that observation was poor and had become progressively worse, as the deteriorating weather did not allow aerial reconnaissance to take place. Secondly, the country was not suitable for good observation. Though Davies does not go as far as to suggest that the area of Neuve Chapelle was an unsuitable place to fight a battle, it was noted by others that poor ground observation was an important factor if the weather became so bad that aerial reconnaissance could not fly.

Neuve Chapelle was the first battle where the area had been photographed from the air and the resulting mosaic of photographs was used to plot presumed enemy trenches, machine gun posts and artillery positions. These were then used to create tactical maps, which were issued to the formations and units participating in the assault.⁵⁹ More than that, starting the day before the battle, some aerial registration of targets seems to have been permitted. Some RFC wireless aircraft, pilots and observers were made available for this and the same pilots and observers observed and corrected fire when the battle started. However, owing to bad weather this did not continue on subsequent days.⁶⁰

Brigadier-General Holland, in his after action report, expanded on the difficulties of obtaining good observation posts on the ground in the flat boggy landscape that was the site of the battle. He wrote:

⁵⁹ *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, pp85-6.

⁶⁰ See Peter Mead, *The Eye In The Air: History of Air Observation and Reconnaissance for the Army 1785 -1945* (London: HMSO, 1983), p67. See *British Official History 1915, Volume I*, p. 85, footnote 2, regarding the interruption to flying caused by the weather.

...The difficulty was the allotment of observation stations which are few and bad for the area to be shelled. Some of the possible observation posts at PONT LOGY were also used by the INDIAN CORPS and it is reported that there was at one time 30 Artillery officers in one house at PONT LOGY.

In order to assist the question of observation posts, a crow's nest was prepared about [grid reference] M 27 d 7.5 by Capt. Langley, 5th Siege Battery, and another about [grid reference] M 27 b 6.5 by the 33rd Battery. Some straw stacks about [grid reference] M 28 d 8.8 were hollowed out and formed into semi-protected observation stations with sandbags and loophole plates by the R.E. at the suggestion of Capt. Langley, 5th Siege Battery...⁶¹

A possible solution was what became known as 'shooting off the map', seen before the war as a means to advance the science of artillery. This was a procedure whereby the bearing and distance between gun and target was calculated using a map. For the two howitzer batteries arriving late on the left flank, this was the procedure used when registration failed. The procedure was in its infancy in 1915. The complexity of the task, that is the requirement to take into account the need for very accurate surveying, to measure the wear on individual gun barrels, assess the weather conditions (including wind speed and barometric pressure) was not fully understood at this time.⁶²

There was an additional impediment in using this system. In order to carry out these tasks the personnel had to be trained and possess the scientific training, for example to calculate or measure barrel wear or assess the effect of barometric pressure. Ian Hogg, a former Master Gunner in the Royal Artillery and an expert on guns, gunnery and ammunition, has commented, "...Today, worked out with computers, this problem still has its drawbacks: in 1915, calculated by a tired soldier with a blunt pencil and a wet

⁶¹ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, 'Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March', dated 21 March 1915.

⁶² See Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp37-41; Shelford Bidwell & Dominick Graham, *Fire Power – British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904 – 1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004), pp. 101-110.

finger, it was dangerous...”⁶³ This failure led to the disaster that befell 23 Infantry Brigade’s 2nd Middlesex and 2nd Scottish Rifles.

The Royal Artillery had expanded as much as the infantry since the start of the war. There were trained gunners, perhaps lacking in scientific knowledge, and there were untrained gunners, who had scientific knowledge and skills gained in their pre-war civilian lives. It would take time to create a trained body of gunners, especially officers, who understood the need to use science in order to achieve very accurate gunnery. It would also take time to educate commanders, even artillery commanders, in what the new system could accomplish. As time was at a premium before Neuve Chapelle, the artillery had to resort to the more achievable method of using ranging shots to register the artillery. In this method, shells were fired beyond and in front of the position and the difference between the two should be ‘on’ the target itself. The obvious draw back was that the enemy would realise that the shells landing in front of and behind their position in the days before an assault were part of the ranging process. Not the least of the achievements of the Royal Artillery before the battle was to range the guns accurately without the Germans being aware of the impending assault. Thus, the initial assault followed one of the cardinal principles of war - surprise. The GOC 8th Division’s after action report said as a comment on the excellence of the artillery arrangements before the battle, “...It is to be noted that these preparations, including registration, were carried out without apparently arousing the suspicions of the enemy...”⁶⁴

The artillery’s task became more difficult as time went on during that first day.

⁶³ Hogg, *The Guns*, p53.

⁶⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, *Report on Operations at Neuve Chapelle*, dated 27 March 1915.

Worsening weather caused flying operations to be severely diminished, if not suspended altogether. Another major cause was the decay in communications. Rawlinson had brought his attention to possible communication problems before, for example, in his lecture to 8th Division's officers before they embarked for France and Flanders. Before Neuve Chapelle he had again been concerned with the problem.⁶⁵ It was realised that the flow of information back was as important as the flow of orders to the front. In fact, the order process could only continue in a timely and efficient manner if the commanders at all levels received opportune information and intelligence from the troops to their front.

Major-General Davies, in the 8th Division after action report, devoted a whole section to the issue of communications. Divisional Headquarters was connected to each infantry brigade by four branches of cable. One ran along the roads, the other three were across the countryside. All four were above ground. From each brigade headquarters to its advanced position, three cables were laid. One was buried, one was on the ground and one was raised on telephone poles. From the advanced brigade headquarters to battalions, cables were laid in duplicate. However, the report doesn't mention if any of these were buried. There were also lateral communications between brigades. In addition at the various headquarters there were motorcyclists, horse mounted despatch riders and cyclists to deliver messages and orders.

Commenting on the problems in maintaining communication, Davies wrote:

...Buried lines were often cut by shell fire and were difficult to repair; many lines laid on the ground were cut by infantry moving forward and when digging themselves in, and lines laid by the roadside were in many cases

⁶⁵ Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, p. 33.

pulled away or broken by wagons.

The most successful lines were those looped up on trees or shrubs along the banks of water ditches, away from roads.

As brigadiers moved forward to advanced headquarters the brigade headquarters were used as test points and were found very useful for locating faults during the operation.

A large number of wires were cut by shells throughout the operations.

Horse despatch riders, riding across country, were useful when roads were too blocked with troops for cyclists...⁶⁶

That the divisional command and staff realised the problem communicating with the front line and beyond was the most acute of many is evident in the next paragraph in Major-General Davies' report.

...A regular system of messenger orderlies for communication between battalion and advanced brigade headquarters, when wires are broken or visual signalling is impossible, is being established in each battalion...⁶⁷

Returning to the subject of the artillery and communications, Davies noted that out of the thirty artillery officers employed on observation duties, six had been killed and five were wounded. Archer-Houblon states the casualties were heavier than they might have been, "...partly because they were carried away by excitement and kept getting involved in the infantry assaults...'⁶⁸ The losses among the accompanying signallers are not given. As they had the very hazardous task of repairing any breaks in the very long telephone lines that had to be deployed, it can only be presumed that they were as proportionately heavy. The casualties among these key personnel would have caused further delay and degradation in the ability of the artillery to provide fire-support as it would have taken time to notify their batteries that casualties needed replacing. More time would have been lost as the replacements had to reach the observation post and there was always the danger that the replacements themselves

⁶⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, *Report on Operations at Neuve Chapelle*, dated 27 March 1915.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Liddle Collection: Archer-Houblon Papers, p. 41.

could become casualties when attempting to proceed to the observation post where they were required.

The main communication problem of the Great War, demonstrated by the battle at Neuve Chapelle, was the one that was the most insoluble. Once the assaulting troops had gone 'over the top', out of their front-line trenches, voice communication became virtually impossible. In 1915 communication with the forward line of troops depended on the bravery and luck of a group of hardy souls who ventured to and from the front line trenches or forward line of troops over fire swept ground or up and down flooded or destroyed communication trenches.

Not mentioned in the Divisional after-action report was the problem of fighting day and night for a period of days in the most stressful of environments. On the night of 12-13 March, when 23 Brigade attempted to advance, as part of what proved to be the final attempt to make progress forward, confirmatory orders had not been received. As zero hour approached, the officers and NCOs of the units involved found:

...the men, exhausted after three days and nights continuously under fire, had fallen asleep, and could only be aroused by use of force, a process made very lengthy by the fact that this part of the battlefield was covered with British and German dead, who, in the dark, were indistinguishable from the sleepers...⁶⁹

The after action reports mentioned that certain things had gone well. Major-General Davies said that the new grenadier companies had worked well.

...The grenadiers performed admirable service and appeared to have obtained a complete superiority over the enemy, who made, so far as I am aware, no attempt to make use of his own bomb throwers. Great credit is due to those who so carefully trained the grenadier companies. This is the first occasion on which the services of the trained grenadiers have been used. The results have

⁶⁹ *British Official History 1915, Volume I, p. 146.*

*more than justified the formation of these companies...*⁷⁰

The artillery after action report recorded that the infantry were satisfied with the cutting of the barbed wire before the initial assault. However, there is a discrepancy here. As has been related above, the left hand units of 23 Brigade had found the barbed wire uncut. It was stated by Holland that the late emplacement of the siege batteries was the reason why the trenches were not destroyed. However, it was the task of the 18-pounders to cut the wire. Why this was not done is not explained or even commented upon.

In connection with the cutting of the barbed wire, Holland reported that his preference was to use shrapnel rather than high-explosive, as it was more effective. If shrapnel was used, the guns had to be less than one thousand seven hundred yards from the obstacle. If the distance was further, owing to ground or other circumstances, then high explosive would have to be used. He wrote:

*...Wire cutting by shrapnel is more effective than wire cutting by H.E. shell, as the latter breaks the wire but leaves it lying on the ground rather entangled whereas the former cuts the wire clear and leaves it lying in small pieces...*⁷¹

It is worth noting that the CRA 8th Division's after-action report does not include any report on the efficacy of the British counter-battery work. Nor is there any mention of the effect the German artillery had on the whole operation or, specifically, on the British artillery.

Attached to the sheaf of after action reports is one from the artillery officer who was

⁷⁰ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, *Report on Operations at Neuve Chapelle*, dated 27 March 1915.

⁷¹ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1683, '*Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March*', dated 21 March 1915.

in charge of the divisional mortar section. His main query, to be re-echoed throughout the war, concerned the high quantities of ammunition that a mortar could expend because of its high rate of fire. He asked for a light lorry and an adaptation of the 13 or 18-pounder ammunition carrier. He also wrote that an officer should be put in charge of solely ammunition supply. He added that spades needed to be issued on a greater allotment than previously and that French clay spades were the best.⁷² The spades were needed to dig the pits to bed the mortars in.

The report of the CRE 8th Division gave a comprehensive list of the tools carried by the divisional sappers.⁷³ These included felling axes, hand axes, picks, shovels, crowbars, wire cutters, hedgers' gloves, masons' chisels, bill-hooks, handsaws and mauls. That proved insufficient, as one company had to send back for a cut-cross saw to cut through trees fallen across one of the roads. Of note, is that every sapper personally carried two sandbags, as did every infantryman in the Division. Each section carried a supply of guncotton with primers, detonators, fuses and fuzee.⁷⁴ Infantry carrying parties, mainly from the Territorial Force battalions attached to the Division,⁷⁵ took forward barbed wire, more sandbags, picket stakes, canvas and additional picks and shovels. The CRE's report gave details of what were titled 'blocking parties'. Their task was to clear the enemy trenches and then put them into a state of defence:

...These parties proceeded up the enemy's trenches in the following order:-

- 1. 2 bayonet men.*
- 2. Grenadiers (1 N.C.O. & 6 men).*
- 3. Officer.*

⁷² Ibid, Report from Captain R.E. Grosvenor, n.d..

⁷³ TNA: PRO, CRE 8th Division, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, report, dated 18/03/1915, signed by Major P.G. Grant.

⁷⁴ Fuzee or fusee appears to be variously a type of slow match or a mechanical fuse igniter or a type of clockwork fuse.

⁷⁵ These were 1/5th Black Watch [TF] and 4th Cameron Highlanders [TF]

2 bayonet men.

4. Remainder of infantry section with 3 sappers with tools and sandbags.

5. Machine-gun detachment.

6. Carrier of additional bombs.

7. 2 bayonet men.

The sappers assisted in construction of machine-gun emplacements, blocking trenches, but allowing 1 man to pass, and in making stops which were to be 40 yards ahead of the gun, also blocking the trench, but allowing 1 man to pass.

The grenadiers bombed forward covering construction of the 'stops'... ⁷⁶

This demonstrates an important step in 8th Division's evolution as a formation - that is adapting to the new type of war. It is another attempt to develop an efficient method of working, using drills based on a standard team pattern. The bombers provided a covering party that cleared a zone within which the sappers, machine gunners and others could work. Thus, a new standard operating system was developed. It is evident from the CRE's report that this standard operating system using an established pattern of organisation was disseminated throughout 8th Division. However, it is not known when this innovation was introduced. It is also not known if it was introduced in other formations.

The Tactical Dilemma

For an infantry attack to succeed, the assaulting infantry has to be able to progress from its start line to the enemy position without coming under such an amount of accurate enemy fire that would cause enough casualties for the attack to be destroyed or suffer enough casualties so the attack is halted. In other words, there must be a device or tactic used that keeps the enemy under protective shelter so long that the assault is in their position before they have time to react. It must also not be hindered by any obstacle, either natural or man-made, that would allow the defender additional time to react so that the attack fails.

⁷⁶ TNA: PRO, CRE 8th Division, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1671, report, dated 18 March 1915, signed by Major P.G. Grant.

The infantry attacks by the BEF in the spring of 1915 were dependant on support from the main weapon system possessed by the army. This was artillery. Though machine guns were used, they were taken forward in order to defend captured positions and localities. Apart from the bomb, the development of which was still in its infancy, the infantry unit possessed no individual or squad weapon part from the rifle, bayonet and pistol. Therefore, if the artillery failed to carry out its mission, at the least the attack became more difficult. Often artillery failure would cause the attack to fail and the assaulting troops could suffer casualties.

The battle of Neuve Chapelle was the model for the British Army in attack for the next two years. Its use of aerial photographs to create trench maps, taking the assault troops out of the line to train and rehearse beforehand, the use of a network of telephones for command and control especially of artillery, wire cutting using shrapnel fired from field-artillery, the emplacement of new batteries surreptitiously at night and the carrying out of artillery registration in such a manner that surprise was kept were all innovations worthy of acclaim.⁷⁷

However, three of the most vital lessons were overlooked or misread. Firstly, obstacles such as barbed wire were seen as the problem. However, it was not the obstacle that was the problem, the problem was the fire from the troops behind the obstacle that caused the casualties and stopped the advance. If there was no covering fire from small arms or artillery then the obstacle is simply an engineering problem to

⁷⁷ Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower*, p. 73.

be overcome.⁷⁸ The destruction by artillery of the obstacle, whether wire or trench, became seen, incorrectly, as the reason for the initial success at Neuve Chapelle. This led to the second lesson that was overlooked or misread. The attack came as a surprise, one of the cardinal virtues in military planning. However, the belief that the requirement to obtain obstacle destruction was paramount meant that surprise was lost. This in turn led to the third lesson that was overlooked. The reason why the bombardment worked was not how long or how short was its duration but the intensity. The defenders were surprised, "...not at being attacked but by the intensity of the bombardment they were receiving, for this was the heaviest artillery bombardment ever fired in warfare to that date..."⁷⁹

What was overlooked is that it is far more effective to fire ten shells at a trench that all land in under a minute than to fire the same number of shells over half an hour or an hour. It was the sheer intensity that deafened and disorientated, so that rational thought and hence resistance was impossible. This took a long time to establish. What is worth remembering is that at the time of Neuve Chapelle and the battles of 1915, a general shortage of shells was prevalent in the British Army. The Army had to wait until industrial production had expanded before it had enough guns and ammunition to achieve the intensity of bombardment required. Additionally, it would take time to train the artillery to use their weapon system so it was at its most efficient and effective.

That the analysis of the artillery plan's effects came to an incorrect conclusion and confused the debate over the objectives that an attack was intended to achieve. The

⁷⁸ "An obstacle without covering fire is no obstacle". This maxim was imparted during British Army infantry training in the 1980s. Personal knowledge.

⁷⁹ Hogg, *The Guns*, p54.

accepted aim was to achieve a breakthrough through which the cavalry could move to roll up the enemy line or even carry out an extended ride through the enemy's rear, wreaking the kind of havoc achieved by Shelby and Sheridan in the American Civil War. However, Rawlinson, after Neuve Chapelle, began to develop a different viewpoint. He wrote:

*...He [Haig] expects to get the cavalry through with the next big push, but I very much doubt if he will succeed in doing more than kill a large number of gallant men without effecting any great triumph. I shall be content with capturing another piece out of the enemy's line of trenches and waiting for the counter attack. I am not a believer in the cavalry raid, which even if it comes off, will not effect very much...*⁸⁰

Rawlinson's ideas crystallised into what became known as 'bite and hold'. There was to be, however, no clearly accepted vision of the aim of the offensive operation for some time. This was to bedevil the tactical development of the BEF until early to mid 1917.

Fromelles/Aubers Ridge

After the end of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, the BEF began planning to attack again. This was to take place as soon as possible in concert with the French. It was to be yet another attempt to prise away the German grip on French territory. The British, being the minor partner in a coalition war, had no alternative but to support their major partner in the latter's attempts to free their country of occupation by a skilled and determined enemy.

The main French effort was to be at Vimy Ridge. At the same time, the main British

⁸⁰ Rawlinson Diary entry, 14 March 1915, quoted in Stephen Badsey, 'Cavalry and the Breakthrough Doctrine', in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 150.

efforts were to be simultaneous attacks by formations of First Army. I Corps and the Indian Corps, were to attack, once again, in the area of Neuve Chapelle and IV Corps, including 8th Division, were to attack further north, at the bottom end of Aubers Ridge, in the vicinity of Fromelles.

The Plan

The plan adopted by IV Corps was complex. It consisted of four phases, to be carried out in quick succession. The attack was to be on a relatively narrow front. It was believed that the reason for the attack at Neuve Chapelle failing, after the initial success, was due to the misuse of reserve units on tasks that were more properly the concern of the units that were responsible for the initial assault. Therefore, the intention was that the reserve units of 8th Division, kept close to the front line, were to be fed through quickly. In turn, 7th Division was then to pass through 8th Division in order to maintain momentum. 8th Division was then to move to the left flank to protect 7th Division. The latter were then to move to the right as the northern part of the pincer move towards Aubers Ridge. The intention was to meet I Corps and the Indian Corps, who were to carry out the southern attack as a right pincer movement pushing north to meet the troops of IV Corps moving southward.

In the 8th Division war diary, a copy of the outline Divisional operation order, dated 20 April 1915, is annotated by General Sir Douglas Haig, GOC First Army. Haig was in overall charge of the operations. His comments in the margins and at the end of the order, dated 23 April 1915, emphasise that, in his view, the paramount component of the plan should be the requirement for speed, that there should be no delay in pushing forward. He noted:

*...Having broken the enemy's front line system, we must try to gain a position beyond [...] by one continuous sweeping movement. The shorter time taken over the operation, the fewer men will be lost. By advancing quickly we give the enemy no time to in which to recover from the effect of the bombardment...*⁸¹

Haig was writing less than a month after the battle of Neuve Chapelle when it was believed that it was the failure to push through the follow up waves that had led the assault eventually to fail. The plan, and comments, pre-supposed that the bombardment would be as successful as the initial bombardment at Neuve Chapelle the month before. It also depended on the supposition that the enemy had not learnt from their experiences, that they had not put improved physical defences and systems of fighting in place to counteract a repetition of the assault at Neuve Chapelle.

Haig's notes were at variance with Rawlinson's own comments in the IV Corps war diary, made thirteen days earlier on 10 April:

*...It will [...] be better to wait a little so as to re-organise the infantry, re-establish communication between artillery and infantry, and get the artillery on to the fresh targets. Therefore we must be prepared for operations lasting several days...*⁸²

On the other hand, there were other communications in which IV Corps Headquarters appeared to hold a different viewpoint from that of its GOC. One set of notes circulated as a memorandum, issued under the signature of Brigadier-General A.G. Dallas, GSO1 IV Corps, to all commanders taking part in the proposed operations, also stated that it was believed operations would last some time. However, this was because the operation would achieve the long desired breakthrough:

⁸¹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1672, "General outline of proposed offensive operations, ref. G.203.K."

⁸² TNA: PRO, IV Corps war diary & narrative of operations: March – April 1915, ref. WO95/708, note by Rawlinson, dated 10 April 1915.

...I. The operations contemplated aim at gaining a decisive victory, and not merely a local success. The entire First Army will therefore be called upon to fight a violent and continuous action lasting probably for a considerable period of time...⁸³

The memorandum appeared to agree with the views of General Haig that speed was of the essence. It stated that all specialist squads must know their part in the plan at each individual phase. Bombers, for example, must act offensively. It continued:

...Immediate advantage must be taken of every success gained and any position captured; any delay in pressing forward means heavy casualties subsequently and possible failure. Under existing conditions, which entail the assault of strong entrenchments over ground which affords little cover and few facilities for keeping direction, loss and confusion are inevitable during and after an attack. It is unlikely, therefore, that any particular body of infantry will be able to make more than a single concentrated effort in one day. Supports and reserves must consequently be kept close up, for the success depends on the energy of the attack being maintained and this can only be done by a wise use of supports by platoon, company, battalion and brigade commanders...⁸⁴

The memorandum went on to state that the infantry must be ready to assault the enemy trenches with grenades as soon as the artillery stopped firing. To do so, the infantry must be moving forward across No-Man's Land while the guns were still firing.

The memorandum stated further that the assaulting troops must not stop if the troops on their flank are held up:

...The attack must be kept on the move at all costs. If a local check is allowed to become general, and the attack comes to a standstill, its vigour will be gone and will be difficult, if not impossible, to recover. The essence of a successful attack is good platoon and company leading. Every platoon commander must move on as rapidly as possible without waiting for orders and without any fear of becoming isolated or cut off. It is the business of company and battalion commanders to fill any gaps that may occur by pushing up the supporting platoons and companies. These should not

⁸³ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1672, IV Corps memorandum, dated 23 April 1915 (under the signature of Brigadier-General A.G. Dallas, GSO1 IV Corps).

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

*be used to reinforce directly troops that are temporarily held up, since overcrowding the firing line is apt to lead to heavy casualties and little else...*⁸⁵

The memorandum said gained ground must be held as lightly as possible as the best way to secure it would be by continuing to move forward. It then discussed how to maintain contact, how officers should indicate the position reached by the forward line of troops. The artillery's forward observation officers did not need to be with the leading infantry but should use any vantage point to observe the ground over which the infantry were advancing. At the same time, if the observers became casualties their mission had failed. One method seen as beneficial was moving field guns, mortars and machine guns as far forward as possible, by hand if necessary, to attack defensive positions.

The order annotated by the Army commander was kept in the war diary of 8th Division. This might indicate that the divisional commander and staff were very much aware of the philosophy behind General Haig's comments and that is what they attempted to put into action in their plan of attack. This view must have been reinforced by the additional memoranda from IV Corps stating that the aim of the battle was a decisive victory with an emphasis on the need to keep pushing forward and to keep support up with the first assault.

The comments from General Haig, together with the memorandum, therefore appear to have had the desired effect on 8th Division's planners. The memorandum is endorsed for communication to all commanders concerned. It can be seen as an attempt to address what had been thought to have failed at Neuve Chapelle with its

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

emphasis on a quick follow up to the artillery, pushing reserves up quickly and with proposals on how to deal with delays and confusion.

The memorandum is remarkable in other ways. It exhorts that the assault must be kept going, that platoon commanders must use their initiative and disregard the flanks, that the best way to defend ground is not to consolidate heavily but to keep moving forward and that failure must not be directly reinforced. These are similar to the infiltration tactics used by the German *Sturmabteilung* in 1917 and 1918 and the tactics of 'peaceful penetration' used by the Australians so successfully in the summer and autumn of 1918. The ideas put forward have even more parallels with the ideas of the French Army's Captain Laffargue, which he developed after his participation in the battles on Notre Dame de Lorette and Vimy Ridge in May 1915. The ideas propounded by Dallas, like Laffargue, recommend that the supports had to be as close as possible to maintain the momentum.⁸⁶ However, Dallas' memorandum shows that there was a realisation in some quarters at least that some form of embedded fire-support was also required. The problem was that the portable trench mortar was still in development and it was almost impossible to move sections of fieldguns or even single guns in the advance. Portable direct fire had to wait until the tank with its 6-pounders or until the open warfare of the 'Hundred Days' from August 1918, which allowed direct artillery support.

However, other viewpoints put forward by others involved with the planning process concentrated on other lessons learned during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. These

⁸⁶ For a discussion of Laffargue and the BEF's use of infiltration see, Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 58-64.

argued against the use of surprise and a battle of movement. In early April 1915, Brigadier-General Holland, CRA 8th Division, also indicated that deliberate registration for the artillery was more desirable than surprise:

...I would also again draw attention to the vital necessity of having all the batteries in position at least 14 days before the attack takes place so as to enable deliberate registration to be undertaken, and during this period a wireless aeroplane should be at the disposal of the artillery daily for work...⁸⁷

Holland, perhaps more in hope than any other frame of mind, also asked that the 4.7-inch battery be exchanged for the more modern, more accurate and more reliable battery of 60-pounder guns. Sir Martin Farndale commented on the condition of the artillery support:

...An analysis of the artillery shows severe defects. Of the field guns, eighty-four were obsolete 15-pounders; twenty of the field howitzers were of the obsolete 5-inch variety; only thirty three of the heavies were the effective 60-pounders. The twenty eight 4.7-inch guns were now so worn that the driving bands stripped off the shell at the muzzle resulting in extreme inaccuracy. The four 6-inch guns were also old and inaccurate...⁸⁸

A fatal flaw in the artillery plan was that the amount of ammunition available was pitifully small. There could not be a repetition of the hurricane bombardment that stunned the Germans in the first phase of Neuve Chapelle, neither could there be a bombardment heavy enough to smash the German defences.⁸⁹

The plan finally decided on by 8th Division planners followed the set of guidelines expounded in the comments of General Haig and Brigadier-General Dallas made in the memorandum. The initial assault by 8th Division was to be made by 24 and 25

⁸⁷ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1672, report, ref G 203 K, dated 08 April 1915.

⁸⁸ Sir Martin Farndale, *History of the Royal Artillery*, pp. 103-4.

⁸⁹ The situation was complicated by the requirement to send ammunition to the Dardanelles. This had delayed the attack from its original date. See Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1988), p. 90.

Infantry Brigades. They were to combine in three separate but co-ordinated attacks. The centre attack was to be made on a three-battalion thrust astride the Saily–Fromelles road. 2nd East Lancashires (of 24 Brigade) were to be west of the road and 2nd Rifle Brigade and 1st Royal Irish Rifles (both of 25 Brigade), would be deployed to the east of the road. This was to be the main assault.

The two other attacks were considered to be subsidiary. On the right, separated by some 500 yards, the 2nd Northamptonshires were to attack ten minutes after the main initial attack in the centre. This was to be against an exposed salient, point 372, in the German lines. On the left, the 13th London Regiment,⁹⁰ further to the north of the main assault and separated by approximately 200 yards, were to attack a sector at point 882 immediately after the explosion here of two mines.⁹¹

It must be emphasised that the plan adhered to Haig's requirement for a fast tempo. The supporting and reserve units were to move forward very quickly after the initial attack. The divisional outline order said, "...Reserve Brigade. (23rd Infantry Brigade) will move forward (as soon as the assault is launched)...", and with regard to the Second Phase:

⁹⁰ A battalion of the Territorial Force [TF] attached to 25 Brigade since late 1914 to gain experience. Embodied for service in August 1914, in Kensington. Part of 4th London Brigade, 2nd London Division. October 1914: name changed to 13th (County of London) Princess Louise's Kensington Battalion. November 1914: moved to France and joined 25 Brigade, 8th Division on 13 November. 20 May 1915: transferred to GHQ Troops, and formed a composite battalion with the 1/5th and 1/12th until 11 August 1915. 11 February 1916: transferred to 168 Brigade, 56th Division.

⁹¹ The mines contained 2000 lbs. of guncotton and were 70 yards apart. See Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1915, Volume II: Winter 1914-15: Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos* [henceforth *British Official History 1915, Vol. II*] (Reprinted London: Imperial War Museum, 1995), p. 31, footnote 1.

...Reserve Brigade. Meanwhile the reserve brigade will have been moving up to the assembly trenches and trenches of departure, its leading battalions close on the heels of the left brigade...⁹²

The plan made no allowances for delay or any inability to move forward.

In the air, there were attempts to improve on the quantity of available air support and the quality of what it was able to provide. A comprehensive air plan was devised:

...in which every effort seems to have been made to profit from lessons recently learnt. Wireless aeroplanes were attached to the heavy artillery groups, with the role of locating hostile batteries and helping our artillery to engage them. Wireless aeroplanes were also allotted for local reconnaissance and a 'contact patrol' was to be maintained all day, infantry reporting on successive lines by means of white-ground strips...⁹³

With regard to 8th Division's initial phase, the plan adopted proved to be over complicated. The British trenches fell away on the right hand side of the central attack. Therefore, the intention proposed was that the attacking units, especially the 2nd East Lancashires on the right, would dress to the left and pivot on the left flank so that they would form up parallel to the enemy front line. This meant that the attacking troops had to change direction in No Man's Land while under fire and during the confusion of battle. It also meant that the 2nd East Lancashires would have more ground to cover than 2nd Rifle Brigade and 1st Royal Irish Rifles on their left. To address this, 2nd East Lancashires were to deploy out in front of the British front line prior to the main assault. The intention was that the units were to attack from a newly

⁹²TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: April – July 1915, reference WO95/1672.

⁹³ Mead, *The Eye in The Air*, p. 67.

dug trench that was on the enemy side of the road that ran in a dog-leg across No Man's Land. However, despite the efforts of the Royal Engineers, little progress was made with this new work. This was because of the very high water table and the close proximity of the enemy.⁹⁴ As a result, two lengths of disused British trenches, forward of the British front line had to be used. Therefore, only a relatively small body of troops, some 200 men, were forward of 8th Division's front line at this point. The remainder were in breastworks behind the front line. This deployment would remove any element of surprise with a far smaller number of troops advancing from a position further from the enemy line.

Narrative

The shelling of the German front line wire began at approximately 5 a.m. on Sunday 9 May 1915. Almost immediately the units waiting to assault stated that they were suffering from British shells 'dropping short', that is landing on their own side rather than the enemy's positions. When the bombardment proper of the enemy trenches began ten minutes later a similar experience again took place. The 24 Brigade after-action report succinctly remarked, "...During this bombardment the enemy were able to keep up rifle and Machine gun fire showing it was not really effective..."⁹⁵

The 2nd East Lancashires moved out to their forming up positions at approximately 05.20 a.m. They were met by very heavy small arms fire as they attempted to deploy in No Man's Land. This caused heavy casualties and much disorganisation. When the

⁹⁴ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 35.

⁹⁵ TNA: PRO, 24 Brigade war diary: November 1914 – June 1915, reference WO95/1716, "24th Infantry Brigade Report on Operations on May 9th, 1915".

main attack of the central column began at 05.40 a.m., the disorganisation was made worse by the over complicated plan. The move to their left exposed the attacking units to enfilade fire. All units were unable to move forward. The survivors made their way back to behind the line of the Saily-Fromelles road running diagonally across No Man's Land. This offered scant protection.

The supporting unit in the rear of the 2nd East Lancashires was 1st Sherwood Foresters. They left the breastworks at 06.10. Finding their path blocked by the held-up remnants of the unit to their front, 1st Sherwood Foresters moved diagonally to their right. This was in the direction of the subsidiary attack by 2nd Northamptonshires. 1st Sherwood Foresters were then held up by uncut wire and they suffered heavy losses. Their assault was stalled in front of the enemy wire.

The subsidiary attack by 2nd Northamptonshires had very mixed fortunes. They had formed up in an orchard that was in front of the front line. At first light, even before the battalion began to move, the German machine guns, laid very accurately, began ripping up the sandbags of the breastwork in the front of the orchard. The regimental history described this as:

...not very encouraging [...] The German fire actually increased in volume during the continuance of the bombardment. For fifty minutes this went on, the officers, non-commissioned officers of the two front companies standing with their feet on the first rungs of the ladders – waiting...⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Hughes, *The Northamptonshires*, pp. 114-5.

On leaving its cover, the left hand company, 'A' Company, was almost completely wiped out by enfilade fire coming from their left, from the enemy trenches in front of the main assault. The right company, 'D' Company, was more successful. Its efforts had been assisted by two field guns of 104 Battery, XXII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (RFA). These guns had been brought forward the night before. They had then been emplaced in the British front line to fire directly at the enemy front parapet and the barbed wire at front of it. As a result of this direct fire, a party of 2nd Northamptonshires gained the enemy front trench.⁹⁷ However, they could not be reinforced by the follow-up troops due the enemy machine gun fire sweeping No-Man's Land. The situation was made worse by the follow up units now moving into the already crowded British trenches. Throughout this time heavy casualties were being caused by the German artillery, the British artillery still dropping shells short and the unceasing German machine gun and rifle fire.

The attacks east of the Sailly–Fromelles road were initially far more successful. Only in a few places was the barbed wire cut and in some positions the German had lowered the wire in old trenches and in hollows so it was below ground level and, therefore, not visible from the British trenches.⁹⁸ 2nd Rifle Brigade and 1st Royal Irish Rifles, despite heavy losses, occupied the enemy front line trenches. Some of the Rifle Brigade pushed forward to the enemy second line. The 13th Londons, the northern diversion, occupied the blown mine craters and moved beyond Delangre Farm, in the German Second Line. They occupied an enemy communication trench in order to provide flanking cover for the central assault. Two of the four companies of

⁹⁷ The presence and use of these guns is not mentioned by the Northamptonshire Regiment history.

⁹⁸ However this was known beforehand. See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1672, intelligence report, reference G 323, dated 05 May 1915.

the 2nd Lincolnshires, in support, were pushed forward. However, when Brigadier-General Lowry Cole, GOC 25 Infantry Brigade, arrived in the British front line at approximately 06.20 a.m., some forty minutes after the attack had begun, he found that all forward movement had stopped. Movement across No-Man's Land was now impossible due to the extremely heavy enemy machine-guns and rifle fire.⁹⁹ Lowry Cole directed the two remaining companies of 2nd Lincolnshires to go through the mine craters to near the 13th Londons, and to work down along the German front line towards 2nd Rifle Brigade.

While this was taking place, soldiers of the 1st Royal Irish Rifles, 2nd Lincolnshires and 2nd Rifle Brigade were seen retiring back across No-Man's Land after an order was allegedly heard commanding the troops to retire at the double. Whether this was through a German ruse or battle confusion is not clear.¹⁰⁰ While rallying the troops who had taken part in the unauthorised retirement, Lowry Cole was mortally wounded. Command of 25 Infantry Brigade now devolved to Lieutenant-Colonel R. B. Stephens, CO 2nd Rifle Brigade, but he was in the enemy trenches with his battalion.

At 08.00 a.m., Lieutenant-Colonel W.H. Anderson, 8th Division GSO1, went forward to see for himself the difficulties. Brigadier-General Pinney, GOC 23 Infantry Brigade, in divisional reserve, was put in charge of all the troops north of the Saily – Fromelles road. Meanwhile, the two companies of the Lincolnshires sent through the craters had gained a lodgement in the German line but could not support the 13th

⁹⁹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ See *British Official History 1915, Vol. II*, p. 36, foot note 1.

Londons nor were they able to work down to 1st Royal Irish Rifles and 2nd Rifle Brigade.

After the initial assault, follow up troops were unable to move quickly across No-Man's Land to provide reinforcement to the lodgements made in the enemy trenches. Where troops were able to move, it was only as dribbled packets. The numbers that managed to cross the fire-swept gap between the British and German lines were too few to sustain momentum in the face of the losses being suffered in the enemy lines. At about 11.20 a.m. 25 Brigade requested that the sappers from its attached field company, 15 Field Company, dig a communication trench across to the enemy trenches along the line of the Fromelles road which crossed No-Man's Land. The 25 Brigade after-action report is scathing about the efforts of the Royal Engineers:

*...The 15th Field Company had not kept in touch with Brigade Headquarters and the request for sappers was repeated through 23rd Infantry Bde. Headquarters at 12.50 p.m. About 2 p.m. a corporal with a party of R.E. reported at Brigade Report Centre, and was sent to see what could be done. The reclaimed trench [...] was by this time so full of dead and wounded, and the report of the R. E., so unfavourable that the scheme was abandoned. An R.E. Officer might have been of assistance...*¹⁰¹

Lieutenant-Colonel Stephens made the perilous return back across to the British trenches to take over command of 25 Brigade. Strenuous efforts were made to move more troops across to the captured trenches.

¹⁰¹ TNA: PRO, 25 Brigade war diary: October 1914 - August 1915, reference WO95/1724, "25th Infantry Brigade Report on Operations on 9/10th May 1915".

Lieutenant John Wedderburn-Maxwell, serving with XLV (45) Brigade, RFA, had been sent by Brigadier-General A.E.A. Holland, CRA 8th Division, to act as a liaison officer with Brigadier-General Pinney. A detailed letter he wrote on 12 May 1915,¹⁰² told of his experiences on the left flank. He wrote:

*...our supports were now coming up over the same ground as we had crossed. A furious fire broke out from the Germans and they soon got the range; the line thinned out, men stumbled and fell, but the majority got safely into the trench where we were...*¹⁰³

The units that had made a lodgement in the enemy trenches were pushed back until only parts of the German front line were still held. There was a second factor that increased the inability to move enough reinforcements across the fire-swept No-Man's Land. The troops that still had a lodgement in the enemy lines now suffered a further difficulty. They ran low on ammunition especially grenades. The enemy began to bomb them out and there was relatively little they could do in return. Without additional support and with the attackers being unable to destroy or subdue the defence, it was increasingly looking unlikely that any portion of the enemy line could be held. Any further advance was impossible. Further assaults were cancelled and, where possible, the survivors made their return to their own start lines. The Germans counter-attacked fiercely and the few machine guns in the captured trenches were destroyed or put out of action. The last cohesive party from 8th Division still in the enemy trenches held out until about 3 am, when it was withdrawn.¹⁰⁴

Many of the infantry battalions had lost very heavily. From 25 Brigade, for example, 1st Royal Irish Rifles marched back to its billets under the command of its RSM as all

¹⁰² Wedderburn-Maxwell, like many officers, circumvented the military censors by sending the letter home with a fellow officer going on leave.

¹⁰³ John Wedderburn-Maxwell papers, IWM, reference 99/83/1 & con. shelf.

¹⁰⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, WO95/1672, *Narrative of the Operations*.

the officers of that had been in the assault were killed or wounded. The battalion's total casualties were 477. 2nd Rifle Brigade suffered 21 officer and 571 other rank casualties. Among 24 Brigade, 2nd East Lancashires lost 19 officers and 435 other ranks, 2nd Northamptonshires 12 officers and 414, 1st Sherwood Foresters lost 347 officers and men as casualties.¹⁰⁵ Again, it was the loss of the experienced long service professionals from the pre-war regulars that was so keenly felt.

Formation	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
1st Division	100	3808	3908
2nd Division	0	20	20
47 (London) Division [TF]	2	77	79
<i>I Corps total</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>3905</i>	<i>4007</i>
7th Division	1	24	25
8th Division	192	4,490	4,682
49 (W. Riding) Division [TF]	2	77	79
<i>IV Corps total</i>	<i>195</i>	<i>4,591</i>	<i>4,786</i>
Meerut Division	94	2,535	2,629
Lahore Division	7	115	122
<i>Indian Corps total</i>	<i>101</i>	<i>2,650</i>	<i>2,751</i>
Total	398	11,544	7,537

Table 2.3: British casualties at Fromelles / Aubers Ridge: 10–13 March 1915 ¹⁰⁶

Analysis

Prior and Wilson state that the main reason Aubers Ridge failed while Neuve Chapelle had succeeded, at least as far as the initial assault was concerned, was that the method of attack was ‘...markedly inferior...’¹⁰⁷. The infantry plan adopted meant that the infantry had to manoeuvre to change direction in No-Man’s Land. This is never an easy thing to accomplish. Secondly, with the use of columns there were gaps between the attacking formations. These gaps were a crucial cause of the failure of the assault.

¹⁰⁵ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 42-3.

¹⁰⁶ Constructed from casualty figures, *British Official History 1915, Volume II*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁷ Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, p. 91.

The defences in the gaps where no assault was taking place were manned by defenders who had not been stunned by artillery fire into either surrendering or into running away. They were able to bring fire onto the assaulting forces and, more crucially, the reinforcements as they tried to cross No Man's Land. The German defences were physically stronger than hitherto. The front parapet was some fifteen to twenty feet thick, more than capable of stopping field gun shells, let alone small arms fire. More importantly, the front line now possessed bombproof shelters, which could keep out all but the heaviest shell. Also, behind the front trench itself the rear protection, the *parados*, had been constructed in such a way so it could act as a fire position if the trench in front was occupied by the British.¹⁰⁸ Though no specific mention can be found in any of the immediate post-action official accounts examined, a number of the post war regimental histories and the divisional history state that the Germans had built machine gun posts into the parapet itself where it sloped forward to the ground, that is the parapet itself had been dug into and 'loop holed'.¹⁰⁹ One of the most detailed descriptions is given by the history of the 2nd Devonshires. The machine-guns were, "...in pits at the bottom of the parapet, practically flush with the ground, so that they could deliver a grazing fire and were invulnerable to anything except direct hits..."¹¹⁰ That the position of these weapons is subject to so many different descriptions is indicative of the confusion of the battlefield and that the pre-battle tactical reconnaissance was not of the highest standard.

One enemy obstacle that had been upgraded was the barbed wire. Previously, the wire had been formed by knife rests bound together. This could be pulled apart and

¹⁰⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, WO95/1672, "*Observations on the Operations*", p14.

¹⁰⁹ See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p35 and Hughes, *The Northamptonshires*, p. 120.

¹¹⁰ Atkinson, *The Devonshires*, p. 84.

removed as had been carried out at the time of Neuve Chapelle. However at Fromelles, the after action report said:

...the enemy made use of a new and thicker type of wire for the entanglements, which may account for the smaller amount of effect than was anticipated from our wire cutting guns. A new type of wire was seen by the 2/Rifle Brigade on the FROMELLES road and it was stated to be too thick to be dealt with by the ordinary wire cutters...¹¹¹

As at Neuve Chapelle, physical obstacles were seen as the problem. However, like Neuve Chapelle, the obstacles would not have been insurmountable if the defence had not been able to fire on the attackers while the latter were moving forward. This could have been accomplished if the bombardment had resulted in the defenders being stunned or if the machine gun posts were destroyed. For that reason, a weak, ineffective bombardment caused very heavy casualties among the attacking infantry. Yet the failure to clear the obstacles and destroy the breastwork reinforced the erroneous analysis that total physical destruction was the true answer.

Prior and Wilson stress that they believe failure was due to the lack of weight in the British artillery bombardment. They highlighted that successful breaches in the German defences only took place where the bombardment was by 6" howitzers.¹¹² However, in the 8th Division war diary is a report submitted to the Brigadier-General Royal Artillery IV Corps (the senior artillery advisor to the Corps commander) by Brigadier-General Holland, the 8th Division CRA.¹¹³ He reported that the success of the 2nd Northamptonshire attack on the right flank attack was due to the use of two 18-pounder guns emplaced in the British front line, firing directly at the German wire and parapet. Holland believed this was worth noting for future operations.

¹¹¹ TNA PRO, 8th Division war diary, WO95/1672, "Observations on the Operations", p. 14.

¹¹² Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, p. 92.

¹¹³ TNA PRO, 8th Division war diary, WO95/1672, *CRA 8th Division report to CRA IV Corps on Operations of 9 May 1915* ['Appendix 13'].

The 8th Division battle at Fromelles was disheartening for the higher commands and staff of the BEF. It was a failure though the British had attempted to remedy what they perceived were the reasons for failure at Neuve Chapelle. More sophisticated systems had been put into place, but still that elusive breakthrough was not achieved.

To gunners like Holland, the solution appeared to be that there were not enough shells to fire at the enemy. This was true. The shortage of artillery ammunition was a primary reason why the barrage was so sparse and why the attack at Fromelles was called off.¹¹⁴ The shortage of ammunition was broadcast as the cause of the disaster that had befallen 8 Division. This became widely known as the 'Shell Scandal', which brought down the Liberal Government of Asquith.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, this was not the sole reason for failure.

The British artillery was still not accurate enough to carry out the task that it had to accomplish if the infantry were to attack and capture the enemy trenches. The artillery co-operation pilots reported that the registrations made previously were out of date due to changed atmospheric conditions.¹¹⁶ The systems of air-artillery control still were not uniform or efficient enough to react to targets of opportunity.¹¹⁷ Too many of the British guns were worn out or too old or both. For example, the 4.7-inch guns still used by 8th Division. Too much of the ammunition was faulty, being too old or, conversely, too new. As mentioned above, the Army had expanded greatly. The same

¹¹⁴ See *British Official History 1915, Volume II*, pp39-40.

¹¹⁵ One reason why Charles à Court Repington, the military correspondent of the Times newspaper, made public the difficulties with ammunition, was that he was appalled by the casualties suffered by 2nd Rifle Brigade, a battalion of his old regiment. See *The Letters of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court Repington* (edited by A.J.A. Morris) (London: Sutton Publishing, for the Army Records Society, 1999), p. 36 and Documents 136 and 137.

¹¹⁶ *British Official History 1915, Volume II*, p. 41.

¹¹⁷ Mead, *The Eye in The Sky*, p. 68.

was true in the munitions industries. Labour brought into the fuse and shell factories were attempting to engineer complicated tasks with little or no previous experience. Quality control was an issue that took time to address.

Fromelles also differed from Neuve Chapelle in that it appeared the Germans were aware that there was an attack in the offing. There was a widespread belief in German agents and their French sympathisers. The Northamptonshire Regiment's history relates:

*...Apparently not much secrecy was observed about the forthcoming operation, for there is a naïve account of how detailed instructions were given 'in a field full of peasants' and a statement, not to be wondered at, that 'all the villagers knew a lot of forthcoming events.' ...*¹¹⁸

Archer-Houblon, of the divisional artillery, remarked:

*...The Germans were very active for the three or four days preceding the assault, and we strongly suspected that they must have received warning of the impending attack: a considerable number of their aeroplanes kept coming over, and their guns also were unusually active...*¹¹⁹

Rather than spies and 'fellow-travellers', a far more probable cause was the preparatory work for the attack, especially the construction of a large number of visible assembly trenches. These were not camouflaged. The Germans had good visibility over the British front lines and the immediate rear area. The visible work in progress gave the Germans prior warning that the British were preparing an attack and, most probably, caused the increase in air reconnaissance by the defenders.¹²⁰

The failure of the artillery and of the element of surprise masked the fact that new

¹¹⁸ Hughes, *The Northamptonshires*, p. 113.

¹¹⁹ Liddle Collection, Archer-Houblon papers, p57.

¹²⁰ See comments in Atkinson, *The Devonshires*, p. 84, fn.2 and *British Official History 1915, Volume II*, pp. 29-30, fn.3.

methods had been attempted. For example, the assaulting battalions had tried to move their integral machine guns forward to provide firepower for the assault. Unfortunately, the German small arms fire and artillery destroyed the guns and killed the crews. The Vickers-Maxim was the only machine gun used by the infantry in the British Army at this time. It was termed a 'medium' machine gun. It was heavy in weight, thirty eight to forty pounds for the gun alone while the tripod weighed the same again. It consumed prodigious amounts of ammunition and water. It was man-intensive as a whole additional squad of acolytes were needed to keep the gun-team supplied by filling the ammunition belts and carrying cooling water.¹²¹ Additionally, when the machine guns were brought up there was confusion as to where in the enemy breastworks friend or foe was located. However, these difficulties did not mean that the idea was wrong. What was needed was a lighter, more man portable weapon. In July 1915, the American-designed Lewis, which had a weight of 28 to 30 pounds, plus 4½ pounds per magazine, began to be issued on an experimental scale of four per battalion.¹²²

The battle was a very disheartening experience. Stephens, now confirmed as GOC 25 Infantry Brigade, wrote to his wife:

*...We had a dreadful day yesterday...the poor 2nd Bn is down to nothing again. We have lost 21 officers and 700 men. We took a trench yesterday morning and held it for 24 hours and lost it again, bombed out, at 3 am, this morning...we succeeded where nearly everyone else failed and everyone seems pleased with what we have done but it won't bring back my battalion that is gone...*¹²³

¹²¹ See Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, p. 54 and Weeks, *Infantry Weapons*, pp. 123-4. Bidwell & Graham gave the weight for the gun only. The Vickers-Maxim, being a water-cooled weapon with a cooling metal jacket on the barrel needed a condenser to be fitted if it was to work efficiently. The tripod gave its stability for firing on fixed lines or to cover defensive areas.

¹²² Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, p. 122 and Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 130.

¹²³ NAM: Stephens' papers, letter, ref. 2000-12-501-274.

One melancholy comment made with regard to the air plan summed up the sorry tale that was Fromelles. "...Tactical reconnaissance aircraft were able to report the movement forward of enemy reinforcements, but contact patrols remained untried, since the infantry never reached the first of their report lines..."¹²⁴

After Fromelles, 8th Division was able to rebuild and regain its numbers. However, what was irreplaceable was the loss of the pre-war regular soldiers, the long service non-commissioned officers, warrant officers as well as the officers. The warrant officers and non-commissioned officers were the backbone of any regiment. Their loss was a crucial factor in what has been described as the 'deskilling' of the infantry.

During the summer, 8th Division was kept busy, dealing with the routine of trench warfare. Patrolling took place. More units of Kitchener's New Armies were attached to the Division. New methods to deceive the enemy were also attempted. In June 1915, while under the Indian Corps, 8th Division carried out false preparations to make the enemy believe further operations were being attempted on Aubers Ridge. This included the artillery appearing to register on German positions, the repairing of disused assembly trenches, firing on German wiring parties and giving the appearance that assault columns were forming up.¹²⁵

The Operations at Bois Grenier

During the summer of 1915, Franco-British plans developed. The main body of the BEF was to fight at Loos, in the continuous conurbation of coal mines and pit

¹²⁴ Mead, *Eye in the Sky*, p. 68.

¹²⁵ TNA PRO, 8th Division war diary: April-July 1915, ref. WO95/1672, *Notes on Operations [...] in accordance with Indian Corps Instructions...*, dated 09 June 1915.

villages, south of the La Bassée Canal. As the junior partner in a coalition, there was little choice. A diversionary attack at Bois Grenier, at the northern extremity of Aubers Ridge, was to be carried out by 8th Division.

On 1 August 1915, 8th Division's commander changed. 'Joey' Davies went to command a corps at Gallipoli. The new GOC was Henry Havelock Hudson. His background was staff work. Previously he had been GSO1, in effect the chief of staff, to the Indian Corps. As can be guessed from his middle name, his family background was India and the Indian Army.

The tactical problem faced at Bois Grenier was simple. The British line ran in a deep bow-shaped re-entrant from Well Farm Salient on the right to Bridoux Salient on the left. The German line ran across the top of the re-entrant. Sited within the German front line were a series of strong points. These were the Corner Fort, almost directly opposite Well Farm Salient, then travelling up the line, the Angle, the Lozenge and then opposite Bridoux Salient, Bridoux Fort. The plan was to seize the German front line trenches and remove the threat from the re-entrant. Running across the chord of the re-entrant was a ditch. Dry in summer but wet in winter, it made a good 'jumping-off' point. The plan adopted was also simple in that all the assault units came from Stephens' 25 Brigade. 24 Brigade was in support, especially favouring the right flank. 23 Brigade were in reserve.

Orders followed the prescribed pattern. Following verbal warning orders, general

instructions were issued on 4 September 1915.¹²⁶ These dealt with assembly places, the need for careful but controlled reconnaissance, and the use of tram lines, bomb depots and traffic routes. Formal orders were issued on 6 September 1915.¹²⁷ 2nd Rifle Brigade would assault on the right around Corner Fort. 2nd Royal Berkshire would assault in the centre and 2nd Lincolnshires around Bridoux Fort. The fourth regular battalion in the brigade, 1st Royal Irish Rifles was stacked behind 2nd Lincolnshires. The two attached Territorial battalions, 1/1st Londons (City of London Battalion, Royal Fusiliers) and 1/8th Middlesex, formed the brigade reserve, being used to man trenches and for carrying parties. The brigade's trench mortar battery was reinforced by 23 Brigade's trench mortar battery.

24 Brigade was in support. 1st Sherwood Foresters was detached to the trench garrison, under the command of 25 Brigade. To the right of the main assault the trench garrison was formed into 'Lambert's Detachment', commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Lambert, CO 2nd East Lancashires. 23 Brigade was in reserve.

As well as the main Operational order, a separate appendix dealt with the artillery plan. Unlike the bombardments at Neuve Chapelle and Fromelles, the bombardment would sacrifice surprise in order to smash the German defences. A four-day bombardment was envisaged. 8-inch howitzers, newly arrived in France, would be used to smash the enemy strongpoints as well as engage enemy artillery. Further counter-battery fire would be carried out by an armoured train and 60-pounder guns and 4.7-inch guns. However, as it was probable that the heavy guns would be pulled

¹²⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary & narrative of operations: August – December 1915, reference WO95/1673, "*Instructions for offensive operations, ref G.404.K*".

¹²⁷ Ibid, "*8th Division operation order no. 62*", dated 6 September 1915.

out to go to the battle at Loos,¹²⁸ a novel expedient was proposed. Just prior to the assault, a mixture of smoke and gas would be released, over forty minutes in sequences of ten to six minutes or over sixteen minutes in sequences of six, two and eight minutes, depending on how much gas was available. The infantry were to assault five minutes afterwards. After the assault smoke would be used to cover those parts of the front still on the defensive. As there were insufficient trench mortars, catapults were to be used to launch much of the smoke, in the form of smoke candles.

When the assault commenced, a box barrage would be fired to halt enemy reinforcements.¹²⁹ Following from their successful use at Fromelles, now more 18-pounder guns were to be placed in the front line as ‘parapet’ guns. Three were to fire directly at three of the enemy strong points and another three were sited outside to open enfilade fire on enemy machine gun posts when these became known.

A further appendix was issued on 14 September 1915. This gave in detail the arrangements for exploiting the mines that were to be exploded at either end of the line of attack, a minute before the assault. Following their successful use at Fromelles, it was proposed that the RE would turn them into fire and communication trenches.¹³⁰

On 21 September 1915, timings were issued:

...4.25 am beginning of bombardment, single guns, smoke, catapults and demonstrations on each flank of attack.

4.29 am Mines exploded in salients.

4.30 am Assault

Single guns cease firing.

*Bombardment lifts from enemy’s front trenches...*¹³¹

¹²⁸ This was due to the overall shortage of heavy artillery. See *British Official History 1915, vol. II*, pp. 116, 136 & 155.

¹²⁹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1673“*Appendix B, 8th Division operation order no. 62*”, dated 14 September 1915.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, “*Appendix C, 8th Division operation order no. 62*”, dated 21 September 1915.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, “*Continuation of 8th Div. Operation Order No. 62*”, dated 21 September 1915.

The bombardment on the front line was to be very short. However, in order to deceive, a similar bombardment but of longer duration, was to take place at the same time the day before. 8th Division, being a diversionary operation, were to assault one hour before the main attack at Loos.

It was to be Stephens' first action where he commanded from the outset. On Friday 24 September 1915, he wrote to his wife:

*"...tomorrow is the day. I've waited till today to tell you as it now cannot do any harm. I think we are in for a good show just here tho' the affair is almost universal. But (don't get swelled head) just here it is my plan and the Bn are going to do it and – as far as it goes- I think we shall succeed without great loss always supposing no-one behind issues any impossible orders about going on at once..."*¹³²

On Sunday 26 September 1915, Stephens wrote another letter. The tone was completely different:

*...My darling, We have failed. Oh my dear such a bad day yesterday and I'm so disheartened about it all. It was the old story. We got into the trenches easily enough but failed to hold them effectively..."*¹³³

Analysis

As at the battle of Neuve Chapelle, the assaulting troops gained the enemy trenches relatively easily. They used skilful approach tactics, which meant they were upon the enemy as soon as the barrage lifted. The parapet guns had blown great gaps in the enemy's parapet. However, a stretch of some 200 yards around the Angle was not

¹³² NAM: Stephens' papers, letter, ref. 2000-12-501-351.

¹³³ Ibid, letter, ref. 2000-12-501-352.

captured. Incessant German bombing counter-attacks took place. The bombers of 24 Brigade had to be sent up to reinforce the assault brigade. At 1pm the 2nd Lincolnshires were thrown out of the Bridoux Fort and the 2nd Royal Berkshires were hard pressed from both flanks. They had to withdraw about 2 pm. All the pressure now fell on 2nd Rifle Brigade in Corner Fort. Though well dug and wired in, their position in a deep salient in the enemy lines was untenable. The order to withdraw came at 3.30 pm. By 4 pm they had withdrawn back to the British front line in good order. That night, a trench was dug along the length of the ditch that was the jumping-off point. 8th Division had to be satisfied with that gain.

Stephens wrote to his wife again two days afterwards:

*...Everyone is very kind about our own show and I've had nothing but praise. But I am not satisfied. The plan was most carefully made and if I had to do it all again I can think of little to improve. The simple truth is that it became a bombing match and we were beaten at it...I am proud of some things. It was nothing like May 9th. We'd communicated the whole show with the captured trench. There was no confusion or overcrowding in our own trenches. The wounded were almost all got away...We had 1100 casualties but...an enormous proportion are slight...I feel that it has shown the Brigade that they can do it without appalling loss even if they have to be pulled out again. I'm very proud of them...*¹³⁴

James Jack, OC 'B' Company, 2nd Scottish Rifles, in Divisional reserve wrote in his diary:

*...The fuses of their bombs became damp and would not light...there were 12 patterns of hand bomb in British use and few had mastered completely the mechanism of all of them...*¹³⁵

The divisional history commented further:

...great numbers [of bombs] were wasted because in the extreme excitement of action, the men forgot how the different types were to be treated. Apart from

¹³⁴ Ibid, letter, ref. 1200-12-501-353.

¹³⁵ *General Jack's Diary: The trench diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack* [henceforth *General Jack's Diary* (2000)], ed. by John Terraine (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 113.

*those spoiled by the rain, many bombs of the time fuse type, which required to be lighted, were thrown unlighted and so failed to explode...*¹³⁶

The reason the attack failed appeared to be mainly due to the problems with bombs. However, the division carried out detailed analysis afterwards. The report of the Divisional commander, Major-General Hudson, singled out the bombing problems but also said the mines did not create enough crater damage to be useful.¹³⁷ He believed the smoke on the flanks was useful.

Hudson also submitted a set of relevant points to III Corps.¹³⁸ It covered many topics. Regarding the bombers, the memo said there was no need for bombers to carry rifles but perhaps carry a cosh rather than a knife or dagger. Bombs needed standardising around the Mills & impact grenades. Rifle grenades and a simple trench mortar were essential. The memo also believed the duration of the bombardment needed varying and that where used the parapet guns were effective. A standing box barrage was useful to allow consolidation by the assault troops but the memo stated that the smoke was not suitable for use on the front that was assaulted. The Lewis gun should be preferred in the assault but captured enemy weapons would be better removed to the rear to stop their use by the enemy if a successful counter-attack was mounted by them. The memo stated that it was better to leave the Engineers back until fighting had decreased and the infantry should consolidate themselves. It further stated that the tramways were useful in evacuating casualties quickly. In conclusion, the memo stated that an unsuccessful attack would not be improved by having further troops

¹³⁶ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p51.

¹³⁷ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, WO95/1673, “*Report on the Action of the 8th Division 25th September 1915*”, dated 29 September 1915.

¹³⁸ TNA: PRO, 25 Infantry Brigade war diary: September 1915 – May 1916, reference WO95/1725, copy of untitled memo on points re 8th Division operations of 25/09/1915, dated 9 October 1915.

brought into trenches choked with dead and wounded and leaderless men.

Stephens, GOC 25 Brigade, as the assault brigade commander, wrote his own set of notes as well as the official report.¹³⁹ The notes complemented the points made by the divisional commander but also included further suggestions. These included training officers & bombers in the use of German bombs. The trench mortars needed improvement and the catapults were more reliable for throwing bombs and smoke. Rifle grenades were very valuable in keeping enemy bombers at a distance. Stephens believed there should be two assault lines not just one. The assault troops should risk casualties from our own artillery in order to close with the enemy. He also repeated the point that the duration of the bombardment needed varying. He stated that more work had to be done by the artillery to damage the communication trenches. He thought parapet guns were very effective, stating that the assault failed where they were not used. Regarding casualty evacuation, Stephens suggested a hooked handle to drag or pull the waterproof ground sheets, which were very effective in carrying wounded in the trenches.

The CRA, Brigadier-General G.H.W. Nicholson, submitted a detailed eight-page report. It covered communications, ammunition supply, the arrival and preliminary work of the batteries, communication with the infantry, the ‘parapet’ guns, use of smoke, the duration of the artillery bombardment, the assault bombardment and SOS signals.¹⁴⁰ This was nothing new. Though the infantry reports were more detailed than previously, the artillery had made detailed analysis before. For example, the CRA’s reports & notes after Neuve Chapelle had run to some 11 pages. More importantly,

¹³⁹ Ibid, “*25th Infantry Brigade Notes on the operations, 25th September 1915*”, dated 3 October 1915.

¹⁴⁰ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: November 1914 – December 1915, reference WO95/1683, “*Report on Operations 8th Division and Attached Artillery – 25th September 1915*”.

both reports made by the CRA used the same headings. Thus, from early on, the artillery in particular was attempting to analyse its experiences systematically.¹⁴¹ Nicholson stated that the Divisional Reporting Centre, located on a previously used site, was too far to the right of the attacked front, but this was dealt with by using a central exchange. This was more efficient at clearing messages and saved on telephone wire. He stated that there was a need for clear labelling of cable in trenches and that certain types of cable-support were too complicated. Buried D5 cable was found to be better than the ordinary D3. However, flag communication from the captured trenches was very poor. Problems with ammunition supply and the need for air observation caused problems in registration, as did the postponing of operations from 11 September 1915, which meant that a number of exposed batteries had to be moved or cease firing. The parapet guns were seen to perform well. Nicholson commented that the Angle, which did not receive such attentions was the one strong point not captured. He went on to say that the shock of the guns was such that many of the embrasures collapsed. Also he suggested a lighter gun might be used. One gun took an entire night and half of the next to remove while another took six hours and a detachment of fifty men to retrieve.

Nicholson was not so positive regarding smoke. He wrote:

*...Was it a success for the Infantry? For the gunners, on this occasion, it was not. It defeated observation for a considerable time until 11 am [...] and combined with the fog...*¹⁴²

Nicholson stated that the numbers of days of bombardment needed varying. Four days appeared now to be the custom and was predictable. He was pleased with the aerial

¹⁴¹ Ibid. See “*Report on Operations 8th Division Artillery 10th – 14th March, 1915*” and “*Remarks on Experiences of 10th – 13th March*”.

¹⁴² Ibid. “*Report on Operations 8th Division and Attached Artillery – 25th September 1915*”.

registration but stated that more was needed, not just for the heavy howitzers. The withdrawal of the heavy howitzers meant that the Germans were able to bring in reinforcements because the communication trenches were not sufficiently damaged nor was sufficient damage done to the front line strongpoints. He was not convinced of the benefit of the box barrage but stated a short assault barrage allowed the infantry to move into the assault with fewer casualties.

The medical units also submitted their own reports on the operation¹⁴³. Of the three divisional field ambulances, the bulk of the arrangements fell on 24 and 25 Field Ambulances. In order to deal with abdominal and chest wounds, 26 Field Ambulance set up a special ward at their main site at Bac Saint Maur, manned by a surgeon, a Captain Fraser, and four staff from the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, that is female nurses. As the war progressed more and more complicated surgery was performed as far forward as possible in advance of the casualty Clearing Stations (CCS) where most surgery was performed. In this instance, 8th Division's medical services were in the forefront of innovation designed to improve the chances of the casualty surviving.¹⁴⁴

The first wounded arrived at 24 Field Ambulance at 06.40 am and at 26 Field Ambulance at 06.55 am. Casualties then arrived in a steady stream. 24 Field Ambulance admitted until 09.00 pm, six officers, two hundred and twenty eight other ranks and five German prisoners of war. 26 Field Ambulance admitted to midnight nine officers, four hundred and thirty three other ranks and eighteen prisoners of war. Altogether, the 8th Division medical services admitted, between 06.00 am on 21

¹⁴³TNA: PRO, ADMS 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1687, "*Report on Action of Bois Grenier-Battle of Loos 25th September 1915*".

¹⁴⁴ See Noon, 'The Treatment of Casualties', p. 98.

September to 09.00 am 28 September 1915, twenty-two officers and 819 other ranks from 8th Division. 69 Field Ambulance of 23rd Infantry Division also treated five officers and 227 other ranks from 8th Division. Apart from this mention in the statistics, there is no other mention in the report of any other activities carried out by 69 Field Ambulance. 23rd Division was one of the 'New Army' divisions and had arrived in France the previous month. Presumably its role was to support the operations of the other field ambulances in order to gain experience. What the medical services reported in some detail was the evacuation of the wounded. For example, the report detailed the problems caused by weather and enemy action:

...The weather was wet and the mud in the trenches greatly added to the difficulties of evacuation and the work of the bearer division was arduous [...] Y Farm [also named 'Wye Farm', the site of a dressing station of 26 Field Ambulance] – Was under very heavy fire and could not be used...¹⁴⁵

When a system worked it was commented on. For example, the benefits of using trams or light railways to evacuate casualties were noted. Another was using barges to evacuate the abdominal cases. Also not neglected were improvements that would increase benefits:

...Trams were very useful but would have been more easily worked if there had been transverse boards to give foot hold for those pushing them. M. Ambs. [motor ambulances] should go as far forward as possible unless engines are used for the trams. Wooden rails and wheels give much friction during the wet weather – light steel rails would be better...¹⁴⁶

Such detailed analysis was seen as important not just for the benefit of the units already on the Western Front but above all for the units and formations of Kitchener's 'New Armies'. The knowledge gained from hard won experience was seen as

¹⁴⁵ TNA: PRO, ADMS 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1687.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

essential for effectiveness of the 'New Armies' with their 'dug-out' senior officers, inexperienced junior officers and their enthusiastic but naïve non-commissioned officers and other ranks. Lessons learned, especially at the tactical and operational levels were quickly disseminated. For example, a 'sanitised' copy of Stephens' notes were sent to all the GOCs-in-Chief of all Training Areas and Commands in the UK, the BEF, the New Armies and the Inspectors of all Arms by the War Office Director of Military Training under cover of a letter dated 30 October 1915.¹⁴⁷ This was less than four weeks after Stephens had written the original.

In conclusion, Bois Grenier was more of the same. It was a failure, as were Fromelles/Aubers Ridge and Loos. However, it was more of the same on more levels than just repeated failure. It showed a continuation of the learning curve. 8th Division was, as was the whole BEF, attempting to analyse what worked and what did not. The gunners in particular saw the merits, or lack of them, in old as well as new methods. Direct fire was the oldest form of support from the artillery. 8th Division's use was a throwback to the tactics of the Peninsular War, Waterloo and the Indian Mutiny. The advent of accurate long-range rifles and, above all, the machine-gun, had meant that from the late nineteenth century, artillery could not be placed in range of the enemy's infantry. However, by its continual experiments with parapet guns using surprise to aid the initial assault, 8th Division's artillery commanders showed a willingness to experiment with what could be used. Direct fire was to return again in 1918 in the March Retreat and in the Hundred Days, when warfare again became more open. The tank, one of the most important of the new weapon systems introduced in the war, was nothing if not an attempt to return to direct fire but with more mobility and protection.

¹⁴⁷ See copy in TNA: PRO, 25 Infantry Brigade war diary: September 1915 – May 1916, reference WO95/1725, letter reference 'M.T.2', dated 30 October 1915.

One other lesson also seemed to be more apparent than ever. Brigadier-General Reginald Byng Stephens wrote to his wife:

*...I believe now that all these side shows are wrong. The only thing that can succeed is a very big show [...] we ought to have been added to the one big show in the south...*¹⁴⁸

For 8th Division, its next battle was to be a very big show and it was to take place further to the south, beyond Loos. It was to be on the River Somme in July 1916.

* * * *

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle had initially been a success, but quickly degenerated into stalemate. Post-battle analysis indicated that this was because the artillery fire planning did not envisage that subsequent phases would be greatly influenced by the rapid construction of further defence lines by a skilled enemy. That the initial success was due to the intensity of fire over a short time period prescribed by the fire-plan was also ignored, with consequences that lasted well into 1917. Little was done to ameliorate the central issue of the breakdown of command and control, dislocated simultaneously by enemy fire and the move from friendly positions. 8th Division's subsequent history shows that attempts were being made to analyse the experiences undergone by the formation, but the lessons learnt did not follow a consistent pattern. The next chapter will examine 8th Division's part in what became known as 'the First Day of the battle of the Somme'.

¹⁴⁸ NAM: Stephens' Papers, letter, ref. 2000-12-501-356.

CHAPTER 3

1916: 'THE BIG PUSH'

Historians continue to argue about every facet of the Battle of the Somme, from the motives of those in the highest command to the tactics used at unit and sub-unit level. Particular attention has been given to the genesis of the first day disaster. Tim Travers has criticised the dangerous gulf between the GOC Fourth Army, Sir Henry Rawlinson's concentration on limited objectives and the GOC-in-C, Sir Douglas Haig's wish to achieve a breakthrough.¹ However, Travers does show that Haig and Rawlinson (and even Maxse) agreed that taking the German First Defensive Line would not be a problem.² Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have argued, in their examination of his methods of battle fighting, that Rawlinson acquiesced in Haig's more ambitious plan although he knew the British artillery was too weak to smash the enemy strong points or suppress their guns.³ They developed this argument, especially with regard to counter-battery fire, in their book on the battle itself.⁴ They argue that the infantry, owing to the inability of the artillery to accomplish their task, were doomed to failure no matter what they did.⁵ This was reflected in the experience of 8th Division on 1 July.

The fighting on the Somme after 1 July has been overshadowed by the events of that day, but it is in the fighting after this date, according to revisionist historians – notably Paddy Griffith, John Lee and Gary Sheffield - that the BEF learned its trade and

¹ Travers, *Killing Ground*, Chapter 6, pp. 127-51.

² *Ibid*, pp. 132-3.

³ Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, for example pp. 166-70.

⁴ Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 117

became a far more effective instrument of war.⁶ It is in their examination of this period that the revisionist school has gained ground. Griffith has argued that the Somme was fundamental to the BEF's progression along the 'learning curve'. The publishing of the two pamphlets, SS 135, *Instructions for The Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, and SS 143, *Instructions for The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, heralded the commencement of the idea of the co-ordinated all-arms battle.⁷ This was encapsulated in the platoon organisation comprising a section each of bombers, a Lewis gun, riflemen (including a sniper and a scout) and rifle-grenadiers. It was not just the infantry that learned lessons and reorganised. As will be seen the artillery performed poorly at the start of the Somme campaign. This was especially true with regard to the suppression of the German artillery. By the winter of 1916, a system of dedicated counter-battery artillery staffs at Corps level came into existence. They became particularly effective when they combined the use of aerial photography and survey.⁸

Aided by technological advances, such as in fuses, innovations such as the creeping barrage were now put into place. The tank made its debut. These innovations also went hand in glove with learning the lessons of previous operations. Andrew Syk takes the 46th (North Midland) Division, a notable failure on 1 July 1916, as an example.⁹ Andrew Whitmarsh has similarly examined 12th (Eastern) Division, a New Army war-raised formation.¹⁰ Work by Christopher Duffy has shown how the German Army paid close attention to the BEF's increasing proficiency, especially its

⁶ Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell, 2004), p. 157.

⁷ See Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 76-9.

⁸ See Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower*, pp. 102 *et seq.*

⁹ Andrew Syk, 'The Learning Curve – the 46th North Midland Division on the Western Front', *History Today* (November 2004).

¹⁰ Andrew Whitmarsh, 'The Development of Infantry Tactics in the British 12th (Eastern) Division, 1915-1918', in *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*, 48 (January 1997), pp. 28-32

use of the Lewis Gun pushed forward in the attack.¹¹ The experience of the BEF's formations and units were synthesised by the work of schools and training establishments at all levels. These have been the subject of research by Alistair Geddes, who has shown that systematic procedures and organisations were in place from early 1917 but there had been much debate before this about 'the lessons' learnt on the Somme.¹²

A recent important counter to the view that the whole campaign was a failure is William Philpott's *Bloody Victory*.¹³ He argues that the British view of the Somme has been moulded in particular by Winston Churchill's post-war writings, which had their own agenda, and that the battle should be more correctly viewed as the equivalent to the Battle of Stalingrad in the Second World War. He further emphasises the importance of the French Army's greater professionalism at this stage of the war and the fact that the German defences were organised by a very skilled opponent who was allowed to act unhindered.

Gary Sheffield has written that the British Army '...was a far more effective instrument of war in November 1916 than it had been in July...'¹⁴ He goes on to say that these changes did not bear fruit until the Spring of 1917, at the Battle of Arras. This was true of 8th Division. However, first it had to undergo the martyrdom during the fighting in the summer and autumn of 1916 on the Somme and back in Artois.

¹¹ Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and The Somme 1916* (London: Phoenix, 2007), p. 279.

¹² Alistair Geddes, 'Solly-Flood, GHQ and Tactical Training in the BEF, 1916-18' (MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2007).

¹³ William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century* (London: Little Brown, 2009).

¹⁴ Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell paperback, 2004), p. 157.

* * * *

In March 1916 8th Division moved south from the sodden flat plains of Flanders and the grimy conurbations of northern Artois to the chalk uplands of the Somme. The area had been a French sector until the British Army had extended their proportion of the line after acceding to pressure from the French following their losses in the battles of 1915. However, the move of 8th Division to the south was not simply part of an effort to relieve French units. The Somme had for some time been envisaged as the area for the next Franco-British offensive.

The impetus for what became known as the First Battle of the Somme had been the planning conferences held by the Allies from mid-1915.¹⁵ The original intention was for a joint attack by the French and British Armies. Initially, the French armies were to predominate. However, following the start of the battle of Verdun on 21 February 1916, the French component inevitably decreased until the greater balance of effort was to be assumed by the BEF. The forthcoming attack was to be the largest battle to date not just for the BEF during the present war but for the British Army in its history to date. For example, the Allied army at Waterloo in 1815 had numbered approximately seventy thousand. The British Army on the Somme would at the time of the first assault number about four hundred thousand men. The British Army on the Somme was not only far larger than anything that had gone before, but it was also

¹⁵ See Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1916, Volume I: Sir Douglas Haig's command to the 1st July: Battle of the Somme* [henceforth British Official History 1916, Vol. I] (Reprinted edition London: Imperial War Museum, 1993), Chapters 1 and 2.

different in make-up from the Army of 1914. The Somme was to see the first major assault by a British Army that included the fruits of Kitchener's call to arms, the men of the New Armies.

The attack was to be carried out by what was itself the newest Army in the BEF's Order of Battle. This was Fourth Army, formed on 1 March 1916, under the command of General Sir Henry Rawlinson, fresh from his experiences with IV Corps at Loos. The process of broadening the experience of the new troops had commenced as soon as they began to trickle in to France in late 1915. Down to the lowest level, units were attached or exchanged so that knowledge of the trenches and trench routine could be broadcast as widely as possible. Regular battalions and brigades were exchanged for their equivalent in the New Armies. For 8th Division this meant that in October 1915, it exchanged 24 Brigade for 70 Brigade of 23rd Division. The procedure did not stop there. By the time it moved to the Somme, 8th Division had assisted in the training of 102 Infantry Brigade from 34th Division. 8th Division instructed from 39 Division, 116 and 117 Brigades, two of its Royal Engineer Field Companies, part of the divisional headquarters' staff, the divisional artillery, the divisional pioneer battalion and the divisional ammunition column.¹⁶

Having been in France for over 18 months, 8th Division settled into the routine of trench warfare with the usual round of front line duty, reserve and training. Actions and activities were carried out by the Division, which indicated lessons had been learnt about this new style of warfare. The minutes of a divisional conference held on 3 May 1916 included the following:

¹⁶ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 59-60.

...1. Model of the Divisional front has been made and is in the General Staff Clerks room at Divisional headquarters.

Officers from battalions in Divisional Reserve are to be sent to study it – not more than six officers at any one time.

2. Re-naming Avenues.

Some of the Avenues at present having 2 or 3 names will be re-named. A list will be sent round to all concerned.

3. Tramways.

The C.R.E. will start the trench tramways as soon as possible for carrying washing water up to the trenches.

4. Trench Number Boards.

Several of these are up in the wrong place. The C.R.E. will arrange to have all trench number boards put up on the ground to coincide with the trench map.

5. Training Ground.

Negotiations are in progress for the hiring of a piece of ground west and North of HENENCOURT WOOD...¹⁷

The examples given show that as a body 8th Division was continuing to systemise its experience. Higher authority was providing the lead, putting into place what would nowadays be called ‘best practice’ or ‘systems of work’. Operating procedures were being standardised further than hitherto. This was done in an attempt to put order into what was a chaotic and hazardous experience so that routine and habit would assist in making the organisation more efficient and enable easier decision-making. Guidance and directives were issued from higher command on a plethora of matters. In III Corps’ war diary from May 1916, there is a detailed memorandum issued by Fourth Army regarding the procedures to be followed by divisions that were nominated as the GHQ reserve.¹⁸ Such divisions were to move by either road, termed ‘march route’, rail, the so-called ‘strategic train’, or a combination of both, called the ‘tactical train’. The crucial timings were that the division had to be ready to move within nine and a half hours of receiving notice. However, if the tactical train option was used, the first

¹⁷ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary & narrative of operations: January – June 1916, reference WO95/1674, “Conference held at 8th Divisional headquarters on 3-5-16”, ref G.131.K.

¹⁸ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary & narrative of operations: January – June 1916, reference WO95/672, Fourth Army memorandum, reference 101(G.), dated 06/05/1916. A similar system was used for the rest of the war.

brigade had to be ready to move within three hours, the second at six hours and the third at nine hours. Machine-gun and Lewis gun detachments were to move on separate trains and allowed slightly more time. In all cases the artillery was to move last of all. Each brigade's tactical train was to consist of two trains for dismounted personnel and a third train for machine-gun, Lewis gun teams and some transport. The tactical train had to be capable of being entrained and detrained anywhere on the railway line. Consequently, the brigade should have the capability to go directly into action. The Corps that commanded the nominated division placed in GHQ Reserve, had to arrange billeting in such a manner that the move could be accomplished in the given time. The procedure put in place regarding the warning orders was noteworthy. The order to move would come from Army HQ directly to the division, with a copy sent to Corps HQ.

The BEF as a whole was not allowed to operate in isolation. At all times, the efficient and ever watchful enemy were a presence. If one thing could be counted on, it was that the German Army would not conform to its opponent's wishes or react in a manner that would be beneficial for the British. From the earliest days, following its move to the Somme area, 8th Division made attempts to deny information to the Germans. The methods used ranged from the simple, making the newly arrived troops aware that the enemy had a considerable amount of observation into British lines, to the sophisticated, such as the use of deception plans. III Corps' war diary contains a memorandum that was issued to all divisions when they arrived in their new area:

...It is of great importance to prevent the enemy learning of the arrival of new troops in the 4th Army area.

(2). The country is very different from that in which the Divisions of the 3rd Corps have passed the winter. It is far more open and the enemy can see from

*such points as THIEPVAL, POZIERES, CONTALMAISON, etc., considerable portions of the ground behind our lines [...] units should be very careful about moving in daylight [...] Stretches of road which are visible to the enemy must be avoided until it is possible to screen them [...] troops should be warned about movement in the front and communication trenches. Owing to the irregular tracing of our line and the hilly ground over which it runs the Germans can often look into our trenches...*¹⁹

The newly arrived formations were asked to use deception plans so that the enemy could not easily detect the arrival of the said formations by detecting differences in routine or in procedures.

*...It will be advisable for the 8th and 34th Divisions to adopt at first the same methods in regard to sniping, patrolling, etc., as have been employed by the troops whom they are relieving. Any alterations in these methods which Divisional Commanders consider necessary should be made gradually...*²⁰

The Germans were surprised by the arrival of the British. They had replaced their original French opponents who had opposed them since 1914.²¹ Since time immemorial, armies have attempted to find out about their opponents²². Raids to obtain details of which enemy units were opposite, by capturing prisoners, were just as common as those carried out simply in order to inflict damage and kill the enemy. Both sides, therefore, carried out raids in order to obtain intelligence. With the arrival of the British, the Germans made determined efforts to find who their new opponents were. The German Army had become very efficient and methodical at planning and executing such operations.²³

¹⁹ Ibid, Memorandum, reference G.216, dated 30 March 1916.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on the Somme* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2005), pp. 74-8.

²² For example, see The Bible [King James' version] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, no date), Joshua 2. 1.

²³ See Sheldon, *The German Army*, pp. 100-6, regarding a report issued by General von Stein, GOC XIV Reserve Corps, on 29 February 1916. He stated that raids on the British trenches opposite were directly for the purpose of capturing prisoners for intelligence purposes.

As a result, in early April 1916 especially, the British formations on the Somme suffered a series of raids that caused concern in higher headquarters. These raids coincided with the arrival of more British formations in the Somme area, including those released from the Imperial Strategic Reserve that had gathered in Egypt after the end of the Gallipoli campaign. Formations included were those such as 29th Division, which had won such fame at Gallipoli, and of whom great things were expected.²⁴

The III Corps war diary contains the following memo, dated 17 April 1916, from Fourth Army HQ and forwarded to 8th Division:

- ...1. There are indications that changes in the enemy's dispositions opposite the front held by the Fourth Army have recently taken place. Identifications are therefore much needed.*
- 2. The Army Commander hopes that these identifications may be obtained by raiding the enemy's lines...*²⁵

The III Corps war diary contains a number of reports concerning the problems caused by enemy raids. One reason for the disquiet over hostile raids was that there was a belief that certain units had not done as well as they should have when faced with an enemy incursion, however temporary, into the British front-line trenches. Of particular concern was an enemy raid mounted against the sector held by 1st Royal Irish Rifles of 8th Division's 25 Brigade on 11 April 1916. Concern was high enough that reports were requested by the III Corps commander, Lieutenant-General Pulteney.²⁶

The brigade commander, Brigadier-General Pollard, put forward various factors that

²⁴ See *British Official History 1916, Volume I*, pp. 23-4.

²⁵ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary: January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, memorandum, reference G.412, dated 17 April 1916.

²⁶ *Ibid*, report to Fourth Army, ref. G.378, dated 15 April 1916.

could mitigate what was seen as a poor performance by 1st Royal Irish Rifles. These included the poor state of the defences, which the battalion had been unable to improve, as it had been in the front line trenches just over 24 hours and there had been two heavy German bombardments. However, it is apparent that Pollard was dissatisfied by the performance of the 1st Royal Irish Rifles. The officer commanding the company attacked was put under arrest and a Court of Enquiry was convened. There was a widespread view that the company attacked had no officers in the front line. The GOC 8th Division, Major-General Hudson, noted on the report by the CO of 1st Royal Irish Rifles, "... A bad report – not candid. Where was the Company Commander and his officer? ..." ²⁷

Lieutenant-General Pulteney, the III Corps commander, was even more scathing when he sent the initial report to Fourth Army headquarters.

...As far as I am able to ascertain at present, there is no redeeming feature in the conduct of the Irish Rifles during this action; with the exception of one officer who was killed there does not seem to have been any officer in the front and this matter will be dealt with by the Court of Enquiry... ²⁸

Nine days after the raid, on 20 April 1916, three members of 1st Royal Irish Rifles were dealt with by way of a Field General Court-Martial. The soldiers on trial comprised two riflemen and an acting serjeant. The two other ranks were sentenced to death and the NCO was found not guilty. The death sentences were later commuted to suspended sentences of fifteen years penal servitude. The company commander in charge of the length of trenches attacked, Captain Ernest French-Mullen, was court-martialled for offences under Section 40, the Army Act. This covered conduct, disorder or neglect by the person charged, that were to the prejudice of good order and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

military discipline. Captain French-Mullen's court-martial took place on 2 June 1916, some six weeks after those of the lower ranks. He had the benefit of a full General Court Martial, with the presence of a legally qualified judge-advocate advising the court, rather than the abbreviated Field General Court Martial faced by the other ranks at the earlier trials. He was completely exonerated. However, his health was said to have broken down under the stress of awaiting trial after having had no leave since his arrival in France and Flanders in December 1915. Following his acquittal he was invalided home.²⁹

Herbert Whitfield, serving as the Assistant Adjutant in the 1st Royal Irish Rifles, wrote:

*...The battalion received very severe criticism for their night's work, but some allowance must be made for what appeared to be a very poor fight put up by them. First of all, it was the first occasion that they had ever been subjected to such a bombardment, either in intensity or length. Secondly, it was the first occasion that gas shells had been used against them in any quantity. Thirdly, those that survived the bombardment were forced to fight in gas helmets (sack type) and being night-time they had no idea where they were themselves or where the enemy was coming from...*³⁰

The criticism made by higher command did not take into account the difficulties in bringing up reserves during a heavy and prolonged enemy bombardment. Few allowances were made for units that had not acclimatised having just moved to the Somme or for any weaknesses caused by tiredness or ill-health. However, the harsh strictures were tempered by use of suspended sentences and the medical system. What is apparent is that the battalion was condemned from on high for appearing to lack resolution and for being slow to react in the face of a very well planned and executed

²⁹ For details of the courts-martial, see Taylor, *The 1st Royal Irish Rifles*, p192, and for the service of Captain Ernest French-Mullen, see *ibid*, p. 243. Captain French-Mullen later returned to the Western Front and in 1919 was awarded the Military Cross.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 72.

operation carried out by the enemy.

Raids carried out by the Germans, such as the one suffered by 1st Royal Irish Rifles, re-inforced lessons received by the BEF since the start of the war. An amateur approach would not, and could not, prosper in the face of a professional and motivated enemy.³¹ The German Army at all levels, including that of minor tactics, still appeared to be more professional in its training and actions than its British opponents. Worth noting, as a counterpart to the comment of Captain Whitfield of 1st Royal Irish Rifles that the troops were unused to, and unable to fight at night when wearing gas respirators, is the following from General Von Stein's report on raids, issued some two months previously:

*...If gas shells are used, gasmasks must be carried hung around the neck and tucked into open jackets. No headdress is worn, so as to facilitate masking up. Walking and running in gas masks in the dark must be practised...*³²

In the face of an enemy that was skilled and thorough in its preparations and methods, the British Army had to learn many a hard lesson. However, what cannot be forgotten is that the British Army at this time of the war was, in the main, an army of civilians in uniform. Most had only been serving with the colours for less than two years. Many of those who had experienced the trials and tribulations of warfare in the trenches of the Western Front were dead or in hospitals. In any case, there were too few experienced Regulars or TF men left to pass on their hard won experience. This

³¹ 1st Royal Irish Rifles were not alone in their experience. 2nd South Wales Borderers, 88 Brigade, 29th Division was subject of a very well conducted raid on the night of 6-7 April 1916, see Sheldon, *The German Army*, pp. 106-9. Worth noting is that the unit attacked had, like 1st Royal Irish Rifles, only been in the Somme area for a short time. 29th Division had only arrived in France during the previous month, from Egypt after its efforts at Gallipoli. See *British Official History 1916, Vol. I*, p. 24 and p. 24, fn. 2.

³² Sheldon, *The German Army*, p. 102.

applied to formations such as 8th Division that were becoming increasingly 'Regular' in name only, the skilled professionals lost in the battles of 1915 ranks replaced by volunteers and, later on, by conscripts.

Fourth Army circulated a lengthy memorandum concerning enemy raids on 13 April 1916. The main points made were that listening posts should be put in place in front of the British front line wire; that these posts should be every 100 to 200 yard intervals and themselves well protected by barbed wire. Accurate defensive fire tasks by the artillery, covering closely the British front line and listening posts would make up the second component of the defensive preparations. Especially favoured was the use of shrapnel 'box' barrages to enclose the threatened areas. Furthermore, counter-raids were to be mounted at the same time to take advantage of the dislocation that was taking place in the enemy trenches. The memo emphasised the need for an aggressive defence. The defenders were not to be passive. This emphasis must be seen in the light of what was seen as a poor response by attacked units like the 1st Royal Irish Rifles. The memo continued:

...5. The fact that the enemy has succeeded in gaining a footing in our trenches is no reason for the garrison to surrender, even if temporarily cut off from support. It is the duty of every man to continue fighting and inflict casualties. Heavy loss to the raiders is the best deterrent against future enterprises.

6. It is very noticeable that where the defence has been well organised, and the artillery fire has been promptly brought to bear and has been well directed and maintained, hostile raids have failed...³³

A few days later, on 16 April 1916, the subject of hostile raids was the first subject dealt with at a conference held at Fourth Army headquarters. The thinking behind the

³³ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary: January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, memorandum, reference III/1 (G) v, dated 13 April 1916.

counter raids was made clear:

*...These raids will probably be more successful if launched immediately a hostile raid has taken place, and in the same vicinity, as the preparatory bombardment and wire cutting might then be taken for retaliation. At the same time, the Army Commander does not necessarily wish commanders to wait for the enemy, but to undertake raids at their own selected time...*³⁴

The need to raise the British Army's operational standards was, therefore, reflected in the response of General Rawlinson and his staff at the Fourth Army conferences. However, as will be seen, the British Army on the Somme was still an imperfect tool, being technically unskilled, especially when compared to the German Army.

The Plan

The events on the Somme uplands in the summer, autumn and early winter of 1916 have had such a profound effect on the British, especially on its governing and military classes, that the debate on the planning and conduct of the series of battles that became known as the First Battle of the Somme still continues after almost one hundred years have passed.³⁵ It is not proposed to go into the details of the higher planning of the battle at a strategic level. However, what can be viewed as the conflicting and contradictory methods of attack put forward by the various higher British commanders did have an effect on the operations of 8th Division.

It must be remembered that the strategic imperative constantly running in the

³⁴ Ibid, memorandum, reference G X 3/1, dated 18 April 1916.

³⁵ See, for example, Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, p.285.

background was the need to take pressure off the French at Verdun.³⁶ The German offensive there had been in progress since 21 February 1916. It can be argued that the British had to attack too soon, before the New Armies were ready, before the artillery was trained. In many respects the Battle of the Somme was what is called by the modern British Army a 'Come As You Are' battle, one in which you use what is available not what will be available in the future.

The plan that was put into operation on 1 July 1916 envisaged that the British attacked along a wide front with a diversionary attack in the north at Gommecourt. A wide front was chosen so that the enemy's reserves would be stretched and when a weak point was established, there the reserves could attack.³⁷ That no gaps were left between the attacks was, perhaps, recognition of the damage done at Aubers Ridge where the attacks had failed due to enfilade fire from flanking trenches that were not attacked.

The major difference between General Haig and General Rawlinson was regarding the depth to which the enemy positions were to be penetrated.³⁸ Haig believed that a breakthrough was possible, as the Austro-Hungarians and Germans had accomplished at Gorlice-Tarnow on the Eastern Front in May 1915. Rawlinson believed that an offensive with limited objectives ('bite and hold') was more possible. Tactically, Haig believed that the enemy would be in some confusion, as they had been at Loos, or even in a state of panic, on the loss of their First Position (the front line) and it would be possible to move far enough forward to capture much of the enemy's heavy

³⁶ For example, TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary: January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, paragraph 2, *Conference held at Fourth Army Headquarters, 12th June 1916, ref. Fourth Army No. G.X.3/1 C.*

³⁷ See Travers, *The Killing Ground*, pp. 127-8.

³⁸ *British Official History 1916, Vol. I*, pp. 253-6.

artillery. Rawlinson thought that it would be best to proceed only to the limit of the range of the British field artillery. This would be just before the enemy's Second Position (also known as the Second Line). However a compromise was reached, whereby on the left portion of the battlefield, the three corps involved were given the line Serre – Grandcourt - Pozières in the German Second Position as their objective. These were the objectives, running from south to north, of III, X and VIII Corps respectively. III Corps was made up of three infantry divisions. 34th Division was on its right. 8th Division was on the left. 19th Division was in reserve.

The task facing III Corps was '...a formidable task...'³⁹ The German positions consisted of the First Position. This was made up of a series of trench lines, including a number of strongpoints and the fortified villages of La Boisselle and Ovillers. There were two intermediate lines, then the Second Position running between Bazentin le Petit and Mouquet Farm. The Third Position ran some 5,200 yards [4,800 metres] behind the Second position. At the time of the attack on 1 July 1916, the latter was still incomplete.

However, it was the geography of the area of operations that made the German defences so formidable. III Corps' area was bisected by the old Roman road that ran from Albert to Bapaume. Running across the battlefield were a series of spurs. In the south was the western edge of the Fricourt spur. Then there was the La Boisselle spur. The next spur was at Ovillers. The re-entrant, or valley, running between the Fricourt and La Boisselle spurs was known as 'Sausage Valley'. Supposedly, this was because there was a German observation balloon of that shape flown at its head. Logically, to

³⁹ Ibid, p. 373.

the British soldier, the adjacent re-entrant between La Boisselle and Ovillers was labelled with what would be a proper compliment to a sausage. Therefore, the re-entrant was named 'Mash Valley'.⁴⁰ To the north, in X Corps' area of objective, lay another spur, that of Thiepval. This dominated all of the German front line to the south through which III Corps would have to advance.

8th Division's plan was to have all three infantry brigades carrying out their assault simultaneously. This was because of the length of line for which 8th Division was responsible. From right to left, 23 Brigade were to advance towards Mash Valley, 25 Brigade were to assault the German line centred on Ovillers village and 70 Brigade were to attack the feature known as Nab Valley, which was part of the re-entrant along the southern flank of the Thiepval spur. Despite the whimsicality inherent in the labelling of features with names that were innocuous or even witty, the area through which 8th Division was to advance was a formidable killing ground if the German defences were not subdued and the high features on either flank were not captured or neutralised. The existence of the spurs meant that No-Man's Land in the areas between them was particularly wide. It was some 700 yards [640 metres] wide in Mash Valley for example. The 8th Division official history states that:

*...It will readily be appreciated that unless the results of the final intense bombardments were such that the defence was for the time being put almost completely out of action, and unless the progress made by the troops on either flank was rapid and successful, the 8th Division was likely to find its task beyond the power of human accomplishment...*⁴¹

The tactical difficulties faced were considerable. The British Official History states that:

⁴⁰ See Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, p. 65, footnote. For a detailed study on trench names, including the use of humour and irony, see Chasseaud, *Rat's Alley*, especially pp 29-31.

⁴¹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 70.

...In fact, it seemed to Major-General Hudson that there was small chance of success unless the divisions on either side advanced a little ahead of his own. A proposal to postpone its zero hour slightly was, however, rejected by the commander of the Fourth Army [Rawlinson]; but the 8th Division was given a call on a battery of the 32nd Division to keep down flanking fire...⁴²

I cannot find in the Rawlinson Diary at Churchill College, Cambridge, or in the III Corps and 8th Division war diaries in the National Archives, any other reference that the specific tactical problems facing III Corps, and 8 Division in particular, was ever considered. Travers, commenting on why different tactics and weapons were not used in attempts to assist the troops to cross No-Man's Land, stated:

...the sheer organisation and mass of detail surrounding the plans for 1 July seemed to iron out innovation – the structure was stronger than any deviations...⁴³

Furthermore, there was no use of one of the tactics that had worked at Aubers Ridge/Fromelles and at Bois Grenier. This was the use of what were called 'parapet guns', the emplacement of field artillery, such as 13-pdr or 18-pdr guns, in the front trench to provide direct fire support at the time of the assault. This was despite such tactics being recommended by higher command. A Fourth Army conference on 17 May noted:

...13. 18-pdrs pushed forward close up to the front trenches, and concealed in emplacements not used till the moment of assault, have in the past proved very useful...⁴⁴

Why 'parapet' guns were not used is unclear. It might well be that it was thought the guns would be of more use as part of the massed batteries behind the British lines. Another reason is that, perhaps, the artillery did not think the difficulties in emplacing and then removing the guns were a worthwhile investment, especially if the front line

⁴² *British Official History 1916, Vol. I, p. 385.*

⁴³ Travers, *The Killing Ground*, p145.

⁴⁴ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary: January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, *Conference held at Fourth Army Head-quarters 17th May 1916*, reference G X 3/1C, dated 18 April 1916.

was to move rapidly as Fourth Army advanced to Bapaume.

Accounts from soldiers of 8th Division state that they were told to be confident it would go well on the day. Martin Middlebrook quotes from two battalions with 70 Brigade:

...To the 11th Sherwood Foresters [70 Brigade]: 'You will meet nothing but dead and wounded Germans. You will advance to Mouquet Farm and be there by 11 a.m. The field kitchens will follow you and give you a good meal [...] To the 8th K.O.Y.L.I. [70 Brigade]: 'When you go over the top, you can slope arms, light up your pipes and cigarettes, and march all the way to Pozières before meeting any live Germans...'⁴⁵

What was the reason for the widespread optimism? For the troops of 70 Brigade, the forthcoming battle was to be their first major engagement. Their original parent division, 23rd Infantry Division, had only been in France since August the previous year. Not having suffered as their Regular and Territorial Army counterparts had in the previous battles of 1915, the New Army soldiers were protected by their lack of experience. They were unaware of what participation in a battle against a skilled and determined enemy really meant. Their naivety acted as a barrier, which inoculated them against the terrible realities of fighting on an industrialised battlefield.

For others involved, the survivors among the regulars, confidence grew from seeing that the lessons previously learned were being acted on. Major O.M.T. Frost, OC 8 Signal Company (the Division's integral signal unit), wrote of the preparations carried out with regard to communications:

...before the battle, a very complete system of deeply buried telephone cables, with numerous by-passes and small exchanges for circumventing breaks during repairs, was laid by the VIII [8] Div., extending even along the tunnel (I went there myself) below No Man's Land, towards Ovillers.

⁴⁵ Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, p. 97.

This line was to connect VIII Divnl. HQ, when they advanced [...] with III Corps HQ, and was later to have been used by III Corps and Army HQ, in turn, when they advanced. These lines gave uninterrupted service, during the battle, throughout the VIII Divnl. area (thereby evoking General Hudson's especial comment)...⁴⁶

The build up of men and material, especially of guns and ammunition, was commented on by all.

Others found that old colleagues, friends from officer-training days or pre-war postings, were also present. Their efforts to assist in the great endeavour, to do their utmost to ensure success, engendered optimism and encouragement. Major R. Archer-Houblon, OC 32 Battery, RFA, made preparations to protect his gun pits from enemy fire. This entailed visiting the Royal Engineers to obtain engineer stores in order to acquire items to be used to revett gun-pits and provide overhead cover from observation and enemy fire. He later commented:

...I remember now, as clearly as could be, visiting "Buster" Browne at his HQ in Albert and planning out these requirements. His HQ was in an abandoned factory, the yards filled with all sorts of RE treasures and curiosities, and Buster himself, red faced and weather beaten, driving away all who had no business, but plotting with his real dependants how to defeat his own official efforts to suppress over-luxurious demanding of stores. Buster was with us in Cairo before the war, a most noble and gallant fellow; he was killed in the early battles of 1918, I think when the 8th Division was with the French on the Aisne...⁴⁷

It is worth noting the stores obtained to protect one 18-pdr gun:

*...10 8ft pit props 7" to 8" diam.
4 12 ft lengths 9" x 3" scantling
7 'I' girders, 9' 6"x3"
30 12 sheets corrugated iron, roof
30 12 sheets corrugated iron, sides*

⁴⁶. TNA: PRO, Official Historian's correspondence, Battle of the Somme, authors' surnames D-F, reference CAB45/133, letter Major O.M.T. Frost, dated 27 May 1930.

⁴⁷ "Buster" Browne was Major Austin Hanbury Brown, OC 2 Field Company RE, 8th Division, from 1915 until he was killed in action on 27 March 1918 in the course of 8th Division's rearguard actions on the Somme. See Liddle Collection, Archer-Houblon Papers.

75 ft run 1½" planking
 5lb 6" nails
 5lb 3" nails
 50 ft 4x3 timber
 8 trench boards
 ½ roll wire-netting
 250 sandbags...⁴⁸

Archer-Houblon also described one of the gun pits subsequently constructed in some detail:

...These pits were built nine feet wide; a greater width would have been more convenient, but in this case the width had to depend on the length of the girders available for supporting the roof. The pits were sunk 2½ feet into the ground. Five 8 inch pit props on each side supported the girders of the roof. About five feet of chalk was heaped on the roof, with a layer of flints one foot from the top to form a 'burster' which was to ensure that shells dropping on the pit burst before they had time to penetrate very far into the chalk. Powdered bricks made a good hard floor, or 'platform' in technical language. In the pit [...] were shelves taking 300 rounds of ammunition, all sorted into the different types of shrapnel and high explosive. Rifles for local defence, picks and shovels for digging a way out in event of a shell blocking the pit, notice boards with instructions and information for the firing, and spare gas helmets, were hung on the walls. Inside the pit there were also buckets of water and 'sponges' for keeping the guns cool during heavy firing [...] When the gun had been put into position inside, the back was closed up by building a 'parados' or wall of sandbags. In front of the mouth of the pit, called the 'embrasure', we dug holes to act as shell traps, the idea being that shells falling just in front of the pit would burst in the hole and be smothered, instead of sweeping with its fragments the whole interior of the pit. When the guns were not firing, screens were put in front of the embrasures, to prevent their showing up as a row of black marks to an airman over the German lines. The whole pit had a camouflage net supported on poles spread flat like a canopy over it. This made it invisible to any airman who might be examining the country from above...⁴⁹

Each gun was also provided with a magazine and a dug out to sleep four men at the side of the gun pit. Further ammunition magazines were built nearby. The whole position was laid out with trenches and dugouts so that it gave the appearance of a defensive redoubt rather than an artillery position. Alternative command and

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 80-1.

telephone exchange dugouts were also constructed, as were troop shelters that allowed all the gunners to rest away from the guns. Nearby were built a First Aid post, a canteen, a fitter's workshop, battery office, cookhouse and sergeants' mess. All gun and command positions were linked by buried and duplicated telephone wires.

After a re-organisation in May 1916, there were then eight batteries, making a total of forty-eight 18pdr guns, and three batteries, totalling eighteen 4.5-inch howitzers, in 8th Division's artillery component. Other infantry divisions had a larger establishment. There were also additional artillery allocated at Corps and Army level. There were some eighteen infantry divisions scheduled to participate in the first assault on the Somme. It can be seen, therefore, that the task of simply emplacing and protecting the artillery alone was in itself a prodigious feat of logistics and military engineering.

8th Division's artillery units were not the sole field-artillery units that supported the Division. III Corps had also made the decision that the artillery of 19th Division, its reserve division, would also take part supporting 8th and 34th Divisions.⁵⁰ The artillery of the other two divisions would also support 19th Division if the latter had cause to advance.

The artillery also laboured long and hard to provide observation posts, which would assist in their task. W.E. Duncan, Officer Commanding [OC] 55 Battery, XXXIII Brigade RFA, wrote of the attempts made to improve the battery's ability to fire on the enemy:

⁵⁰ See TNA: PRO, CRA III Corps war diary: November 1915 – July 1916, TNA, reference WO95/689, *Organisation and Employment of The Artillery IIIrd Corps*, dated 12 June 1916.

...it was apparent to me that our Observation Post for the opening battle would have to be in the front line, for from there only, could our tasks be observed. I knew, too, from experience that enemy counter-fire would concentrate on that area, and it would be fiercer than any that we had met before. We gradually heightened the trenches at the spot selected and then proceeded to build behind it. We made three large wooden cases each the size of an enormous coffin. On a dark night we carried the first one to the spot and sank it into a prepared pit. Next night we filled it in with concrete and drove in iron screw pickets to reinforce it. A few nights later we carried up the second "coffin", dovetailed it in above the first one and continued the process of reinforced concrete. The third case had a previously prepared framework for loopholes and this was set into position above the second. When the concrete had set we had a really strong buttress wall with loopholes of the correct size. We then provided overhead cover with iron girders and concrete working six hours every night for nearly a month. Then we dug a really deep shelter with a speaking tube leading to it. The front of the buttress was then draped artistically with the loophole shadow screened by an old boot and a broken bucket. Finally the false parapet in front was removed to allow a clear view. The Germans did not appear to notice any new work; the Somme section appeared to be still asleep...⁵¹

However, though there was justifiable satisfaction at the work carried out, the account above does not show any insight into the actions or intentions of the enemy.

The senior officers of the higher formations involved played their part in fostering optimism. Major-General A. A. Montgomery,⁵² Fourth Army's chief of staff, gave a lecture on the lessons learned from the Battle of Loos.⁵³ The lecture was given on various dates. These commenced on 14 December 1915 and the last lecture was given on 5 June 1916. The recipients included HQ Third Army, HQ Indian Cavalry Corps, the GHQ Intelligence course and the Schools of Instruction for Second, Third and

⁵¹ In June 1916, Duncan was OC 55 Howitzer Battery, XXXIII Brigade RFA. Liddle Collection, Brigadier W.E. Duncan Papers, reference GS 0478.

⁵² Archibald Amar Montgomery. Born 1871. RMA Woolwich 1891 Royal Artillery, 1899-1902 South Africa, 1905 Staff College. 1914 GSO2 4 Div. 1915 Chief of Staff IV Corps. Acting GSO1 4 Army when Rawlinson became GOC. 1916-18 Chief of Staff Fourth Army. 1919 Chief of Staff British Army on the Rhine [Army of Occupation], 1920-2 Dep. Chief of Staff India. 1923-6 GOC 1 Division. 1928-31. GOC Southern Command [UK]. 1931-3 Adjutant General. 1933-6 CIGS. Died 1947. Known as "Archie". Assumed surname of Montgomery-Massingberd in 1926 following an inheritance.

⁵³ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London [henceforth Liddell-Hart Archive], Field-Marshal Sir Archibald A. Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, "Lessons", Section X, 'Lecture on Battle of Loos' [Ref. 7/1].

Fourth Armies. As would be expected, having the major role in the forthcoming offensive and, as the lecture was given by its own senior staff officer, Fourth Army School of Instruction at Flixecourt was lectured to on four separate occasions. The last lecture was given to the School on 5 June 1916, less than one month before the start of the Somme offensive.

The lecture notes are worth quoting at length:

...2. Limited Objective.

[...] There can be little doubt that a limited objective such as was given to 47th Division [at Loos⁵⁴] is by far an easier task than what we may describe by contrast as the "all out" attack or attempt to break through the enemy's whole system of defences at one rush: but, because the limited objective is an easier task, it does not at all follow that it is always the correct one. [...] nor is it true that the selection of an "all out" form of attack was the cause of failure: the failure, was in fact, due to faulty method of execution and not to the selection of the wrong form of objective.

The nature of the objective given must depend firstly on the ultimate object at which we are aiming. If this object is simply to inflict local loss on the Germans in front of us, or to draw in as many local reserves as possible and prevent them being used elsewhere, then a limited objective is probably best: but if the object is to make a really serious attack so as not only to draw in the local reserves but also to cause a big stir in the enemy's ranks, then it becomes another question, and it is very doubtful whether the limited objective will serve such a purpose [...]

The "all out" attack undoubtedly entails risks, but no big results can be obtained in war without risk.

Moreover, under present conditions the amount of risk can be fairly estimated beforehand. Aeroplanes and other conditions have undoubtedly changed the aspects of modern war more than we yet quite realise. It has been said that war would be simple if one knew what was going on on the other side of the hill, but to all intents and purposes we are in that position and do now know what we have to deal with.

One can ascertain very fairly accurately beforehand from Intelligence sources and aeroplane photographs the main factors which affect the risks to be undertaken:-

The strength of the enemy on the front to be attacked.

The available supports and reserves, and approximately their strength and distance in rear of front line.

The extent and strength of the enemy's lines of defence.

The distance of his 2nd and 3rd line ~~between~~ behind the front line.

Knowing these approximately, we can calculate our chances of breaking

⁵⁴ Inserted for clarification.

through in one rush, remembering always that experience has shown us that what we gain in the first rush is the easiest gain and very often much more than we are finally left in possession of.

Also, we know that the Germans usually construct their third line far enough back to prevent its being effectively shelled by our guns from positions occupied before the first and second German lines are captured, but that their third line is seldom manned. The amount of risk involved depends on a very great extent, therefore, on whether the first rush will reach the German third line before it can be manned by their reserves or not [annotation in pencil- 'and of course on its strength'].

There are several other factors which affect the question, such as the effect of gas and smoke and the preliminary bombardment, and whether a panic has been cause or not. A panic such as occurred at LOOS renders the chance of reaching the enemy's lines in time very favourable, as any reserves coming up are likely to be swept away by fugitives.

A careful consideration of all these points should enable us to compute what the risks are and to decide whether we are justified in taking them in order to attain the object we have in view...⁵⁵

When the main points of Montgomery's lectures are examined in detail, the arguments he put forward were many. To his audience at the time they would appear to be a thorough, and therefore, convincing analysis formulated from hard-won experience. Montgomery stated the attack had to be on a grand scale to achieve grand results. He went on to state that the initial gains were the easiest to achieve, that the German Third Line could be reached and would be thinly manned by the enemy. Finally, due to modern intelligence from aircraft etc, there were no longer any surprises that the defence could conceal.

The recipients of these lectures at the Schools of Instruction were from two of the most important command levels within the army. Rawlinson wrote in his diary for 10 April 1916:

...I went to the [Fourth] Army School at Flixecourt today to give an opening address to the Cmdg [Commanding] Officers class there – They are an

⁵⁵ Ibid.

*appreciative audience and I was very pleased with the look of the students – The School is doing first rate work in the way of educating Company Officers and it will do good work with Cmdg officers too...*⁵⁶

Montgomery's lectures were from the *de facto* Chief of Staff of an Army that was the formation in charge of and responsible for, what was to date, the British Army's greatest ever operation. The recipients of the lectures were the battalion and company commanders. With regard to the ethos and morale of a unit, these two groups were probably among the most influential, especially the battalion commanders. These lieutenant-colonels, majors and captains were the officers looked to for leadership and guidance by all those junior to them. John Baynes, himself a former battalion commander, wrote:

*...The importance of a Commanding Officer cannot be overemphasized. It is perhaps fair to say that as far as the morale of an Army is concerned the Commanding Officers of battalions and Regiments are the vital people [...] At the unit level one man's personality and efficiency are decisive in creating the spirit of his command, and it is almost frightening to see how the character of a Commanding Officer can be reflected in his battalion [...] Certainly it is possible for the experienced eye to judge quite soon from working with a battalion the quality of its commander. At no level in the military hierarchy does anyone have such direct power over the lives of those below him. Not only does his approach to all the myriad activities which make up the life of a battalion permeate down to the humblest private, but all his subordinate officers, commissioned and non-commissioned, take their line from him in the running of their particular sub-units...*⁵⁷

James Dunn, medical officer and chronicler of 2nd Royal Welsh Fusiliers, wrote, about the efforts of a new commanding officer, to revitalise what he considered a slack battalion:

*...To a detached onlooker at close quarters the supreme importance of the character of a commanding officer to the efficiency of a battalion was strikingly shown...*⁵⁸

⁵⁶ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, entry for 10 April 1916, RWLN 1/5.

⁵⁷ Baynes, *Morale*, p. 110.

⁵⁸ J.C. Dunn (ed.), *The War the Infantry Knew: Service in France & Belgium with 2/RWF* (London: Cardinal Penguin, 1987), p. 180.

Montgomery's lecture, giving a detailed analysis of what had happened at the British Army's previous 'big battle' of the current war, would have been valued by the recipients. The BEF was constantly evaluating what had happened and why. As can be seen from the rapid dissemination of Stephen's report on Bois Grenier, all levels were eager to use what had happened before in order to predict what might happen. Furthermore, these officers came from an organisation that was an extremely hierarchical part of a society, which was at the time deferential to those seen as superior in rank, wealth and status. The Regular British Army was not an organisation where subordinates were able to question what an officer very senior in rank had stated were the lessons to be learned.⁵⁹ Doing so might well risk an officer's career as a professional soldier. Therefore, at this stage of the war, at the level of battalion command, it would take a brave officer who would question the professional wisdom of an Army Chief of Staff, especially one who had seemingly made a thorough study of previous experience and was willing to impart the knowledge gained. It is not difficult to assume that the attitudes of the units taking part were affected by the seeming optimism passed on by officers returning from the courses that Montgomery had lectured to. The lessons and information learnt by those attending were disseminated to all who would listen or who would benefit. This was done by formal lecture, conferences or by informal anecdote.

The lecture given by Montgomery demonstrates that it is too simplistic to state that one school of thought led by Haig, and later Gough, were proponents of 'breakthrough', while on the other hand Rawlinson and his staff believed that 'bite

⁵⁹ See Travers, *The Killing Ground*, Chapter 1.

and hold' would be the most effective method. Haig and Montgomery appear to be not far apart in their belief that the Germans would be thrown into confusion during the initial assault. Furthermore, Montgomery's lecture stated that the aim of the offensive was to achieve substantial results and that a 'limited' offensive was not the way to achieve this.

All planning for the initial assault assumed that the First German Position, and a substantial part of the Second Position, would fall to the attackers. This is what 8th Division had achieved at Neuve Chapelle and Bois Grenier. The failure at Aubers Ridge was viewed as an anomaly. It was believed that the attack had failed because the assault in columns had left gaps between the points attacked. These gaps had exposed the attacks to enfilade fire from adjacent enemy positions. Now, on the Somme, the British Army was to attack along the whole front with no gaps left between the assaulting units.

The main problem envisaged by the planners was how to consolidate the ground gained from enemy counterattacks. Once these had been repulsed, reserves and the artillery would move forward for the next 'heave' further into the German positions. Therefore, though warnings were made such as, "...the hardest part of the nut is the shell', and if we do not get through the front trench it is no use contemplating operations further back...",⁶⁰ these appear to be lip service. Most operational planning was concerned with the movement of formations forward, the problem of moving artillery support and the passing of formations through one another.⁶¹

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, "Conference held at Fourth Army Head-quarters 17th May 1916".

⁶¹ Ibid.

On 12 June 1916 8th Division issued the preliminary operation order for the forthcoming offensive.⁶² The plan envisaged that all three of 8th Division's infantry brigades would be in the front line. 23 Brigade would be on the right, adjacent to 34 Division. 25 Brigade would be in the centre and 70 Brigade on the left, with 32nd Division of X Corps, on its left. Two battalions from each brigade would lead the assault with the other two in support. The preliminary orders detailed how each brigade was to carry out its assault:

*...The Assaulting Columns will go right through above ground and special parties are to be told off from the leading Companies for cutting wire, blocking side trenches and bombing down communication trenches. Special bombing parties will be detailed by each brigade on their flanks to join up with the Brigade next to them...*⁶³

Worth noting is the use of the phrase "assaulting columns". This appears to be in direct contrast to the more widespread terminology of 'waves' and 'lines'. The Fourth Army conference of 12 June had made the following point:

*...Sufficient use is not made of small columns during an advance. The tendency of a great many units is to deploy too quickly. Formation in small columns should be maintained as far as possible. The men are then under the control of their platoon and section commanders, and there is no advantage in extending them until it is rendered necessary by the enemy's fire...*⁶⁴

What was envisaged was an approach in column until near the enemy forward position; the unit would 'shake-out' into a linear formation and carry out the assault. This tactic is not unlike the pre-war tactics, put forward by many, that had grown out

⁶² TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary January – June 1916, ref. WO95/1674, "8th Division Preliminary operation order no 107", dated 12 June 1916.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, "Conference held at Fourth Army Head-quarters 12th June 1916".

of the lessons learned during the Boer War.⁶⁵ However, Fourth Army as a formation was not prescriptive in laying down tactics to its subordinate formations and units. These were allowed to work out their own solutions. Therefore, with regard to 8th Division, while units in 70 Brigade were told that they would advance in measured line,⁶⁶ others, such as those of 23 Brigade, who had the immense expanse of Mash Valley to cover, went out into No-Man's Land, crawling forward to form up in front of the German line.⁶⁷

The timings were rehearsed time and time again in the training areas behind the front line. All were carried out under the eyes of the staff and the commanders. General Sir Henry Rawlinson wrote in his diary:

...Querrieu June 1st [1916] A lovely morning – before breakfast I rode out to see 32 and 8 Div do a practice attack over the between LA HOUSSAY and FRANC-VILLERS- They made a good many mistakes but the exercise was a useful one. The gap between the III and X Corps was very noticeable [...]
*Querrieu June 1st [...] This afternoon I visited the 34 Divn and found they were not as afar forward in their preparation as I could wish – Williams and Mayles had not thought out their details sufficiently – Hudson and the 8th Divn were both prepared...*⁶⁸

A preparatory five-day bombardment was initially envisaged.⁶⁹ Built into the fire programme were increases in the tempo of the bombardment at set times every day and at set targets. Rockets were to be fired in order to make the enemy presume an

⁶⁵ See Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, Chapter 3 'Infantry during the First two Years of the War', especially p.51.

⁶⁶ See Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, pp. 93-4 (especially the comment of Corporal. J.H. Tansley, 9th Yorkshire & Lancashire).

⁶⁷ See Prior & Wilson, *The Somme*, pp. 114-5.

⁶⁸ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, RVLN 1/5, diary entry for 01 June 1916.

⁶⁹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary & narrative of operations: July – December 1916, reference WO95/1675, Section 6, 'Preparation for Assault' in "8th Division Preliminary Operation Order No. 107", dated 12/06/1916,. See also TNA PRO, III Corps war diary January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, "Conference held at Fourth Army Headquarters, 12th June 1916" (ref G.X.3/1 C.), Section 17.

infantry assault was imminent.⁷⁰ This was a repeat of tactics used in the battles of 1915, carried out in order to deceive the enemy as to the time the British would carry out the expected assault.

On the day of the assault, labelled 'Z' day, eight minutes before the hour of the assault, the enemy's front line trenches were to be subjected to a hurricane bombardment by the Division's 3-inch Stokes mortar batteries. The role of the artillery during the infantry attack was to be as follows:

*...After the assault of the enemy's front line the subsequent movement of the infantry will be assisted and regulated by a system of barrages which will move back slowly...*⁷¹

However, there is no mention of the actions to be carried out by the field or heavy artillery at the time of the assault. The Artillery time table stated that the artillery would fire onto the BLUE line at Zero hour and then to the PINK & YELLOW lines at Zero + 3 minutes then from the PINK line to the GREEN line at Zero + 5 minutes and from the YELLOW line to the GREEN line at Zero + 12 minutes respectively.⁷² The GREEN line was the objective to be reached by 8 Division by the end of the first day. This was to be on the eastern outskirts of Pozieres, some 2000 yards east of the German First Position. Therefore, within 12 minutes after the initial assault, the artillery would be firing at some real distance from where the infantry would be. More importantly, this would be at the very time the infantry would be attempting to break into the front line German trenches. For the infantry to advance behind the artillery

⁷⁰ TNA: PRO, CRA III Corps war diary, ref. WO95/689, 'Artillery Instruction no. 21 for 'V' Day', issued 15 June 1916 by GOC RA III Corps.

⁷¹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675, "8th Division Preliminary operation order no 107" dated 12 June 1916.

⁷² Ibid, "8th Division Preliminary operation order no 107", Appendix B (Artillery Barrage), dated 12 June 1916.

lifts, covering the distances in the time allowed would require them to move at speeds that would be difficult for modern infantry in mechanised infantry combat vehicles. For the infantry of 1916, such timings were completely unrealistic. Even more unhelpful, was an addendum to Appendix B, which gave the timings that prohibited the artillery firing *west* of certain lines, that is back towards the front line trenches. For example, for the GREEN line on 8th Division's front, the artillery could not fire west of that line after Zero + 5 minutes. Therefore, the artillery plan moved fire away far too quickly and then prohibited fire being brought back to where the infantry would still be fighting. The tasks and timings given to the artillery did not help the infantry. Each arm would be fighting its own battle according to plans that were not realistically coordinated. The artillery plan was also in contravention of the spirit of co-operation between arms propounded at the Fourth Army conference of 12 June 1916. This stated:

*...In the first phase of the operations a time table has been drawn up to ensure the closest co-operation between the artillery and the infantry. When that time table has been completed, and it is desired to switch the artillery from one objective to another, communication between the two arms becomes of the very first importance. Headquarters of heavy artillery groups should be sufficiently close to the headquarters of Divisional Commanders to ensure that there can be no delay in transmitting the requirement of the infantry to the heavy artillery...*⁷³

Even this remark is not as helpful to the infantry as might be supposed on initial examination. It does not allow any flexibility until the initial programme has taken place. If the programme was inherently flawed, as was the case with that for the divisions in III Corps, then later co-operation between artillery and infantry would be of little use. What was required was flexible support for the assaulting infantry at the

⁷³ TNA: PRO, II Corps war diary January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, “Conference held at Fourth Army Headquarters, 12th June 1916” (ref G.X.3/1 C.), Section 16 (a).

time of the assault and for all the length of time they required. This was exactly what 8th Division did not have as a result of the III Corps artillery plan.

That the planners on the staff considered the advance would be rapid is indicated by the fact that the site for the proposed RE dump to be used by the artillery was, as Archer-Houblon of 32 Battery RFA, wrote at a grid ref, "...X8c4.2 i.e. in the then German trenches just south of Ovillers..."⁷⁴ Reinforcing the belief that the advance would be relatively rapid, Archer-Houblon further noted the care that was taken regarding the arrangements that would be required to cross the trench lines. He referred to notes made contemporaneously in a book kept for that purpose. In this, he wrote that he was greatly concerned about the temporary bridges to be used for trench-crossing and that the advancing artillery would be in danger not only of cutting their own signal wire in the advance but would also not have enough wire to cover the distance traversed. He wrote:

...The time had come for a conference with the men, and I had noted down some of the points to tell them. The gunners were to be told about the 'bridges, packing up, quiet, digging, points about the guns', and cutting wires: the telephonists about slow, and, similarly, about cutting the wires [...] This done the next point seems to have been the working out of the wire for the telephonists [...] For this equipment we had, according to the notes, as mobile wire 5 miles of D3 [a heavy red coloured wire] and 1/2 mile of D1 [the light black coloured pre-war telephone wire]; and also 4 1/2 miles of 'Japanese' which was, I think, a thin very light 'enamel' wire intended to be left on the ground when no longer required...⁷⁵

One arrangement in the planning for the assault is worthy of remark. Much was made of the need for consolidation after the capture of the enemy positions. However, 8th Division still did not have its own pioneer battalion to support the work of the Royal

⁷⁴ See Liddle Collection, Archer-Houblon Papers, *A Somme Note-Book*, page xiv. Archer-Houblon's post war comment was that this was optimistic.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, page xxvi.

Engineer field companies. Therefore, 5th South Wales Borderers, from 19th Division, the reserve division of III Corps, were lent to 8th Division. 8th Division's dedicated pioneer battalion did not join until 2 July 1916.⁷⁶

Final Arrangements

The timings for the assault were changed by the delays caused by the alteration of the artillery timetable. This was due to heavy rain making all the roads, except those that were metalled, impassable. This made the re-supply of ammunition for the heavy artillery in particular very difficult. The front line trenches were very wet and in some cases flooded. Therefore the date of the attack, already put back from 25 June 1916 to 29 June, was further put back to 1 July 1916.⁷⁷

During the bombardment, it was realised that the trench mortars and howitzers were not as effective as predicted in clearing the barbed wire entanglements in front of the enemy positions. Captain Hanbury-Sparrow of 2nd Royal Berkshires, 25 Brigade, stated that his own commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Haig, was asked to ascertain if the wire was sufficiently cut. He wrote to the Official Historian after the war:

...About June 28th Col Roland Haig was sent up by Div to report if he considered the wire on the 1st German position was cut, as it should have been by the artillery programme.⁷⁸ He reported himself doubtful & in consequence the artillery was brought back from the wire of the 2nd objective to that of the 1st, General Hudson commenting that it was no good dealing with the wire further on till that in front had been demolished. I am very

⁷⁶ See K W Mitchinson, *Pioneer Battalions in the Great War: Organised and Intelligent Labour* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), p. 85.

⁷⁷ See *British Official History 1916, Vol. I*, pp 50-1 and Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914 – 1918*, p. 191.

⁷⁸ In the 8th Division Order of Battle in the III Corps war diary, he is shown as Major R. Haig DSO, the Divisional Sniping Officer. TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary: January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672. .

*doubtful if the wire of the 2nd objective was ever cut...*⁷⁹

Archer-Houblon wrote:

*...The original plan had contemplated the cutting of the German wire by trench mortars and howitzers; but after two or three days the progress was not considered satisfactory, and we 18-pounders were called upon to carry out the work. This was in addition to our own tasks, and it meant that once again we had the horrid responsibility for clearing a passage for the attacking battalions...*⁸⁰

Problems with cutting the enemy barbed wire created other diversions of effort. The following point was made at the Fourth Army conference on 12 May:

*...12. The wire-cutting problem is not an easy one. In some cases, the more distant wire can be cut by 60-pdrs., but it is very difficult to tell whether it has been effectively cut. Aeroplane observation, in combination with observation from the ground, helps...*⁸¹

Apart from the obvious query concerning how ground observers would be able to check the state of enemy wire on the German Second Position in places like Pozieres or Longueval, there is a lack of recognition of the further hurdle that this solution would create. The 60-pounders were the main counter battery weapon. Putting these valuable weapons to such a use would further weaken the efforts being made to reduce the effectiveness of the enemy artillery.

The Fourth Army conference of 12 June noted that:

...Most corps have allotted certain batteries to answer calls from aeroplanes in connection with counter-battery work. Though these batteries may be allotted other tasks they must be careful to answer the calls of the aeroplane otherwise an opportunity may be lost of dealing with a hostile battery which is

⁷⁹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's correspondence: Battle of the Somme – Authors' surnames G – H, TNA, reference CAB45/134, letter, no date, Lieutenant-Colonel A.A. Hanbury-Sparrow.

⁸⁰ Liddle Collection, Archer-Houblon Papers, p. 86.

⁸¹ TNA: PRO, III Corps war diary January – June 1916, ref. WO95/672, "Conference held at Fourth Army Head-quarters 17th May 1916".

*known to be in action...*⁸²

This comment illustrates that there was no mandatory requirement for a Corps to have dedicated counter-battery artillery units. Even if they were in existence, they could be used for other tasks. There does not seem to be a recognition that a battery engaged on these other tasks, that is wire cutting, supporting an assault or engaged in harassing fire, would be far too slow to react to targets that would inevitably present themselves very briefly.

The German artillery was a very professional body. Through training and experience, they knew that they would either have to fire briefly and then resume the camouflage of inaction or move very quickly to alternative positions in order to avoid the expected British retaliation. Any enemy battery opening fire would be under no illusion that it would be able to continue firing from a position for any length of time. Such poor insight into the tactics of the opposing artillery confirms what Prior and Wilson have written: "...counter-battery was given little prominence in any of Rawlinson's or Haig's plans for the Somme".⁸³

It is not clear why this disregard arose. It is possible there was a belief that suppressing German artillery should not be given as much a priority as cutting German wire or the demolition of German machine guns. It had been the German machine guns that had caused the heavy casualties at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the view was held that the enemy artillery would not be a difficulty until after the break in and subsequent

⁸² Ibid, "*Conference held at Fourth Army Head-quarters 12th June 1916*".

⁸³ Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 55.

consolidation of the German First Position. Such a dispersion of their efforts meant that the efforts of the artillery were not concentrated on the urgent tasks in hand. These provided further indication of the continuing dilution of the objectives set for the artillery. As Bidwell and Graham perceptively commented, "...the artillery effort was spread across the front and in depth, too, being less than effective anywhere..."⁸⁴

As the day for assault approached, all ranks concentrated on the forthcoming battle. As part of the deception plan, patrolling and raiding continued as normal. For example, 2nd Royal Berkshires carried out a successful raid on the night of 25-26 June.⁸⁵ However, as this was at the same time as the bombardment, it is difficult to see how the Germans could be led to believe that the British would not be attacking sooner rather than later. In order to cause casualties and disorientate the enemy, on the 26 and 27 June gas and smoke was discharged towards the German lines but on 28 June smoke only was used.⁸⁶

Within the ranks of 8th Division, hopes were high that the assault would be successful. The 8th Division history commented:

*...So far as the infantry themselves were concerned, all had been done that experience could suggest or ingenuity or foresight could devise [...] It did not seem too much that, when the day of the great attack came, the division would succeed in gaining, or at least nearly approaching, its objectives on the further edge of Pozieres; and so would take a prominent and effective part in the realization of the general objectives of the British Army...*⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, p. 82.

⁸⁵ See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 68. However, one result of the raid was that Lieutenant-Colonel Sandys of 2nd Middlesex became more concerned about the task facing his battalion. See Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, pp. 98-9.

⁸⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675, "Report on the Action of the 8th Division in the Operations About the River Somme on the 1st July 1916".

⁸⁷ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 67-8.

However, it cannot be forgotten that 8th Division would only be able to attempt its tasks if the formations on either flank were successful. Only then would the infantry be able to cross the expanse of No-Man's Land, especially in the area of Mash Valley.

1 July 1916: The Assault of 8th Division

The assault on the Somme that has become known in British military history as 'The First of July [1916]' was a terrible experience for most of the infantry units involved. It was the worst single event to befall the British Army in its whole history. John Terraine wrote:

*...July 1st 1916 was a [...] catastrophe in the British Army's history. Only on the extreme right of the Fourth Army, beside the French [...], were any significant gains made and held. The total British casualties for the day were 57470 officers and men, of whom over 20000 were killed and missing...*⁸⁸

8th Division began its assault at 7.30 am. The infantry were out in No-Man's Land ready to assault as soon as the artillery barrage lifted. Captain H.B.W. Savile, in the leading waves of 2nd Middlesex (23 Brigade), stated that, "...the leading units of the 23rd Brigade left their assembly trenches at times which were calculated to bring them to the German front line trenches as our barrage lifted at 7.30..."⁸⁹

Both leading battalions of 23 Brigade began the long crawl to just before the enemy front line. However, as the division's history states, this availed them little. "...During this manoeuvre, and notwithstanding the intensity of the covering bombardment, they were subjected to a searching fire from rifles and machine guns and sustained many

⁸⁸ *General Jack's Diary* (2000), p. 150.

⁸⁹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors R-S, ref. CAB45/137, Letter, H.B. Savile, dated 19 May 1930,.

casualties...”⁹⁰

Captain Savile amplified this:

*...There were at least 2 Machine Guns (probably Machine Gun Corps Weapons) traversing our front line trenches from the moment our intensive barrage opened at 7 a.m. Our heaviest casualties occurred as we started to descend into the narrow bottom of Mash Valley and were caused by Machine Guns firing from our flanks (Ovillers and La Boisselle). I do not believe that these guns were anywhere near the German trenches we were assaulting but were in specially prepared positions either in front or behind the trenches...*⁹¹

2nd Middlesex, who had to cross the vast expanse of Mash Valley, suffered tremendous casualties in its first three waves. The fourth wave broke into the German trenches and fought their way into the support trench system. However, after heavy fighting they were forced back into the shell holes of No-Man’s land. 2nd Devonshires, the left hand battalion of the brigade, also suffered very heavy casualties and only some two hundred men reached the enemy trenches. In the fighting in the German front line, about half became casualties. As a result the unit was unable to keep possession of the enemy front trenches and was also forced back out into No-Man’s Land. About 8.25 a.m. three and a half companies of the 2nd West Yorkshires attempted to cross No-Man’s Land. Almost all were killed or wounded, very few reaching the enemy front line. The remaining battalion, 2nd Scottish Rifles, had replaced the 2nd West Yorkshires in the British front lines. At 09.30 a.m. they were ordered not to advance.

⁹⁰ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 71.

⁹¹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian’s Correspondence, Battle of the Somme, Authors R-S, ref. CAB45/137, letter from H.B. Savile, dated 19 May 1930. It is not clear what Savile means by ‘Machine Gun Corps Weapons’ as the German Army had no such body. It is presumed he meant dedicated heavy machine guns firing in such a manner as to keep an area free of British movement. Worth noting is his supposition that these machine guns were not in the trenches but behind or in front of them.

25 Brigade was in the centre. 2nd Royal Berkshires advanced on its right. As soon as they left their trenches they came under such heavy fire that only a small party reached the German front line. 2nd Lincolnshires were on the left of 2nd Royal Berkshires. They also came under very heavy rifle and machine gun fire. This fire was from the front and from their left, from the direction of Nab Valley and the Thiepval spur. Despite heavy casualties, 2nd Lincolnshires managed to take control of some 800 yards of the enemy front line at the centre of their attack. However, their right flank failed to get into the enemy position, suffering the same fate as the adjacent 2nd Royal Berkshires on their right. In command of the party in the German front line was the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Lincolnshires, Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald Bastard. He took charge of the troops who had arrived in the German position. They were very few in number, approximately 100 or so.⁹² Though attempts were made to get into the German support trenches, none was successful. Commenting on the difficulties encountered when the attacking infantry attempted to consolidate in the German front line, Lieutenant-Colonel Bastard wrote, "...Attempts were made to consolidate and make blocks,⁹³ but the trench was so badly knocked about that very little cover was obtainable..."⁹⁴

The 1st Royal Irish Rifles had even less success than those in front of them. Moving up in support of the 2nd Royal Berkshires and the 2nd Lincolnshires, two companies advanced into No-Man's Land. Only one company managed to get troops into the

⁹² Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, p. 144.

⁹³ 'Blocks' was the term used to indicate the place where a trench had been blocked by sandbags, barbed wire etc so that the enemy could not advance back down the trench and recapture it. They also physically and morally delineated the success of the attacker.

⁹⁴ Simpson, *The Lincolnshires*, p. 169. This is an example of how enlightenment can be gained from facts mentioned in a regimental history but not in any official account. It is clear that the German trenches were not uniformly damaged or undamaged but in varying states of disrepair.

German front line. The rest of the battalion suffered very heavy losses when attempting to reach their jumping off position, the British front line. The losses of the 1st Royal Irish Rifles demonstrated one major difficulty. Owing to the congestion in the communication trenches, the advancing support troops tried to move forward by getting out of the trenches and moving quickly above ground. This exposed them to the heavy machine gun fire coming from both flanks. Heavy casualties were also caused by the German artillery, which had been left relatively unmolested by the almost non-existent counter battery fire referred to above.

The pattern of events that befell 25 Brigade was a repetition of what had fallen 23 Brigade on the right. The initial assaults managed to get very small parties into the enemy front trenches. However, the support units were unable to move freely into the British front line let alone cross No-Man's Land. Whatever tactic was tried, whether advance in line or movement by small parties or groups, none were successful in feeding reinforcements to the beleaguered parties in the German front trenches or stuck in front of the enemy parapet. Attempts were made to bring the artillery fire back but, as Brigadier-General Pollard, GOC 25 Brigade, wrote after the war, "...The barrage was by then somewhere above Pozieres. In those days however it was not possible to switch back without considerable delay..."⁹⁵

The tragedies that befell the right and centre brigades of 8th Division were repeated on a greater scale, if that were possible, by 70 Brigade, on the left flank. The brigade was a New Army formation, which had been exchanged with 24 Brigade, the latter transferring to the former's parent division, 23rd Division, some seven months before.

⁹⁵ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors M-P, ref. CAB45/136, Brigadier-General J.H.W. Pollard, letter dated 19 May 1930.

The types of formations used by the battalions of 70 Brigade did not follow a set pattern but were altered to suit the task they were set. The two leading battalions, 8th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and 8th York and Lancasters, crossed the parapet in four waves. As each company had a platoon in each wave, in effect each company formed a column of platoons echeloned behind the one in front. The support battalion, 9th York and Lancasters, advanced in two waves, each a half battalion of two companies, covering the whole brigade frontage.

The reserve battalion, 11th Sherwood Foresters, was in the same formation. Its first wave was to consolidate on the German First Position when captured. The second wave was to pass through it and consolidate on the German Second Position that is on the line running from Mouquet Farm to the road running from Albert to Pozieres.⁹⁶

The tragedy that befell 70 Brigade was made all the more awful because at first it was more successful than the other two brigades. The two lead battalions, 8th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, on the right, and 8th York and Lancasters, on the left sector, moved off from the British trenches at 7.27 a.m. and made a quick passage across No-Man's Land, across the feature called Nab Valley. By 7.30 a.m. they were through the German front line, receiving the few casualties they had suffered on the far left from machine guns in the direction of Thiepval. At this time, German artillery fire was not intense.

The advancing troops made a deep penetration as far as the German support line but fell back to stay in line with the troops of 25 Brigade on the right. A worrying sign

⁹⁶ TNA PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors S-Y, ref. CAB45/191, Lieutenant-Colonel Harold F. Watson, letter dated 10 August 1930.

was that, though the centre and right companies of 8th York and Lancasters on the right made progress, the casualties on the far left flank became heavier and heavier as the machine gun fire from the direction of Thiepval grew in intensity until it was very heavy. The situation became progressively worse. The German artillery was now shelling very heavily the area behind the British front line. It became increasingly difficult to move up the support and reserve units. The 9th York and Lancasters left the British front trenches at 08.40 a.m. Within the space of ten minutes their passage had become far worse than that of their comrades who had preceded them. They had already suffered delay from communication trenches blocked with dead and dying. Again, though the centre made good progress to the German support line, the flanks, right as well as left, suffered from the very heavy enemy machine gun fire.

The events that followed are those that made the fate of 70 Brigade one of the most tragic of the whole day. Major W.C. Wilson, the brigade-major 70 Brigade, was a participant in events in 70 Brigade HQ.

...We knew that the 25th Brigade on our right were back in their original front line, which meant that the high ground North of OVILLERS which commanded the NAB Valley was still in enemy hands. We also believed that the left Brigade of the Xth Corps, which at first had reported a successful attack, was also back in their original line. Here again, the high ground South of Thiepval entirely enfiladed the NAB Valley. On the other hand, the enemy front line opposite the 70th Brigade was certainly in our hands and it was almost certain we still had elements fighting in the German 2nd and 3rd lines...

⁹⁷

Thus, believing that the other brigades on the right, and those of 32nd Division of X Corps had been repulsed, Brigadier-General Gordon, GOC 70 Brigade, was faced

⁹⁷ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors T-Y & unidentified, ref. CAB45/138, letter from Lieutenant-Colonel W.C. Wilson, dated 18 June 1930, duplicated Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors S-Y, TNA, ref. CAB45/191.

with a most difficult decision. He was aware that his forward battalions had fought their way into the German trenches and were possibly still fighting there. Major W.C. Wilson, continued:

...The 70th Brigade still had the 11th Sherwood Foresters moving forward automatically to go over the top. In view of the fact that the NAB Valley they would have to cross was enfiladed from both sides, and that the enemy's barrage was more intense than at any other period of the day, it looked to be a terrible sacrifice of life and an attempt almost certainly doomed to failure to put our last troops into such a forlorn hope rather than keep them against a possible counter attack. The 9th York and Lancs., who had preceded the 11th Sherwood Foresters, had lost 50% of their troops before they had even passed our trench system. Similarly, the 11th Sherwood Foresters were losing men at every step during the movement forward to cross our original front line. The impression General Gordon had was that the 19th Division was moving forward automatically in rear and as long as we had a man in hand it was the duty of the Brigade Commander to put him into the fight, especially as there was a gap in front of us...⁹⁸

Wilson was of the view that Gordon believed that every man needed to be sent forward. Gordon appeared to have interpreted matters far differently to the other brigade commanders. 70 Brigade had put all its battalions into the assault while the other two brigade commanders had kept battalions in reserve. Lieutenant-Colonel H.W. Hill, OC XLV (45) Brigade, RFA, was in 70 Brigade HQ. He stated that the reason why 11th Sherwood Foresters were sent forward was not solely the responsibility of Brigadier-General Gordon.

...After the failure of the first attack and when General Gordon had only a few men left – mostly Sherwood Foresters – he asked for further instructions and the Headquarters, 8 Division ordered the remainder to go forward. At that time, the Germans were practically manning their whole front line system, but Artillery Fire could not well be directed upon it as our men were laying about all over No Man's Land close up to the German trenches...⁹⁹

Brigadier-General Gordon sent his last battalion forward. By 08.56 a.m., when the

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors G-L, ref. CAB45/189, letter from Lieutenant-Colonel H.W. Hill, dated 14 May 1930.

first wave of 11th Sherwood Foresters was crossing No-Man's Land, the hostile machine gun fire from both flanks was very heavy. The leading wave of, "...the Battalion had to crawl forward on hands and knees..."¹⁰⁰

Major W.C. Wilson commented that Brigadier-General Gordon was aware of the consequences of his actions that morning:

*...it must be understood that General Gordon fully realised the gravity of the order he was giving when he ordered the 11th Sherwood Foresters to continue their forward movement. There was a tense silence in the dug-out after General Gordon had given his decision and General Gordon was never quite the same man again from that day...*¹⁰¹

The order to Gordon may have been correct if there were still troops in the German trenches that were holding on, continuing to resist German attempts to remove them. Even if Gordon made the decision himself, it might have been correct if the case was still valid. However, by this time, whether there were still British soldiers carrying out a meaningful fight were unclear at the very least.

Lieutenant-Colonel H.F. Watson, Commanding Officer 11th Sherwood Foresters, wrote afterwards that his battalion had been slower in moving to than the planning had allowed for in moving to the British frontline. This was due the number of wounded blocking the communication trenches. He added that:

¹⁰⁰ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1675, "Report on the Action of the 8th Division in the Operations About the River Somme on the 1st July 1916". The preceding narrative has been taken in the main from this report. Major [now Lieutenant-Colonel] W.C. Wilson, in his correspondence with the official historian states that Brigadier-General Gordon had to make his decision about 10.00 a.m. The difference in timings could be due to the fact that 11th Sherwood Foresters were in two waves. See TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors T-Y & unidentified, ref. CAB45/138, letter from Lt.-Col. W.C. Wilson, dated 18 June 1930, duplicated Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors S-Y, TNA, ref. CAB45/191.

¹⁰¹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors T-Y & unidentified, ref. CAB45/138, letter from Lt.-Col. W.C. Wilson, dated 18 June 1930, duplicated Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors S-Y, TNA, ref. CAB45/191.

*...the first wave got well away under a heavy fire and in some cases got to the German front line and possibly further. About 9.45 a.m. it became apparent that the Germans were back in their front line, and I received orders to consolidate it with my second wave. This I endeavoured to do, but owing to the machine-gun fire which was terribly heavy from both flanks as well as from the front hardly a man reached the trench...*¹⁰²

Lieutenant-Colonel Watson, most of the battalion's HQ staff and almost all the second wave became casualties crossing No-Man's Land.¹⁰³ He himself lay out in No-Man's Land till about 2 a.m. the next morning.¹⁰⁴

The second wave of 11th Sherwood Foresters was allowed to proceed though by this time it was known the Germans had regained at least some of their front line. The British Official History's perception of events is in complete contrast to those held by Wilson and Hill. The Official History states that Gordon made his decision to proceed because, "... In view of the situation on his flanks, where his neighbours seemed to be progressing, he decided to do so..."¹⁰⁵

It is not known why the Official Historian stated that Gordon was affected by events on the flanks. It would appear from the accounts given above that Gordon was influenced by the possibility that his troops were still fighting in the German trench system and that 8th Division Head Quarters' orders were that progress had to be made. Gordon appeared to know full well that the attacks on both of his flanks had failed but he attempted to carry them out.

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁴ Poignantly, Lieutenant-Colonel Watson stated that he did not return to the Somme until September 1916. He went over the ground covered on 1 July and found most of his dead soldiers lying where they had fallen

¹⁰⁵ See *British Official History 1916, Vol. I*, p. 389.

The situation for 8th Division by mid-morning on 1 July was not one that gave any hope that they could achieve the mission set them. "...By about 10 a.m. the whole of the 70th Brigade, except for about 100 men of the 9th Bn. York & Lancs. on the left flank had left our trenches and all communication with our troops in the German trenches had been cut off..."¹⁰⁶ At approximately the same hour, small parties of 23 and 25 Brigade were still fighting in the German trenches at Mash Valley or in No-Man's Land. The commanders of 23 and 25 Brigades asked for the barrage to be brought back to the German front line and Division asked for the views of the front-line commanders as to a mutually suitable time. Brigadier-General Pollard, GOC 25 Brigade, wrote afterwards:

*...Half an hour later I was asked by Division whether I really wanted it [the barrage] brought back, and I replied that I did, stating that of course I realised that some of my men might still be in the German front system, but that they were probably very few, if any. Later [...] I was ordered to consult with Tuson [GOC 23 Brigade] about a fresh attack but we decided that with what we had left it would be useless sacrifice...*¹⁰⁷

Sometime in the late morning or early afternoon, a party of fifty or so men from 70 Brigade, described as being mainly bombers, attempted to advance up the sunken road leading up Nab Valley to Mouquet Farm. They were wiped out by a German machine gun placed to fire directly down the road.

Just after midday, GOC III Corps placed 56 Brigade from 19th Division at 8th Division's disposal for a further attack. At 12.35 pm 8th Division was ordered to

¹⁰⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1675, "Report on the Action of the 8th Division in the Operations About the River Somme on the 1st July 1916".

¹⁰⁷ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors M-P, ref. CAB45/136, Brigadier-General J.H.W. Pollard, letter dated 19 May 1930.

attack again. The commanders of 23 and 25 Brigades decided that 5 pm was the most appropriate time. 70 Infantry Brigade was ordered to attack at the same time. At approximately 3.30 pm, III Corps were informed that no troops from 8th Division appeared to be still fighting in the German trenches and that the infantry brigades had suffered grievous losses. At 4.30 pm, III Corps ordered that the proposed attack was to be cancelled. 8th Division was to be reorganised while 56 Brigade took over the front line. Later, due to the confusion and the fact that 19th Division did not know the area, 56 Brigade were kept in reserve while the remnants of 8th Division manned the front line. At 6.45 it was decided that 8th Division would be relieved by 12th Division, joining III Corps from Army Reserve. 56 Brigade was to rejoin 19th Division and take part in their new attack on La Boisselle.

Major O.M.T. Frost, OC 8 Signal Company, wrote that the actions carried out with regard to communications had helped with the removal of wounded and the relief of the Division:

...in the matter of traffic circulation in the forward area, - the removal of wounded and the getting up of reinforcements, stores etc, all went like clockwork. Certain communication trenches were placarded [UP →], having unnecessary branches blocked, and others were clearly marked [DOWN→]; at the bottom end were police. I circulated nearly all over the Divnl. area; my signal brassard passing me everywhere. The actual front line certainly became much smashed about and congested...¹⁰⁸

James Jack, as usual a perceptive participant, wrote afterwards:

...The reaction from this dreadful day, one of the worst I have ever experienced, was so great that, having seen to the relief of my companies, I

¹⁰⁸ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence, ref. CAB45/133. Major O.M.T. Frost, letter dated 27 May 1930.

was forced to ask the Colonel's permission to withdraw ahead of him [...] Accompanied, therefore, by an orderly kindly sent by 'Sandy' (Lt-Colonel Sandilands, CO 2/Cameronians), I quitted the field on which such brilliant success had been expected that fine summer morning...¹⁰⁹

8th Division was incapable of carrying on. The Division had been shattered by the experiences of 1 July. Brigadier-General Arthur Solly-Flood, GOC 35 Brigade, 12th Division, commented, perhaps not very empathetically, on the condition of the formation that was being relieved by his division. "...The confusion in the 8th Division which had failed was very great. Nobody knew where anybody else was and the numbers of dead and wounded were a great hindrance..."¹¹⁰ Brigadier-General Pollard, GOC 25 Brigade, wrote about the work of the Divisional Engineers, "...The Engineers were to have come up at a later stage, which was never reached, but they afforded most welcome assistance after dark in helping to get away the wounded, for which I was very grateful..."¹¹¹

Owing to the immense number of casualties, 8th Division's medical services came under very great pressure. The medical services of all the divisions in the area worked together in attempting to move all the wounded away as quickly as possible. The war diary of the Division's ADMS recorded:

...HENENCOURT. 1.7.16: [...] wounded commenced coming in about 8 am to Divnl Collecting Station [...] at 9 am asked DDMS for extra lorries for walking and sitting cases [...] at 1 pm 8 Div HQ asked 19th Division for use of Motor Ambulances 1.15 pm wired DHqrs [Divisional HQ] MILLENCOURT (25 Fd Ambulance) blocked with walking cases and that I had arranged with ADMS 19th Divn to send cases direct to LAVIEVILLE. 1.50 pm 26 Bearer

¹⁰⁹ *General Jack's Diary* (2000), p. 150.

¹¹⁰ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors S-Y, ref. CAB45/191, annotated draft of official history, Solly-Flood correspondence, n.d.

¹¹¹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors M-P, ref. CAB45/136, Brigadier-General J.H.W. Pollard, letter dated 19 May 1930.

Division¹¹² thrown in to work between Regimental Aid Posts and ADSs [...] at 5 pm 19th Division Bearer Division which were to be thrown in front line was countermanded. At 6 pm 26 Field Ambulance (less dressing station personnel) ordered to open another clearing ALBERT & relieve congestion at 24 & 25 Field Ambulances [...] At 8 pm DDMS writes that 12 Divn Bearer Divn were coming to help 8 Divn [...] 10.30 pm both 24 & 25 [Field Ambulances] report full up and want more cars for evacuation [...] Lessons learnt from today- 1. To order up of plenty of stretchers in ADS – will require about 100 in addition to those with regiments. 2. Operations cannot be performed in Main Dressing Station if evacuation isn't rapid. 3. Motor ambulances of our Divn. not sufficient if a fresh attack occurs – Luckily roads were okay otherwise it would have been impossible to carry on as we have done. Total casualties to day to 9pm were Officers 71 & OR 1364. This only gives numbers collected and passed through ambulances to 9pm. Lots more hundreds were sent as direct admissions to LAVIEVILLE (19 Divn Ambulances) [...] 2.7.16 12.10 am 24 & 25 [Field Ambulances] both blocked with wounded. No lorries available from Hd Qrs for evacuation. 26 Fd. Ambulance now open for reception of wounded. Bearer Division of 38 Fd. Ambulance, 12th Divn came into HENENCOURT WOOD to be in reserve. 3.30 am Have had messages from 70 Bde. that 100 cases waiting for stretchers in trenches...¹¹³

Examination of the original war diary of the ADMS 8th Division, held in the National Archives, Kew, shows that it was maintained at a time when the writer was under extreme pressure. The handwriting at times degenerates to a doctor-like illegibility. In the midst, however, there are points made for future reference, such as the need to have more stretchers in place, so that the system can be improved for the benefit of the Division's sick and wounded. That the writer was composed or detached enough to note these points for future improvements is remarkable.

Casualties continued to arrive. By 3 July, 8th Division medical units had received and processed 124 officers and 2,699 other ranks. The first reckoning of the Division's casualties was not possible until 5 July 1916. 8th Division's casualty figures were incomplete for some time. This was due to the fact that many were evacuated direct to

¹¹² The stretcher-bearer team of 26 Field Ambulance.

¹¹³ TNA: PRO, ADMS 8th Division war diary, reference WO95/1687.

the Casualty Clearing Stations or by medical units belonging to other divisions and thereby by-passed the Division's Field Ambulances. Thus they were not registered in the medical records. That they were absent had to wait the unit roll-call returns. As can be imagined, after 1 July 1916, this was an exacting and long-drawn out process.

The Great Debate

The failure of the main part of the British attacks on 1 July 1916 caused immense grief and feelings almost akin to bewilderment in the participants. Like ripples in a pond these became shared by the wider public as the casualty telegrams were received by grieving families and the lists of names and photographs were published by the press back home in Britain.

Formation	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
23 Infantry Brigade			
2nd Middlesex	22	584	606
2nd Devonshires ¹¹⁴	16	415	431
2nd West Yorkshires	16	490	506
2nd Scottish Rifles	2	69	71
<i>23 Brigade total</i>	56	1,558	1,614
25 Infantry Brigade			
2nd Lincolnshires	20	434	454
2nd Royal Berkshires	20	414	434
1st Royal Irish Rifles	16	411	427
2nd Rifle Brigade	5	127	132
<i>25 Brigade total</i>	61	1,386	1,447
70 Infantry Brigade			
8th KOYLI	25	500	525
8th Yorks & Lancs.	22	612	634
9th Yorks & Lancs.	20	547	567
11th Sherwood Foresters	19	488	507
<i>70 Brigade total</i>	86	2,147	2,233
Total	203	5,091	5,294

¹¹⁴ For an unknown reason, 2nd Devonshire's casualty figures were not included in the ADMS' war diary, which is the basis for the table. These have been obtained from Atkinson, *The Devonshires, Volume 1*, p. 145.

Table 3.1: 8th Division Infantry Unit casualties as Known at 5 July 1916¹¹⁵

After the high hopes of great success, shared by all, what were the reasons for such a catastrophic failure? It is worth noting that the 8th Division war diaries and narratives of operations covering the event contain very little analysis, merely a simple narration of events. One reason may be that the survivors writing up the record were too busy or too traumatised by recent events to put in much detail. There could well have been too few survivors that were able to supply information as to what took place elsewhere. Another reason may be due to the participants having the view that the causes were obvious or that the events were so awful that objective assessment was not possible at the time. Reflection and analysis would have to wait till a later date. The post-war correspondence of the Official Historian contains much evidence from persons connected with the events that 8th Division had undergone on 1 July 1916. It is evident that this was the opportunity to tell their story.

Long after the event, much was made of the fact that the dilution of the artillery fire meant vital targets were not dealt with. Hanbury-Sparrow stated that one particular group of enemy machine-gun posts on the Thiepval spur were seen as a very serious hindrance to 8th Division's left attacking brigade (70 Brigade) as it gave enfilading fire across the whole front. He wrote:

...As a result of very strong representations to the GSO1 and Div Commander one 6" how[itzer] was finally told off to blanket them, but the attack started with the GSO1 knowing the emplacements had not been destroyed. In fairness to him, I do not believe the 70th Brigade raised any objections. The man who pointed out their existence and the impossibility of success until they were

¹¹⁵ ADMS 8th Division war diary, reference TNA: PRO WO95/1687, op.cit.

destroyed was the scout officer of the Royal Berks¹¹⁶. It was these guns that crushed the left wing of the Divn (up to the crest of the Owillers spur)...¹¹⁷

Lieutenant-Colonel H.F. Watson, Commanding Officer 11th Sherwood Foresters, believed the failure to deal with these weapons was a specific weakness in the tactical fire plan in this area, the boundary between 70 Brigade and 32nd Division.

...On the left ran a valley from Authuille Wood into the German line as afar back as Farm du Mouquet.¹¹⁸ This valley was not to be attacked in the advance by any troops, but fire was to be brought on it from trench mortars and machine guns; which with the previous intense bombardment was thought sufficient to deny it to the enemy [...] owing to the our trench mortars and machine guns being knocked out the valley on the left of the brigade advance was not secured while the 32nd Division was quite held up...¹¹⁹

While not specifically referred to, it would appear that Lieutenant-Colonel H.F. Watson was referring to machine guns and trench mortars that were brought forward by 70 Brigade's battalions to deal with enemy defences. It is apparent that insufficient attention had been paid by X Corps and III Corps to any problems likely to arise on the inter-Corps boundary. Each Corps appeared to act in isolation. The disaster in Nab Valley was largely attributable to this.

One factor that had not been taken into account was that, as after Neuve Chapelle and Fromelles/Aubers Ridge, the tactics used by the Germans were constantly being changed in an effort to adapt to new circumstances. As well as fighting in the remains of their trench system, machine guns and riflemen were moved into the shell holes in front of and behind their positions. The bombardment planned by III Corps, with its

¹¹⁶ Major Roland Haig, later CO 2nd Royal Berkshires and GOC 24 Infantry Brigade.

¹¹⁷ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors G-H, ref. CAB 45/134, Lt-Colonel A.A. Hanbury-Sparrow, letter, no date.

¹¹⁸ This is the feature known as Nab Valley. The mouth of the re-entrant ran from the north-west side of The Nab. The re-entrant then ran directly up to Mouquet Farm.

¹¹⁹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors G-L, ref. CAB45/189, letter from Lieutenant-Colonel H.W. Hill, dated 14 May 1930.

series of lifts, was thereby rendered much less effective than expected. Furthermore, the Germans were not content to stay their side of the wire. One of the senior German officers in command of the area described how a British assault party (possibly the 70 Brigade bombing party that attempted to advance up the sunken road in Nab Valley) was stopped:

*...by the fire of a machine gun, which had been hastily brought into action from behind the parapets of the first trench of the position. The enemy detachment [...] which numbered about 150 to 200 men was literally mown down. The enemy had placed a machine gun to cover its advance along the sunken road, but one of our patrols succeeded in shooting its crew and capturing the machine gun...*¹²⁰

The narrative shows that the British did attempt to push support weapons forward. It can only be presumed that this was not done as much as was hoped for in the Fourth Army Tactical Notes.¹²¹ There were a number of reasons for this. The heavy German shell and machine gun fire would tend to inflict higher casualties on weapon crews grouped together. Also, the British units were loath to lose the few Lewis guns they had by putting them in the front of the assault.¹²²

Captain Charles Broad, Staff Captain to the General Officer Commanding Royal Artillery III Corps, later wrote:

...the barrage of III Corps was made to jump from one trench system to the next. We did not realise that the Germans would be driven out of their trenches and would occupy their shell holes with machine guns and riflemen.

¹²⁰ Oberstleutnant Alfred Vischer, Commander Infantry Regiment 180, quoted in Sheldon, *The German Army*, p. 157.

¹²¹ See *Appendices, Military Operations, France and Belgium 1916, Volume I: Sir Douglas Haig's Command to the 1st July: Battle of the Somme* [henceforth *Appendices to British Official History 1916, Volume I*] (reprinted edition London: Imperial War Museum, 1995), Appendix 18, 'Fourth Army Tactical Notes', paragraph 52.

¹²² See Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, p. 122.

*It was this defence together with the concrete machine guns posts, especially round OVILLERS that caused the trouble on the first day owing mainly to the fact that the barrage jumped from one trench to another and did not touch the shell holes...*¹²³

The failure of the artillery plan was the main cause of the repulse of 8th Division's assault on 1 July 1916. Together with 34th Division, attacking towards La Boisselle, 8th Division suffered because III Corps' artillery plan did not achieve what it was meant to do. It did not destroy the German machine gun positions nor pulverise the deep bunkers that the Germans had constructed. Above all it did not subdue the German artillery. As a result, many of 8th Division's casualties were caused by German shelling of the British communication trenches before the infantry units had even reached the British front-line trenches.

Not all available weapon systems were used. Gas was available but was not deployed. Gas, mainly phosgene, had been used in the weeks before the assault. After one discharge no enemy fire was received and over an hour later it was possible to stand on the parapet of the British trenches and not be fired at.¹²⁴ At no time during the 1 July along the whole front attacked by Fourth Army made was any use made of gas. The reasons are not known. It is not mentioned in the British Official History. It is most probable that after Loos it was seen as unreliable as a weapon that could be used

¹²³ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors A-C, TNA, ref. CAB45/132, letter from Brigadier C. N. F. Broad, dated 11 June 1930. Later Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Broad. Born 1882; Educated Wellington College; 1905 Commissioned Royal Artillery; 1916: Tank Corps; 1924-7 OC Tank Corps Gunnery School 1927 Directorate of Staff Duties; 1931 GOC Experimental Armoured Brigade on exercises; 1931-4 BGGs Aldershot; 1935-7 GOC brigade, India; 1939-40 GOC Aldershot; 1940-2 GOC Eastern Army, India; 1942 Retired List. It is ironic that Broad's name and signature appear at the bottom of many of the III Corps artillery orders before 01 July 1916. It is said that his experiences with III Corps decided him into joining the Tank Corps.

¹²⁴ See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1675, "*Report of Gas Attacks near Ovillers 8th Division front June 26 & 27*", para. 16. On the evening of 27 June 1916, 600 cylinders of gas (some 20 tons according to the report) were released over Ovillers and the surrounding area. After the discharge no enemy fire was received and over an hour later it was possible to stand on the parapet of the British trenches and not be fired at. The type of gas used is not stated but it was probably phosgene.

in direct conjunction with an assault, being too reliant on wind direction. Planners needed more certainty than that provided by the gas cloud.¹²⁵

It is evident from the comments made by eye witnesses that personality played a part in the command processes carried out within 8th Division on 1 July 1916. There appeared to have been difficulties in communication. This in turn might have led to a lack of trust between 8th Division command and the brigade commanders. Major O.M.T. Frost stated that orders from 8th Division HQ that appeared unrealistic or did not pay any regard to the situations then prevalent were not because physical communications had failed and rear command was not aware of what was happening. He has already been quoted as saying that a comprehensive signals cable system had been laid down, which was in use long after 1 July. He further stated:

...the VIII Division Staff was represented, throughout this battle in the forward area, by the Divnl. Observation Officer, who was in constant telephone communication with Div^l HQ [...] However, General Hudson did not advance beyond his Advanced Hqrs. W[est] of the River Ancre...¹²⁶

Nonetheless, this must be qualified. Alan Hanbury-Sparrow, GSO3 on the divisional staff, was the Divisional Observation Officer. He stated that the attack took place in far more mist and smoke than was supposed. "...At zero visibility was limited to about 200 yards and in spite of my favourable position I could see nothing distinctly..."¹²⁷ Hence, the 8th Division HQ was probably less well informed than the troops in the front-line trenches supposed they were. It must be noted that Major-General Hudson appears to have made no attempt to go forward and see for himself what was taking

¹²⁵ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, see p. 119.

¹²⁶ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors A-F, ref. CAB45/188, Major O.M.T. Frost, typed notes, n.d.

¹²⁷ TNA: PRO, Official Historians Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors G-H, ref. CAB45/134, Lieutenant-Colonel A. A. Hanbury-Sparrow, letter n.d.,.

place or what had happened.

Again, this criticism must be qualified. Senior commanders in the Great War are often criticised for not moving away from their headquarters but travel to the forward areas was very time consuming and meant that they were unable to control the battle even less than before. John Terraine quotes the views of two Royal Marine officers who were staff officers on the Western Front:

*...Nobody recognises that once troops were committed to the attack, all control was over. Why didn't you and I and our generals go up and take charge? – See for ourselves and give the necessary orders? – What the hell use would we have been? The ONLY place where it was possible to know what was going on was at the end of a wire, with its antenna to Brigades and Artillery...*¹²⁸

The telephone line and exchange became of paramount importance to the senior officer. Llewellyn Wyn Griffith, who was a junior staff officer on the Somme, wrote: “...For in this war, a telephone wire was not only the outward sign of command, but the life-blood of it's existence; a General without a telephone was to all practical purposes impotent, a lay figure dressed in uniform, deprived of eyes, arms and ears...”¹²⁹

Another pertinent point made by a Captain Harry Yoxall regarding a hasty exit from the front line by his Divisional commander was, “...But after all you don't want a first chop divisional commander taken off by a miserable Minnie [*Minenwerfer*- German

¹²⁸ Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire*, p. 179. The two officers were Lieutenant-Colonel C.F. Jerram, who had been GSO1 46 [North Midland] Division (TF) and General Alan Bourne who, from June 1918 to the end of the war, had been GSO1 8th Division.

¹²⁹ Llewellyn Wyn Griffith, *Up To Mametz* (Norwich: Gliddon Books, 1988), p. 207.

trench mortar]: it's not his job..."¹³⁰ The exposure to death of a competent senior was therefore seen as an unnecessary risk, which could result in the death of more front line soldiers if he had to be replaced by a less competent commander or by one who paid less regard to the lives of the soldiers under his command.

Brigadier-General Gordon obeyed orders from divisional HQ to attack. The 8th Division operation orders were very emphatic that all four battalions in each brigade were to take part in the assault. "...All three Brigades will attack with the two battalions in the front line and two in support..."¹³¹ Consequently, all three brigade commanders knew what was expected of them by 8th Division command. Perhaps due to having less compliant personalities, the other two brigade commanders, in Frost's words, 'demurred'. Frost further commented to the Official Historian that, "...the exact wording (though true) were perhaps better suppressed..."¹³²

In defence of Major-General Hudson, he also was aware of the need to move forward quickly. One lesson of Neuve Chapelle and Loos was that reserves had to be put in quickly. While there was a chance that progress could be made it had to be seized. Also, 70 Brigade had made very good progress to start with and the situation had changed within minutes. Even with direct voice communication, whether to continue to push troops forward was a very difficult decision to make. Against that, the other two Brigadier-Generals, Tuson and Pollard, were allowed to show dissent and at least one of the battalions from each brigade had been saved from decimation. The Official

¹³⁰ Malcolm Brown, *Tommy Goes To War* (London: J.M.Dent, 1980), p. 244.

¹³¹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675, "*8th Division Preliminary operation order no 107*" dated 12 June 1916.

¹³² TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors A-F, TNA, ref. CAB45/188, Major O.M.T. Frost, typed notes, n.d.

Historian said that 70 Brigade's losses were, "... the heaviest in the division..."¹³³ As can be seen from Table 3.1, all 8th Division battalions, from all of the brigades, that had left the British front line had suffered similar casualty figures. It was being kept in reserve, in the British trenches, that had saved 2nd Scottish Rifles from 23 Brigade and 2nd Rifle Brigade of 25 Brigade from suffering similar casualty figures.

Therefore, in conclusion, Hudson did not go forward to see for himself. The orders issued were inflexible. He allowed two of his brigade commanders to make decisions for themselves. Later on in the war, allowing the front-line commander this very flexibility was seen as beneficial. However, in 1916 the BEF was attempting to achieve objectives with an imperfect understanding of what was possible, hence the disaster that befell 70 Brigade.

Frost stated that the expectations of the bombardment and of the whole assault, for that reason, were unrealistic:

*...What was really hoped for was that the Germans after so much bombardment, and being (as was thought) in the initial stages of wishing to surrender, would do so if given the opportunity. This point was confidently expected; and this expressed hope was freely circulated. Notice also the preparations for dealing with enormous numbers of unwounded German prisoners [...] We had been told that the Germans would surrender when they found our men behind them: for that reason the front waves were to proceed without stopping to take prisoners...*¹³⁴

Frost's comments corroborate that the pre-battle tone had been set by talks and lectures like those given by Major-General A.A. Montgomery, Fourth Army's chief of

¹³³ *British Official History 1916, Vol. I*, p. 389.

¹³⁴ Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors A-F, ref. CAB45/188, Major O.M.T. Frost, typed notes, n.d. See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675, "8th Division Preliminary operation order no 107" dated 12 June 1916, especially paragraphs 4a-c.

staff, referred to in the previous chapter. The BEF did not realise that its major weapon system, the artillery, was incapable of carrying out its task.

The Fourth Army plan had one other major flaw. It ignored the tactical considerations imposed by geography. With its collection of spurs interspersed with re-entrants, the area where 8th Division were to assault was among the most difficult on the whole battle area. Tactical nous was required at Army and Corps level. This was not present, certainly in III Corps area. Higher command did not allow any variation from a plan where there was to be an all out assault across the whole front. That this was blinkered thinking was especially true where 8th Division was concerned. The long distances to be traversed, especially in the right sector up Mash Valley, in an area where the enemy defences were so strong, was a recipe for a disaster. Colonel Hill had seen the destruction of 70 Brigade. His comments, made with understandable bitterness, apply to the experience of the whole of 8th Division. "...An attack on a valley from which good observation for defending machine guns is obtainable for a distance of about 1,000 yards should not be regarded as a reasonable Military Operation but a serious criminal offence..."¹³⁵

With regard to the morale of the Division, R. Archer-Houblon took issue with Alan Hanbury-Sparrow. The latter stated that it was a lack of discipline, of inculcated spirit, caused by the casualties suffered in the battles of 1915, which meant that 8th Division's regular brigades, 23 and 25 Brigades, did not do as well as the 'New Army' 70 Brigade. Archer-Houblon wrote:

¹³⁵ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Fourth Army, Authors G-L, ref. CAB45/189, Colonel H.W. Hill, letter dated 14 May 1930.

...in his proving of the point that the average man is not naturally actively brave, but has to be induced and fortified by discipline and a sense of duty into facing death with firmness and resolution, he is not fair to the 8th Division. He attributes their repulse on the Somme to the effect on their moral [sic] of the losses at Fromelles; i.e. to their not going hard enough. He says the only brigade to get in was the 70th, a new army brigade which had not seen Fromelles. But what are the facts? Though the 70th Bde, it is true, did penetrate most deeply and widely, both the other brigades also entered the German front line, though only after suffering desperate losses on route. That they should be able to maintain themselves there was out of the question from the start, for No Man's Land in the first minutes of the assault was made impassable by the enfilade fire from Thiepval and La Boisselle, strong points on either flank of the 8th Division, which had resisted the assaults of New Army divisions, neither of which had been at Fromelles any more than had the 70th Bde. Further, two days later the 12th Division tried their fortune and failed to make even as much impression as had the 8th and they also had been spared Fromelles. No! It was not Fromelles; the 8th Division merely failed to achieve the impossible...¹³⁶

Major W.C. Wilson, on the staff of 70 Brigade, did think his brigade achieved more, at least initially, because it was New Army. He did not believe that 70 Brigade had an easier task than 23 and 25 Brigades:

...It is my belief that no other troops at that time, after two years of war, except the first Kitchener Army Units would have been capable of carrying out such an operation. The 70th Brigade was composed of the finest fighting material I have ever seen. They had been out in France for over a year. The officers and men who had been the first to enlist in England were filled with a magnificent spirit and belief in the justice of the Allied cause. The Brigade had been specially trained for the great attack and, up to the present, had had no experience of the difficulties and disappointments of an advance across a trench system occupied by determined Germans...¹³⁷

The last parts of Wilson's comments seem to support Hanbury-Sparrow's views. The New Army units were fresh and eager and unsullied by the events of 1915 especially at Fromelles/Aubers Ridge. Even so, the soldiers in the regular battalions thought they

¹³⁶ Liddle Collection, Archer-Houblon Papers, loose paper in Somme section of diary.

¹³⁷ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence, ref. CAB45/138, duplicated CAB45/191, letter from Lieutenant-Colonel W.C. Wilson, dated 18 June 1930.

would gain success, as is evidenced by James Jack, quoted above, and Sidney Rogerson, for example.¹³⁸

8th Division's assault on 1 July 1916 was never going to succeed. The weakness in the artillery planning exacerbated the decision to attack a well dug in and motivated enemy in an area where the geography was especially suited to defence. The fact that there was the same weight of attack along the whole front showed that there had been no calculation of the effect of ground on the tactical environment. Major-General Sir Richard Lee commented to his fellow Royal Engineer, Sir James Edmonds, the British Official Historian, "...I always attributed our excessive losses on the Somme to the manner in which the old principles of enfilade and defilade were completely ignored when staging an attack on a long front such as on July 1st..."¹³⁹

An additional tragedy for 8th Division is that they have gone down in history, at least in the Official British History, as the example of the lines of heavily laden men marching to their fate at the hands of the German defences:

*...the leading battalions of all three brigades rose and moved forward, each battalion in four lines of companies at 50 paces' distance and on a frontage of 400 yards. The enemy machine gun and rifle fire immediately grew in volume [...] Nevertheless, the advance was carried out with great coolness and precision, and in excellent order...*¹⁴⁰

However, it has been demonstrated that the infantry units of 8th Division tried many

¹³⁸ See Sidney Rogerson, *Twelve Days on the Somme: A Memoir of the Trenches* (London: Greenhill Books, 2006), p. 4.

¹³⁹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence, ref. CAB45/135, letter from Major-General Sir Richard P. Lee, dated 07 July 1936. Enfilade - firing from angles across a front or line; defilade - protection of a fortified area (see *Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

¹⁴⁰ *British Official History 1916, volume I*, p. 386.

different methods of approaching the German trenches so they could be entered as soon as the bombardment lifted. Their tragedy is that the artillery did not perform their task of suppressing the German defences, which had also been deployed out of the trenches as well as in the prepared positions. The assaulting troops were operating in a time when there was no voice control. Above all, they attempted to perform a series of military manoeuvres, which were tactically impossible given the ground and the strength of the defences with weapon systems that were not yet fully efficient.

The experience of 8th Division on 1 July 1916 can be seen as a continuation of its depressing experiences of 1915. It could plan, initiate and participate in increasingly complex operations. However, these plans were drafted without seeming to consider the effect of enemy reactions. The actions of the enemy would require speedy revision to plans and the tactics used to achieve the aims laid down in the plans. The planning process ignored the fact that plans do not often survive the first contact with the enemy. The plans were also created using lessons incorrectly learnt from previous events. Apart from what can be seen as overly prescriptive planning, little was put in place to obviate the loss of command and control during those initial minutes after the launch of the assault. This dilemma had been present since Neuve Chapelle and would bedevil operations until the restoration of voice control with the advent of radio.

After 1 July

8th Division was promptly moved away from the Somme battle area after 1 July. Its next area of operations was with I Corps, serving with First Army in Artois. This did not mark a return to the wetlands around Neuve Chapelle or Bois Grenier, however.

The Division was now to go into the line in the shattered wasteland of the Loos battlefield. It relieved 15th Division on 22 July 1916. Its two main sectors were Cuinchy and the Hohenzollern Redoubt, where 46th (North Midland) Division [TF] had suffered so terribly at the end of the Loos offensive in September 1915.

As the Divisional history commented,¹⁴¹ this area was totally unlike any previously experienced by 8th Division. It ran through mining villages and mounds of coal waste. Artois is relatively flat land. Any heights that could be used for observation or for fire positions gave an immense tactical and operational advantage. For example, the Hohenzollern Redoubt was of such vital tactical importance because it was constructed to protect The Dump, a waste tip that dominated the landscape. A maze of active and derelict trenches was imposed on existing coal mine tracks and railway lines. The area had been the scene of heavy mine warfare and many of the resultant craters had been the scene of bitter struggles for control of the new features. James Jack recorded in his diary:

*...As a rule the explosion of a mine causes a miniature local action for the lips of the crater; both sides wanting to hold these slight ridges either for the purpose of firing into hostile trenches or to prevent the enemy from doing so...*¹⁴²

Further trenches and wiring had taken place to connect the craters to the existing trench systems. This had added further to the disorderly, tangled nature of the battlefield, which was described by the Divisional History:

¹⁴¹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 81.

¹⁴² Archives, The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum, York, Brigadier-General James Lohead Jack, 'The War Diary of Captain James Jack, The Cameronians (with 2/West Yorkshire Regiment), France and Belgium 1916 – 1917 (^{TS})' [henceforth J.L. Jack West Yorkshire TS Diary¹, p. 4.

*...Any attempt to dig new lines was a task gruesome in the extreme. Bodies were turned up at almost every yard. In many places – notably the captured Kaiserin Trench – the parapet was largely reveted with corpses, thinly concealed by rotting sandbags through which at night the rats fled squealing from their ghoulish repasts...*¹⁴³

The regimental histories do not describe any large-scale attacks, the Worcestershire Regiment history stating quite baldly, “...not much of note occurred...”¹⁴⁴ What took place was a constant cycle of raids, mine explosions and sniping. For example, the GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Hill, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, was shot by a sniper while in the front line trenches on 10 September 1916. This was a return to the fighting conditions of early 1915 but this time in a chanel house with the constant threat of having the trench below blown up by enemy mining. The Northamptonshire Regiment’s history says that, “...here reigned day and night the nerve racking expectation of being blown sky-high without warning. As a sector it was ‘unhealthy’ in more ways than one...”¹⁴⁵

The Divisional Conferences held throughout this period are taken up with the difficulties of operating in such an environment.¹⁴⁶ The conference on 2 August 1916:

¹⁴³ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 80-1.

¹⁴⁴ H. FitzM. Stacke, *The Worcestershire Regiment in the Great War* (1928; Uckfield, East Sussex, n.d.), p. 195.

¹⁴⁵ Hughes, *The Northamptonshires*, p. 158.

¹⁴⁶ The 8th Division war diary for the time spent in Artois has a fairly comprehensive set of minutes for divisional conferences. Minutes have been found for conferences on 25/07, 02/08, 09/08, 16/08, 23/08, 30/08, 16/09, 20/09, 27/09 and 03/10/1916. See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675.

...I. Enemy's Raids were discussed and the means of defeating them [...].

- (i). All Lewis gunners must be armed.
- (ii). Every man on the Divisional front must know his Alarm Post and action he should take in event of an enemy raid.
- (iii). Spoils parties are to be told off for defence of mine shafts and bombs are to be stored in all mine shafts [...].
- (iv). Brigadiers will test the existing scheme for the defence of mine shafts [...]
- (viii). Some system must be devised by which the sentry can see down into the [mine] crater. Suggestions for this are invited [...] Another suggestion was made that our infantry in front lines should, when enemy's barrage begins, go out and lie down in front of our wire in 'NO MAN'S LAND' outside the barrage.

2. Trench Discipline.

The Divisional Commander drew attention to the necessity of strict Trench Discipline.

On relief nights every man should carry something out of the trenches.

The disposal of refuse by burying in refuse pits or burning in incinerators was discussed...¹⁴⁷

The minute regarding Lewis gunners needing to be armed referred to the fact that they did not carry a side arm, so if the Lewis gun was disabled they were then, in effect, unarmed. The mention that all soldiers need to know the post they had to take up on hearing an alarm indicates that the Division was still receiving a large number of reinforcements after 1 July 1916.

¹⁴⁷ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675 '8th Division Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 2-8-16' (ref. G131 K.).

The same topics kept constantly reoccurring in the divisional conferences. The difficulties with German raids were again mentioned at the Divisional conferences on 9 and 23 August 1917. The Commander Royal Engineers was asked to comment on drainage and defending sap-heads and craters at the conferences on 28 July, 16, 20 and 30 August 1916. The difficulties with defending mine shafts and disposing of the spoil-waste was discussed on 16 August and 16 September 1916.

The matter of control and use of the trench mortars was discussed on 25 July, 16 August and 23 August 1916 with some inconsistency. The control of the medium trench mortars was initially transferred to the Royal Artillery but that was subsequently rescinded.

The rifle-grenade was discussed at the conference held on 23 August but only as a defensive weapon. "...Rifle batteries for firing rifle grenades taking 6 rifles are made by 1st Army Workshops and can be obtained by Brigades by indenting on the C.R.E..."¹⁴⁸ This new equipment was seen only as an addition to the defensive arsenal available to the Division. There is no suggestion that the rifle-grenade could act as immediate support during an assault or when patrolling.

There was a comment from divisional command that patrolling should be a widespread skill.

...The Divisional Commander drew attention to the fact that all N.C.O.'s and

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*, '8th Division Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 23-8-16' (ref. G131 K.).

men should be trained in patrol work in ‘No Man’s Land’.

It is not sufficient for the same men to be always going out on patrol. All men should be accustomed to being out in front of our wire...¹⁴⁹

At the conference on 23 August it was decided that the introduction of Divisional Trench Standing Orders was unnecessary owing to, “...the complete instructions given in ‘Notes For Infantry Officers on Trench Warfare’...”¹⁵⁰ The feeling is gained the Division was attempting to keep things simple.

At the same time the Division was still coming to terms with its experiences on 1 July. Prior and Wilson have said that its experiences on 1 July 1916 amounted to “...the destruction of 8 Division as a fighting unit...”¹⁵¹ There were quieter sectors that 8th Division could have been sent to for rebuilding. For example, the area south of Ypres around Ploegsteert. That 8th Division was sent to a tough sector indicated that higher command thought 8th Division was still not only Regular Army in title but also in ethos and spirit.

Sidney Rogerson’s perspective, given in his memoir, *Twelve Days on the Somme*, is illuminating. He considered that the period spent in the area around Loos was not beneficial to the Division’s recovery:

...This is the charge that must be laid at the door of the higher staff, that it kept troops with no strategic or tactical advantage in that giant memorial to its own failure, the Loos battlefield, instead of withdrawing them to clean

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*, ‘8th Division Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 16-8-16’ (ref. G131 K.).

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, ‘8th Division Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 23-8-16’ (ref. G131 K.).

¹⁵¹ , Prior & Wilson, *Somme*, p. 96.

*ground where some adequate trench system could be constructed which would enable them to observe and hold the enemy and at the same time to cut down the high daily toll of lives...*¹⁵²

Rogerson's views do not take into account the circumstances surrounding the strategic and political direction of the war at this time. Britain was the junior partner in a coalition. Moreover, the French, the senior partner in the alliance, were very much aware that the most productive industrial areas of north-eastern France, especially the coalfields of the Lille basin, were, if not directly benefiting the German occupier, of no use to France unless the enemy were rapidly ejected. The idea that tactical withdrawals could take place, leaving more of France in the hands of the *Boche*, was unthinkable to the France as a nation and to the French Army as the keeper of spirit of France. What is not in question is that the area of line that 8th Division was sent to was not a 'rest cure'. It was a particularly tough environment for a formation that had undergone a very traumatic experience. Even this rest cure was not too last long. In September 1916 the Division returned to the Somme.

The Return to the Somme Front

8th Division returned to the Somme on the 20 October, with headquarters based at Bernafay Wood. It was again part of Fourth Army, serving in XIV Corps under Lord Cavan. Its first attacks towards were made on a German position known as Zenith Trench, south east of Gueudecourt and west of Le Transloy on 23 and 24 October 1916. They were only partially successful. A renewed attack was halted in its tracks

¹⁵² Rogerson, *Twelve Days*, pp. 5-6.

after only advancing 70 yards. The weather conditions made worse the difficulties with command and control that was such a constant running through the experience of the BEF on the Western Front.

A senior officer could find himself in a position where he was unable to control or react to events. Sidney Rogerson, 2nd West Yorkshires (23 Brigade), made the following observation with regard to tours of the front line trenches towards the end of the Battle of the Somme in the winter of 1916 by his Commanding Officer and Brigade commander. After stating that it took the battalion commander no less than four hours to carry out each visit:

...How long it took the Brigadier to come up from still farther in the rear can only be conjectured but the very fact that he would thereby be absent from his headquarters for many hours should be some answer to those who demand to know why general officers did not put in more frequent appearances in the front line... ¹⁵³

However, the situation for 8th Division applied just as much to the other formations involved in operations at this time. 8th Division did not appear to be as efficient and able as its title and status as a Regular Army division implied.

The after-action reports for the attacks on Zenith Trench make bleak reading. The Division took over the line on the two nights of 19-20 and 20-21 October 1916. Consequently, the sector was new to the formation. The 8th Division was warned on

¹⁵³ Rogerson, *Twelve Days*, p. 58.

20 October that it would be attacking Zenith Trench on 23 October. On 21 October the brigade commanders carried out their reconnaissance and orders were issued. At this time, "...the tracks were for the most part impracticable, and the roads were deep in liquid mud, and crowded by traffic..."¹⁵⁴

What also made the preparations so difficult was that the German artillery was laying down heavy barrages on several occasions. The 25 Brigade after-action report said, "...This was his [the enemy's] invariable custom during this period under report, and will not, therefore, be specially referred to further..."¹⁵⁵ The assaulting troops had to make their way to assembly trenches dug by the two battalions in each brigade who were in support and reserve and by the divisional pioneer battalion, 22nd Durham Light Infantry, and the Royal Engineer field companies.

Zero hour had originally been set for 11.30 am but due to fog it was put back to 2.30 pm. The three brigades were all in line 23 Brigade on the right, 25 Brigade in the centre and 24 Brigade on the left. The creeping barrage commenced at 2.30 pm and this was closely followed by the infantry. As the Divisional report states, "...As an Officer and several men were wounded by our shrapnel it would appear that the assaulting troops were keeping well up..."¹⁵⁶

The assaults on the left and right flanks succeeded but with heavy casualties in places. In the centre, 25 Brigade's attack almost completely failed with the first wave of 2nd

¹⁵⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary July – December 1916, ref. WO95/1675, 'Report on Operations Octr. 19th -30th 1916' [25 Brigade], dated 5 November 1916, signed by Brigadier-General J.H.W. Pollard.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

Lincolnshires being cut down by German rifle fire as in the midst of the barrage the German infantry were still able to man their parapet. 2nd Rifle Brigade suffered heavy casualties as well and were forced to lie out in the mud of No-Man's Land. Even on the most successful flank, the left flank, part of the assaulting battalion, 2nd East Lancashires, had, in effect, gone too far forward, and went out of sight of the main body. They suffered very heavy casualties and had to be pulled back. This was most probably due to the fact that they were unfamiliar with the ground and the weather and the shelling had made the geography even more featureless than before. It was very easy to lose your bearings in such a landscape.

A further assault was ordered to take place at 3.50 am on the morning of 24 October. The area would be bombarded by the supporting artillery from 1 am onwards. 8th Division only issued the operation order at 00.01 am. In the meantime, the weather had worsened and it had rained from the evening onwards. The assaulting troops commenced to leave their assembly trenches before Zero hour so they could advance behind the creeping barrage without delay. Unfortunately, owing to the weather, the ground was so bad the infantry could not keep up with the barrage. The assaulting units from 25 Brigade, 2nd Royal Berkshires and 2nd Royal Irish Rifles suffered very heavy casualties. The attack was stopped. 25 Brigade, in the centre, had suffered the worst casualties. From a total bayonet strength of 78 officers and 2,177 men, they had incurred casualties of 49 officers and 1,017 men. The percentage loss rate ranged from 57.8 per cent in the 2nd Lincolnshires, 51.9 per cent in the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles to 38.9 per cent and 27.6 per cent in the 2nd Royal Berkshires and 2nd Rifle

Brigade respectively.¹⁵⁷

The efforts of the Division on its return to the Somme exhausted a division that had scarcely recovered from its ordeal of 1 July 1916. Sir Henry Rawlinson noted in his diary in an entry for 31 October 1916:

*...The roads are very bad. At the Sucrierie Waterlot Farm I met a variety of men coming out of the trenches stone cold and beat to the World. They were Devons and West Yorks [of] 8 Div. I also saw the 2 Rifle Brig in Bernafay Wood looking very done up. The conditions in the trenches are unfortunately very bad as men get beat-in certainly 48 hours – under such conditions an offensive does not look hopeful – I told Kiggell...*¹⁵⁸

Analysis

Officers serving with the Division held the belief that things were not as they should have been. E.F. Richards, of 2nd Lincolnshires, wrote of the attack on Zenith Trench:

...At a conference of C.O.s. with Brigade Commander it was strongly urged that, as the early mornings were invariably foggy it would be better to make a surprise attack without a barrage as it had been noted

¹⁵⁷ There are some inconsistencies in the summary of these operations presented by Prior and Wilson in their book, *Somme*. On p. 96 they state that on 1 July 1916, Brigadier-General Tuson was GOC 25 Brigade and that he gave the loss percentages suffered by the Brigade on that day. They further state that by the time of the assault on Zenith Trench on 23 October 1916, 25 Brigade's commander had changed and the new commander also created loss percentages for that action - see p. 274 & endnotes 44 & 45. However, Brigadier-General James Pollard was GOC 25 Brigade throughout the time period covered.

¹⁵⁸ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, ref. RWLN 1/5, diary entry for 31 October 1916. Kiggell was Chief of Staff of the BEF. Therefore, certainly he and, therefore, Haig would have been aware of the worsening conditions for the troops in the front line trenches by communications made by Army commanders like Rawlinson.

(i) That directly we dropped a barrage the enemy counter-barraged with great accuracy.

(ii) That his M-G's [machine guns] on the high ground in the Transloy area opened a very effective fire across our front line system.

At this period there was very little liaison between Div. HQ and O.C. Units. The latter's advice was seldom sought for and the Div Staff were out of touch with Regimental Commanders.

The actual detailed orders for the attack did not reach Bn HQ until very late of the evening of the 22nd Oct. Bn. HQ was well forward in the sunken Lesboeufs – Le Transloy road, but in spite of this it took at least 3 hours for a coy. commander to get to Bn HQ and return to his company. The result was that the attackers were only able to receive brief and hurried orders for the attack which was stopped by M-G fire and by German front line troops who were able to man *[sic]* their trenches after the barrage had gone over them. It is interesting to note that our objective was eventually captured by the 17th Div who attacked in the fog without a barrage... ¹⁵⁹

In the after-action reports, though, it is mentioned that the Germans still manned their parapet, despite the barrage to repulse 2nd Lincolnshires in particular. There is no further analysis or explanation of why this happened. Therefore, it is not known whether the bombardment, and the creeping barrage, were too weak or if the German defences were stronger than estimated.

¹⁵⁹ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's Correspondence: Battle of the Somme, Authors R-S, ref. CAB45/137, letter from E.F Richards, dated 20 April 1936. The brigade commander was Brigadier-General J.H.W. Pollard, GOC 25 Brigade.

Alan Hanbury-Sparrow, serving with 2nd Royal Berkshires, 25 Brigade, said of this time:

...Since Neuve Chapelle the division had never captured a yard of enemy trench; that battle had taken place eighteen months ago, and eighteen months of war is a long time. In that period it had sustained twenty thousand casualties, that is to say it had rather more than turned over its total war strength without anything tangible to show for it. Why was it? Were we really so much inferior to these other divisions that had stormed and held positions in this steel-torn wilderness of sticky mud?...¹⁶⁰

When the trench 8th Division failed to take was taken by a division just as weary for the loss of ‘only’ ten men.¹⁶¹ Hanbury-Sparrow said that it was the nadir of the Division.

The difficulties outlined above overshadowed the fact that the divisional command was attempting to formulate responses to tactical problems that had emerged as a result of the more open warfare now in place. For example, the conference on 22 November raised the issue of the need to train junior officers to use more initiative in the attack:

...to push forward outposts and patrols with Lewis guns, to seize points of

¹⁶⁰ Lieutenant-Colonel Alan A. Hanbury-Sparrow, *The Land-locked Lake* (London: Arthur Barker, 1932), pp. 205-6.

¹⁶¹ *British Official History 1916, Volume II*, pp. 469-70. 17th Division attacked at 17.30 hrs [5.30 pm] on 2 November 1916 after sunset (sunset being at 16.24 hrs [4.24 pm]) using a surprise attack. Times for sunset obtained from <http://www.sunrisesunsetmap.com/> 50°03'N 002°53'E data for 02/11/1916. Last accessed 17.01.2010.

vantage or to deny such to the enemy after the capture of a line of trenches. The organisation of special troops for the purpose was discussed and the Div. Comdr. decided that the question should be brought up again at the next weekly Conference...¹⁶²

At the next conference on 29 November, the decision was made:

...7. Organisation of troops to push forward and seize points of vantage after the capture of a position was discussed. The Divisional Commander decided that no special parties should be organised for this, but it should be left to the initiative of the Company or Platoon Commanders on the spot to push men forward, with any Lewis gun available. Officers and N.C.O.'s must be trained to do this, and taught that it is their duty to do this without waiting for orders...¹⁶³

The need for junior officers and NCOs to show initiative had been a constant refrain since Neuve Chapelle. However, the realisation that there was no need for another specialisation was perhaps an indication of the belief that any well trained section or platoon should be able to carry out the task.

The Divisional Conferences at this time also provide evidence that 8th Division was working at a lower efficiency than before. The conference on 2 November 1916

¹⁶² TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1675, July-December 1916, '*Proceedings of the 110th Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 22-11-1916*', (ref. 8th Div.no. G.21/1).

¹⁶³ Ibid, '*Proceedings of the 111th Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 29-11-1916*', (ref. 8th Div.no. G.21/1).

noted:

...1. The Divisional Commander discussed various points that had arisen in connection with the recent operations, and decided that whilst the Division was in the line there must always be, at all Headquarters, a Staff Officer available to answer the telephone at any hour of the night or day [...]

6. The Divisional Commander issued the following instructions:-

(a) Units must arrange that no man remains in the front line for more than 48 hours. If possible, this period should be cut down to 36 hours [...]

(e) The defence of the front line system is to be entrusted chiefly to machine gun fire from flanks and rear, and Lewis guns in the front line itself...¹⁶⁴

The requirement for a duty staff officer is symptomatic of a number of problems. Firstly, that there was not such a 'watch keeping' scheme in place was an indication that there were serious problems with the Division's command and control system. Secondly, it is possible that such a system was not in place, or had been allowed to fall into abeyance, because the staff officers were too exhausted and it was not possible under the current conditions to keep one in operation. That relatively short time limits were put upon the length of time a man was supposed to be in the front line is perhaps a sign that perhaps the troops had less powers of endurance than before or that the conditions in the front-line were far more exhausting than before.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, '*Proceedings of the 109th Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 2-11-1916*', (ref. 8th Div.no. G.21/1).

More revealing is that certain behaviours that could indicate that discipline and administration was becoming slack were now brought to the attention of the divisional conference:

...(a) The danger of trench foot is now considerable. Arrangements must be made by Brigades to ensure that everyman on going into the line is supplied with sufficient whale oil to last his tour of duty. If possible, each man should be supplied with a small bottle for his personal use.

(b) A considerable amount of sickness has been traced to men drinking water from shell holes. Strictest discipline to prevent this was necessary.

(c) Efforts should be made to save rations wherever possible. With daily casualties occurring, there must always be a surplus. This surplus should be collected into Company and Battalion dumps so that the amount to be drawn and carried can eventually be reduced by drawing upon these dumps.

(d) Rifle fire was becoming more important every day and too much care could not be devoted to ensuring that the men kept their rifles clean and fit for use.

(e) Carrying was likely to be as difficult in the new sector as the old. Carrying parties must be organised so as to ensure short stages. The necessity for carrying parties must be cut down as much as possible firstly by saving rations as already directed, secondly by taking careful stock of all Trench Stores, bombs etc., on going into the trenches and by seeing that no waste occurs. Nearly all trenches were littered with derelict hand grenades, boxes of ammunition and dirty ammunition. This should not be the case and units must make arrangements to collect any spare stores found in the trenches and to

return them to their units' dumps or stores...¹⁶⁵

There are other matters worth noting. Brigades were being asked to check 'trench feet', a matter that had been the concern and preserve of the battalion officers since that first winter in 1914. Was there now a concern that these very officers were no longer making checks themselves and needed to be supervised? That some of the troops were drinking contaminated water could mean a number of things. All would be a cause for concern. Either, not enough drinking water was reaching the front line troops or some were deliberately drinking contaminated water so as to become ill and have a valid excuse to leave the forward line. The need to enforce weapon cleanliness and to avoid waste went to the heart of pre-war discipline and 'interior economy', the most efficient systems of administering a platoon, company or battalion. More pertinently, such items had not appeared as matters that required discussion at divisional conferences hitherto.

Causes for concern continued to be brought to attention. At the next conference on 22 November 1916, as well as covering matters of importance such as artillery formations, training on rapid wiring, patrolling and raiding, an item was raised regarding discipline:

... (vii) Discipline is required in the matter of abandoning arms and equipment.

It should be considered a point of honour with all ranks not to abandon their

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. However a sense of duty still predominated among many. See the German notes made regarding a private of the 2nd East Lancashires captured at Le Transloy in Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and The Somme 1916*, p. 88.

arms, ammunition or any part of their equipment even when wounded...¹⁶⁶

It would appear that higher command was aware that not all was well with 8th Division. On the day that the 8th Division Conference dealt with the thorny issues of trench feet, sickness due to drinking water in shell holes and the problems of wasted rations and ammunition, that is on 2 November 1916, Rawlinson wrote in his diary on the same day, "...I want two more fresh divisions badly – The 8 and 29 [Divisions] which are in reserve are much played out and I doubt if they could be counted on for a successful offensive..."¹⁶⁷

Even the Divisional history said that 8th Division needed a rest. Its command and staff were worn out. "...Time was needed to for systematic training in order to train and assimilate the new drafts of reinforcements..."¹⁶⁸ John Baynes has written on the difficulties that arose when staff-work was not all it should be:

...Lack of food; lack of ammunition; being sent to the wrong places; no proper evacuation of casualties; poor treatment of the wounded; shortage of equipment; bad deliveries of mail from home; these are the results of incompetence by the Staff...¹⁶⁹

Hanbury-Sparrow then wrote:

... [The new Divisional Commander] came with the suddenness of a cyclone.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 'Proceedings of the 110th Conference held at Divisional Headquarters, 22-11-1916', (ref. 8th Div.no. G.21/1).

¹⁶⁷ CCC: Rawlinson Diary, ref. RWLN 1/5, entry for 02 November 1916.

¹⁶⁸ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 96-97.

¹⁶⁹ Baynes, *Morale*, p. 239.

One day the [former] divisional commander called and said good-bye; the next the C.O. of the battalion in the adjacent village rang up hurriedly to warn us to look to our guard. The New Man, he said, had just passed and raised hell, had hauled him over the coals and threatened to send the adjutant home in disgrace. "Look out," he reiterated, as he rang off. [...] Into this Arcady [of our rest billets] was sent the new General, and at once the fur flew. Within a fortnight the greater part of the big-wigs had disappeared. Never had there been such a fevered replacement and displacement since the September massacres of the French revolution. Each day the tumbrel carted off some victim, and through it all rode, strode and drove the General, exclaiming, 'That guard's a disgrace!' 'Why aren't those buttons cleaner?' 'Get wire put in the men's caps' 'Those jackets are filthy. Scrap the lot and damn the expense'. Like an electric shock the imperious will jarred through the division... ¹⁷⁰

That imperious will belonged to Major-General William Charles Giffard Heneker, ably abetted by the Division's new GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Henry Lionel ('Moses') Beddington.

* * * *

The experiences of 8th Division in 1916 show that the cumulative experiences suffered by the formation in the two years it had been on the Western Front had damaged its efficiency. Acts such as drinking contaminated water, as well as launching attacks that were mainly ineffective, indicated that there were problems

¹⁷⁰ Hanbury-Sparrow, *Land Locked Lake*, pp. 215-6.

within 8th Division. The next chapter examines the remedies put in place by a new command team.

CHAPTER 4

EARLY 1917 - A NEW WEAPON IS FORGED

'Billy' Heneker did not fit the stereotype of the Great War regular army major-general. He was not from the cavalry, he had not been educated at an English public school nor was he from a fashionable regiment. He was not even a graduate of the Royal Military College [RMC], Sandhurst or of the Royal Military Academy [RMA], Woolwich. Heneker was born in 1867 in Canada. His father was Robert William Heneker, part of the Irish ascendancy. Robert Heneker trained as an architect and worked with Sir Charles Barry on the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament. In the early 1850s he made an abrupt career move. He emigrated to Canada, becoming an entrepreneur in the English settlements of the Eastern Townships of Quebec.¹

William Charles Giffard Heneker was educated at the Royal Military College Kingston, Ontario. The syllabus was more wide ranging than that of its British equivalents, more suited for officers intended to become the organisers, surveyors and managers of the new lands of the Canadian Confederation. This was advantageous in many ways.² The syllabus included subjects that taught task management, expedition planning and the planning of engineering enterprises. However, graduates of the RMC Kingston were not highly rated in the British Army's ranking system. Heneker was not destined for the cavalry or the Guards though Heneker's family were comfortably

¹ See entry in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (online), <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?Bioid=41561&query=Heneker> (access date 01/03/2006).

² See comments made by Andrew Godefroy in the introduction, William Heneker, *Bush Warfare - The Early Writings of General Sir William C. G. Heneker KCMG DSO*, (Kingston, Ontario: Directorate of Land Concepts and Design, Department of National Defense [Canada], 2009, p. x, and also comments made by Heneker himself, *ibid*, pp. xii-xiii.

off. In 1888 he became a subaltern with the Connaught Rangers and was posted to India and then to the UK.

After initial regimental service, Heneker volunteered for employment in West Africa. The pay was better and there was the chance of adventure and responsibility. He spent the years 1897 to 1906 in a theatre that was as demanding of its participants' ability as the North-West Frontier of India and, probably, more demanding on their health. He performed many roles, from column commander to Travelling District Commissioner. He won admission to the DSO and wrote a book on his experiences. One drawback was that he did not serve in the Boer War and so did not make contacts and bring himself under the regard of his superiors and peers. However, the long and arduous service in West Africa meant Heneker also had his own circle of contemporaries. He was described after his death by Hubert Essame, who had served with Heneker in 8th Division, as, "...more at home in a rough house than in civilised discussion or conversation...".³

Heneker was seen as a rising star. His army rank advanced at some pace. He was made an Aide-de-Camp to the new King, Edward VII. He was part of the funeral procession when Edward VII died.⁴ As well as the members of the aristocracy such as Colonel The Earl Cawdor and Colonel the Duke of Northumberland were others who could be viewed as rising members of the British Army. They included future luminaries such as Colonel W. Birdwood⁵ and Colonel J.E. Gough VC.⁶ It can be

³ Ibid, p. X. The original quote can be found in LHCMA, Liddell Hart Papers 1/269/107, Major-General H. Essame to Liddell Hart, 27/01/1962.

⁴ Order of Service, funeral procession for King Edward VII, Heneker Family Archive.

⁵ Later Field-Marshal Lord Birdwood (1865-1951)

deduced, therefore, that Heneker was also viewed as a future leader of the Army. In 1912 he was posted to command the 2nd North Staffords during their tour of the North-West Frontier. By 1914, he was an acting brigadier, commanding the Rawalpindi Brigade and noteworthy for driving his own car.

The outbreak of general war in August 1914 made that seem a curse. Fruitlessly attempting to string-pull, Heneker appeared doomed to be left in India but in November 1914 he received orders to return to the UK. Heneker's next piece of good fortune was to be appointed a brigade commander with Ivor Maxse's 18th Division. Maxse was a trainer par excellence and he soon realised Heneker's worth. However, misfortune struck. In December 1915, after being on the Somme for four months, Heneker was wounded in the thigh. His recovery was slow and painful. He missed the opening battles of the Somme.⁷

On his return to France in October 1916, Heneker visited Maxse in order to learn about the latest developments in tactics. He kept badgering the Military Secretary for a posting. He was made a brigade commander in the 63rd (RN) Division and was involved in the great attack at Beaucourt-Hamel in November 1916. In December 1916, he was appointed General Officer Commanding 8th Division. Throughout his career, until he took command of 8th Division, Heneker had held, in the main, command appointments. His experience was that of being a commander. He had never attended Staff College. However, he was fortunate in that for the first year of his command, his chief staff officer was E.H.L. Beddington.

⁶ Member of the famous Irish military family. Brother of General Sir Hubert Gough. Chief of Staff to Haig in First Army 1915. Killed in 1915 while visiting his old battalion, 2nd Rifle Brigade, when the latter was with 8th Division.

⁷ The information on Heneker's early years has come from his diary still held by his family. See Heneker Family Archive, General Sir William Heneker, 'Diary 1914 – 1916'.

Beddington also did not fit the stereotype of the pre-war Regular Army officer. True, he was a cavalryman, a lover of polo, the racecourse and hunting field. He was also a very competent and professional soldier and a member of one of the Jewish mercantile families that became firmly embedded in the upper society of Victorian and Edwardian England. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Edward Beddington's army nickname was 'Moses'.

Beddington was a junior officer in the 16th Lancers when he met a new Commanding Officer, Hubert Gough. He stood up to Gough. The latter in turn recognised his qualities as an exceptional officer with a potential for high responsibility. Therefore at an age, 28, and rank, captain, junior to what was usual, Beddington was chosen to go to the Staff College in 1911.

It is worth examining Beddington's time at the Staff College in some detail as it indicated that before 1914 the training of commanders and staff was becoming increasingly professional. The Commandant of the Staff College during most of Beddington's time was Major-General William Robertson.⁸ He was the first independent Commandant of the Staff College following its separation from the RMC Sandhurst in 1911.⁹

⁸ Born 1860. Enlisted in ranks, 16th Lancers, 1877. Troop serjeant 1885. Commissioned as lieutenant, 3rd Dragoon Guards, India, 1888. Transport officer, Niranzai and Black Mountains 1891. Staff Captain and DAQMG Intelligence Branch, Simla 1892-6. Staff College 1896 (1st ex-ranker to enter). Head of foreign section, Intelligence Dept., War Office 1900-7. BGS Aldershot 1907-10. Promoted Major-General 1910. Commandant Staff College 1910-13. Director Military Training 1913-14. QMG GHQ BEF 1914-15. CGS BEF 1915. CIGS 1915-18. GOC Eastern Command (UK) 1918. GOC Home Forces 1918-19. GOC-in-C BAOR 1919-20. Field-Marshal 1920. Created baronet. Died 1933.

⁹ Lieut.-Colonel F.W. Young, *The Story of the Staff College 1858 – 1958* (Camberley, Surrey: The Staff College, 1958), p. 4.

The Staff Course, since the re-organisation of 1904-6, was intended to avoid the disasters of the Crimea or the nightmares of the Boer War. The Staff Course was now more focused on military subjects than in Victorian times, which had an emphasis on mathematics. However, anomalies still remained. The standard of draughtsmanship required for field sketching was so high that crammers held classes in pencil sharpening to assist candidates in getting good results.¹⁰

Ian Brown, in his study of British logistics in the Great War, argues that a drawback with the course was that the Staff College tended to emphasise command rather than logistics but this was balanced by the pragmatism of the officers on the course who were tutored by their experience on column on the North-West Frontier, in the jungles of Burma or West Africa or on the veldt of South Africa.¹¹ The thread running through the Staff College course was that the Staff officer was the servant of the troops. During his time, Robertson also emphasised that the Army was also the servant of the elected government. This was particularly forward thinking for the time.

The Staff College course consisted of two divisions – Junior, which concentrated on the tactical, and Senior, which concentrated on the operational and strategic level. Students were under the control of Directing Staff of Lieutenant-Colonel rank. During Beddington's time, as was the case before and since, they were considered to be some of the best officers of that rank in the army. The leader of the Junior Division was Colonel John Gough VC, brother of Hubert Gough, who became Haig's chief staff

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

¹¹ Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front: 1914 – 1919* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1988), pp. 25-6.

officer until he was killed in 1915 (by coincidence being sniped while visiting his old battalion, 2nd Rifle Brigade, when it was with 8th Division).

Work was either carried out by individual appreciations, or outdoors, largely in syndicates of seven or eight with each member taking it in turn to head the syndicate or holding a position such as Force Commander, Chief Staff officer, Brigade Major, Battalion Commanding Officer or Quartermaster (transport and supplies) Staff Officer. General Sir Harold Franklyn, who was in the war-shortened Staff College course of 1914, has written that one of the most important parts of the course was the insistence on meticulous accuracy in Staff Duties (the writing of orders). Every error, from the most trifling to one that brought total disaster, was ringed in red ink. This insistence was drilled in with such effect that using the prescribed format became second nature. Franklyn stated:

...As a consequence when orders and messages had to be written on active service one could concentrate one's full attention on the substance without having to worry about the form. In 1914 only one typewriter was allotted to Brigade Headquarters and so almost all correspondence with units was carried out by message; it was as well that we had been taught to compress and select. One of the best exercises that we did at the Staff College was to write a fairly complicated Appreciation on the back of a message form; every word had to be weighed and most of them discarded...¹²

According to Beddington, one important component of the course was that during the summer of the first year students had to do two attachments of about a fortnight each with other arms, in his case 1st Scots Guards in Aldershot and a Royal Horse Artillery battery based at Trowbridge. He went on to say, "...I made some good friends, had a very good time and learnt a lot: those friends one met afterwards in the war [] and

¹² Young, *Staff College*, p. 24. See also J. Masters, *Road past Mandalay*, pp. 86, regarding the World War Two staff course which had the same ethos and used the same techniques.

previous acquaintance was a great help...”¹³ This can be seen as a pre-1914 example of networking.

The Senior Division of Beddington’s course was commanded by Colonel R.S. Oxley, late commanding officer of a battalion of the KRRC (60th Rifles), and later a brigade commander with 8th Division. During the early part of this term, Beddington thought the work was piled on as a test to see who could cope with the stress the most effectively.¹⁴ This included, while on the mountain warfare component of the course, held in North Wales, being awoken in the middle of the night by ‘Wully’ Robertson, and having to lead the course to the site in the mountains of Snowdonia previously selected as being suitable for a piquet.

Beddington went to war in 1914 with the Cavalry Division as a squadron commander with the 16th Lancers. He was involved in chasing the Germans in the advance to the Marne and then became a GSO3 on the Cavalry Divisional staff then the Brigade-Major of 4 Cavalry Brigade. How he dealt with what he saw as a problem is an interesting illumination of how he worked. One of the cavalry commanding officers was a former Brigade-Major with the brigade and Beddington knew, before his arrival at the brigade, that this commanding officer kept seeing the brigade commander to discuss what the brigade should do next. Beddington wrote:

...I was determined to stop it and ensure that there could only be one Brigade Major while I was there. So the first time he came to see the Brigadier I sent a note to him asking him to look me up when he had finished with the Brigadier. He duly came and I told him what was worrying me. At first he got very angry

¹³ Sir Edward Beddington, *My Life*, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Department of War Studies, King’s College London, University of London [henceforth LHCMA], p. 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 48. Such practical tests with the student or candidate having to work under severe constraints of time are still the basis of much of the selection process in organisations ranging from medical schools, the emergency services and the armed forces.

and said he would see the Brigadier as and when he liked. I agreed, providing he would confine his chat to the affairs of his regiment, and then asked him how he would have liked it when he was a Brigade Major if one of the commanding officers had been always coming to he Brigadier about brigade matters. He suddenly saw my point of view and gave in, was very nice to me then and thereafter and gave me no trouble in the future...¹⁵

Beddington was always a believer in the quiet word but he could wield the iron fist when required.

Beddington was still linked to General Hubert Gough's star. When Gough's IV Corps was asked to train the newly arrived 16th (Irish) Division and a staff officer was required with trench experience to run the Corps training School for junior officers, Beddington was the man selected. In the spring of 1916, Gough was requested to put forward a plan to use the cavalry to exploit any breakthrough on the Somme. Beddington was brought onto this planning staff. On 23 May 1916 this became the HQ for Reserve Army, later designated Fifth, Army. Until HQ staff arrived, for the first three weeks the burden fell on Beddington. He was an officer with the regimental rank of captain, with the army rank of brevet-major, undertaking the role of a Major-General General Staff. This helped Beddington's 'networking' as he was in constant contact with the generals commanding corps, such as General Horne and General Jacob (the latter he particularly liked) and their senior staff officers.¹⁶ Beddington remained with Fifth Army until after its success at Beaumont-Hamel, Beaucourt and St Pierre Divion. He was then told that he would be going as GSO1 to an infantry division.

Beddington arrived at 8th Division about two weeks before Heneker. He had been

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 83.

¹⁶ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 92 & Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie*, p. 182.

ordered initially to 22nd Infantry Division but as the General Officer Commanding there was also a cavalryman, Beddington did not think it was correct for the General Officer Commanding and GSO1 of an infantry division both to be cavalrymen. He asked Gough to make representations to GHQ and so was appointed to 8th Division. He asked his new General Officer Commanding, Major-General Havelock Hudson, for leave as he was very tired. Hudson was not happy but eventually agreed. On Beddington's return he found Heneker had arrived, being appointed on 8 December 1916.

Heneker had been notified that he was to be the new General Officer Commanding 8th Division the day before, on 7 December 1916. He wrote in his diary, "...In the afternoon got a wire to say I have been given command of 8th Division with temporary rank of Major-General..."¹⁷ He cancelled his already arranged leave. He wrote the next day, "...I succeed Major General Hudson in 8th Div. He was with me in Murree before the war. Hear 8th Div are slack but it may not be true..."¹⁸

On his arrival at 8th Division, Heneker embarked on a period of inspections and conferences, ranging from the Divisional School to battalion commanders and their adjutants. After a short leave in England, Heneker continued with his work of assessing the condition of 8th Division. He was unhappy with what he saw. "...Dec 26th. Inspected 23rd and 25th Inf Bdes on parade. Disappointed. Dirty and no spirit

¹⁷ IWM: Heneker Diary, reference 66/154/1. The copy in the Department of Documents, IWM, is typed. The Heneker family have Heneker's previous diary covering the period 1913 -1916 which is in manuscript. It is most probable that the typed copy was created for a writer, William Moore, who used the diary for a book on the German March 1918 offensive (William Moore, *See How They Ran: The British Retreat of 1918* [London: Leo Cooper, 1970]). The Heneker family believe the original manuscript was lost while in the possession of William Heneker's son, David, in the course of his many moves of dwelling between Wales, England, Ireland and the USA between the 1960s to 1980s.

¹⁸ Ibid. Murree was one of the larger cantonments in British India.

about them...”¹⁹

Beddington wrote that he received a note from Gough that said:

*...You will remember that I would not tell you anything about your former Divisional Commander when you left us, but now he has gone I don't mind saying that you are well rid of a stupid, cantankerous old Hindu. You and Heneker, your new divisional commander, ought to get on well: he was a Brigadier in 18th Division...*²⁰

Beddington then stated that he managed to get Heneker himself away on leave for a week owing to the latter's efforts on the Ancre while Beddington assessed the Division. This does not tally with Hanbury-Sparrow's account, while Heneker says that he did not meet Beddington until his return from leave on 24 December 1916. Beddington wrote that he looked at the senior officers and decided that all four brigadier-generals (the three infantry brigadiers and the Commander Royal Artillery) should be replaced as well as three battalion commanders, the AA&QMG (the Division's senior administrative officer), the GSO2 (the second ranking operations staff officer) and the Principal Chaplain. Beddington then stated that he refused to share his report with Heneker until the latter had made his own tour of the division and made his own mind up. After a week or so, according to Beddington, both met and agreed the Division needed a real shake-up with an insistence on Regular army standards of smartness and discipline. The only difference was that Heneker's list of personnel that he wanted to replace was three-quarters of the length of Beddington's. Heneker's problem was that he could not report adversely on all of them, as he was new to the Division. Beddington suggested that Heneker contact the General Officer Commanding XV Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir John Du Cane, and ask for a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 104.

meeting.²¹ Heneker could then express his concerns that the persons named should be employed elsewhere, and replacements brought in so that 8th Division could regain its confidence.

Beddington was unsure that Du Cane would agree. Du Cane was relatively new to command on the Western Front, having previously been BGGs III Corps, Artillery Advisor at GHQ BEF and at the Ministry of Munitions since November 1915. Therefore, Beddington, according to his personal record, contacted Major-General 'Archie' Montgomery, the MGGS, Fourth Army, as soon as Heneker had left for his meeting. This was where Beddington's contacts made while in the Operations Section of Reserve/Fifth Army came into play. He knew Major-General 'Archie' Montgomery very well. He asked Montgomery to invite Heneker and himself to tea as he had a very good reason for them to meet. Montgomery agreed. Beddington said he could not say why and anyway Heneker could not make it as he had gone to see Du Cane. He further asked Montgomery to get Rawlinson to ask why Heneker had gone to see the Corps commander. Beddington went and had tea. Rawlinson asked why Heneker was absent. Beddington explained that Heneker had gone to ask that the Division be supplied with new blood. Rawlinson thought that was a good idea but then asked why had Beddington come to see him. Beddington said that he was worried that Du Cane would not agree but he had no confirmation of what his view was. Now, Rawlinson had simply asked him a question and he had given him a simple answer. Beddington wrote, "...Rawly roared with laughter and Archie on the way out

²¹ John Philip Du Cane, dob 05 May 1865, Commissioned RHA/RFA; 1912-14 BGGs Inspectorate of Home Forces; 1914-15 BGGs III Corps; 1916 Ministry of Munitions; September 1916 – April 1918 GOC XV Corps; April 1918-April 1919 British military representative Allied HQ; 1920-23 Master-General of the Ordnance; 1923-4 GOC-in-C Western Command; 1924-7 GOCinC BAOR; 1927-31 Governor and Commander-in-Chief Malta; 1931 retired; (1919 Colonel Commandant Royal Artillery 1919) ; 05 April 1947 died.

told me it would go through...”²²

On Beddington’s return to 8th Division Headquarters, Beddington states he found Heneker quite dejected, as Du Cane would not agree to the proposed changes. Beddington told him that Rawlinson had asked both of them for tea (omitting that he had contrived the invitation). He further said that when Rawlinson had asked why Heneker was absent, Beddington said he had told Rawlinson that Heneker was with Du Cane and the reason why. He added that Rawlinson said he would back the plan. That evening, according to Beddington, Du Cane rang Heneker and said he’d had second thoughts and would support him and for the list of changes to be submitted at once.

Heneker wrote that on 27 December 1916 he went for lunch with Du Cane at the latter’s HQ at Eitenham. Heneker recalled:

...told him I wanted to get rid of Nicholson my C.R.A., Generals Eden and Pollard of respectively 24th and 25th Bdes and Freeland, GSO2. He promised help and would see Army Commander, Sir H. Rawlinson. Long talk re organisation and attack. He agrees with my views.

Dec 28th. Inspected 24th Bde. Same as other two. Corps Commander came to lunch having seen ‘Rawly’. I must write letter and my wishes will be met if possible.

Dec 29th. Inspected Div School. Not right yet...²³

There is no mention of the incidents concerning Beddington’s visits and requests in Rawlinson’s diary held at Churchill College, Cambridge. His version certainly does

²² LHCMA: Beddington, My Life, pp. 105-6.

²³ IWM: Heneker Diary, reference 66/154/1.

not tally with Heneker's narrative in the latter's diary.²⁴

What is not in question is that Heneker and his new GSO1 were unhappy with the conditions they found in 8th Division. N.P. Birley, 1st Sherwood Foresters, was sent as a 'staff learner' to 25 Brigade HQ. A very short time after Heneker had taken over, he was sent to Divisional HQ for a conference as the brigade-major, Major Currie, was unable to attend. '...I sat and listened with awe as General Heneker expressed strong views on the inefficiency of most of his subordinates...'²⁵

The changes in 8th Division were certainly radical. The CRA, Nicholson, went on 3 January 1917. Two of the three infantry brigade commanders were replaced quickly. Pollard of 25 Brigade went on 11 January and Eden of 24 Brigade on 14 January. The GSO2, Freeland, went on the next day, 15 January. The DAA&QMG, Crauford, went on 25 February 1917. James Jack commented in his diary, after being asked to accompany his brigade commander, Fagan, of 23 Brigade to a conference of brigadiers on 12 January 1917:

...under General Heneker a commander's saddle is a slippery one [...] The Divisional Commander is exceptionally thorough and the conference of brigadiers is convened for the purpose of sifting every detail of organisation with a view to improvements [...] [an] august –and so chilly– an assemblage...²⁶

²⁴ Another instance demonstrating that Beddington is not the most reliable source is given in Ian F.W. Beckett, 'Hubert Gough, Neil Malcolm and Command on the Western Front' in Brian Bond *et al*, "Look to Your Front": Studies in the First World War by the British Commission for Military History (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), p. 4.

²⁵ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, ref. GS 0142, p26.

²⁶ *General Jack's Diary* (2000), p. 191.

The last remaining infantry brigadier-general was Fagan of 23 Brigade. Heneker wrote in his diary, "...Jan 6th. [...] Visited Fagan 23rd Brigade in line in afternoon. Very little shelling. Mud bad. Have had to strafe Fagan a bit lately..."²⁷ Beddington wrote that, when told he was not playing his part properly in rebuilding the Division, Fagan became very angry. Beddington said he was only doing his job. Fagan was told that, "... if he would not take criticism from me, then the only course open to me would be to report the matter to the Divisional Commander. After that he shut up..."²⁸ The entry in Jack's diary for 11 March 1917 said, "...Sad news greets me on returning to the Battalion; General Fagan, our popular brigade commander, has left owing to a difference with the divisional general, a fine but exacting chief..."²⁹

The character of the new commanders was certainly not one of *laissez-faire*. N.P. Birley described Brigadier-General Clifford Coffin, who was brought into command 25 Brigade instead of Pollard:

*...Coffin was a sapper, very able and a strong personality. A powerful, broad, rather shambling figure, with piercing eyes beneath bushy eyebrows, with a rather florid complexion which helped to produce an impression of irascibility (He drank port, and nothing else, at dinner every night!). Long after the war I learnt that, as CRE of his division he had a reputation for bad temper and intemperate language, and had been told off by his Divisional Commander. I never once heard him swear; but I've never forgotten his telling off of Brigade Signallers who hadn't behaved very well at Ypres; 'You behaved like a lot of silly sheep, silly, silly, sheep' and as he spoke it was the most shattering rebuke imaginable...*³⁰

Alan Hanbury-Sparrow believed that the emphasis on discipline was the means by which the will of the Divisional commander was imposed on the troops. At the same

²⁷ IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1.

²⁸ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 108.

²⁹ *General Jack's Diary* (2000), p. 197.

³⁰ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, p. 25.

time, it also built up regimental spirit, by instilling pride in their units. He wrote that the mind:

...released by discipline and certainty from the numbing pressure of fear, was able to think coherently and thereby make adjustments for the unforeseen [...] and with this feeling of certainty confidence grew...³¹

Heneker's clean sweep of many of 8th Division's senior officers was not repeated on such a scale. After the initial purge there were officers who were left in place for long periods. As can be seen in the appendices to this thesis, an examination of the tenure of the administrative officers in divisional headquarters bears this out. The division's senior administrative officer, the Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General, Lieut.-Colonel R. Q. Crauford, was replaced in late February 1917 though he had only been in post since the previous October. However, his successor, Lieut.-Colonel Rudolph Feilding, remained in post from February 1917 until 3 November 1918, though he had not passed staff college.³² His successor was Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. Percy Gerald Scarlett, who had been 8th Division's Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General from 29 August 1915 until 30 August 1917.

Worth noting is that by 1918, much of the division's senior administrative staff were not Regular Army. Fielding was a Special Reserve officer, In March 1918, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, Captain H. Ramsbotham MC, was described by Phillip Ledward, Staff captain of 23 Brigade, was described as, '... a civilian soldier who had taken a 1st [class degree] at Oxford...'³³

³¹ Hanbury-Sparrow, *Land Locked Lake*, p. 217.

³² Rudolph Edmund Aloysius Edmund Fielding, b. 12/10/1885; d. 10/01/1937, was a Special Reserve officer in the Coldstream Guards. Usually known as 'Rollo' Fielding.

³³ IWM: Department of Documents, Philip Ledward Diary [henceforth *Ledward Diary*], reference 76/20/1.

If Heneker perceived a battalion commander as being suitable for promotion to higher command, he tried to ease their path. Brigadier-General E.A. Fagan, GOC 23 Infantry Brigade, was replaced in March 1917, as referred to by James Jack above.³⁴ His successor was Lieut.-Colonel George Witham St George Grogan, who had previously commanded the 1st Worcestershires in 24 Brigade. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Grogan had also served in West Africa at the same time as Heneker.³⁵ Grogan was still in place at the end of the war. Another example of an 8th Division battalion commander being placed in a higher command position within the division took place in October 1917. Heneker wrote in his diary, "...am getting rid of Cobham under the 6 months rest rule. hope to get Roly Haig for 24 Bde...".³⁶ Roland Haig assumed command of 24 Infantry Brigade on 24 November 1917. He was replaced in June 1918 but after he had been badly gassed on the Aisne during the previous month.³⁷ Roger Brand had commanded 2nd Rifle Brigade in 25 Brigade from early 1916, except when he was absent through wounds. In October 1918 he was promoted to command that brigade.³⁸

It does not appear that Heneker placed obstacles in the further career progression of his senior officers. Brigadier-General Clifford Coffin, GOC 25 Brigade, left the

³⁴ Fagan's career did not suffer. He became GOC 46 Brigade, 15th (Scottish) Division, TF in April 1917, see Lieut.-Colonel J. Stewart and John Buchan, *The Fifteenth (Scottish) Division 1914-1919* (Facsimile print Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, n.d.; First published Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1926), pp. 154-5; p. 200. He was gassed at 3rd Ypres and ended the war commanding 12 Infantry Brigade. See Simkins, "Building Blocks", p. 153.

³⁵ http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main=inc/c_grogan (last checked 03/12/2009).

³⁶ Entry for 16-31/10/1917, IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1.

³⁷ Boraston and Bax, *8th Division*, p. 225.

³⁸ As John Bourne has written, he had unusually for a general officer spent the whole war in the same brigade. See entry <http://www.firstworldwar.bham.ac.uk/donkey/brand.htm> (last checked 03.12.2009).

division to take command of 36th (Ulster) Division in May 1918.³⁹ Coffin and Grogan won VCs while commanding infantry brigades. They were the two highest ranking officers to win the award in the Great War. As Peter Simkins has written, ‘...surely a unique distinction for any division...’⁴⁰

When Hudson was GOC, a number of officers were posted as GSO3s at divisional headquarters from the infantry battalions within the division, presumably to widen their experience. Examples were Gerald Gartlan, who returned to 1st Royal Irish Rifles for 1 July 1916 and Alan Hanbury-Sparrow, who went on to command 2nd Royal Berkshires in 1917. This practice was not continued when Heneker took command. It is quite apparent that he saw a difference between staff officers, who he considered suited the purposes required by the division and so were kept in post, and officers who he wanted as commanders. In 1918 he forcefully told Phillip Ledward, on the staff of 23 Brigade, that he should be back in the front line.⁴¹ Ledward did not like Heneker and was not prepared to accept that the latter had any beneficial motives in making his comments.⁴² George Roupell gave another viewpoint.⁴³ In the spring of 1918 he had recently completed a wartime staff course at Caius College, Cambridge. His first posting as a qualified staff officer was as GSO2 to 8th Division and he was involved in the confused fighting on the Aisne and the subsequent retreat in May

³⁹ His successor was unusual for 8th Division in that he was a Territorial. Ralph Husey had been a pre-war officer in the London Rifle Brigade. He had commanded his battalion with great skill and courage during the German March 1918 offensive and had been awarded a bar to his DSO. Promoted to command 25 Infantry Brigade, he died of wounds after being captured on the Aisne, again being involved in hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy. See Frank Davies and Graham Maddocks, *Bloody Red Tabs General Officer Casualties of the Great War 1914-1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1995), pp. 75-6.

⁴⁰ Simkins, “Building Blocks”, p. 155.

⁴¹ See *Ledward Diary*, Department of Documents, IWM.

⁴² *Ibid.* See Ledward’s view, when writing about Heneker’s principle ADC, George Hennessy, later Lord Windlesham, that no really decent man would have been ADC to Heneker.

⁴³ George Rowland Patrick Roupell, b. 07.04.1892, d. 04.03.1974. Regular Army commission 1912 - 1st East Surreys. He was awarded the VC for his actions at Hill 60 at Ypres on 20/04/1915.

1918. Following the removal front line of 8th Division's remnants for recuperation and yet another reconstruction of the decimated division, Heneker sent for him. Roupell later recorded,

...Heneker sent for me and more less said that I wasn't his idea of a good staff officer and that he no longer wanted me on his staff but that he was prepared to strongly recommend me for command of any Bn in his Division or elsewhere. Any hurt feelings about 'the Poor Staff Officer' were completely outweighed by what I have always looked upon as one of the greatest compliments ever paid to me...⁴⁴

Bouschavesnes – The Dawn Of A New Era

As well as fostering an improvement in the character of the Division, the other element in the improvement of 8th Division as an organisation was that in organisation and operational planning. Hanbury-Sparrow wrote of the benefits of the rehearsed attack that he states came in about this time, early 1917. The enemy trenches were duplicated and the planned attacks rehearsed so often that the tactical actions required became second nature.⁴⁵ However, these were not new methods. They had been used before the Battle of the Somme, for example at Neuve Chapelle. This is an indication of the de-skilling of the Division that had taken place since early 1915. Rehearsal had changed in some respects. There was now a greater use of drills so that complicated procedures became almost an automatic action. At the same time, there were attempts to teach tactical awareness. This meant that commanders were allowed to appreciate that there was not only one way to approach a problem. Thus

⁴⁴ IWM: Department of Documents: Brigadier G.R.P. Roupell papers, ref. PP/MCR/56.

⁴⁵ Hanbury-Sparrow, *Land Locked Lake*, p. 217.

drills such as deploying a Lewis gun team would allow a tactical decision to be made by the commander on the scene. Allowing the man at the front to make decisions was again an example of the principles of *FSR, Part 1* being used as a guide to constructing standard procedures and drill.

At the same time, in late 1916 and early 1917, the lessons of the Somme were applied to the organisation and tactics employed by division and platoons in order to increase its effectiveness. Two fundamental training pamphlets were published, SS135 *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, issued in December 1916, and SS143 *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, issued in February 1917. SS135 envisaged an advance behind a rolling barrage and the use of all weapons, rifle-grenades, smoke, snipers and Lewis guns to deal with any enemy still active after the barrage had moved on. SS143 re-organised the platoon into a headquarters and four sections. The first section was made up of two expert grenadiers and three bomb-carriers. The second section was made up of nine riflemen including a scout and sniper. The third section was a Lewis gun crew and carriers for thirty drums of ammunition. The fourth section was composed of four rifle-grenadiers. In effect, the platoon was now a self-sufficient all-arms unit able to function by itself. Now the platoon would be able to manoeuvre on to an objective and use the Lewis gun and rifle grenades to suppress or distract the defender while the rifle and grenade sections were able to attack the enemy from the flank.⁴⁶ Though the introduction of the new organisation was not specifically mentioned in 8th Division war diaries and reports, brigade conference agenda in January 1917 include items on

⁴⁶ See Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 76-9. The British Official Historian was of the opinion that the linear formations, though suited for attacking trenches, were not flexible enough for fighting in open country. See Captain Cyril Falls, *Military Operations, France and Belgium 1917, Volume I: The German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the Battles of Arras* [henceforth *British Official History 1917, Vol. I*] (1940; London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), p. 13.

the progress of the new teams.⁴⁷

When the Division returned to the line for the first time at the end of December 1917, Beddington together with the Commander Royal Engineers, Lieutenant-Colonel C.M. Browne, wrote a description of the line they were taking over and what work was required. Beddington remarked in his diary that, to his surprise, almost all the Commanding Officers wrote notes of thanks stating that they had found the guide useful and nobody had done the like before.⁴⁸

The divisional artillery was also re-organised. 8th Division's artillery organisation had always been anomalous owing to its being a war-raised division. However, from 6 February 1917, it followed the standardised organisation of two artillery brigades. Each was made up of three 6-gun 18-pounder gun batteries and one 6-gun 4.5"-howitzer battery. These were XXXIII (33) and XLV (45) Field Artillery Brigades. V Brigade, RHA left to become an Army Brigade. The Army Artillery Brigades were a result of the reorganisation of the field artillery in the winter of 1916-17. They were artillery brigades at the disposal of the Army commanders, to be used to add weight to any formation in attack or defence. This reorganisation was carried out across the whole BEF because there was a lack of suitable battery and brigade commanders.⁴⁹

Planning and Preparation

⁴⁷ For example, see TNA: PRO, 25 Brigade war diary: June 1916 – March 1917, ref. WO95/1726, '25th Brigade Conference 24th January 1917'.

⁴⁸ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 108. Beddington is certainly not backward in coming forward. I can find no copies of any notes of thanks in the war diaries.

⁴⁹ See *British Official History 1916, Vol. I*, p. 59, footnote 1; *British Official History 1917, Vol. I*, p. 12 and Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 126. From this time on, 8th Division's artillery was always reinforced by 'Army' field-artillery brigades.

In early 1917, 8th Division was tasked to carry out operations, which were to be, in effect, a continuance of the battle of the Somme. Beginning in February 1917, Beddington issued a series of instructions. The topics covered work to be carried out in preparation for the forthcoming operations. Subjects covered were communications, maintenance of dumps, the kit, equipment and ammunition to be carried by each man, medical arrangements, numbers to be left out of battle, including personnel nominated for temporary command, liaison arrangements, SOS signals for artillery and machine gun support, battle straggler posts and prisoners of war, gas and smoke discharges, wire cutting and other instructions for the artillery.⁵⁰

The instructions were very detailed. For example, regarding the kit to be carried, the proportion of shovels to picks to be carried was to vary, “.... according to the frost...”⁵¹ No distinguishing marks were to be worn other than those already detailed and officers were to dress exactly like the men and no sticks were to be carried. Concerning the machine gun barrages, the Instructions were equally detailed covering safety precautions to stop any fire falling upon 8th Division troops, such as a prohibition on the use of worn barrels, the use of observers and the requirement that safety distances had to be calculated. The signal to open fire was only by using either a green parachute Very light, one red and white rocket, displaying a three feet square yellow and black flag or sending SOS on a signal lamp. Guns were to open fire only when one of the approved signals was displayed and were to fire for, “...10 minutes at the rate of 128 rounds a minute and will then cease fire...”⁵² The infantry could only call on a machine gun barrage, “...when the enemy is believed to be massing for, or

⁵⁰ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary & narrative of operations: January – July 1917, reference WO95/1676, ‘*Index to 8th Div, Instructions already issued*’.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, ‘8th Division Instructions No.4, ref. 8th Div. No G.12/29’.

⁵² *Ibid*, ‘8th Division Instructions No.6, ref. 8th Div. No G.12/52’.

about to develop a counter attack, or in case of a counter-attack...”⁵³

The Instruction as to who was to be left out of the proposed operation, the so-called ‘Left out of Battle’ increment, is illuminating. The instruction stated that no more than twenty officers and seventy-five percent of NCOs and none of the Company Serjeant-Majors would go into the attack. It is also worth noting that the two officers nominated to be in temporary command, in case of casualties in the command of 24 and 25 Infantry Brigades were Lieutenant-Colonel Grogan (1st Worcestershires) and Lieutenant-Colonel Brand (2nd Rifle Brigade) respectively. These two officers were to later to be appointed by Heneker to permanent positions as brigade commanders within the division.⁵⁴

The Instruction with regard to stragglers was thorough. There was to be a line of Brigade Battle Straggler Posts and behind them two Divisional Line of Battle Straggler Posts and a Divisional Straggler Collection Station. The Instruction stated that from the brigade straggler posts:

...stragglers will be marched to the nearest Straggler Collection Station, where all ungassed stragglers without arms and equipment will be re-armed and equipped as far as possible with arms and equipment collected from the Advanced Dressing Stations [...]

(b) In the case of Divisional Posts [...] the stragglers will be marched in formed bodies to the Divisional Straggler Collection Station – stragglers without arms or equipment will be re-armed and equipped as far as possible. They will be marched to the Brigade Battle H.Q. and a receipt obtained from an Officer. These receipts will be collected at the Divl: Straggler Collecting Station and handed to the A.P.M. who will inform Divisional and Brigade H.Q. the names of all stragglers who have

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 283. Within a month, on 12 March 1917, Grogan was appointed as GOC 23 Infantry Brigade. Brand was appointed GOC of 25 Brigade on 09 October 1918 just over a month before the war ended. There is no mention of a replacement for 23 Infantry Brigade. Presumably, this was because in any forthcoming initial operation 23 Brigade was to be in reserve.

*been returned to their Brigades...*⁵⁵

8th Division's first structured assault under its new command team was in the area of Bouchavesnes. The objective was to seize the high ground in the area and win control of the area of the Bouchavesnes towards Rancourt. It was to be carried out by 24 and 25 Infantry Brigades with 24 Brigade in reserve. At first, 27 February 1917 was given as 'Z' day, the day of the assault.

Orders were laid out very clearly, with a change in emphasis from those for the assaults made a year or so earlier. Timings between the artillery and the infantry were no longer separate and dependent purely on the clock. They were now congruent, dependent on events, "... (c) Zero will be the hour at which the barrage will descend and at which the infantry will advance to the attack..."⁵⁶ Consolidation was not the only aim of the assault. Forward movement was also to be encouraged. "... (d) 25th and 24th Inf. Bdes. will push straight through behind the barrage to the second objective without halting on the objective..."⁵⁷ This is similar to the memorandum written by the then GSO1 of IV Corps, Brigadier-General Dallas, in April 1915 in that both attempt to protect ground gained by movement as well as by consolidation.⁵⁸ Smoke and gas were to be discharged if wind conditions allowed. RFC contact patrols were to be in place and very detailed instructions were given regarding the synchronisation of watches.

⁵⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676 '8th Division Instructions No.10, ref. 8th Div. No G.12/72'.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, '8th Division Order No. 157', dated 22/02/1917.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, April-July 1915, reference WO95/1672, IV Corps memorandum, dated 23 April 1915 (under the signature of Brigadier-General A.G. Dallas, GSO1 IV Corps).

The artillery's fire plan consisted of a timing grid for three main types of fire required. These were the creeping barrage, the standing barrage and flank barrages on the north and south flanks. There were to be total of ninety-six 18-pdr guns and thirty-six 4.5" howitzers in the frontal barrages and thirty-six 18-pdr guns on the flanks.⁵⁹ The artillery's forward observation officers were given exact instructions that they were to act as general observers of the whole battlefield as well as assist in the controlling of the Division's main weapon systems, the artillery. Counter battery work assumed a greater importance, especially the requirement to negate the German defensive barrage. Suppressing this would remove one of the major problems of 1 July 1916, which was the inability to move reinforcements in men and equipment into the captured German trenches. The Forward Observation Officers were asked to indicate which type of guns the Germans were using to create the defensive barrage. The SOS signals were to be one red and white rocket or displaying a three feet square yellow and black flag or sending SOS on a signal lamp. These were also the last three methods of calling for one of the pre-planned machine gun barrages. Consequently, their use would call down artillery and machine gun fire on any German counter-attack.⁶⁰

Though the attack was originally scheduled for 27 February 1917, on 22 February Heneker wrote an extremely detailed three-page memorandum to the GOC XV Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir John Du Cane. This was evidently in response to a series of questions from XV Corps regarding the forthcoming operation. Heneker argued that there was no prospect of the proposed attack having a reasonable chance of success.

⁵⁹ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, reference WO95/1685, 'Report on the Artillery work during & leading up to the action of the 8th Division on 4th March 1917', dated 08 March 1917.

⁶⁰ Ibid, *Instructions to F.O.Os., ref. 8th D.A. No. B.M./627*, dated 22 February 1917, signed by Major W.E. Duncan, Acting Brigade-Major, 8th Divisional Artillery.

This was due to a series of factors. The state of the ground, especially the communication trenches were such that it “...precludes men arriving in front line in anything but a tired condition...”⁶¹ Heneker continued that the weather was so poor that the “...going is such that movement is bound to be slow. I doubt whether, when the barrage lifts off an objective trench, the Infantry will be able to reach that trench in less than 3 minutes however close they were to the barrage before it lifted...”⁶² The conditions were so poor that the working parties sent to prepare the base of departure (the start line) were exhausted without being able to achieve anything. Any further progress required duckboard tracks to the front line. They did not exist nor was there time to construct them and carry up the required stores by 27 February. The poor weather also meant that that observation was so diminished that hardly any enemy barbed wire had been successfully cut.⁶³

Heneker then answered specific questions that had been asked by Corps in the chances of success if 27 February was still ‘Z’ day. This was composed of two sections. The first was based on the outcome if the weather improved and held good, the second if the weather stayed poor. For both eventualities, Heneker described the chances of success as poor, especially as the ground that the 8th Division infantry were to consolidate on had been so damaged by shellfire that any trenches dug filled with the water from them. He finished his memorandum with:

...4. I am of the opinion that, given a weeks fine weather to dry the ground, a further week would then be required to complete the base of departure and communication trenches. All other preparations would be complete after a total of

⁶¹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, memo to XV Corps, ref. 8th Division No. G.12/75, dated 22 February 1917.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The weather was so bad that, while taking the line over from 8th Division, several men of 40th Division were drowned. See Hughes, *The Northamptonshires*, p. 206.

*10 days really fine weather...*⁶⁴

Heneker submitted a further report two days later, following a XV Corps conference earlier that day. He stated he could only qualify his earlier reports in a few respects. The top of the ground was drying and the laying of duckboards was going well. Even so, the communication trenches were still very bad and made worse by the thaw. He still emphasised that it would be the advance across 'No-Man's Land' that would be very difficult, as would the maintenance of the troops in the areas captured from the Germans. He added:

*...There is one further point to mention: owing to the moon, the longer the operation is postponed, the greater will be the chances of the assaulting troops being detected forming up...*⁶⁵

The assault date was changed to 4 March. As the day for the assault approached the weather improved. The assault could not be delayed too long with a waxing moon in the offing.

Meanwhile, Heneker contacted XV Corps HQ to express his concerns about the machine-gun organisation within the Division. In his opinion, the most able and efficient machine-gun company commander was the youngest in age and service. He expressed a desire for a senior Machine Gun Corps officer to be appointed to, "...supervise the work of all three or four Companies with advantage, and all the

⁶⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, memo to XV Corps, ref. 8th Division No. G.12/75, dated 22 February 1917.

⁶⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, report, dated 24/02/1917, ref. 8th Division No. G.12/87. The new quarter of the Moon would have been 28 February 1917 and the Full Moon would have been on 08 March 1917. Information from NASA website <http://sunearth.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse/phase/phases1901.html>. (Last checked 20.00 hrs, Sunday 03 December 2006).

existing difficulties would disappear...”⁶⁶ Heneker was foreseeing the establishment in early 1918 of a battalion structure for the machine-gun units within the Division.

1 March 1917 saw the first reports to be received by 8th Division concerning a German withdrawal. The CRA 8th Division’s war diary recorded, “...The Flying Corps reported that the Germans had burnt four villages behind their lines, this information requires confirmation...”⁶⁷

On 2 March Rawlinson visited 8th Division headquarters. He recorded in his diary:

*...I went into the details of the attack with Heneker today- they seem all right but he is not very satisfied with the spirit of the Div [ision] as a whole – two small raiding parties failed a few days ago from want of push on the part of subordinate officers...*⁶⁸

It may have been that Heneker was being unduly harsh. The Germans, who were past masters on the mechanics of running an orderly retreat, often placed strong rearguard parties as they prepared to move off. Their task was to deal harshly with any contact patrols put forward by the enemy.⁶⁹ This was done to make the enemy hesitant and tardy in following up the retreat. This would allow the retreating Germans more time to move off in orderly fashion. The Germans had been putting into practice the phased withdrawal to the Siegfried Stellung since 9 February 1917. The date of the proposed first ‘marching day’, when the German Army moved back, was to be 16 March 1917.

The Germans were already under pressure and had commenced the withdrawal early

⁶⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, report, dated 23 February 1917 (ref. 8th Div. No. G.12/85).

⁶⁷ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, reference WO95/1685, entry for 01 March 1917.

⁶⁸ CCC: Rawlinson Diaries, entry for 02 March 1917.

⁶⁹ Thus 137 Brigade, 46 [North Midland] Division was punished at Bucquoy on 13 March 1917. See *British Official History 1917, Vol. I*, pp. 108-9.

on 22 February 1917. A concern was that British pressure would increase to an uncomfortable degree. It may well have been that the raids were especially roughly handled to reduce the likelihood of imminent follow up attacks on the withdrawing forces.

The Initial Assault

The composition of the attack varied between the two brigades carrying out the operation. On the right, 25 Brigade only had one battalion, 2nd Royal Berkshires in the lead on a front of some 300 yards. 2nd Lincolnshires were detailed as supporting ‘moppers-up’ and carriers. 24 Brigade, on the left, had a front of 800 yards to cover. The Brigade had two battalions, 1st Worcestershires and 2nd Northamptonshires, in the lead. The 1st Sherwood Foresters were detailed as ‘moppers-up’ and carriers. Both assaulting battalions had Stokes mortars from the Brigade Light Trench Mortar battery under their direct control.

Before the assault, the infantry formed up along tapes laid in front of the British front line. The tapes were numbered consecutively from front to rear. The first two waves had been sent up earlier to man the front line. These were placed there so that, “...they might reconnoitre their objective and make certain of their direction for the assault...”⁷⁰ The other troops were marched up from assembly trenches some 2, 500 yards behind. In order to help stop the assault troops coughing, they were issued with chewing gum, after the ordered cough lozenges had failed to arrive from England.⁷¹

The chewing gum “...seemed not only to stop the men coughing but also give them

⁷⁰ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, ‘Operations carried out by the 58th Regiment [2/Northants] on the 4th March 1917’.

⁷¹ *British Official History 1917, Vol. I*, p. 120, fn.2.

something to distract their minds...”⁷² Lieutenant-Colonel Buckle, CO Officer 2nd Northamptonshires, wrote that the men were actually lying out in No-Man’s Land for two and a half hours, which exceeded the calculated time by half an hour. To make the men more comfortable in his battalion, they were allowed to lie on their ground-sheets and at Z -1hour, that is 6.15 am, they were given a half-ration of rum.⁷³

The assault went very well. The CRA 8th Division’s war diary recorded, “...The attack was everywhere successful, All the objectives being gained and consolidated...”⁷⁴ There was stubborn resistance from the enemy, especially in a position called ‘the Triangle’. However, by 10.00 am they had been dealt with by the troops detailed to be ‘moppers-up’ and troops brought in from other sectors. If troops went astray, they were soon guided back onto the objective by the relative positions of the barrage.⁷⁵ Machine-gun barrages were used to break up enemy counter attacks of which there were five on that first day alone. In addition to 8th Division’s machine-gun companies, those of 40th Division were used as well. The German counter-attacks were not only dealt with by the barrages of the artillery and the machine-gun companies but also by the rifle-grenades and Lewis guns of the assaulting infantry which were pushed as far forward as possible.

Beddington wrote that the Division received congratulatory messages from the Commander-in-Chief as well as General Officer Commanding Fourth Army and that when the USA came into the War, GHQ sent a complete set of the orders &

⁷² Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 102.

⁷³ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, ‘*Operations carried out by the 58th Regiment [2/Northants] on the 4th March 1917*’.

⁷⁴ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, reference WO95/1685, entry for 4 March 1917.

⁷⁵ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 103.

instructions to the US Command & Staff College.⁷⁶ Rawlinson made the following entry in his diary:

...The attack by the 8 Div. on the enemy line east of Bouschavesnes at 5.15. a.m. this morning was wholly successful. They gained all their objectives and held throughout the day against several enemy counterattacks – they captured 172 prisoners and killed many Germans whilst our own casualties are about 500 – Its an excellent thing for the Divn and I am delighted that they have brought off so complete a success. Heneker deserves great credit for the way he proposed and worked out the scheme...⁷⁷

Heneker wrote that the capture of the trenches was carried out with little loss. It was during the subsequent heavy German bombardment that the losses occurred. Initially, he believed that three quarters of the Division's casualties, which were just over 1,000, were wounded. Subsequently, he wrote:

...8th March. Up at 4 am and with General Cobham went round captured trenches. Very little shelling at this early hour. Trenches in fair condition. Most of the dead buried but still some of ours hanging on the barbed wire and some Boches in shell holes and around the Triangle where the desperate fighting took place. Our casualties now amount to 1,064 of which a very large proportion, almost 40 per cent are killed...⁷⁸

Co-ordination with other formations was the major change between the way the army had operated on the Somme and the operations during spring 1917. Prior and Wilson, in their study of the British Army on the Somme, comment on the disjointed efforts during the fruitless attacks of August 1916.

...The overwhelming characteristics of the attacks was that they were constant, small-scale, and narrow front. This method of proceeding allowed the German troops to concentrate the maximum artillery resources against the small number of attacking troops and on each occasion inflict on the attackers a high percentage of

⁷⁶ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', pp. 109-10, and Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p108, fn.

⁷⁷ CCC: Rawlinson Diaries 1/7, entry for 4 March 1917.

⁷⁸ IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1.

*casualties...*⁷⁹

Now, while operating as part of XV Corps, 8th Division used the artillery of 4th, 33rd and 40th Divisions and X and XIV Army Brigades, RFA. Though 33rd and 40th Divisions were part of XV Corps, 4th Division was in reserve for training.

The artillery after-action report stated that though the guns were divided into three main groups to cover the front and both flanks, a fourth group was also formed. It consisted of two field batteries and two 4.5 inch-howitzer batteries. It was "...placed on one flank, and utilized for special tasks with oblique fire, the object aimed at was to make the tasks for individual batteries and guns as simple as possible..."⁸⁰ The contrast with 1 July 1916 could not have been greater, with groups of guns now kept on hand to deal with difficulties as they arose. There was considerable discussion of the merits of the two main fuses used, the 101 and the 106.⁸¹ The CRA 8th Division concluded that the best wire cutting would be done with 4.5" and 6" howitzers using the new 106 fuse.

What is interesting is that the barrage was constructed in the form it took as a result of specific intelligence on the nature of the enemy defences. It was believed that the first line of German trenches was lightly held so the barrage took the form of creeping barrage of only one quarter to half of the 18-pounders only up to trench line three and trench line four while the rest formed standing barrages on to trench lines two and three. Thus, "...It will be seen therefore that the creeping barrage behind which the

⁷⁹ Prior & Wilson, *Somme*, p. 187.

⁸⁰ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, reference WO95/1685, 'Report on the Artillery work during & leading up to the action of the 8th Division on 4th March 1917', dated 08/03/1917.

⁸¹ Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, p. 98.

infantry were to, and did, advance was very thin. In point of fact it consisted of 42 guns only on a front 1200 yards, or nearly 30 yards per gun...”⁸² The heavy artillery, under XV Corps control, was used mainly for counter-battery work and to bombard enemy trenches north and south of the objective. The heavy artillery did not bombard number 1 trench line at all and number 2 trench line only in a few specific points because, “...it was desired not to destroy these trenches, which our troops would occupy, especially no.2...”⁸³

Surprise was attempted by varying bombardment times and the intensity, covering areas in the rear. The use of ‘chinese’ attacks involving smoke and bombardments away from where the assault was to take place were especially useful.

...Six minutes after Zero a moderately heavy hostile barrage was put down on front attacked, but a very heavy barrage was put down on the front to the North [...] where wire cutting had taken place, and where smoke was put over...⁸⁴

In order to forestall the expected German counter-attacks a system of box barrages laid on the German trenches that were to be captured was carefully worked out. The planning of these was part of the task of three artillery Reconnaissance Officers. They had no other duty except to build up a thorough knowledge of their area of responsibility.

A most important reason for the artillery/infantry success was the use of two specially selected senior artillery officers to act as liaison officers, one at each infantry brigade

⁸² TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, reference WO95/1685, ‘Report on the Artillery work during & leading up to the action of the 8th Division on 4th March 1917’, dated 08/03/1917.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

headquarters:

...Certain powers of direct command over [artillery] Group Commanders were delegated by the C.R.A. to the Liaison Officers, to be acted upon in certain circumstances.

*They worked in consultation with the Infantry Brigadiers. All action taken was at once reported to the C.R.A....*⁸⁵

Captain W.E. Duncan, who was artillery brigade-major, that is staff officer to the CRA 8th Division, wrote:

...The barrage of the whole divisional artillery was impressive as it crept forward to envelope [sic.] the German trenches in a mass of smoke and flame. But after near an hour we noticed that our infantry had not been able to keep up with its timed programme, and a number of Germans could be seen firing from the ever increasing gap between them and the protection of the barrage. I managed to get through to Division and arranged for the barrage to be pulled back from line Z + 50 to line Zero + 20. I forget the exact figures, but it worked out right; the defenders could not stand up to a second barrage and the position was taken...⁸⁶

In conclusion, the CRA 8th Division's after action report put success down to the fact that matters were kept simple for the gun crews, especially the gun-layers, in that they used the same type of shell throughout, and they were opposite where their sector was to be. Orders were received well in advance so they were able to be digested and understood. There was less confusion, as there was no continual change in orders. Moreover, the infantry were carefully coached as to what the guns could achieve and the very close liaison down to company commander level. Finally:

...I am of the opinion that previous, heavy, destructive bombardment of trenches to be taken is entirely unnecessary. Careful reconnaissance, study of air photographs etc. should be able to locate Machine Gun and trench Mortar emplacements, and strong points.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Liddle Collection: W.E. Duncan Papers, p. 62.

*These, and these only, should be 'done in' by Heavy Artillery fire...*⁸⁷

It can be seen that the fire-plan used by the artillery was not intended to be destructive and it was finely tuned to react to circumstances. Above all, it was not set to a rigid timetable, part of a central plan. It was capable of devolved command, making almost instantaneous decisions in reaction to changing events.

The after-action reports made by the two infantry brigades that provided the assaulting infantry have differing views, as was to be expected from those nearer the action. Generally, both brigades thought the operation went well. The 24 Brigade after-action reported stated that realising that the assaulting troops would be lying out on a forward slope in moonlight, an experiment was carried out, "...with a view to test visibility at night, aided by 1½" Very Lights, the most advanced tape was at no point nearer than 500 yards from the enemy's line..."⁸⁸

However, both brigades agreed that the one weak area was communications. The 25 Brigade after-action report called them, "...the most disappointing part of the whole operation..."⁸⁹ Cables were repeatedly cut and signalling lamps and their crews were knocked out. 25 Brigade commented that the 'power buzzers' failed as the earthing cables, which had to be some 100 yards in length were also repeatedly cut by the enemy shelling.⁹⁰ 24 Brigade's report stated that the best means of communicating

⁸⁷ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, reference WO95/1685, 'Report on the Artillery work during & leading up to the action of the 8th Division on 4th March 1917', dated 08/03/1917.

⁸⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, 24 Brigade after-action report.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 25 Brigade after-action report.

⁹⁰ Power buzzers operated by the signal being sent through earth to the receiving station. See Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 172.

were by runner or pigeon.⁹¹

Both brigades praised the use of the Lewis guns and rifle-grenades. They were seen as defensive weapons though they were pushed forward to extend the reach of the defence against the German counter-attacks. All agreed that the critical time was the first half-hour after the capture of the position and that more grenades were needed to be in the position at this time. 24 Brigade proposed a special carrying vest.⁹² Lieutenant-Colonel Buckle, 2nd Northamptonshires, thought that some of the bombing parties could dispense with their rifles and carry more bombs.⁹³

There was general agreement that the new platoon formation of platoon HQ and four sections, one each of riflemen, bombers, rifle-grenadiers and Lewis-guns was very effective. Lieutenant-Colonel Buckle commented, "...We all have nothing but praise for it. Platoon Commanders found their Lewis guns invaluable..."⁹⁴ The artillery barrage was seen as very effective at first but decreased in effect the further forward the advance progressed.

It is noteworthy that within the 8th Division war diary a copy was kept of Lieutenant-Colonel Buckle's report, together with an attached paper of comments by Major-General Heneker. Heneker's comments are not hostile. He appears to realise that Buckle had valid arguments to put forward, which are worthy of consideration and action. For example, Buckle was concerned that the 'Moppers-Up' and Supports

⁹¹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, 24 Brigade after-action report.

⁹² Ibid. This annotated with a definite 'No'.

⁹³ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – July 1917, ref. WO95/1676, '*Operations carried out by the 58th Regiment [2/Northants] on the 4th March 1917*'.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

became intermingled. Heneker went into the arguments for and against using infantry of the same battalion as ‘moppers-up’ and supports. He stated that the events Buckle described took place because the area covered was relatively shallow and the support companies were not required to replace heavy casualties in the leading assault waves. He wrote that if “...’Moppers Up’ are found by the assaulting Bn., it may be necessary to call on another Bn. to furnish the Supporting Coy. This may lead to an early intermixture of units...”⁹⁵

Heneker agreed with Buckle that the Lewis gun teams needed to be made larger to carry the extra ammunition required but was not sure about removing rifles from the bombing teams unless they had a long distance to cover. He noted the comments concerning the artillery’s shooting becoming inaccurate at the far end of the advance and that the standing and SOS barrages needed to be further away from the infantry they were protecting. In reply, he wrote:

*...I agree re Standing Barrage and S.O.S. and have made a note for future safety. It must be remembered, however, that a barrage laid too far in front of our line is no barrage at all, and in this case, as the ground dipped so quickly East of FRITZ, it was necessary to place the barrage close to that trench. I later ordered it to lift 100yards and after that no complaints were received...*⁹⁶

Rawlinson’s congratulatory message to 8th Division contained perceptive comments. He praised the excellent work carried out in forming up in No-Man’s Land, the discipline and tenacity demonstrated and the effectiveness of the artillery and machine-guns. Nevertheless, he remarked that the Triangle should have been dealt with before the infantry assault.

⁹⁵ Ibid, comments from Major-General Heneker regarding ‘Operations carried out by the 58th Regiment [2/Northants] on the 4th March 1917’, *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Ibid.

The assault on Bouchavesnes on 4 March 1917 demonstrated how far the Division had progressed since 1 July 1916, let alone from the efforts of 1915. In some respects the tactical ideas were the same. The advance took place in waves, so as to hit the enemy trenches as the barrage lifted. There was still an emphasis on the need to cover ground quickly. The main differences were in the techniques used and the amount of supporting firepower that could be deployed to support the assault. There was now in place far more efficient artillery, which had a communication system that allowed it to respond far quicker than before. Most importantly, the infantry were now equipped with its own mobile firepower in the form of the Lewis gun and the rifle-grenade. This allowed the tactical command and control on the battlefield to take place at a lower level than before.

It has been commented that the infantry in 1916 were mere onlookers, helpless in the face of the firepower of the machine-gun and the artillery.⁹⁷ The picture for 8th Division in the spring of 1917 was now different. The techniques and equipment were in place, though still subject to constant revision and improvement, which could neutralise the enemy defences without the need for massive destruction. Now, more than before, the Division was able to affect its fate.

When the British Official Historian wrote of the actions during the German withdrawal where the British had done especially well, Bouschavesnes was not included.⁹⁸ The action is not as well-known as it should be.⁹⁹ For 8th Division it was

⁹⁷ See Prior and Wilson, *Somme*, pp. 117-8.

⁹⁸ *British Official History 1917, Vol.I*, p. 344.

⁹⁹ After the war the Worcestershires' history commented that this was because the action was, "...unaccountably omitted from the despatches of the C.-in-C and hence is not to be found in the

an antidote to the disappointments of the previous year. Above all, it showed that 8th Division was in the vanguard of the BEF's tactical development with its use of the tactics of neutralisation rather than destruction.

A Failure to Adapt?

It has been said that the BEF did not do well in the phase of open warfare that took place when the German Army marched back to its prepared positions in the *Siegfried Stellung*, known to the British and Imperial Armies as the Hindenburg Line. It showed hesitancy, especially when its flanks were exposed, and there was a general lack of initiative. The British Official Historian commented, "...When the Germans fell back the British divisions were for the most part bewildered and helpless until they had accustomed themselves to a new form [of warfare]..."¹⁰⁰

When 8th Division joined II Corps in the Ypres area in the summer of 1917, that Corps had made an analysis of its performance in the advance to the Hindenburg Line.¹⁰¹ The report made for depressing reading and appeared to confirm the opinion subsequently synthesised by the British Official Historian. It lamented that trench warfare had caused well-known principles to be forgotten. It stated that patrols after coming under fire would halt and report, ground of tactical importance was ignored and so opportunities of forcing the enemy to withdraw were missed. More damning still:

official list of battles: nor has a battle honour been allowed in spite of a petition from the Regiment..." See Stacke, *The Worcestershires*, p. 239, footnote (f).

¹⁰⁰ *British Official History 1917, Vol.I*, p. 543.

¹⁰¹ TNA:PRO, II Corps war diary and narrative of events: April-July 1917, ref. WO95/642 'Provisional notes on the open fighting in the SOMME area March 1917' (ref. II Corps, G.T. 100), dated 5 April 1917.

...Battle patrols on one or two occasions failed to 'make good' points which were found to be unoccupied by the enemy and instead of seizing and holding the points in question and sending back information, the patrols returned to our lines...¹⁰²

Generally, there was a reluctance to push forward, especially by the artillery, which was at times poorly placed to provide continued support for the infantry. There needed to be good liaison between the CRA and the CRE and the former had to ensure the division's general staff realised what engineering support was required beforehand.

Being prepared only for limited trench attacks with close objectives, units and formations were not prepared for the needs of a far longer move forward. For example, water-testing equipment was left behind though the advance was into country where the Germans had carried out a 'scorched earth' policy and water sources may have been contaminated. The advance guards often did not realise the value of reports giving details of road conditions, the state of the ground and even errors in the maps provided. In the advance guards, the cavalry components were often too hesitant. However, it was recognized that the advance guards needed frequent relief, as the work was very strenuous.

8th Division, unlike the formations and units of II Corps, did well in the advance to the Hindenburg Line. Until the middle of April, 8th Division took part in the operations of XV Corps in consolidating the advance. The aim of the advancing British was to remove the Germans from the outposts that acted as a buffer in front of the main Hindenburg Line defences.

¹⁰² Ibid.

The tactics used varied. There was good co-operation with the cavalry and neighbouring divisions, especially 40th Division. Combined machine-gun and artillery fire were used to mark boundaries and stop counter-attacks. Artillery fire was used to guide night attacks. Very lights were used to cause the artillery to lengthen their range. Different methods were used and varied to suit the tactical problems encountered. Among them was approaching at night and then lying up till the afternoon, as at the assault on the villages of Fins, Sorel and Heudicourt on the night of 29-30 March 1917. Another method used was an evening approach and then assaulting at night, as at Gouzeaucourt on 12-13 April 1917.¹⁰³

During the attack on Villers Guislain, on 18 April 1917, the artillery's fire converged towards the north-east. Therefore, though the rate of fire slowed the density of fire remained the same. In the same action, heavy artillery was used to fire ahead so that defences were destroyed, the defenders driven into cover and any defenders that were in the process of withdrawal would be caught in the open.¹⁰⁴ The advancing infantry brigades were given direct control of their own increment of artillery. N.P. Birley, now brigade-major of 25 Brigade commented:

...The Division moved forward by a succession of minor attacks against semi-fortified villages [...] attacks had to be improvised hurriedly, old ideas of fire and movement again came into their own, and the opportunity for initiative among junior officers increased. I think it was on one of these occasions I initiated, for our brigade, the use of the new Stokes mortars for preliminary bombardment prior to an infantry attack. Casualties were light, there was a nice feeling we were

¹⁰³ For the former see LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 'Report on Operations carried out by the 23rd Inf. Bde. And 25th Inf. Bde., 8th Division, on 30th March 1917'. For the latter, see TNA PRO, 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1676, 'Report on Operations carried out by 8th Division on Night 12th/13th April, 1917'.

¹⁰⁴ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, ref. WO95/1685, 'Artillery Action in the attack on VILLERS GUISLAIN by 8th Division on 18-4-17'.

*winning...*¹⁰⁵

Open warfare meant that old skills now had to be relearned. The use of map and compass, especially the need for back-bearings in order to fix position in open country, and the use of short 'bounds' to keep direction and cohesion were all found to be effective methods. Command and control was improved by each battalion having an advanced reporting centre pushed well out in front to receive reports.¹⁰⁶ Different tactics were used to guard the forward line of troops. With the commencement of open warfare, it was not practicable to have a continuous line of trenches. After the capture of Gouzeaucourt on 13 April 1917 an outpost line was established with posts grouped in threes with a trip wire in front.¹⁰⁷

When in support, Jack's battalion, realising the need to rest the men as much as possible, established that:

*...one sentry per half company, with a Lewis gun, and two snipers per company are sufficient for observation duties in daylight: at night every post finds its sentry. In spite of the heavy fatigues each company sends out one small patrol by day and by night: more for practice than for any harm they can do to the enemy...*¹⁰⁸

Throughout this period time was constantly used to instruct the troops in the complexities of open warfare, especially the hostilities-only soldiers, for whom this facet of warfare was novel. Jack further stated that:

¹⁰⁵ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, pp. 27-8.

¹⁰⁶ See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary, ref. WO95/1676 'Report on Operations carried out by 8th Division on Night 12th/13th April, 1917'.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Archives, The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum: J.L. Jack West Yorkshire TS Diary, entry for 25 March 1917, p. 50.

*... Although I am delighted in the good leading and 'drive' of my companies, we have not neglected to overhaul lessons in detail. The more important are: Engaging the enemy forthwith, whenever he is seen within range, with overwhelming fire. Keeping touch with other units out of sight by means of patrols. Placing company headquarters where they may be easily be found. Attacking or defending in small, mutually supporting, lines of groups. Insisting on correct and soldierly bearing at all times, even paying the usual compliments, when out of the enemy's view...*¹⁰⁹

The Division's advance was slowed by the German artillery and machine gunners. Jack wrote, "...the enemy's field guns continue to squander ammunition on single men..."¹¹⁰ Another tactical device used to delay and deter the British follow-up was the booby trap. These included placing explosives in stoves left behind and other explosive devices initiated by the use of delayed-action timers. Jack wrote, with black humour, "...We begin to fancy we hear a 'ticking' in every dug out we enter..."¹¹¹ Lieutenant-Colonel Sherbrooke, CO 1st Sherwood Foresters, wrote, with even darker humour, that the Divisional Royal Engineers devised their own particular method of dealing with such devices:

*... We became wary and eventually inaugurated an excellent game called 'Human Ferrets' – the ferrets being Boche prisoners captured in the neighbourhood, who were put down into suspicious cellars or dug outs and invited not to return without at least one of their friends mines, A humorous sapper with the name of Brown was, I believe, the first to think of this excellent method of avoiding casualties and at the same time exercising our happy Huns...*¹¹²

Nonetheless, the much-vaunted German tactical ability was seen at times to be poor.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, entry for 22 March 1917, p. 49.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, entry for 25 March 1917, p. 50.

¹¹¹ Ibid, entry for 1 April 1917, p. 54. By 'compliments', Jack meant the payment of due military courtesies such as marching at attention and saluting senior officers. Another example of the belief that a well-turned out unit was an efficient one.

¹¹² H.C. Wylly, *The 1st and 2nd Battalions The Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment) in the Great War* (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, no date), p. 43. The identity of the Royal Engineer officer is not confirmed. Quite probably it was Major A.H. 'Buster' Brown, OC 2 Field Company RE, or possibly Lieutenant-Colonel C.M Browne, CRE 8th Division from 6 September 1916 to 9 November 1918.

The defenders occupied the villages but neglected the adjacent hills and slopes, which were vital tactical ground if the position was to be successfully held.¹¹³

8th Division's prescience in anticipating the open warfare of the 'Hundred Days' was demonstrated in another method used against the withdrawing enemy. A 'flying column' was formed to push the enemy. It was commanded by one of the infantry brigade commanders. The brigade-major would come from a different brigade, the one in reserve, and the staff-captain, responsible for supply and administration, from 8th Division HQ. The Column would consist of one battery of 18-pounder field guns, one section (three guns) of 4.5-inch howitzers, an appropriate proportion of the divisional ammunition column, one platoon of pioneers, one infantry battalion and a bearer sub-division from one of the field ambulances. The arrangements for resupply in the open were more flexible than before. The supply wagons refilled artillery ammunition from the dumps of 40th Division, one of the adjacent divisions in the XV Corps.

8th Division appears to have done well in this phase of operations whereas other formations did not deal with open warfare comfortably. After Bouchavesnes, where casualties were relatively heavy, 8th Division's operations until the end of April were not marred by a heavy casualty bill. This was due in part to the fact that the Germans were carrying out a controlled and orderly withdrawal and were not interested in contesting every inch of ground as they had during the 1916 Battle of the Somme. James Jack wrote that it was a time of "...individual fighting full of incident, not too

¹¹³ See LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, 'Report on Operations carried out by the 23rd Inf. Bde. And 25th Inf. Bde., 8th Division, on 30th March 1917'.

deadly, and over a wide expanse of country...”¹¹⁴ Even so, 8th Division had to make do with what it had. As James Jack perceptively noted, “...the means at the disposal of the Division were limited, practically all reinforcements and shells being earmarked for the Battle of ARRAS which opened on 9th April...”¹¹⁵

The methods and tactics used by 8th Division during this period were signs that the BEF was becoming more professional. Even so, there was always room for improvement. A two-battalion raid was carried out on the Hindenburg Line on the night of 5-6 May 1917 by 2nd Scottish Rifles and 2nd Middlesex. Heneker’s after action report was very detailed. In his analysis, the first point he made was:

*...A raid must be treated in the same respect as an attack, for although it is intended to withdraw after the objects have been achieved, still the enemy’s lines have to be entered and his strong points taken before any results justifying the raid can be obtained. I find that in this Division there is a tendency to consider the operation in a less careful and serious spirit because it is a raid. This is obviously wrong.*¹¹⁶

Heneker’s views on the artillery support used were astute. He said that the ‘practice’ barrages fired before hand, in order to draw out the enemy defenders, should be exactly the same as the ones used during the attack because:

*...In the two practice shoots we had, the Heavies did not take part, nor did the machine-guns of the Division [...] but when Zero hour sounded, the unaccustomed volume of sound left him in no doubt as to our intentions...*¹¹⁷

The depth of analysis was further demonstrated by the comment that at night the

¹¹⁴ Archives, The Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum: J.L. Jack West Yorkshire TS Diary, entry for 8 April 1917, p. 55.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 45-6.

¹¹⁶ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, ref. WO95/1676, ‘Report on Raid carried out on night 5th/6th May, 1917’, ref. 8th Division No.G.30/97.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

rolling barrage in front of the infantry should not be ‘air-burst’ shrapnel but ‘burst on graze’, so the infantry could see the line of fire in front of them.¹¹⁸ The analysis of technical gunnery had reached such a level that Heneker could write, “...A sudden and unexpected change in temperature and a sudden rise in the wind shortly before the attack necessitated an alteration after dusk of all the fuses that had been prepared...”¹¹⁹

By and large, Heneker was pleased with the way 8th Division carried out its responsibilities. Even more, he was pleased with the way in which the Division’s operations were used almost as a realistic exercise. The participants were under real fire but not under too much pressure so that the experience could not be used as a means of learning and instruction. He wrote on 2 April 1917:

...The principle point which strikes one is the power which our infantry appear to possess of adapting themselves to circumstances. Three weeks ago I really do not think that we could have, with success, carried out such an open warfare attack.

*During the above three weeks, constant instruction has been going on, and the Infantry Brigadiers have been using the small advances made as object lessons on which instruction and criticism have been based...*¹²⁰

The last paragraph is quite remarkable. Heneker was stating that 8th Division ran the operations almost as large-scale field-exercises. There was the added bonus that senses were sharpened by the unknown factors because the enemy were real, not the

¹¹⁸ ‘Air-burst’ is where a time fuse is set so that the shell explodes in flight at a pre-determined interval. A ‘Burst on graze’ fuse was one that exploded as soon as it encountered resistance e.g. barbed wire or the ground surface. Its benefit was that it did not turn the battlefield into a crater field. It took the British until early 1917 to perfect such a fuse, the type Fuse 106. See Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, p. 98, and Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 140.

¹¹⁹ TNA: PRO, CRA 8th Division war diary: January-December 1917, ref. WO95/1676, ‘Report on Raid carried out on night 5th/6th May, 1917’, ref. 8th Division No.G.30/97.

¹²⁰ LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, ‘Report on Operations carried out by the 23rd Inf. Bde. And 25th Inf. Bde., 8th Division, on 30th March 1917’.

scripted opposition that would have been found on exercise. Therefore, 8th Division appears to have differed from other formations at this time in that its experience of the German withdrawal was viewed as a positive event. In addition, the Division did not participate in the Battle of Arras, where the initial successes turned into a bloody slog. The Divisional history commented:

*...Commencing on the 2nd March, the troops of the division had gone resolutely and rapidly forward, meeting and overcoming skilfully all the difficulties in their way, gaining steadily in knowledge and experience and in that quiet confidence in themselves and their leaders without which the best work of a division is impossible. In the end, the morale of all ranks had been raised to a pitch which made them feel that there was nothing they could not accomplish...*¹²¹

* * * *

8th Division did well in the period after Heneker took command. The methods brought in for the attack at Bouschavesnes were flexible and precise. Noteworthy is that the successful attack was for a limited objective and exploitation was controlled. The period when 8th Division followed the German withdrawal to the Siegfried position/Hindenburg Line indicated that, unlike many other British divisions, the division could operate in open warfare, using initiative, depending on the leadership of the leaders at the front of the advance.

¹²¹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 118.

CHAPTER 5

LATE 1917 AND EARLY 1918 - STRESSES AND STRAINS

The historiography relating to the BEF on the Western Front during this period is dominated by the Battle of Third Ypres and the German Spring offensives of 1918. There is comparatively little written about the Battle of Arras. Often any examination of the events of April 1917 is as a background to the actions of the Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge. Even so, the experiences of 1917 have been integrated into the 'learning curve' thesis. Jonathan Bailey has argued that the move from destructive artillery fire to neutralisation developed slowly in 1917 but that the green shoots were there.¹ Bidwell and Graham demonstrated that the technical component of artillery, such as calibration and 'flash' spotting and sound ranging, became even more proficient.² This enabled greater support to the infantry. Andy Simpson's examination of corps command argues that the fighting encapsulated the lessons of the Somme.³ An analysis of how a division engaged in the disastrous action at Gommecourt on 1 July 1916 had progressed by this time to perform well on 9 April 1917, at the Battle of the Scarpe, is to be found Matthew Brosnan's thesis on 56th (London) Division (TF).⁴ The development of training at a divisional level is further examined by Ian Riley's thesis on Major General Jeudwine and 55th Division.⁵

¹ Bailey, 'British Artillery in the Great War', pp. 35-7.

² Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower*, pp. 108-9.

³ Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2006), pp. 61-86.

⁴ Matthew J. Brosnan, 'The Tactical Development of the 56th (London) Division on the Western Front' (MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2005), pp. 56-89.

⁵ Ian Riley, 'The Formation of the 55th (West Lancashire) Division and the Development of Training and of the Divisional Infantry School during 1916 and 1917' (MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2009).

With regard to Third Ypres, much of the examination of the battle has concentrated on the strategic level, on the motives and actions of the higher commanders and the politicians.⁶ An important synthesis of modern thinking on the battle is the book edited by Peter Liddle, *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*.⁷ For example, John Lee argues that Plumer's change in tactics for the Battles of the Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde in September and October 1917 marked a successful phase using 'bite and hold' tactics, that is limited objectives and the use of artillery and massed machine-guns to smash the predictable German counter attack, which gained successes that have often been overlooked.⁸ In contrast, Tim Travers reiterates his belief that the British command's system was too inflexible of mind and body to provide the sophistication required to control a modern technological battlefield.⁹ One of the few modern examinations of the performance at a divisional level is contained in Kathryn Snowden's thesis on 21st Division.¹⁰ Any improvements in operational technique during the campaign at Ypres in the latter half of 1917 were negated by one overriding disadvantage. The area of operations was a salient. This meant that advancing British Empire infantry and their supporting artillery constantly suffered from defensive fire not only from their front but also from their flanks. Andy Simpson comments perceptively that the British Army had to be very reliant on aerial observation, which made it difficult to assess the success of counter battery fire. In

⁶ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996)

⁷ Peter Liddle, ed., *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997).

⁸ John Lee, 'The British Divisions at Third Ypres' in Liddle, ed., *Passchendaele in Perspective*, pp. 210-20.

⁹ See Tim Travers, *How the War was Won: Factors that led to Victory in World War One* (paperback Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), especially chapter 1, 2 and 3.

¹⁰ Kathryn Louise Snowden, 'British 21st Infantry Division on the Western Front 1914-1918 A Case Study in Tactical Evolution' (MPhil thesis, University of Birmingham, 2001), Chapter 2 Broodseinde, pp. 63-95.

contrast the Germans had excellent fields of ground observation and could effectively conceal their artillery in dead ground. As a result their counter-battery work was very effective. This meant that the German defences were not suppressed as effectively as they should have been.¹¹ Thus 8th Division's two attacks at Westhoek on 31st July and on the Hanebeek on 16th August failed not only due to the failure of formations on their flanks but also due to the volume of fire from German defences on the flanks.

Bryn Hammond's book on the battle of Cambrai argues that much of the initial success was due to the increasingly sophisticated use of artillery, that the tanks of the time were too unreliable and technically crude to be the war-winning weapon put forward by their advocates since the war.¹² Whereas most recent British works have emphasised the increasing tactical sophistication and the all-arms battle, American historians have championed the German use of infiltration, using 'storm-troop' assault units and the application of overwhelming firepower by artillerists such as Bruchmuller.¹³ These tactics were to reach their apotheosis in the *Michael* offensive of March 1918. There is no modern academic study of the BEF during the German offensives. The most recent analysis of the period, by David Zabecki, is a study of the German stance.¹⁴ Following their efforts in the Battle of Third Ypres, 8th Division were to face some of their sternest tests facing the enemy onslaught during March to June 1918.

¹¹ See Chapter 6, pp. 93 -104, Andy Simpson, *The Evolution of Victory: British Battles on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London: Tom Donovan, 1995), especially pp. 93-4 and pp. 100-1.

¹² Bryn Hammond, *Cambrai 1917 The Myth of the First Great Tank Battle* (London: Phoenix, 2009), especially pp. 429-32.

¹³ For example, Martin Samuels, *Command or Control?: Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1995) or Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army 1914-18* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

¹⁴ David T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

* * * *

By the end of May 1917, the emphasis on the forthcoming operations in Flanders meant that 8th Division took its place in the move of forces north. 8th Division joined II Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Claud Jacob. Jacob was an officer of the Indian Army who had remained with the BEF after the Indian Corps had left France in late 1915. II Corps was noted as a formation where divisions found that the staff-work "...was efficient and above all they appreciated that too much would not be asked of them..."¹⁵ II Corps, when asking for staff to be nominated to man the Corps School and Reinforcement Camp, asked for the best instructors available because, "...it is in the interest of Divisions that really good instructors should be sent as the numbers of reinforcements coming to the camp will probably be large..."¹⁶

8th Division threw itself into the preparations for the offensive interspersed with spells in the front line or support. Birley, still Brigade-Major 25 Brigade, wrote:

*...Preparations for the attack were, once more, extremely thorough. A replica of the ground over which the attack was to be made, with all the German trenches, was laid out in the training area and the Brigade took over a sector of the front line to familiarise everyone with the ground. Meanwhile, there was a steady build up of artillery activity [...] the gun sites were under constant and heavy enemy shelling, and scarcely ever seemed to get out of the battle for a rest...*¹⁷

With regard to the staff work, Jack wrote on July 15, before the attack on Westhoek:

¹⁵ See entry on Claud William Jacob in Bourne, *Who's Who*, p. 143.

¹⁶ TNA: PRO, II Corps war diary and narrative of events: April-July 1917, ref. WO95/642, memo, dated 14 June 1917, ref. *II Corps G.T. 1061*.

¹⁷ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, p. 28.

... 'Instruction' after 'instruction', forecasting the Battle Orders, keeps arriving. Intricate and lengthy as they cannot avoid being, Lieut.-Colonel H. Beddington [...] has framed them simply and clearly besides issuing them in their proper sequence at a few days interval to allow recipients to digest the contents. Each instruction deals with a separate phase of preparations and operations...¹⁸

II Corps provided detailed information with regard to the German defences and defenders. The intelligence summaries understood the doctrine of the German defences, that is a very lightly held front line and counter attack by storm troops held further back.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that a sentence stating that it might be necessary to mount a second operation to capture the German second line has been crossed out.

8th Division carried out two main assaults. The first was towards Westhoek on 31 July 1917. The second was beyond Westhoek, towards the Hanebeek, on 16 August 1917. On both occasions the Division was under the command of Jacob's II Corps. That both attacks were only partially successful owing to heavy fire from the enemy in flanking positions was not the fault of 8th Division. In fact, Heneker had made unsuccessful representations to II Corps on 12 August arguing that 56th Division on the right flank, towards Polygon and Nonne Boschen woods, should attack first aided by a special concentration of artillery. Hanbury-Sparrow was present when Heneker told his infantry commanders this at a divisional conference afterward. Hanbury-Sparrow's view was, "...if we were to be scuppered, it was at least something to

¹⁸ Archives, The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire Museum: J.L. Jack West Yorkshire TS Diary, entry for Sunday 15 July 1917, p. 77.

¹⁹ See especially TNA: PRO, II Corps war diary and narrative of events: April-July 1917, ref. WO95/642, 'Summary of our present information concerning the enemy forces and defences opposite the II Corps front', dated 27/06/1917, p. 4.

know the fault did not lie within the division...”²⁰

The infantry found the attack on 16 August particularly gruelling. John Nettleton, an officer with 2nd Rifle Brigade in 25 Brigade wrote that the day had begun badly when the battalion headquarters was sheltering in a captured German pill-box. These were deliberately designed so that the thinner walls and entrances were now facing towards the enemy, their former owners. The battalion’s acting adjutant was blown to pieces inside the building and his remains were plastered over the inside walls:

*This was a bad beginning to a bad day - one of the worst, in my memory, as far as the actual fighting was concerned. Our attacking battalions took their first objective and, in some places, reached their second, but the division on our right could make no progress at all, so our forward troops were soon being enfiladed by machine gun fire from the right. Then the division on our left which had gone forward with us was driven right back to its starting point, so we were left in a completely untenable position [...] Companies [...] were pushed in here and there to try and stabilise the position, but could only delay matters a little. By 9 a.m. the Irish Rifles had not a single officer left and the 2nd R. Berks were in little better case. At one time even the Brigade HQ personnel were pushed into the line. The Brigadier (Brigadier-General C. Coffin) was here, there and everywhere [...] but the whole situation was very confused, with enfilade fire from both flanks, continual counter-attacks and units all mixed up.*²¹

Both attacks again saw the use of repeated rehearsal and of special tactics to deal with the pill boxes, the use of smoke-bombs and grenades by dedicated mopping-up squads and the use of prompt Defensive Fire tasking by artillery and machine-guns to deal with enemy counterattacks.

The post-action reports contained complaints about communications. The communications were bad and would remain so until the German artillery was

²⁰ Hanbury-Sparrow, *Land Locked Lake*, p. 252.

²¹ John Nettleton, *The Anger of the Guns* (London: Kimber, 1979), pp. 97-8.

destroyed. Burying cable was also too time and resource-intensive. One complaint made was that, due to the many types of signalling systems used, power buzzer, signal lamp and flag, the brigade signalling parties were now so big that they suffered severe casualties.

Detailed analysis was made of the effect of the local environment. The Germans had used much indirect machine gun fire so it was recommended that all future consolidation should be on reverse slopes. The enemy trenches were extensively destroyed by the bombardment. This meant fewer bombs were needed for clearing trenches and dugouts. A greater emphasis on rifle fire was envisaged as the way to deal with the enemy in the open. Defensive positions needed to be 'sited' quickly, and dug even quicker, to avoid casualties. Finally, if a deep objective was chosen, then the front needed to be narrower because carrying parties could not cover a wide deep area.²² That 8th Division's struggles had been desperate was evidenced by the fact that Brigadier-General Clifford Coffin, GOC 25 Brigade, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his efforts on 31 July and 16 August 1917. He was the first soldier to win the honour while serving in a rank above colonel.

After leaving Ypres the Division moved sideways to Ploegsteert, first of all under II Anzac, then under Hunter-Weston's VIII Corps. The main activity was attempts to divert enemy eyes from the efforts further north. Tactics used included the mass deluge of enemy positions near Warneton using hundreds of Livens projectors and a 'chinese' attack using dummies constructed by the Divisional engineers, 1,200 smoke candles and the whole of VIII Corps artillery and machine guns.

²² TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary and narrative of operations: June-December 1917, ref. WO95/1677, *Report on operations of 31/07/1917*, dated 02/08/1917, ref 8 Div. G.93/A/1.

One event that demonstrates the increasing complexities of modern warfare occurred when 2nd Rifle Brigade was subjected to a German trench raid on 23 September 1917. Though the raid was successfully repulsed, Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Brand, CO 2nd Rifle Brigade, was censured for improper use of the insecure field telephone as he urgently attempted to ascertain the situation:

Entirely unknown to us, there was an Army detecting station almost under our battalion HQ and they took down every word of the CO's conversation and reported them to the higher command. The next day the CO was called to Divisional HQ and it was read out to him [...] he had tried to disguise his questions and wrap up all his meanings while talking, but when all the conversations had been analysed, it was shown he had given away all the code names of the posts in the line and their positions. The Boche could have deduced pretty nearly all our front line dispositions from these apparently innocent conversations. It was a most interesting example of intelligence work, but our CO got a dressing down.²³

In December 8th Division moved back to Ypres on to Passchendaele Ridge itself. It attempted to maintain activity despite the horrors of weather and mud. Beddington stated:

...conditions were intolerable [...] with only poor cover for the men in the so-called trenches but Battalion & Brigade H.Q. were safely housed in captured pillboxes and Divisional H.Q. in Ypres ramparts. It was a big physical effort to go up to the line and get round it, but following our usual custom the three G.S. Officers of the Division visited the whole line in rotation, i.e. I went every third day...²⁴

On 30 November 1917, after being warned that it was being relieved and moved to the training area at Wizernes near the coast in the Pas-de-Calais, the Division was

²³ Nettleton, *Anger of the Guns*, p. 107. For the work that took place regarding communication intelligence and security see John Ferris, ed., *The British Army and Signals Intelligence during the First World War* (London: Army Records Society, 1992), especially Chapter I, pp. 25-52.

²⁴ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 118.

ordered to carry out an attack together with 32nd Division, of II Corps, on two redoubts north of Passchendaele. 32nd Division was on the left, 8th Division on the right. As it was known that on the commencement of the British barrage, the Germans would lay a defensive barrage on the British front line, it was decided to dispense with a covering barrage.

Beddington commented that both Heneker and he hated the operation and suggested many amendments, all of which were turned down. Heneker wrote in his diary:

*...Shute with 32nd [Division] came in on my left. He wishes to do a surprise attack by moonlight and have no covering fire to protect the advance from hostile machine gun before Z + 8. I don't agree and protested but my protest was overruled. I told the Corps Commander that neither we nor the 32nd would succeed in consequence. However, I was ordered to attack...*²⁵

Beddington also wrote:

*...it was a night attack over horribly churned up ground three nights after full moon and we considered that even if we were not seen advancing to attack, which was highly improbable, we were certain to be heard squelching through the mud...*²⁶

John Nettleton commented:

*The moon would be only just past full; there was no cover of any sort [...] and there was no possibility of rushing forward and 'overrunning' anything; it was only with difficulty that one could advance at all a dead slow stumble.*²⁷

The operation turned out to be as horrid as forecast, with the enemy alert and ready. On the left flank, a position known as Teal Cottage was found to be still occupied by the enemy, not 32nd Division as previously informed. The 8th Division troops involved were forced to dig in short of the crest that had been the objective. Total

²⁵ IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1, entry for 19-29/11/1917.

²⁶ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 119.

²⁷ Nettleton, *Anger of the Guns*, p. 115.

casualties for the Division were 40 officers and 584 other ranks.

Heneker wrote:

...Dec. 2nd. Attacked at 1.55 am. 32nd Div got nowhere and are back on original front line owing to heavy casualties from M.G. fire. I took a bit of ground but not all my objectives. Just as I said, damnable operation. Lost 600 officers and men and did little. Tillet, commanding 2nd Devons, mortally wounded. Brand, 2nd Rifle Brigade, badly wounded but I hope will recover...²⁸

This was Beddington's last operation with 8th Division. Three days later, when the Division was moved to Wizernes, he went to his new post as GSO1, Fifth Army, under Gough again. Heneker wrote, "...Dec.3rd. [...] Moses (Beddington) promoted to G.S.O.1 Fifth Army. Awful loss to me..."²⁹

Beddington did not want to leave 8th Division. He reflected at length on his time with it:

...Thus ended one of the happiest years of my life. I approached the work originally with a sense of inadequacy but I soon found the necessary confidence and, as time went on, I realised that I was on the top of my job and had the full trust of the Divisional Commander, the Brigadier[s] and the Battalion Commanders as well as that of the C.R.E. and the Q Branch: the Gunner Brigadier I don't think trusted anybody but I could deal with him and could always find out what I wanted from one of his subordinates whom I spotted as exceptional. I was very lucky; Heneker was a good tactician and a good man to serve so long as one stood up to him; he was also a good disciplinarian but a bit of a bully. Our relations were such that not only did we become friends but he would let me during his bullying of someone pull his coat and whisper 'That'll do, Sir, he has had enough.' The Brigadiers when in difficulty would ring me up and ask me to come to see them and solve the problem for them whether in the line or out. I had two really good G.2s one after the other in [Major D.F.] Anderson and [Captain J.H.T.] Priestman, who both became Generals, and a splendid G3 in [Captain R. W.] Pongo Brooke, a Yorkshire Yeoman. [Lieut.-Colonel C.M.] Browne was a grand C.R.E. [...] During that year I never felt overburdened with the responsibility for the lives of some 13,000 infantrymen and the only nights on which I could

²⁸ IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1.

²⁹ Ibid.

*not sleep were those when our infantry were moving up to tapes preparatory to attack that night or at dawn and I knew that I could do nothing for them if trouble broke out; fortunately it never did...*³⁰

The evidence shows Beddington was an effective head of the staff of an infantry division operating in exacting circumstances. Operations did not always come off but that was often due to factors outside the Division's control.

8th Division climbed in the BEF ranking system from Category 4 to Category A by the end of May 1917 and to Category A1 by the end of August 1917.³¹ There were sound reasons for this improvement in 8th Division's standing within the hierarchy of infantry divisions in the BEF. Beddington was methodical and able to work under pressure. He was not above being devious when it was required. He recognised talent and above all he was able to delegate and allow others to do their job. In the Second World War, he was re-called to head one of the intelligence departments at the War Office. Major-General John Kennedy, the Director of Military Operations, looked askance when Beddington did not know how many Yugoslav army divisions there were, as it was in his area of responsibility. Beddington said:

*... 'I don't clog my mind with useful detail: let us send for Talbot-Rice, my G2 for the Balkans, he will tell us at once.' Rice came up and told him all he wanted to know. As I was leaving, he [Kennedy] said to me: 'Do you always work that way?' I said, 'Invariably. My practice is to let my Juniors give me the details and I will do the rest, sometimes making them listen whilst I dictate in case of any blobs. I don't see how you can hold down your job unless you adopt somewhat similar methods...'*³²

Beddington realised that it was important to praise good performance as well as criticise when errors were made. Before the July 1917 battle at Westhoek he contacted

³⁰ LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', pp. 119-20.

³¹ Ibid, p. 112 & p. 116. The grading system appears to have been not of Beddington's devising. However, I can find no other references to such a system.

³² Ibid, pp. 268-9.

HQ II Corps and spoke with the G2, Major James Stanhope. Beddington said:

*...I told him to tell the Corps Staff that whatever happened next day there was nothing more they could have done to ensure success and asked him to tell that to them all. I had forgotten all about it but when I got my knighthood forty years afterwards Jim [by now a former First Lord of the Admiralty as well as Earl Stanhope], in writing to congratulate me, alluded to that message and said I could have no idea of the pleasure it gave and the relief it was to get such a message...*³³

Anthony Farrar-Hockley thought that Beddington's ability to deal with people was very important. He believed that his absence from Fifth Army during his time with 8th Division could be a reason why Fifth Army HQ became so unpopular, with a reputation for being slipshod and uncaring.³⁴

It is apparent that Heneker and Beddington worked well to raise the standards in a poorly performing division, so it became vastly more effective. They complemented each other well – Heneker acting as Divisional 'Inquisitor', concentrating on detail, but at the same time tactically astute and possessing moral integrity. Beddington was the planner, dealing in the larger picture and letting others fill in the details. He was able to spot talent and delegate. He achieved much by a quiet word but was also willing to shoulder responsibility and to be ruthless for the greater good. All this was built on a foundation of training and experience, which was passed on to subordinates.

8th Division was in GHQ reserve when the awaited German offensive started on 21 March 1918. The Division was recovering from its efforts in the previous months in the Ypres sector. During this time, Heneker continued to assess whether commanders

³³ Ibid, pp. 114-5.

³⁴ See Hanbury-Sparrow, *Land Locked Lake*, p. 285, for thoughts of the front-line officer about Gough & his staff. See Farrar-Hockley, *Goughie*, pp. 228-9, for views about Beddington and Fifth Army's command team.

in the division were meeting the standards he believed they should match. During this time, the CRA, Lloyd, was replaced by Brigadier-General J. Lamont. Heneker's diary, "...Have to report badly on Lloyd, C.R.A., and he is going at once..."³⁵ Cobham, GOC 24 Brigade, was replaced by Roland Haig, who had been Commanding Officer 2nd Royal Berkshires in 25 Brigade. Heneker used the 'six month' rule which allowed commanders to be rested but he wrote in his diary, "...Cobham who has gone home for a rest as he is not very satisfactory..."³⁶ Sundry battalion commanders were weighed up and found wanting.

In early January 1918, as with all the other British infantry divisions in the BEF, 8th Division was reorganised in order to reduce the number of infantry battalions in each brigade from four to three. Heneker was sorry to see 2nd Scottish Rifles leave the Division. He wrote, "... but not the other two who have never really done well. Especially the Lincolns..."³⁷

23 Infantry Brigade	24 Infantry Brigade	25 Infantry Brigade
2nd Devonshires	1st Worcestershires	2nd Rifle Brigade
2nd W. Yorkshires	1st Sherwood Foresters	2nd Royal Berkshires
2nd Middlesex	2nd Northamptonshires	2nd East Lancashires [from 24 Bde.]
<i>2nd Scottish Rifles</i> [to 20th Division]	<i>2nd East Lancashires</i> [to 25 Bde.]	<i>2nd Lincolnshires</i> [to 21 Division]
		<i>2nd Royal Irish Rifles</i> [to 36 Division]

Table 5.1: Reorganisation of 8th Division's infantry – January/February 1918.

Heneker's attitude appears to be based on the fact that when he inspected 2nd Lincolnshires or saw them marching past, when they were on column of route, he was not impressed with their appearance. This did not mean that they were not an effective

³⁵ IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

unit but increasingly appearance and turn out appear to be a major factor in his methodology regarding unit efficiency.³⁸ His diary for late 1917 and early 1918 had the following comments about 2nd Devonshire:

...30th Dec. [1917] Saw 23rd Bde on march up in afternoon. Imbert-Terry, commanding 2nd Devons, must go I think [...] 13th Feb. [1918] Up at 4 am. and with Priestman went round supporting posts Moselmarkt–Coudberg line. Resited some trenches. 2/W.Yorks and 2/Middx good. 2/Devons poor and doing no work [...]

1st March-5th March. [1918] Various early inspections of front line, once with Corps Commander. Found Middx. and Devons not too good. Had to kick out Green commanding Devons...³⁹

According to David Miller's examination of 2nd Devonshires' commanding officers in the Great War, both Imbert-Terry and Green were officially replaced because their health 'broke-down'.⁴⁰ The reason why the next commanding officer was replaced was more discernible. On the first day Lieutenant-Colonel James was appointed, he argued with Heneker over having to provide working parties of 450 men each day. He allegedly said to Heneker's face that his battalion was "... 'fighting soldiers and not bloody navvies'. James was dismissed on the spot..."⁴¹ This incident is not mentioned in Heneker's diary. If this incident is true Heneker may have had a more subtle sense of humour than he has been given credit for. James' next appointment appears to have been command of 22nd Durham Light Infantry, 8th Division's pioneer battalion. The main role of the latter unit was to be fighting infantry, capable of providing 'organised and intelligent labour' for engineering operations.⁴² A history of 2nd Devonshire

³⁸ It must be borne in mind that Heneker had now been in command of 8th Division for over 15 months and the strains of command were immense. See his photographs in William Moore, *See Ho They Ran: The British Retreat of 1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1970), facing p. 185.

³⁹ IWM, Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1.

⁴⁰ See David Miller, *Commanding Officers* (London: John Murray, 2001), p. 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 47-8. .

⁴² See Mitchinson, *Pioneer Battalions*, p. xi, and Wilfred Miles, *The Durham Forces in the Field 1914-18: The Service Battalions of the Durham Light Infantry* (1920?; Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, n.d.), p. 296.

Regiment commented about what was seen as Heneker's obsession.

*... 'The 2nd Devons', the General is reported to have said, 'are the finest fighting unit I have under my command, but out of the line, they are the scrubbiest lot in the Division!' [...] Major Cope [...] had roundly rated the NCOs for allowing their men to look 'sloppy' [...] they passed rude remarks when they went by the 2nd Middlesex guard, wearing painted equipment, kept for the purpose. 'Posh and swank; that's what Lance-Corporal Heneker wants!' said those NCOs, smarting under the wiggling they received..."*⁴³

8th Division had received warning that it was not the British who would carry out the expected Spring offensive but the Germans. Heneker wrote in his diary:

*... We now come into G.H.Q. Reserve and may be sent off by train at 24 hours notice to be thrown into a fight anywhere. It is therefore more necessary to train as quickly as possible. Am trying to get concentrated in Tilques area [...] 50th Divn suddenly ordered south so the Boches offensive looks imminent...*⁴⁴

The reference to 'train' in the second sentence may not mean training but the fact that 8th Division had to be able to entrain as quickly as possible. Owing to the need for a pared down scale of equipment to be carried out if the Division was to be deployed by train, arrangements had to be made for entraining and the appropriate scales of equipment loaded. The planning involved was very detailed. For example, spare kit was to be stored at 23 Veterinary Hospital in an area laid out for each brigade in set gangways, all kit was to be marked and so on.⁴⁵

8th Division was in reserve, alternating with another war-raised Regular Army division, the 29th. A brigade commander with the latter formation was Bernard Freyburg VC. He later commented that when the German offensive commenced, the Corps reserve, which was 8th Division, was sent south almost immediately and his

⁴³ Reginald A. Colwill, *Through Hell To Victory: From Passchendaele to Mons with the 2nd Devons in 1918* (1927; Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, n.d.), pp. 44-5.

⁴⁴ IWM: Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1 entry for 08 March 1918.

⁴⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Div. AA&QMG war diary: July 1917–May 1919, ref. WO95/1682, memo, dated 13/03/1918, ref. 8th Div. no. C/316/A.

division was almost sent two days afterwards but 35th Division was sent instead. He said that if his division had gone as well they would have been completely destroyed.⁴⁶ Life as Army Reserve in 1918 was exciting but brief.

When the German offensive started on 21 March 1918, the move of 8th Division was hurried along. Heneker wrote subsequently:

*...Suddenly put on 6 hours to move. In afternoon orders received to move but no details up to 6p.m. At about 7 p.m. orders to entrain tomorrow for the south and come under Gough, Fifth Army. Telephoned Moses with Fifth Army and he told me Gough wanted to see me tomorrow morning at breakfast. Had a quick dinner and started for Nesle via Doullens and Amiens at 8 p.m. with Armitage...*⁴⁷

N.P. Birley was with 25 Brigade HQ. The GOC, Brigadier-General Clifford Coffin, had been sent off to be in temporary command of 50th Division. Birley wrote:

*...we had plenty to do getting out draft orders for a move if that became necessary, as in fact it did. On March 21st we had orders to be ready to move at five hours notice, followed by definite orders to move on the 23rd...*⁴⁸

It was not realised at first how serious the situation was. Viscount Rollo Feilding, AA&QMG 8th Division, wrote that his party, "... got to Amiens by 2pm and had a slap up lunch at one of our old haunts and then went onto look for the General at Villers-Carbonnel [...] We found the General at the Corps HQ and learned that things were going gather badly..."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Paul Freyburg, *Bernard Freyburg, VC – Soldier of Two Nations* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), p. 122.

⁴⁷ IWM, Heneker Diary, ref. 66/154/1. Armitage was Lieutenant-Colonel C.C. Armitage, the new GSO1 8th Division.

⁴⁸ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, ref. GS 0142, p32.

⁴⁹ Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick, ref. CR 2017/F196/1, Viscount Feilding Papers, Earl of Denbigh Papers, 'Account of what I saw with the 8th Division of the German Offensive on the Somme' [henceforth *Viscount Feilding 1918 account*].

8th Division was put under the command of XIX Corps, General Officer Commanding Lieutenant-General Sir Herbert Watts. The move and detraining of 8th Division was caught up with the move back of base details and the forward troops. The Division's infantry began de-training at Nesle, Chaulnes and Rosieres. 23 Brigade was bombed while de-training at Chaulnes. Feilding wrote of an incident that demonstrated that the Division's morale was high as it moved into battle. A German prisoner, from one of the evacuated prisoner work details, was found by one of the canteen men hiding from the bombing while 23 Brigade were detraining.

...a train came in with the Sherwood Foresters in it going to Nesle. The General [Heneker] called out, 'Here comes a friend for you. Look after him' and the unfortunate Bosch was hoisted into the truck with cheers. Presently, an agitated Military Foot Patrol man came along looking for the Bosch prisoner so our friend was hoisted out again and marched away with more cheers...⁵⁰

The work of coordinating movement and defence was made very difficult by the circumstances in which 8th Division now found itself. Birley wrote:

...I remember nothing of the actual move but I remember meeting the G.S.O.3 [R.W. Brooke M.C. (TF)] late at night in a large Nissen hut to be given some idea of what was happening; in the morning I set off to try and find out more, and had a terrible ride up a road crowded with civilians many with little Ford motor ploughs which kept getting hitched onto the revetment posts at the side of the road – and my horse loathed motor engines and the noise they made! It was hard to find out anything. I discovered little of value, and was rejoiced, when I got back, to find Coffin back in control with definite orders from Division...⁵¹

The confusion was made worse by the German air service's ground attack and bombing raids. Captain R.W. Brook, GSO3 at 8th Division HQ, gave his view of 8th Division's deployment. He stated that an orders group took place in the waiting room at Chaulnes station while the enemy:

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, pp. 32-3.

...had discovered something important was occurring and bombs were dropped continuously in and around the station. The intention was for the Division in conformity with Corps orders to occupy a line marked green on the map but very undefined on the ground [...] it was expected that the Division might have a matter of 24 hours in which to dig in [...] I proceeded to Nesle give the orders to Gen. Haig commanding the 24th Brigade [...] while waiting for the General the OC of Mobile Veterinary Section returned to Nesle stating that he had been fired on by the enemy while trying to enter Athies. Before long further confirmation came in a message from a billeting party of the 2nd Northamptonshires who had also to retire somewhat hurriedly...⁵²

Heneker had gone back with Armitage, the Divisional GSO1, to Rosieres to meet 25 Brigade who were detaining there. Brook was unable to inform them of the rapidly changing situation because the roads were so congested. He went with Brigadier-General Haig to XIX Corps HQ at Villers-Carbonnel arriving there some time after midnight.

...The Brigadier-General General Staff [the Corps chief of staff] was up the line trying to find out the situation. The Corps H.Q. was trying to pack up and move back quickly an operation for which a Corps H.Q. at that time was singularly unsuited. To add to the general chaos a bomb had just dropped in the middle of the G.S. office killing or wounding nearly everyone in it. The Q. branch were very helpful but being quite in ignorance of the situation they could not well issue fresh orders. Eventually with the assistance of the Intelligence Officer and after a discussion with the Corps Commander orders were issued for the Division to take up a line on the west bank of the Somme...⁵³

One unforeseen benefit of the German offensives was that the rear echelon units and headquarters had to become more mobile. This increased mobility was to pay dividends in the British advances after 8 August 1918. Brook's comment that the Quartermaster's branch of the staff was uninformed of the tactical situation highlighted one problem that the British staff system had throughout the war.

⁵² TNA: PRO, Official Historian's correspondence, Fifth Army, authors' surnames A-G, reference CAB45/192, Letter, Captain R.W. Brook (TF) MC, dated 15 May 1927.

⁵³ Ibid.

Operations (the General Staff Branch) and Administration (the Adjutant and Quartermaster Branches) could function almost independently of the other. However, the result was that each could be unaware of the situation and difficulties facing the other portion of the staff.⁵⁴

8th Division attempted to make a stand, firstly on the west bank of the Somme and then on the banks of the adjacent Somme Canal. The front covered by 8th Division at times amounted to over nine miles and the Germans were attacking with over twenty divisions against 8th Division alone.⁵⁵ Birley wrote:

...We were to take up defensive positions on the line of the Somme Canal [...] All brigades were in the line with the 25th on the right. It was a very long line to hold, and the canal was not a very formidable obstacle; and there was no time for a thorough reconnaissance before Germans faced us on the other bank. After remnants of other divisions had passed through our lines all bridges were supposed to be blown up, but few were fully destroyed. The result was that in the early morning of the 24th the enemy had made three crossings on the brigade front, while further South, on our right they had already made crossings in strength and were threatening our flank...⁵⁶

Captain F.C. Walker, then Brigade-Major of 24 Brigade, wrote afterwards that at least one bridge, at Pargny, was blown prematurely when the troops crossing the bridge believed the Germans were on their heels.

...A very excited major [...] dashed across the bridge shouting that the Germans were massing for an attack on the bridgehead and it must be blown up at once. This order a lance-corporal of the R.E. carried out at once without waiting for it to be confirmed though there were still numbers of our troops both Cavalry and Infantry on the east bank of the river...⁵⁷

⁵⁴ See Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front: 1914-1919* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), p. 46.

⁵⁵ See Warwickshire County Archives: *Viscount Feilding 1918 account*, ref. CR 2017/F196/1

⁵⁶ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, p. 33.

⁵⁷ TNA: PRO, Official Historian's correspondence, Fifth Army, authors' surnames H-W, TNA, reference CAB45/193, letter, Captain F.C. Walker, dated 1 May 1929. That many of the bridges were left intact is confirmed by Major Maurice Toye, who, though a Royal Engineer was serving with 2nd Middlesex. He won the VC for his efforts at this time. See his comments in a letter to the Official Historian, dated 23 May 1927, *ibid.*

Unfortunately, the demolitions were not only premature but also ineffective. The Germans were still able to use the bridges to effect a crossing. 8th Division had no alternative but to conduct that most difficult of all military operations – a fighting withdrawal while still in contact with the enemy.

W.E. Duncan had been sent to Divisional HQ to act as Brigade Major RA, the chief staff officer to the division's CRA, Brigadier-General Lamont. He said of this trying time:

...Our division held the crossings of the Somme for a day or so but the positions were soon turned and we were all retreating once more towards Amiens.

I found this the most exhausting experience of the whole war dashing from one part of the divisional front to discover situations, then preparing orders all night which were inoperative due to the changed situation at dawn. It looked as if the Germans must capture AMIENS and cut us off completely from the French...⁵⁸

8th Division retreated for three days. The troops were told that there would be a French counter attack on the right. However, no French troops appeared. By the night of 26 March, 25 Brigade HQ was at Rosières.

...orders came through that the Rosières line was to be held at all costs, and every available man put into the fight.

Then trouble came again, not only, as before from the right, but also from the left flank where a gap was forming between the left of the Division (all infantry were now placed under Coffin's orders) and the Somme...⁵⁹

2nd Devonshires and three companies of 22nd Durham light Infantry were detached and sent some three miles to the north around Harbonnières to stop the enemy outflanking the Rosières position. A further German attack caused 50th Division to

⁵⁸ Liddle Collection: W.E. Duncan Papers, p. 64.

⁵⁹ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, p. 33.

the north of 8th Division to fall back. All remaining reserves, including the personnel of the three brigade headquarters, were thrown into the gap. 1st Sherwood Foresters were brought from the southern flank across the whole width of the divisional front to face the onslaught in the north. Though the line was restored, XIX Corps faced attacks on both flanks, especially from the north side of the Somme. The commanders of the three divisions in the corps, 8th, 50th and 66th Divisions informed higher authority that they must be allowed to withdraw. Lieutenant-General Watts, GOC XIX Corps, wrote in his after-action report that on 28 March the confusion was such that the 8th and 24th Divisions must have completely crossed each others line of march and that the 8th, 24th and 50th Divisions had retreated too far to the west. He further stated that 8th Division HQ had not informed XIX Corps HQ of its new location but that this was, "...the only occasion on which this can be said to have occurred..."⁶⁰

23 Brigade managed to withdraw only after severe fighting:

*...the greatest difficulty was experienced by the brigade staff in communicating the order to retire to the various units. In some cases the order was never received; and the unit concerned finally on its own initiative fought or attempted to fight its own way out. The majority of the 2nd Field Company (Major A.H. Brown, D.S.O., M. C.) and of the 2/West Yorkshires were either killed or captured in such circumstances...*⁶¹

However, despite being forced back time and time again, sufficient troops were found, though desperately tired, hungry and exhausted, to carry out holding actions and even counter attack. Often they were supported by only one or two field-guns firing over open sights, almost a return to the tactics of the bush campaigns of the

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO, XIX Corps War Diary and Narrative of Operations: January – November 1918, ref. WO95/962, 'Report on Operations of XIX Corps from March 21st to April 5th 1918', ref XIX Corps No. G/652/1/16, dated 21 April 1918, p.15.

⁶¹ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 191.

Empire or those used in the Napoleonic Wars.⁶²

The strain was as exhausting for commanders and staff as well as the fighting troops. Somehow, strength was found to carry on. Viscount Rollo Feilding, the Division's senior administrative officer, the AA&QMG, wrote about the pressure of work coupled with exhaustion:

*...March 24th [...] I returned to headquarters about 6 pm with an awful headache due to want of sleep; woke up about midnight quite recovered and sent the others to lie down while I carried on with the work [...] March 26th The General had opened advanced HQ for the night at VERMANDOVILLERS so as to make sure everyone got into the new line alright. I remained at FOUCAUCOURT and twice got quarter of an hours sleep on a table between piles of work...*⁶³

Some units did not fight well. W.E. Duncan wrote:

*I would like to draw a veil over this depressing period. Our infantry had been worn out; more than 90% of them were conscripts, and whereas in 1914, no battalion ever left a trench until it was blown out of it by shell-fire, now it only needed a few salvoes to start an infectious trickle to the rear. Of course there were brilliant exceptions. Colonel [actual rank Major] 'Buster' Brown, and his 2nd Field Company Royal Engineers who stood their ground, and were killed to a man, while the battalion for which they were digging disappeared...*⁶⁴

However, such a verdict did not apply to all units. Duncan wrote further:

*...I remember that the 36th Battery (John Wedderburn-Maxwell) was putting up a very good effort. They were being heavily shelled but were keeping up a quick rate of fire in return. Every time a salvo of German shells landed in the positions the Gunners gave a great cheer, and this heartened everybody, - started by Jock Maxwell no doubt...*⁶⁵

⁶² TNA: PRO, Official Historian's correspondence, Fifth Army, Authors H-W, reference CAB45/193, See comments of H.E. Nash, letter, dated 17 May 1927. At this time he was a company commander with 2nd East Lancashires.

⁶³ Warwickshire Archives: *Viscount Feilding 1918 account*, ref. CR 2017/F196/1.

⁶⁴ Liddle Collection: W.E. Duncan Papers, p. 64. Lieutenant-Colonel C.M. Browne, CRE 8th Division, survived and was CRE until almost the end of the war. His replacement was Lieutenant-Colonel C. Russell-Brown. It is most probably Major Austin Hanbury Brown DSO MC, OC 2 Field Company RE who is referred to here. He was a Divisional stalwart, having been in command of 2 Field Company Royal Engineers since 1915. The Brown clan in all its variants figured prominently in 8th Division's Royal Engineers.

⁶⁵ Liddle Collection: W.E. Duncan Papers, p. 65.

The above quote is an indication that personality was still an important factor in maintaining the morale of a unit. Hubert Essame, an officer with 2nd Northamptonshires, wrote fifty four years afterwards:

...What had really stopped the rot was the personal courage of the officers and men in the remnants of the units and the battle groups. Miraculously, faith in discipline at all costs, the Army's tradition since the days of Cromwell and pride of race had survived: without sleep, without hot food, frozen stiff by night, they fought on until they dropped...⁶⁶

Though the remnants of Fifth Army were exhausted so were the Germans. Their lead assault troops, the *sturmtrippen*, had taken heavy casualties. The German offensive began to run out of steam. N.P. Birley, still with 25 Brigade, wrote of one episode that indicated that the Germans were equally numbed by exhaustion:

... when I got back to HQrs, I found the whole of Brigade HQrs, under the Signalling Officer, advancing across the open with fixed bayonets, against a small party of Germans which had got to within a few hundred yards of HQrs round the north side of Rosières. They were lying down in line; but they never fired a shot, and when our men got within forty yards or so they put up their hands and surrendered. A very cheering sight...⁶⁷

Tim Travers is of the opinion that many of the British difficulties during the *Michael* offensive were because the higher tiers of command were unable to react quickly enough to events. He states that corps and divisional headquarters often retired precipitously because of the way they operated.⁶⁸ Andy Simpson disagrees, saying that though there were breakdowns in communication, this was due fundamentally to the fact that the British were facing overwhelming odds. Being far less numerous than

⁶⁶ Hubert Essame, *The Battle for Europe* (London: Batsford, 1972), p. 47.

⁶⁷ Liddle Collection: N.P. Birley Papers, p. 33.

⁶⁸ See T. Travers, *How the War was Won: Factors that Led to Victory in World War One* (1992; Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military Classics, 2005), Chapter 3, especially pp. 73, 81.

a skilled and determined enemy, they were unable to match the enemy's tempo.⁶⁹

The German offensive petered out on the airfields around Villers Bretonneux, stemmed by the skill and determination of the Australian Corps. 8th Division's losses were truly awful. It had lost 250 officers and 4,693 other ranks.⁷⁰ It needed time to rebuild but like so many instances during the Division's time on the Western Front, time was one commodity that was in very short supply.

On 10 April 1918, Heneker forwarded a memorandum to all senior commanders in 8th Division. He wrote that the main difficulties were communication and liaison. Owing to the removal of the divisional cavalry squadron in 1915, there was an insufficient number of personnel capable of riding well, able to read a map, appreciating a tactical situation and writing a proper message to communicate the required information. The divisional HQ did not possess enough officers available to carry out such work in addition to their normal duties:

...I found it necessary to use Staff Officers and Officers attached to the Staff for this work, but the strain on the few officers I had was enormous and two of them broke down from exhaustion after the Division had been fighting for 3 days.

Finally, in despair, I organised amounted force of Artillery Trench Mortar personnel mounted on heavy draught animals, but I cannot say that this trop was of much service...⁷¹

Not surprisingly, Heneker believed the establishment of horses allocated to divisional HQ was too small. Heneker proposed that corps staff be used to ensure communication and liaison between formations:

⁶⁹ See Simpson, *Directing Operations*, pp. 145-6.

⁷⁰ See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 199.

⁷¹ TNA: PRO, 8 Division war diary: January-June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, '8th Division Lessons from the recent fighting 22nd March – 1st April, 1918', dated 10 April 1918.

...A wider knowledge of the general situation is often required. If the Corps could have a sufficient number of liaison officers over and above those on the 'G' staff to come at intervals and outline the general situation, it would help a divisional Commander materially in appreciating what ought to be done at all times...⁷²

With regard to the organisation of divisional headquarters, Heneker's views do not support Travers' thesis that senior commanders were not in favour of controlling the battle from as far forward as possible. Telephone lines were maintained with corps and the line of retreat for divisional HQ followed these lines. 8th Division had a rear HQ for all the non-battle staff and impedimenta:

...Forward of this, in close touch by telephone with the Corps, Battle D.H.Q [Divisional HQ] was formed, consisting of "G" and "Q" Staff, C.R.A. and A.D.M.S. Forward of this again an Advanced Report Centre in touch with Battle D.H.Q. and the 3 Brigades, was made, and here my G.S.O.1, G.S.O.2 or I remained.

My experience is that it is the duty of the Divisional Commander to be first in touch personally with the Corps, and if from the Advanced Report Centre it is difficult to speak to the Corps, then this Advanced Report Centre must be left under either G.S.O.1 or G.S.O.2 and the Divisional Commander must remain at Battle D.H.Q. ...⁷³

Heneker's views regarding command and control are made clear by the above. His judgement is that the commander must relay the information to the rear to give higher command the greatest amount of information in order to make the latter's decision making more informed. He also proposed an increased use of light signals in order to quicken reaction times for specific tasks, saying, "...In my Division I organised and worked with light signals when advancing last year from near PERONNE to the HINDENBURG LINE and found them invaluable..."⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

The use of artillery pushed out in front of the forward infantry was commended. Heneker was emphatic that the division's artillery should remain under divisional command and not be placed under corps control. "...On 29th March my Artillery was taken from me and my defence at once suffered and suffered in a remarkable degree..."⁷⁵

The work of the support weapons was seen as effective but with some qualification. The trench mortars soon ran out of ammunition, which was resupplied with difficulty. Therefore, the mortar teams were then employed as infantry. 8th Division had allocated a company of the newly formed divisional machine gun battalion to each brigade and the fourth company was kept in reserve. Heneker was scathing about the use of indirect fire, with its use of barrages, saying that, "...The way to kill Germans is to sweep away the attacking waves of his infantry by direct view of these waves over the sights..."⁷⁶ Though his comments went against the doctrine of the Machine Gun Corps, he was not in favour of the disbandment of the new battalion organisation. It is worth noting that the day before Heneker's report, XIX Corps HQ had sent a report to Fourth Army proposing that the machine guns sections be put under direct control of the infantry battalion commanders.⁷⁷ Heneker disagreed with this proposal to such an extent that he wrote another letter solely on the subject to Brigadier-General Mullen, BGGs XIX Corps. Firstly, he condemned those who proposed the removal of the battalion organisation as showing, "...nothing but their incapacity for command and their inability to issue definite orders to their Machine Gun Battalions as to how they

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid. This had been the situation before the establishment of the Machine Gun Corps.

⁷⁷ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January-June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, copy of XIX Corps report, ref. indistinct, dated 9 April 1918.

wish them to work...”⁷⁸ He then reiterated that 8th Division’s machine gun units worked best during the recent fighting when given precise orders and were most effective when engaging the enemy with direct fire. However, though declaring that machine gun companies must be devolved to brigades during open warfare, he wrote:

...Had machine guns belonged to Infantry Battalions it would have been impossible to mass numbers at certain vital points. [...] the battalion organisation is, in my opinion, imperative.

With it, a high tone and fighting spirit can be maintained in the machine gun personnel and the necessary doctrine can be disseminated and practised with ease.

Training is facilitated and every matter tending to efficiency can be more easily scrutinised.

I sincerely trust that it may be maintained.

*If there were any failures in the recent fighting I think these were largely due to the fact that the Battalion organisation was in its infancy...*⁷⁹

That Heneker believed that the organisation of the machine guns depended on the nature of the fighting was viewed as tantamount to heresy by some within the Machine Gun Corps. This is evidenced by the comments of Lieutenant-Colonel G.S. Hutchinson, in his unofficial history of the Machine Gun Corps. He wrote, “...The 8th Battalion placed its companies at the disposal of brigades, contrary to instructions...”⁸⁰ That during the periods of open warfare in the Hundred Days the control of machine guns were generally again devolved is an endorsement of Heneker’s analysis.

Finally, Heneker dealt with the specific question of the needs to maintain defensive strength as against the numbers required to participate in counter-attacks. He said:

⁷⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January-June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, letter to Brigadier-General Mullen, BGGGS XIX Corps, ‘Re the letter on Machine Gun Battalion’, dated 10 April 1918.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ G.S. Hutchinson, *Machine Guns: Their History and Tactical Employment* (1938; Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, 2003), p. 269.

...There is always [...] the nice balancing of the two requirements, maximum fire power and counter-attack, to be considered. If too large a proportion of troops be kept for counter-attack, too few remain for the development of adequate fire from the front line, and vice-versa, too large a proportion for fire, too few for counter-attack...⁸¹

Heneker wrote that usually a quarter to a third of all available infantry should be available to counter-attack. If the divisional frontage was less than three thousand yards then a brigade should be divisional reserve. Over that distance then all brigades should be in the front line but the correct use of machine guns and Lewis guns allowed the forward positions to be lightly held. However, if the frontage was very long, for example, 8th Division had held a front of nine miles on 26 March, then a dedicated divisional reserve was of no use unless it was mounted.

It is clear that Heneker had analysed the requirements of the defensive battle as a result of 8th Division's experiences in the 'Michael' Offensive. The balancing act between a strong defence and the flexibility required to mount a successful counter attack would become part of the Division's next major battle, at Villers-Bretonneux.

Villers-Bretonneux - The Preliminaries

Following its exertions stemming the German '*Michael*' Offensive in late March and early April 1918, the end of April found 8th Division in front of Amiens. The Germans had advanced to within eight or nine miles of Amiens. The front line was now one thousand yards east of Villers-Bretonneux. The town is on the old Roman road on the plateau to the east of the city.⁸²

⁸¹ TNA: PRO, 8 Division war diary: January-June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, '8th Division Lessons from the recent fighting 22nd March – 1st April, 1918', dated 10 April 1918.

⁸² Villers-Bretonneux is one of those places where the term 'village' and 'town' are interchangeable.

Amiens had not been an original objective of the *Michael* offensive. The Germans had advanced towards it because their tactical system of exploiting weaknesses had led them towards it. However, it was vitally important to the Allies being at the junction of the British and French armies. This was always a weak point in any defence. Just as important were the major rail yards. Amiens was the hub of Allied supply lines in the area of the western Somme. To capture it or, at the least, make it untenable through heavy artillery fire, would cause insurmountable problems for the Allies.

The German High Command had another consideration when regarding resumption of the attack towards Amiens. Since 9 April their *Georgette* Offensive had been underway in Flanders. The aim of this operation was to drive towards the Allied railway centres at Hazebrouck and Poperinghe then force the British armies back on to the Channel ports. Any additional attack so near to Amiens would force the Allies to keep formations there rather than move to Flanders.⁸³ It is apparent that the British were aware of German moves against Amiens. General Sir Henry Rawlinson, GOC Fourth Army,⁸⁴ was unhappy with the state of affairs, especially with regard to the French on the right flank below Villers-Bretonneux.⁸⁵ The British command increased efforts to strengthen British defences in the area. This is demonstrated by 8th Division. On 12 April it was resting and rebuilding before Amiens. At 8 a.m. the Divisional Head Quarters was warned to be ready to, ‘...move the 13 [13 April 1918]

Some accounts refer to it as a town, others as a village.

⁸³ Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918 Volume II: March – April: Continuation of the German Offensives* [henceforth *British Official History 1918 Volume II*] (London: Macmillan, for HMSO, 1937), p. 381.

⁸⁴ The new commander, who had taken over the battered Fifth Army of General Sir Hubert Gough, who had been sacked. Fifth Army had borne the brunt of the German offensive on and after 21 March 1918.

⁸⁵ See *British Official History 1918 Volume II*, p. 382.

(less Artillery) to entrain to another Army.’⁸⁶ At 11.55 a.m. the same day it received a further message postponing the move by one day.⁸⁷ The next day, 13 April 1918, a message was received at 3.10 p.m. cancelling the move altogether.⁸⁸ By halting the move of British formations northwards, the Germans achieved one of their objectives before fighting actually took place.

From the middle of April the British forces in the area received increasing information which, when assessed as intelligence, indicated an enemy attack on Villers-Bretonneux. An increase in the number of German artillery batteries was revealed by aerial photographs and roads were subject to ‘registration’ by them.⁸⁹

From 17 April onwards the area of Villers-Bretonneux and the woods behind were subject to intense German gas shelling. There were 1,074 gas casualties.⁹⁰ The gases used were irritant, phosgene and mustard gases. Though the increased use of gas might be taken as a sign of impending attack, mustard gas is a persistent blistering agent. Its use was normally to deny occupation of an area to the enemy. Owing to its persistence, the users’ own troops would be as likely to be hindered and suffer casualties when moving into an area contaminated by mustard gas. It has been said that, in an effort to reduce the casualties among the attackers, the Germans made it a rule that they would never shell an area with mustard gas within three days of an

⁸⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary & narrative of operations: January – June 1918, reference WO95/1678.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ ‘Registration’ was an artillery method whereby individual guns fired at intended targets to obtain the necessary data to allow the whole unit to fire at them during the attack. The drawback was an inevitable warning of an impending attack. By the later stages of the War a system of ‘silent’ registration, using mathematical data and very accurate survey methods, had become far more widespread. See Jonathan Bailey, ‘British Artillery’, pp. 33-49, especially pp. 33 and 37.

⁹⁰ *British Official History 1918 Volume II*, p. 383.

attack.⁹¹ Thus its use could be seen as a sign that an attack was not imminent. Nevertheless, German air activity increased. The leading German fighter pilot Freiherr Manfred Von Richthofen, the famous ‘Red Baron’, was brought down over the Somme Valley on 21 April. Other indicators suggested that the Germans intended to attack towards Albert, to the north, perhaps extending as far north as Arras and Vimy Ridge.⁹²

Defensive Preparations

The British forces in the area came under Fourth Army commanded by General Sir Henry Rawlinson. It was composed of III Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General Sir R.H.K. Butler),⁹³ containing 58th, 8th and 18th Infantry Divisions, and the Australian Corps (GOC Lieutenant-General Sir W. R. Birdwood),⁹⁴ made up of 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Infantry Divisions. The latter Corps had been in the area since halting the German *Michael* advance in early April.

III Corps had also taken part in the March fighting. 18th Division lost some 2,445 casualties, 58th Division had lost 832 men. Another division, 14th Division, had lost over 3,000 officers and men and had been replaced by 8th Division, transferred from the battered XIX Corps. C.E.W. Bean, the Australian Official Historian, considered 8th Division to be a particularly good British division. He noted that “...at this time when extra Lewis guns were issued to the best trained divisions, the 8th was one of three British divisions, *exclusive of dominion ones, chosen to receive the first*

⁹¹ Hogg, *The Guns*, p. 124.

⁹² *British Official History 1918 Volume II*, p. 383.

⁹³ Sir Richard Harte Keating Butler KCB, dob 28 August 1870; Dorsetshire Regt., CO 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers; GOC 3 Brigade [1 Div.] 1914; MGS First Army 1915; Dep. CGS HQ B.E.F. 1915-18; GOC III Corps 1918; Retired. 1929; DOD 22 April 1935.

⁹⁴ Sir William Riddell Birdwood, dob 13 September 1865; 12 Lancers, Indian Army; GOC 1 Anzac Corps 1914-18; GOC Fifth Army May 1918; CinC Northern Command India 1919; Field-Marshal, Baron Birdwood of Totnes and Anzac; dod 17 May 1951.

*allotment...*⁹⁵

8th Division's losses stemming the March Offensive had been truly terrible with casualties of over 230 Officers and 4,300 Other Ranks.⁹⁶ The Division had been reconstituted, in the main, by drafts of new, young soldiers. The Australian Official History contains a description by one of the Australians, who saw them:

*...For two days companies of infantry have been passing us on the roads - companies of children, English children; pink faced, round cheeked children, flushed under the weight of their unaccustomed packs, with their steel helmets on the backs of their heads and the strap hanging loosely on their rounded baby chins...*⁹⁷

The war diary of the Division's AA & QMG gives the following details regarding the influx of new drafts:

		Officers	Other Ranks
<u>12 April 1918</u>			
2nd West Yorkshires		1	6
2nd East Lancashires		3	55
<u>13 April 1918</u>			
2nd Rifle Brigade		3	18
<u>15 April 1918</u>			
2nd Middlesex		0	34
2nd West Yorkshires		1	10
1st Worcestershires		14	0
2nd Northamptonshires.		0	1
2nd East Lancashires.		11	17
2nd Royal Berkshires		13	0
22nd Durham Light Infantry [Pioneers]		1	8
8th Bn., Machine Gun Corps		0	1

⁹⁵ C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914 – 18, Volume V The Australian Imperial Force in France during the main German Offensive 1918* [henceforth *Australian Official History: Volume V*] (Sydney, Australia: Angus & Robertson, 1939), p. 539.

⁹⁶ The figures of 237 Officers and 4,632 other ranks are given in *British Official History 1918 Volume II*, p. 386. The 8th Division history states they were 250 Officers and 4,693 Other Ranks. See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 199.

⁹⁷ *Australian Official History: Volume V*, p540.

Totals		47	150
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Table 5.2: Reinforcement Drafts Received by 8th Division 12- 15 April 1918⁹⁸

Worth noting is the proportionately large numbers of officers involved. By 1918 the number of officer and NCO replacements required had a great impact on the efficiency of a unit because so much control was now exercised at an increasingly junior level.⁹⁹ For 8th Division the numbers involved were such that they were bound to affect the efficiency of a unit. Even if the replacements were experienced officers, returning from being wounded or having completed training courses or posted from units in the United Kingdom, it would take time to assimilate them to the methods and ethos possessed by their new unit.

8th Division faced additional hurdles. Its generic artillery component had stayed to support the French about Domart after the remainder of the Division had been withdrawn for rest and rebuilding. Now it was further back on the Somme for refitting and training.¹⁰⁰ This meant that the Division was not only without its own artillery units which had been with the Division since its formation in 1914, but also, more importantly, its CRA. The CRA was the right hand man of the divisional commander, being his technical adviser and planner in respect of the most important weapons system possessed by the division. The absence of 8th Division's CRA, Brigadier-General J.W.F. Lamont,¹⁰¹ and his replacement by the CRA of another division, Brigadier-General H.W.A. Christie (20 [Light] Division)¹⁰² was, therefore, another factor that could possibly dislocate the command and control system of the division.

⁹⁸ TNA: PRO, AA&QMG 8 Division war diary: July 1917 – May 1919, reference WO95/1682, “Appendix IVB”.

⁹⁹ Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁰ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 200- 1.

¹⁰¹ John William Frasere Lamont, dob 11 September 1872; Royal Artillery; BGRA 11th Div. [New Army] 16 December 1917; BGRA 8th Div. [Regular] 19 March 1918; dod 26 May 1956.

¹⁰² Herbert Willie Andrew Christie, dob 29 November 1868; Royal Artillery; BGRA 20 Div. [New Army] August 1917-1918; dod 17 May 1951.

When drawing up a defence plan the British faced a dilemma. Since December 1917 the British Army had adopted the system of 'defence in depth', used by the Germans during the 3rd Battle of Ypres in the summer and autumn of 1917. It became apparent during the *Michael* Offensive of the previous month that the British had faced severe problems with this change in doctrine and in its practical implementation. During the previous month one of the major reasons given for retirement by a formation or unit when faced by a German attack was that it had been forced to retreat because the neighbouring formations and units had given way. There was a fear of flanks being 'turned' by the enemy, leaving the formation or unit surrounded. This had often resulted in their retirement. Some of this was due to a failure to understand the 'Defence in Depth' tactics. Above all, there was a lack of reserves, at all levels, to mount an effective counter attack or allow the defence to be sufficiently elastic. From some quarters there were calls that the new ideas were unworkable and not suitable for use by the British.¹⁰³ From the outset there were problems with the defensive doctrine. Another major problem faced by the British at Villers-Bretonneux was that they had not been given time to rest and reorganise. They faced the likelihood of another German attack while the *Georgette* offensive was still taking place and while they were receiving an infusion of new reinforcements. Furthermore, there had been insufficient time to assimilate the lessons learned from the problems of the *Michael* Offensive the previous month.

8th Division's provisional defence plan of the Villers-Bretonneux sector, dated 20 April 1918, showed that the thinking regarding defence held by the commanders and

¹⁰³ See *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, pp. 477- 485, and Corelli Barnett, *The Swordbearers: Studies in Supreme Command in the First World War* (1963; London: Pelican, 1966), pp. 327-9.

staff had changed little. Paragraph 5 stated the General Principles of Defence:

... (a) The Front Line is the main line of resistance and will be held. Should the enemy penetrate into any portion of it, Brigade and Local Commanders will at once organise counter- attacks to regain the lost ground.

Should the counter- attack fail, every effort will be made to prevent the enemy extending his gains, and to clear up the situation in order to facilitate a deliberate counter- attack with adequate artillery preparation.

(b) The garrison of VILLERS-BRETONNEUX will retain its positions at all costs and there will be no retirement from that town.

(c) Counter-Attack battalions of the Right and Left brigades in [the] front line will be employed for counter attack on the initiative of battalion commanders.

Brigadiers will issue written instructions regarding the general direction in which these counter-attacks should be launched to meet the probable forms of hostile attack.

(d) The Reserve Bde. (less 2 Coys. forming the garrison of the CACHY SWITCH) and 22nd DLI (Pioneers) will occupy the Reserve Line under the orders of the G.O.C. Reserve Brigade, (one Battalion being held in Brigade Reserve) and will be used for counter-attack under orders of 8th Division as soon as these troops have been replaced by troops from Corps Reserve...¹⁰⁴

It is apparent that the scheme recognised the need for effective counter attack.

However, also apparent was a reluctance to give up ground. This is obvious in Section

(d), which directed that the Reserve Brigade would not counter- attack until they were

replaced in their positions by troops from the corps reserve. The British still had

problems with acting with celerity and with taking risks.

...The forward detachment had to strike a nice balance between yielding so elastically that it amounted to their being driven off their ground, and being overrun. The commanders in the rear had to judge the direction and timing of the counter-attacks with equal nicety; to take too long to view the situation and to attempt too perfect a plan might find the attackers too strongly established to drive out, but to attack hastily and piecemeal could easily lead to failure. The Germans have always been famous for their nice judgement of the timing of a counter- attack and for their quick reactions...¹⁰⁵

That the German defensive system was not slavishly followed by the British does not

¹⁰⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, reference WO95/ 1678, “8th Division Defence Scheme (Provisional)”.

¹⁰⁵ Bidwell, *Gunners*, p. 42.

mean that they were misguided. The British use of ‘bite and hold’ attacks during the Battle of 3rd Ypres, especially by Second Army in the attacks on the Menin Road Ridge in September 1917, had caused immense casualties among the German counter-attack units.¹⁰⁶ As well, 8th Division’s experiences in the previous month had demonstrated that if the initial shock could be borne then it might not be necessary to withdraw. Andy Simpson also comments that the Germans were repulsed at Arras on 28 March 1918 using well-prepared linear defences.¹⁰⁷ Travers criticises the British for not adopting one uniform system of defence throughout their area of responsibility. However, as terrain and requirements were never uniform it can be argued there could never be a standard response. This analysis justified the 8th Division Defence Scheme giving a greater weight to ground not being given when the enemy attacked than to any new ideas of ‘elastic defence’.

The Defence Scheme did make use of one of the new weapons systems and that was the tank. A section of three heavy tanks were allocated to the right hand brigade, 24 Infantry Brigade, for the purpose of, “...preventing the enemy from gaining a foothold in the CACHY SWITCH...”¹⁰⁸ This tactic, known as ‘the Savage Rabbit’, was ineffective because of the slow speed of the vehicles concerned.¹⁰⁹ Nowhere is there any consideration of a possible use of armoured vehicles by the Germans.

During the recent reorganisation of the British Army in early 1918 the heavy machine gun element of an infantry division, controlled by the Machine Gun Corps, had been

¹⁰⁶ See J. Lee, ‘The British Divisions at Third Ypres’, in Peter H. Liddle, *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1997), pp. 219-20

¹⁰⁷ For his views on the merits of British defensive tactics, see Simpson, *Directing Operations*, pp. 132-3.

¹⁰⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, reference WO95/ 1678, “Section 6, 8th Division Defence Scheme (Provisional)”.

¹⁰⁹ For comments on this tactic, see David Fletcher, *Landships: British Tanks in the First World War* (London: HMSO, 1984), pp. 33-4.

expanded from three companies to a battalion of four companies. In the 8th Division's Defence scheme of 20 April, one company was allotted to the right hand brigade and two companies to the left hand brigade with one company in particular having responsibility for Villers-Bretonneux. From this latter company half was to be at rest ready to relieve the two sections in the town. Presumably, this need for regular relief was put in place because of the heavy gas shelling of this area. The company in reserve was responsible for relieving the company allotted to the right hand brigade.

At light or field artillery level, at least, the emphasis was the other way round. The artillery was under the command of the CRA 20th Division, Brigadier-General Christie, who was based at 8th Division's headquarters at Glisy. The field artillery were divided into two groups, Northern and Southern. It was the Southern Group, covering the right brigade sub sector, which was the stronger composed of 91 and 291 Brigades, RFA while the Northern Group was composed 92 Brigade RFA only. In addition, the artillery of 18th Division, presently in Corps reserve, covered the newly dug reserve lines to the rear of Villers-Bretonneux. The 8th Division Defence Scheme had a series of 'SOS' tasks, pre-agreed fire plans, to fire at areas of possible enemy forming up points or approach routes. At the level of the medium artillery, 69 Brigade RGA was directly affiliated to 8th Division. In addition, 32 Brigade RGA could be called on for assistance as required.

8th Division was allotted a higher than usual component of Royal Engineers. As well as the normal component of three Field Companies equally divided between right sub-sector, left sub- sector and reserve (15, 490 and 2 Field Companies, Royal Engineers respectively) two additional companies were allotted to the Division. These were 254

and 256 Tunnelling Companies RE (the latter less one section). The deployment of these latter units is indicative of a number of factors. Firstly, the engineering task of constructing extensive field defences was important enough to make necessary the use of these skilled Tunnelling Companies. Secondly, their employment on non-tunnelling tasks was, perhaps, a recognition that the 'siege' phase of the war was at an end, that a more 'open' phase was now in progress and likely to be the norm for some time to come.¹¹⁰

8th Division took the Villers-Bretonneux area over from 5th Australian Division on the night of 19-20 April 1918. However, the Division was not allowed to make its dispositions without hindrance from the enemy. On the days before 24 April 1918 the Germans continued to shell the town and the woods behind it with gas shells. Conditions were such that the dedicated garrison of the town, 2nd East Lancashire, had to form a perimeter outside the town, as the buildings could not be occupied particularly because of mustard gas. They had been called to relieve the original garrison, 2nd Devonshires, during the night of 23-24 April 1918 because of the latter's gas casualties. British artillery replied with harassing fire at forming-up points, supply dumps and artillery positions.¹¹¹

To sum up, the main British dispositions before the German attack were that 5th Australian Infantry Division was to the north of Villers-Bretonneux facing Hamel, having carried out a sideways move to the left when 8th Division had come into the line. Around Villers-Bretonneux, astride the Roman road, was 8th Infantry Division

¹¹⁰ For the tank, machine gun, artillery and engineer components of the Defence Scheme, see TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, reference WO95/ 1678, "*8th Division Defence Scheme (Provisional)*", 'Sections 6 - 9'.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, "*Narrative of Operations, 22nd April to 28th April, 1918*".

and to the south, around Hangard Wood, abutting the French, was 58th Infantry Division.

8th Division was deployed as follows. 25 Brigade, under Brigadier-General C. Coffin,¹¹² was deployed in the left hand sector. 2nd Rifle Brigade was deployed in front of the town with a southern boundary on the Roman road. 2nd Royal Berkshires was deployed as the counter attack battalion north of the town. Its position was based near a feature called 'Hill 104' which gave commanding views over the town and its approaches. Hill 104 was manned by infantry from 5th Australian Division. The brigade's third battalion, the 2nd East Lancashires, was, as stated previously, responsible for the close defence of Villers-Bretonneux, under direct command of the Division.

23 Brigade, under the command of Brigadier-General G.W.St.G. Grogan,¹¹³ held the right hand sector. Its frontage was longer, being in an arc declining on its right to the junction with 58th Division to the south. As a result it had two battalions in the front line. 2nd Middlesex was immediately south of the Roman road adjoining 2nd Rifle Brigade. South of them was 2nd West Yorkshires. The Brigades counter attack battalion, 2nd Devonshires, was south to south east of the town in the Cachy Switch position.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Clifford Coffin, dob 10 February 1870; Royal Engineers; CRE 21 Div. [New Army] June 1915 – January 1917; GOC 25 Brigade. [8th Division] January 1917 – May 1918; VC at Westhoek July 1917; GOC 36 'Ulster' Div. [New Army] May 1918 – 1919; retired November 1924; dod 04 February 1959.

¹¹³ George Witham St. George Grogan, dob 1 September 1875; West India Regiment then KOYLI then Worcestershires; CO 1st Worcestershires 1915; GOC 23 Brigade. [8th Division] March 1917 – 1918; VC 29 May 1918 at Chemin de Dames; GOC 238 Brigade, N. Russia 1919; dod 3 January 1962.

¹¹⁴ There is some confusion over actual dispositions. The 8th Division history states that 2nd Devonshire and the two companies of 1st Worcestershires were in the Cachy Switch (see Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 205), whereas the British Official History has the Cachy Switch held by the two companies of the 1st Worcestershires and 2 companies of the 6th Northamptonshires, part of 54 Brigade of 18th Division, the III Corps reserve (see *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, p. 387).

24 Brigade was in reserve having been relieved from the right hand sector on the night of the 23-24 April having suffered from the effects of gas. Two companies of 1st Worcestershires was in the Cachy Switch south of 2nd Devonshires. The other two companies were with 2nd Northamptonshires in the Reserve Line in the right sector while the 1st Sherwood Foresters was further to the rear some mile and a quarter away in the Blangy-Tronville trench line. The Divisional Pioneer battalion, 22nd Durham Light Infantry, was not employed on normal pioneering tasks but as infantry in the Reserve Line in the left hand sector.

The German Attack

The German attack did not come as a bolt out of the blue. Prisoners and deserters had given warning of attacks for a number of days before. For example, a German warrant officer captured by soldiers from 8th Division had stated that the attack would be at 3 a.m. on 23 April.¹¹⁵ The III Corps Intelligence Summary stated that the purpose of the attack was not the drive to take Amiens but was purely a local attack to straighten out the Hangard salient with Villers-Bretonneux clearly an objective.¹¹⁶ The Intelligence Summary identified the following German formations as being in the attack:

Division - comprising -	In Line	In Reserve
<i>77 Reserve Division</i>	<i>257 Reserve Infantry Regt. 419 Infantry Regt.</i>	<i>332 Infantry Regt.</i>
<i>4 Guards Division</i>	<i>5 Guards Grenadier Regt. 93 Reserve Infantry Regt.</i>	<i>5 Foot Guards Regt.</i>
<i>228 Division</i>	<i>207 Reserve Infantry Regt. 48 Infantry Regt.</i>	<i>35 Fusilier Regt.</i>
<i>243 Division</i>	<i>479 Infantry Regt. 478 Infantry Regt. 122 Fusilier Regt.</i>	

¹¹⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, reference WO95/ 1678, “*Narrative of Operations, 22nd April to 28th April 1918*”.

¹¹⁶ TNA: PRO, III Corps intelligence summaries: April 1918, reference WO157/339, entry for 24 April 1918.

Table 5.3: Main German Units Attacking Villers-Bretonneux, April 24 1918¹¹⁷

This force was directed primarily at the front held by 8th Division and the left sector of 58th Division.

The Germans had rehearsed tactics at Villers-Carbonnel approximately a week before their attack. The III Corps Intelligence summary stated that the tactics employed were new. Each infantry company attacked in depth, one platoon behind the other. Until the British line was reached each section (one NCO and eight men) advanced in single file, at 20 metres interval. When the British line was reached the soldiers were to deploy into line. III Corps Intelligence summary stated there were two benefits, "... (i) Casualties by M.G., artillery fire are avoided. (ii) The attackers appear to be less strong than they really are..."¹¹⁸

The German artillery plan, taken from a captured copy of an order of 228 *Infantry Division*, was as follows:

...0445- 0515 - Gassing of enemy arty [artillery] .
0515- 0530 - Bombardment of V.B. [Villers-Bretonneux] with all kinds of gas shell.
0530- 0600 - Gassing of enemy arty.
0600- 0630 - Engage enemy positions,- front lines/, during last fifteen minutes.
0630- 0635 - bombard enemy Inf. [infantry] and Arty.
0645- 0700 - Gas Hill 104 and enemy arty. Drum fire on enemy front line positions for last five minutes.
0700 - Inf. attack commences. Barrage advances 300 metres.
0706 - Barrage on defence lines in rear.
0706- 0715 - Further advance of barrage on north edge of V.B. Barrage stops here until 0745.
0745 - Barrage to station road.
*0750 - Barrage as far as Church...*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ IWM: Department of Documents, Brigadier E.K. Page Papers [henceforth *Page Papers*], reference 76/60/1, "Report on Villers Bretonneux by Major B. Combs, Australian Staff Corps and Captain H.C. Duncan, 13 Frontier Force Rifles, Indian Army" [paper prepared for battlefield tour by Staff College,

The British intelligence summary stated that it believed the attack to have local objectives only. However, a 15 Australian Brigade intelligence report on the interrogation of prisoners taken in the subsequent operations states that these prisoners had seen Austrian heavy guns in the rear area.¹²⁰ These were thought to be the Skoda Model 14 30.5 cm. howitzer with a range of 12,000 metres.¹²¹ A result of any local gains would have been the interdiction of the rail/transport systems in Amiens with incalculable results.

The Battle

The precise details of the events of 24 April 1918 in and around Villers-Bretonneux are difficult to establish. The accounts vary greatly in detail.¹²² All agreed the German artillery fire was very heavy not only on the front line but also on the rear positions as well.¹²³ Even after the German fire lifted from the front line, heavy fire was maintained on the rear areas all day causing problems with communications and bringing up reinforcements. Major C.H. Ommaney, commanding an 18-Pounder field gun battery, part of 306 Brigade RFA, in the Bois D'Abbé, near the Reserve Line in the left hand sector, wrote in his diary afterwards,

...At 3.45 am, just as we were working up to fire counter preparation, the enemy fire a heavy sweeping and [...] fire on the Battery with 4.2, H.V., H.E. and gas mixed. The concentration of the latter soon became very strong - the morning was still with a thick mist and the gas hung heavily in the dense undergrowth.

Meredith [Battery Captain, 2 i/c] and I got out as quickly as possible, for we saw that the Boche had started another of his infernal attacks, and doubled towards the dark and gas up to the guns, which we got going slowly on their

Camberley, April 1929, henceforth *Staff College 1929 study*], 'Appendix 'E', *Report re. Counter Attack methods used by the British Army in 1917- 18*'.

¹²⁰ TNA: PRO, 15 Australian infantry brigade war diary: April 1918, reference WO95/3641.

¹²¹ Hogg, *The Guns*, p. 43.

¹²² See *Australian Official History: Volume V*, p. 538, and Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 202.

¹²³ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, reference WO95/ 1678, "Narrative of Operations, 22nd April to 28th April 1918".

S.O.S. lines.

All telephone lines went almost at once so I got the signallers under Corporal Smith out to keep in touch with the other sections and the O.P.

S.O.S. rockets went up from O.P. about 5 minutes later and we quickened up the S.O.S. rates.

Meredith was splendid and worked like a trooper and swore like a Trojan - or the other way on. Sgt. Pullen worked hard putting wounded men, of whom we had several, away and dressed. Meanwhile shell fire got more intense and by 4.45 we had only one gun going - the remaining three having been knocked out and their detachments either killed or wounded.

Runners were sent off to Brigade at 4.45 and 6.00 - only one of whom got through...¹²⁴

Among the infantry further to the front the effects were even worse. Captain Philip Ledward, Staff Captain at 25 Brigade HQ, stated that it "...was the heaviest of my experience [...] certainly the result was appalling..."¹²⁵ Captain M.S. Esler, the medical officer of 2nd Middlesex, 23 Brigade, had his Regimental Aid Post [RAP] in a quarry behind the front line. All the battalion's stretcher-bearers at the RAP were killed when a side of the quarry wall collapsed under the bombardment, burying the cave they were sheltering in. Esler was left with his medical serjeant, believing that death was imminent:

...About 4 a.m. the shelling lifted to further back, a sign that the Germans had left their trenches and were attacking. An hour later, when we were wondering what had happened, the Adjutant, Toye, appeared.¹²⁶ He told us that our trenches had been captured and we were to beat it back to Bois l'Abbé. He asked us where the stretcher bearers were, and I pointed to a pile of rubble and said 'Under that lot'. He expressed no emotion, but said 'Well, you and Walsh [medical serjeant] beetle out of here like hell, and keep moving; we are 180 strong, all that are left, and they have started putting a barrage down between her and Bois [L'Abbé], it will be sticky going'. We joined the rest of the party and the going was very sticky. I do not know how long the journey took us, it may have been half an hour or two hours. We started the walk 180 strong and finished with 21, myself, Major Drew [the battalion second in

¹²⁴ IWM: Department of Documents, Lieutenant-Colonel C.H. Ommaney Diary [henceforth *Ommaney Diary*], reference 86/9/1.

¹²⁵ IWM: Department of Documents, Philip Ledward Diary [henceforth *Ledward Diary*], reference 76/20/1.

¹²⁶ Toye was to be awarded the VC for his actions at Eterpigny on the Somme during the previous month. He was a Royal Engineer officer who had risen through the ranks.

command], and 19 other ranks. I have never known such a barrage of shell fire, it was like walking through Dante's *Inferno*. How any of us survived I cannot imagine, just a miracle of luck. If I had been a foot backwards, forwards, or sideways, I should have had it, for dozens of men that distance away were either blown to pieces, or their heads, arms, or legs were blown off, and some were eviscerated. It was so terrible having lost all our stretcher bearers for we could do no more than to help along those wounded who could still use their legs. I, eventually, had four or five clinging to me, one fellow, I remember, with his jaw blown away. I have been asked whether I was frightened, of course I was frightened, but fear was partly clouded by shock and a sense of unreality. It might have been a nightmare from which I should eventually awake. I was far more conscious of fear while sitting in the quarry, waiting for death after we had lost our stretcher bearers. Here, at least, we were on the move with an objective in view, that of getting through the barrage in one piece.

Amongst the welter of dead bodies and torn flesh, I remember one case in particular. A regimental sergeant was walking beside me and a shell exploded. As the smoke cleared I found him sitting on his bottom with two stumps of legs waving in the air. Nothing to do but to leave him and carry him to the side of the road hoping that he would be picked up by the *Bosche* and taken to their ambulance. I remember his shocked face as he said, 'You are not going to leave me here?' I felt a real heel, but could not explain that we had nothing to carry him in, and if we stayed, we should all die. Luckily, most of the wounded were beyond asking for help and most were beyond caring...¹²⁷

The 8th Division official history stated, '...all units suffered very heavy casualties from the German bombardment...'¹²⁸ The situation was made worse for the British because of the heavy mist already referred to. The German use of smoke shell made visibility very poor.

The German infantry attack came at 7.00 am. When the Germans attacked, most damage was inflicted through the German use of tanks. Usually the Germans made use of captured British tanks. However, on this occasion they used the first native model, the A7V.¹²⁹ The assault was the first in which the BEF had faced enemy tanks

¹²⁷ IWM: Department of Documents, Captain M.S. Esler Papers, reference 74/102/1.

¹²⁸ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 203.

¹²⁹ The A7V weighed 30 tons, had a crew of eighteen and was armed with a 57mm cannon and six Maxim machine guns. See David Fletcher, *Tanks and Trenches: first hand accounts of Tank Warfare in the First World War* (London: Grange Books, 1996), p. 95.

on any major scale. Though not as mobile as British tanks, being described as being, “...more in the style of a travelling fortress...”¹³⁰, their effect was similar to the experience of the German Army at Flers on the Somme in September 1916 and at Cambrai in November 1917. The Germans deployed twelve tanks, divided into three groups. The British Official History commented:

*...Wherever tanks appeared the British line was broken: they got astride the trenches and shot down the men in them, so that a number of the young soldiers surrendered to the following infantry. Having no tank-defence weapons they could make no effective reply...*¹³¹

The initial thrust was against the bend in the British line to the south east of the town. Here were 2nd West Yorkshires and the two southern companies of 2nd Middlesex. The Germans then ‘rolled-up’ the line either side. The survivors made off in a north-westerly direction towards the town. The Germans attacked 2nd Rifle Brigade, with only B Company managing to keep its original position. 2nd Devonshires, in support, had no idea of the enemy attack until the Germans were among them.

The situation was very unclear to the senior officers of the formations involved. Though first reports of the attack began to come through to 8th Division HQ at 7.20 am they were at first treated as alarmist. It was not until 08.30 am that authenticated reports came through.¹³² These demonstrated the problems with command and control in such a fluid battle.

Ledward of 25 Brigade and Grogan, his Brigade commander, went forward to establish what was happening:

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, p. 389.

¹³² Ibid, pp. 391-2.

...We found Page [commanding 2nd Middlesex] in a hut in the wood, very busy with maps and a number of runners, but actually doing no good at all. Lowry [commanding 2nd West Yorkshires], as usual, had managed the show in the only right way. He had walked calmly up from the Transport Lines carrying a stick and a mackintosh and, without bothering about establishing any headquarters, had gone straight through to the front where he could see what had happened. He then placed the remnants of his Battalion, pretty well man by man, in the positions he thought best, calling up the men by name if he knew the name, otherwise addressing them impersonally as "soldier". It took him a long time and he was in full view of the Germans and under every kind of fire. It had a wonderful effect on the troops...¹³³

Ledward wrote that Lowry was upbraided by one of the other brigade staff officers for making it difficult for the Brigade commander, and for not informing Brigade HQ where his battalion HQ was. Lowry had simply ignored the first point and replied succinctly to the second by answering in one word - "Here!" and dropping his mackintosh to the ground. Ledward wrote that in his view the rear headquarters had to establish links forward. The forward commanders should not have had to look to the rear.¹³⁴ Ledward's comments clearly approve that a commander should be going to see for himself and taking control. It is a sign of the command and control returning to the spirit of *FSR, Part I* and a far cry from the 'dugout' period of the middle years of the War.¹³⁵

It is clear that the British had been unable to prevent an enemy break in and had suffered greatly in casualties. Both the British Official History and the 8th Division history do not mention how many British prisoners were taken except for the

¹³³ *Ledward Diary*, pp. 76-7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 77, marginal note.

¹³⁵ For problems with command in the 'middle years' of the war, see Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz* (Norwich: Gliddon Books, 1988. Originally published London: Faber, 1931), p. 207. The 'downward' devolution of command is discussed in Peter Simkins, 'Building Blocks: Aspects of Command and Control at Brigade level in the BEF's Offensive Operations, 1916-18' in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914 – 1918* (Staplehurst, Kent: Spellmount, 2004), pp. 162-3, and A. Simpson, *Directing Operations*, pp. 141.

reference that ‘a number of the young soldiers surrendered to the following infantry...’¹³⁶ The Australian Official History states, more forthrightly, that, ‘..Though some brave men fought stubbornly, whole companies were cut off and surrendered. The Germans claim to have captured this day a total of 2,400 British prisoners...’¹³⁷ German accounts state that British made at times an obstinate defence.¹³⁸ Bean does say, however, that the panic caused by the tanks would have happened with all troops.

Many sources pay tribute to the heavy British artillery fire that stopped the Germans advancing north and north westerly out of Villers-Bretonneux.¹³⁹ Since the *Michael Offensive* the field artillery had adopted the tactic of advancing detached guns forward to deal with attacks like this one. After the war the 8th Division CRA, Brigadier-General Lamont, wrote to Brigadier-General Edmonds, the British Official Historian, that 8th Division had used such a tactic in the month before, during the battles on the Somme Crossings:

*...One Battery from each Brigade occupied a forward position, with a prepared position in rear.
A section from each battery was sent forward to act in close support and under direct command of the infantry Commanders. These sections rejoined their Batteries at nightfall.
The forward Batteries and certain Sections pushed forward, kept up harassing fire [...] during the night, they retired on to the main positions the following morning...¹⁴⁰*

There is no mention of this being done in the 8th Division Defence Scheme. Major Ommaney mentions that one officer from his battery was ‘detached’. When describing his battery position in the Bois De L’Abbé, near Cachy he wrote,

¹³⁶ *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, p. 391.

¹³⁷ *Australian Official History Vol. V*, p. 553.

¹³⁸ Fletcher, *Tanks and Trenches*, pp. 106-116.

¹³⁹ See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 208, and *Australian Official History Vol. V*, p. 548.

¹⁴⁰ TNA: PRO, Official Historian’s correspondence: Battle of the Somme – Authors’ surnames I – L, reference CAB45/135, letter from Brigadier- General J.F. Lamont.

*...Four guns in the wood and two for approach of close attack about 500 yards to their right flank -O.P. near this latter [...]
Tuesday April 23rd. The relief was completed by 9pm. All quite quiet and uneventful. Meredith and myself at the main position - Askey in O.P. and Wentworth at detached section...¹⁴¹*

In the 8th Division history and the Australian Official History, regarding the fighting during the next day, only one gun section can be found in action forward in direct support. This was one gun from an 18-Pounder section which fired from one of the bridges crossing the railway onto German infantry infiltrating along the railway to the north-west.¹⁴² The British official history states that during the German advance six guns of 290 Brigade RFA, covering 58th Division, and all those of 291 Siege Battery, RGA which, "...had been pushed forward among the field batteries..."¹⁴³ were lost but that all these guns were recovered after the subsequent counter attack.

That the actions of one gun stood out, appears to demonstrate that the rest of the artillery drew back to the west of Villers-Bretonneux. What reasons could there be for this? German penetration, albeit in small numbers, from the town into the woods to the west of Villers-Bretonneux affected the gun crews by their use of small arms fire. The 8th Division official history states that by early afternoon the more forward guns, after suffering heavy casualties, were *ordered* to move to positions further back.¹⁴⁴

Heneker, in his after action report, wrote:

...A great number of these guns and batteries were under machine gun fire but refused to withdraw and suffered heavily. My C.R.A. came to me about 2 p.m.

¹⁴¹ IWM, *Ommaney Diary*, p. 8.

¹⁴² The 8th Division official history stated that the gun in question was not identified. See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p.208. Bean, however, identified the gun as being from 'B' Battery, 83 (LXXXIII) Brigade, RFA, commanded by Lieutenant (Temporary Captain) A.I. Butler, MC. This unit was from 18th Division, forming part of 'Shepherd's Force' covering Cachy. See *Australian Official History Volume V*, p. 543 especially footnotes 10 & 11.

¹⁴³ *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 208.

*and asked permission to withdraw some of the most forward guns to positions where they would not be under such direct machine gun fire and from which they could sweep the exits of the town as effectively. I gave this permission...*¹⁴⁵

There was a feeling, however, in some Australian quarters that the British artillery, like many of their infantry, retired too readily.¹⁴⁶ What is apparent, however, is that it was the artillery that stopped the Germans debouching further to the west and north.¹⁴⁷

The 8th Division history concluded:

*...More important still, our artillery, gallantly holding their positions, were continuously sweeping the northern and north-western exits from Villers-Bretonneux with direct fire. In this way they gave the infantry invaluable assistance in preventing the enemy from exploiting his initial success...*¹⁴⁸

The artillery was supported by the heavy Vickers machine guns of the Machine Gun Corps which, by firing in the indirect role, also assisted in stopping any further advance.

The British Dilemma

By mid morning the situation became clearer. Despite initial scepticism, credence was now given to reports that the Germans had made large gains and taken Villers-Bretonneux. It was apparent that a counter attack would have to take place but the units in the line already were in some disarray. The dilemma was balancing the need, and desire, for a quick counter-attack against the need to build up forces so that any planned action would have a greater chance of success.

The senior British commanders considered Villers-Bretonneux vital. They reacted

¹⁴⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, “*Narrative of Operations, 22nd April to 28th April 1918*”.

¹⁴⁶ See *Australian Official History Volume V*, p. 546.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.548.

¹⁴⁸ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 208.

quickly to the taking of the town. The Fourth Army War Diary stated:

...As soon as the news of the loss of VILLERS BRETONNEUX was received, the Army Commander issued instructions that the village was to be retaken without fail that day. The importance of not giving the enemy time to consolidate his gain was paramount and there could be no question of postponement of operations until the following day for that reason...¹⁴⁹

A consideration was that the area immediately to the south of Villers-Bretonneux was the boundary between the British and the French armies. It would have been better if the counter-attacks could have taken place at the same time as any supporting French operation but General Rawlinson said that British counter-attacks were to take place regardless of whether the French were ready or not.¹⁵⁰

Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, notwithstanding the German *Georgette* offensive on the Lys, south of Ypres, was sufficiently concerned to visit the area:

...2. At 12.30 p.m. the Commander-in-Chief arrived at Army Headquarters and after discussing the situation and the Army Commander's plans left for III Corps headquarters at DURY.

The Commander-in-Chief visited Army Headquarters at 4p.m. on his way back to G.H.Q., and subsequently wrote a letter to General Foch and explaining the situation as regards the reserves available for employment by the Fourth Army, and making various suggestions and requests concerning French assistance in case of necessity. A copy of this letter and a favourable reply thereto from General Foch was forwarded to the army commander the same evening.

3. During the afternoon Lieutenant-General Du Cane arrived from General Foch's headquarters bringing with him an order from General Foch for VILLERS BRETONNEUX to be retaken...¹⁵¹

General Debeney, the French commander in the area, sent word that he would not be

¹⁴⁹ LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, "Fourth Army War Diary, Annexe to War Diary, 24th April 1918."

¹⁵⁰ See Peter Simkins, 'For Better or For Worse: Sir Henry Rawlinson and his Allies in 1916 and 1918', in M. Hughes & M. Seligmann, eds., *Leadership in Conflict 1914 – 1918* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000), pp. 24-5.

¹⁵¹ LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers, "Fourth Army War Diary, Annexe to War Diary, 24th April 1918". General Foch, as well as being Chief of Staff of the French Army, had, since 26 March 1918, been in effect Supreme Commander of the Allied armies in France and Belgium.

able to attack until the next day. General Rawlinson considered this to be too late.¹⁵²

Initial counter-attacks carried out by the units of the Tank Corps that were in place already had mixed success but at least prevented further exploitation by the Germans.¹⁵³ Counter-attacks by units of 8th Division were not successful. The main counter-attack was by 1st Sherwood Foresters at approximately midday. The counter attack was ordered by Divisional HQ at 9.30 a.m. The initial unit to be used was 2nd Devonshires. Due to the confused and precarious situation on the ground 23 Brigade were allowed to use 1st Sherwood Foresters instead. This is another example where holding the reserve lines was considered more important than putting forces into a counter-attack.

A counter-attack by a single battalion was faced with an up-hill struggle from the start. The British Official History states simply that the battalion reached the road dividing the Bois l'Abbé and Bois d'Aquenne running in '...a fairly deep cutting: there it stopped any further advance of the enemy...'¹⁵⁴. Other accounts, including the 8th Division Narrative, the 8th Division and Australian Official Histories give a different picture. Brigadier-General Grogan and the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel R.F. Moore DSO, MC, reconnoitred the area beforehand. However in the intervening period the Germans pushed further into the woods, especially using machine gun troops as a screen in front of their main force.¹⁵⁵ When 1st Sherwood Foresters advanced they ran into these and suffered casualties, especially Lieutenant-Colonel Moore, who was severely wounded. It is clear that the attack then lost all

¹⁵²See *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, pp395-6, and Geoffrey Blaxland, *Amiens: 1918* (1968; London: W. H. Allen, 1981), pp.128-9.

¹⁵³ *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, p. 392, and Fletcher, *Tanks and Trenches*, pp. 99-116.

¹⁵⁴ *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, p. 392.

¹⁵⁵ *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 566.

forward momentum and the unit fell back to the sunken road referred to earlier. The 8th Division Narrative states this was because:

*... the Commanding Officer was wounded as a result of which correct orders were not issued to the Battalion which withdrew and commenced to dig in on the road [...]. While digging in here it came under a very heavy 5.9" barrage and suffered heavily...*¹⁵⁶

This failure to maintain the objective of the operation after the loss of a commander shows that there was still a reliance on personality to maintain control. It can only be surmised that sub-commanders were not as well briefed as they should have been and the loss of its commander caused severe problems to the battalion.

There appears to be only one further advance by units including 8th Division troops. Between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. a mixed group of Australian patrols, reconnoitring forward, and troops of 2nd East Lancashires [25 Brigade], supported by tanks, cleared the Germans out of a copse to the north west of Villers-Bretonneux. The Official Australian History stated:

*...This spontaneous attack by the troops on the spot was the only counter-attack carried out with success by the infantry of the 8th Division and was the only one that could have been so carried out. The orders for the others had become impossible of fulfilment long before the troops could have launched them...*¹⁵⁷

Worth noting is that tanks were on hand because they had not been told that another deliberate counter-attack had been cancelled.

A study made in 1929 by students at the British Army Staff College, Camberley, also

¹⁵⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, “Narrative of Operations, 22nd April to 28th April 1918”.

¹⁵⁷ Australian Official History, Vol. V, p. 566.

took the view that the need to put troops into the counter-attack was overcome by the fears that prohibited the use of units in the reserve lines. It stated that the initial counter-attacks by the divisions in place, 8th and 58th Divisions, failed because, for example, the 8th Division battalions detailed for counter-attack were kept in place in the Reserve Line and there was a lack of fire support from artillery and the heavy machine guns of the Machine Gun Corps.¹⁵⁸

The main criticism made by the 1929 Staff College Study was the delay in making another further deliberate counter attack controlled at Corps level. During the compilation of the study the authors were able to question General Sir A.A. Montgomery-Massingberd, who was the Chief of Staff of Fourth Army at the time of the battles at Villers-Bretonneux. Montgomery-Massingberd agreed that events were directed at divisional rather than at corps level. This ‘devolution’ of decision making to a lower level than is supposed to be normal in the Great War is an indicator of this developing trend.¹⁵⁹ Certainly, here, III Corps appeared to ‘decide’ by acquiescing.¹⁶⁰

That another deliberate counter-attack was not launched by 8th Division was a result of a decision by its senior officers. As well as the effort of 1st Sherwood Foresters, a second counter-attack to the north and north-west of the town was to be launched by the 2nd Royal Berkshires and two companies of 2nd Rifle Brigade, both of 8th Division, and units of 5th Australian Infantry Division. This was to be supported by any available tanks. The GOC 25 Brigade, Brigadier-General Coffin, and the two battalion commanders, made representations to Major-General Heneker that such an

¹⁵⁸ IWM: Page Papers, *Staff College 1929 study*.

¹⁵⁹ See the discussion in J.M. Bourne, ‘British Generals in the First World War’, in Gary Sheffield, ed., *Leadership and Command: the Anglo-American Experience since 1861* (London: Brassey's, 1997), p. 111; Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 21-3; Simpson, *Directing Operations*, pp. 155-81.

¹⁶⁰ IWM: Page Papers, *1929 Staff College study*.

attack in daylight over open ground would incur very heavy casualties with, probably, little gain. Heneker cancelled the counter-attack.¹⁶¹ He did so despite pressure from III Corps and Fourth Army for a counter-attack sooner rather than later. That he was able to do so shows progress from 1916 and 1917. Heneker was a regular soldier of much experience, of forceful character, considered by many to be a martinet. He also possessed excellent tactical ability.¹⁶² That his argument of tactical practicality was able to override such pressure can be considered a sign of operational maturity within the British Army by this stage of the War. Unfortunately, no direct evidence for the reasons Heneker's arguments were seen as acceptable could be found in the archives examined.

The Night Counter Attack - Planning and Preparation

As well as 8th and 58th Divisions, there were also other formations available for counter-attack. There was III Corps' counter attack division, 18th Division, and two Australian infantry brigades. It appears that the overriding preoccupation was the need to keep the reserve lines manned by reliable troops. In the 1929 Staff College study Montgomery-Massingberd stated that, '...54 Bde was really the only Bde of 18 Div. that was in any way fit to attack...'¹⁶³ As a result of this the main forces to be used in any counter attack were 13 and 15 Australian Infantry Brigades.

15 Australian Infantry Brigade was part of 5th Australian Infantry Division that held the area to the north of Villers-Bretonneux. The Brigade was commanded by

¹⁶¹See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, "Narrative of Operations, 22nd April to 28th April, 1918" and *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 566, and *British Official History 1918, Vol. II*, pp. 394-5.

¹⁶²See LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 119.

¹⁶³IWM: Page Papers, *1929 Staff College study*.

Brigadier-General H.E. 'Pompey' Elliott.¹⁶⁴ Elliott had been responsible for the sector including Villers-Bretonneux before the take over by 8th Division. He had planned for such an eventuality and knew the ground well. As soon as the German artillery commenced firing, the brigade was alerted and later contact patrols were sent out to establish exactly what had taken place. 13 Australian Infantry Brigade was part of 4th Australian Infantry Division, in Fourth Army reserve. It was commanded by Brigadier-General T.W. Glasgow.¹⁶⁵ It was put under the command of 8th Division after it came north.

Major-General J.T.H.Hobbs, GOC 5th Australian Division, had been offering the services of 15 Australian Brigade and other of his troops from early morning and had offered to have units of his 14 Australian Infantry Brigade attack in the afternoon.¹⁶⁶ Heneker maintained his decision. At about the time that he cancelled the deliberate daytime counter-attack he proposed that a successful operation might be mounted at night when there would be sufficient moonlight for illuminating an effective night counter-attack. The 1929 Staff College study criticised the timing, saying that it should have been earlier. This ignores, however, one salient point made by Bean:

...British leaders were only then learning that the recent arming of the German infantry with the light machine-gun had immensely increased the volume of fire with which such attacks were met unless the machine-guns were

¹⁶⁴Harold Edward Elliott, dob 19 June 1878, solicitor, Militia, Boer war, commissioned in Royal Berkshires; CO 7th Battalion, AIF 1914-15, wounded Gallipoli; GOC 1 Australian Infantry Brigade 1915-16; GOC 15 Australian Infantry Brigade [5th Australian Infantry Division] April 1916-1918; dod 23 March 1931. 'Pompey' Elliott was a brilliant brigade commander. However, he was not very tactful in his dealings with British officers in particular. He believed that he had been unjustly overlooked for divisional command and eventually committed suicide. See Simkins, 'Building Blocks', pp. 157-8, and entry in Bourne, *Who's Who*, p. 83.

¹⁶⁵Thomas William Glasgow, dob 6 June 1876; cattle farmer; GOC 13 Australian Infantry Brigade [4th Australian Infantry Division] 1916-18; GOC 1st Australian Infantry Division July 1918-1919; KCB 1919; High Commissioner for Australia in Canada 1919-20; Federal Senator for Queensland 1920-32; Australian Commonwealth Minister for Home Affairs and Territories 1926-27; Australian Commonwealth Minister for Defence 1927-29; dod 4 July 1955.

¹⁶⁶Joseph John Talbot Hobbs, dob 24 August 1864; architect; Perth Militia Artillery; CRA 1 1st Australian Infantry Division 1916; GOC 1st Australian Infantry Division January 1917- 1919; dod 21 April 1938.

*subdued by bombardment or tanks or hampered by the dark or by fog. It was General Heneker who, following the advice of Brigadier-General Coffin and the battalion commanders of the 25th Brigade prevented the wasting of the 15th [Australian] Brigade at midday and induced General Butler, despite Rawlinson's pressure, to acquiesce in postponement until evening...*¹⁶⁷

The plan of attack decided upon was an envelopment of the town from two sides with a brigade on each side, ignoring the town and meeting beyond the far side. 15 Australian Infantry Brigade would operate north of the town and 13 Australian Infantry Brigade would operate to the south. Below them would advance 54 Brigade of 18th Division with added battalions from the other brigades of 18th Division and 58th Division. Its task was to regain the line originally held by 58th Division. Owing to the confusion over the precise location of the British and German units there was to be no direct artillery support except for a standing barrage at the far end of the proposed operational area.¹⁶⁸

It is not clear who originally proposed the counter-attack in the form it took. Brigadier-General Elliott, GOC 15 Australian Infantry Brigade, had long been proposing such an attack. It has been said that 8th Division's GSO1, Lieutenant-Colonel C.C. Armitage was the initiator.^{169, 170} After the battle almost every senior commander claimed the credit for the successful plan, but, as Bean states "...Probably the plan suggested itself to almost everyone concerned..."¹⁷¹ It was tactically the soundest way of dealing with the problem. What is not in question was the desire that

¹⁶⁷ *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 639.

¹⁶⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, "Op. Order No. 287" and TNA: PRO, 13 Australian Infantry Brigade war diary: April 1918, reference WO95/3519.

¹⁶⁹ Charles Clement 'Clem' Armitage, born 1881; Royal Artillery; GSO1 14th Division, GSO1 8th Division, GSO1 31st Division 1914-18; Instructor Staff School Cambridge; GSO1 BAOR; Chief Instructor, later Commandant, School of Artillery, 1925-29; GOC 7 Infantry Brigade 1929-32; Commandant, Staff College, Camberley 1934-36; GOC 1st Division 1936-38; Master-General of the Ordnance India 1938-42; retired. 1942; died 1973.

¹⁷⁰ *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 570.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 638.

the counter-attack succeed. General Rawlinson sent a senior member of his own staff to Heneker's HQ to see that it was carried out to his approval.¹⁷² Bean states that a number of the Australian commanders were unhappy with delays but then appears to contradict himself by stating that there was a need for reconnaissance, especially by 13 Australian Infantry Brigade for whom the area was unknown.¹⁷³

The 1929 Staff College Study states that GOC 18th Division should have been put in charge of the counter-attack and that GOC 8th Division was not put clearly in charge of the operation until "...2015 hrs when it was too late for 8 Div. to exercise any control..."¹⁷⁴ It would appear that the authors of this study were not alone in confusing the timing of events during the planning of the operation and subsequently. Heneker wrote in the 8th Division Narrative of Operations:

...Between 3 and 4 p.m. the G.O.C. III Corps called me up on the telephone and informed that a counter-attack was to be launched that evening from the N. and S. of the town [...]
By 7 p.m. verbal instructions had been issued and verbal orders received from III Corps, that Zero hour was to be 10 p.m.
Information was also received verbally from III Corps that all three attacking Brigades would be under my orders for the actual attack...¹⁷⁵

There are conflicting accounts of when the counter-attack was organised and when the Australian brigades were put under Heneker's control. The war diary of 13 Australian Brigade states that the GOC and the Brigade-Major went to 8th Division HQ at 11.30

¹⁷² This was Lieutenant-Colonel E.H.L. 'Moses' Beddington, GSO1 8 Division from December 1916 to December 1917, when Heneker was GOC. Beddington, by his own admission, had been very happy with 8th Division and loath to leave. Beddington demonstrated at times an outspoken independence of mind in stating his views to superiors like Gough, Rawlinson and, on one occasion, Haig himself. What his relationship was like with Heneker during this time however can only be matter of conjecture. See LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', especially p. 119.

¹⁷³ *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 571.

¹⁷⁴ IWM: Page Papers, *1929 Staff College study*.

¹⁷⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, "*Narrative of Operations*", p. 6.

a.m. for orders and then onto the railway arch where 23 and 24 Infantry Brigades had their headquarters. The 13 Australian Brigade War Diary goes on to state that the conference at 8th Division HQ regarding the planning for the proposed operation took place at 4 p.m.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, though GOC 8th Division may not have been placed in formal command of the whole operation until relatively late in the day, planning of the operation by all formations was taking place beforehand with 8th Division HQ acting as co-ordinator for the subordinate as well as the superior formations.

There is considerable disparity regarding the fixing of the timing of the operation. Bean states that it was the Australians, especially Glasgow of 13 Australian Infantry Brigade, who forced the time of the counter-attack to be put back to 10 p.m. because the proposed earlier time of 8 p.m. would have been just after sunset.¹⁷⁷ Bean intimates that Heneker was browbeaten into agreeing to the Australians' views. He goes on to state that the first opportunity the two Australian brigade commanders had to meet and discuss the operation together was after 7.05 p.m. when Glasgow went to Blangy-Tronville to establish his headquarters with Elliott's.¹⁷⁸ However the 13 Australian Infantry Brigade War Diary has the GOC (Glasgow) and the Brigade-Major going to this meeting at 2.30 p.m., then going onto 8th Division HQ.¹⁷⁹

Beddington wrote that:

¹⁷⁶ Beddington wrote that after seeing Butler at III Corps he arrived at 8th Division's HQ at Glisy at about 11.15 a.m. There he talked over the proposed plan with Heneker and his GSO1, Armitage. The War Diaries of the Australian Brigades involved also give conflicting times. 15 Australian Infantry Brigade states that it received messages at 9.05 and 9.24 p.m., that placed it under the command of 8th Division. However, the brigade had previously received a copy of the 8th Division Operational Order No. 287, issued at 8 p.m., when still under the control of 5th Australian Division. See TNA: PRO, 13 Australian Infantry Brigade war diary: April 1918, ref. WO95/3519 and LHCMA: Beddington, 'My Life', p. 153.

¹⁷⁷ *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 571. Heneker was a very tough personality and it is difficult to see him allowing himself to be 'browbeaten' by any officer junior to himself. Noteworthy is that he did not send congratulatory messages to the Australians after the battle.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.576.

¹⁷⁹ TNA: PRO, 13 Australian Infantry Brigade war diary: April 1918, ref. WO95/3519.

...Zero hour was tentatively fixed for 8 p.m. but altered to 10 p.m. at the request of General Heneker (8th Division Commander) who was to take charge of the whole operation...¹⁸⁰

The 1929 Staff College study criticised the attachment of one battalion from 8th Division to each of the Australian Brigades to ‘mop-up’ the woods to the west of Villers-Bretonneux and the town itself.¹⁸¹ This appears to be a valid analysis, especially when it is realised that they were replaced in the reserve lines by at least one of the Australian infantry battalions from each of the Australian infantry brigades. Montgomery-Massingberd, in replying to this, stated ‘...in principle the breaking up of formations was wrong, but he puts forward again as an excuse the need for having reliable units in the Reserve Line...’.¹⁸² A point to consider is that Australian infantry brigades at this time of the War still consisted of four infantry battalions whereas the British, owing to manpower shortages, had reorganised their infantry brigades into three battalion formations in early 1918. Therefore, even allowing for the use of one battalion to guard the reserve lines, an Australian infantry brigade was still as strong, if not stronger, than its British equivalent.

The Night Counter-Attack

It is not proposed to narrate in detail the events that took place during the successful counter attack, as the success was almost entirely Australian. 15 Australian Brigade, in the north, succeeded with little loss. 13 Australian Brigade, to the south, had a more torrid time. This was due to a late start by its sister brigade, making it the focus of initial enemy attention. It was then caught in British barbed wire around the Cachy Switch and enfiladed by the German troops in the woods to the north- west of the

¹⁸⁰ LHCMA: Beddington, ‘My Life’, p. 153.

¹⁸¹ IWM: Page Papers, *1929 Staff College study*.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, ‘Section 13’.

Switch. Its success, despite these setbacks is, therefore, all the more remarkable. The Australian attacks were aided by the fact that the German defence was uncoordinated. It fought, in effect, two separate battles to the north and south of the town.

It has to be said that the two battalions of 8th Division detailed to mop up were almost entirely unsuccessful at first. The 13 Australian Brigade War Diary stated:

...During the attack nothing was seen of 2 NORTHANTS and the work of mopping up VILLERS-BRETONNEUX was not carried out by them. It was subsequently learnt that the C.O. and the Adjutant were killed before the attack started and this led to disorganisation...¹⁸³

The Australian commanders thought that the 8th Division units, being involved only in ‘mopping-up’, would have a comparatively easy task. As German fire from the town and, perhaps more significantly, the woods to the east did not appreciably slacken ‘...the impression spread that their operations had not been vigorously attempted...’¹⁸⁴ This was wrong. Both battalions had attempted to carry out their tasks but had been held up by very heavy enemy machine gun fire and had taken heavy casualties. Bean stated:

...The fact was that the task allotted to the attached British battalions was far from being as easy as Australian commanders assumed. While the thrust of the two Australian brigades was directed where the Germans did not expect it, the 22nd DLI and 2nd Northampton had to strike where the blow was expected, and the Germans were in strength with great numbers of machine-guns and fully prepared. Nevertheless the British efforts were not wasted, since even the attempt by the 22nd DLI probably served to mystify the enemy as to the true direction of the main thrusts...¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ See TNA: PRO, 13 Australian Infantry Brigade war diary: April 1918, ref. WO95/3519. The adjutant was Captain Hubert Essame. He in fact survived and returned to the Battalion by the end of the War. He served as a Regular soldier after the war and in World War 2 commanded a brigade and then a division in N.W. Europe after D-Day. He later wrote a history of the fighting in 1918.

¹⁸⁴ *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 613.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 614-5.

The 8th Division Narrative stated that 22nd Durham Light Infantry (Pioneers) came under heavy machine gun fire:

...and it was not until they managed to dribble parties along the railway line into the town and so attack the enemy in flank and rear, that their attack managed to get on. They did not succeed in entering the town until daylight...¹⁸⁶

Heneker was told of the lack of progress by his battalions around 4.00 a.m. and ordered 2nd Royal Berkshires to move into the town from the north.¹⁸⁷ Together Australian and British infantry cleared the town with many prisoners, machine-guns and *minenwerfer* [trench mortars] being captured. After daybreak especially when the early morning mist had cleared further forward, movement became very difficult due to the very heavy German machine gun fire. Further consolidation of the front line was accomplished with great effort, especially by 2nd Northamptonshires and Australian units.¹⁸⁸ The Germans remaining in the ‘pocket’ in the woods behind the town, behind the new front line, were cleared by other 8th Division units including 22nd Durham Light Infantry (Pioneers) and the re-organised battalions of 23 Infantry Brigade – 2nd West Yorkshires, 2nd Middlesex, 2nd Devonshires.¹⁸⁹

That the 8th Division infantry battalions had difficulties contrasts with the success of the Australians. Many at the time considered the latter’s actions to be the exemplar of

¹⁸⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, “*Narrative of Operations*”, p. 8.

¹⁸⁷ This incident is another example of the confusion in events and times. The Australian official history states that Heneker sent 2nd Royal Berkshires into action when he was told of 2nd Northamptonshires lack of movement by Brigadier-General Elliott at 4.15 a.m. (see *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p613). The 8th Division narrative states that Heneker ordered 2nd Royal Berkshires into the town at 4.00 a.m. because 22nd Durham Light Infantry had not succeeded in entering the town (see TNA PRO, 8 Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, “*Narrative of Operations*”, p. 8).

¹⁸⁸ See *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 628, and Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 212.

¹⁸⁹ The Australian official history states that at this time these units consisted of 7 officers and 85 men, 3 officers and 54 men, and 6 officers and 300 men respectively. No figures can be found in British sources. What cannot be questioned is that all 8th Division’s infantry battalions were very weak by this stage of the battle. See *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 622, footnote 114.

infantry work. Bean quotes Brigadier-General Grogan as saying ‘...it is “perhaps the greatest individual feat of the war- the successful counter-attack by night across unknown and difficult ground, at a few hours notice, by the Australian soldier”...’.¹⁹⁰ Essame, adjutant of 2nd Northamptonshire, wounded in the course of the battle, a soldier with great experience, considered the Australian soldier to be the best of the war. He called the battle, ‘...one of the most sanguinary actions of the war...’¹⁹¹ For 8th Division the battle was a further trauma for a formation that had barely begun to recover from its sterling efforts during the *Michael* Offensive.

Aftermath of the Action at Villers-Bretonneux

The fighting at Villers-Bretonneux on 24 and 25 April 1918 ended for the British on a positive note after a start that had seemed to bode nothing but a continuation of the disasters that had been taking place since 21 March. For those involved, the experience had been devastating. 8th Division appears not to have done as well as its war diary or history say it performed nor as poorly as other accounts have stated. Certainly, there appears to be a gloss over how many of 8th Division’s raw and half trained soldiers surrendered in the face of the new use of tanks by the Germans.¹⁹² It is apparent that unit effectiveness depended very heavily on the character of senior officers. When these were removed by death or wounds, the British units lost cohesion and were unable to achieve their objectives. This was especially true in the limited counter attacks attempted after the initial German penetration.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 638.

¹⁹¹ Essame, *Battle for Europe*, p. 49.

¹⁹² Bean quotes a German source as stating that they took some 2,400 prisoners. See *Australian Official History, Vol. V*, p. 553.

	OFFICERS				OTHER RANKS			
UNIT	Killed	Wounded	Missing	TOTAL	Killed	Wounded	Missing	TOTAL
23 Brigade HQ	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
2 Devonshires	3	6	1	10	49	184	93	326
2 West Yorkshires	1	5	10	16	18	162	226	406
2 Middlesex	2	2	9	13	6	98	435	539
23 Light Trench Mortar Battery	-	-	-	-	1	2	13	16
1 Worcestershires	3	8	-	11	20	106	-	126
1 Sherwood Foresters	3	4	-	7	36	176	15	227
2 Northamptonshires	4	6	-	10	15	251	19	285
24 Light Trench Mortar Battery	-	1	-	1	-	4	-	4
2 East Lancashires	3	8	2	13	31	153	85	269
2 Royal Berkshires	3	7	-	10	55	185	10	250
2 Rifle Brigade	1	3	10	14	15	66	297	378
25 Light Trench Mortar Battery	-	-	-	-	1	7	5	13
22 Durham Light Infantry (Pioneers)	2	4	-	6	59	186	8	253
8 Battalion MGC	1	-	5	6	12	78	91	181
R.E.	1	1	-	2	1	10	1	12
R.A.M.C.	-	1	-	1	1	10	1	12
Attached 20th Division artillery	1	11	-	12	7	85	-	92
TOTALS	28	67	37	132	327	1764	1299	3390

Table 5.4: 8th Division Casualties - Villers-Bretonneux, 23-28 April 1918¹⁹³

Unlike the Australians, among the British there did not appear to be a coherent system regarding the communication of vital information so that commanders could form a correct picture of events and formulate their plans accordingly. The Australians threw out contact patrols of infantry and used detachments of Divisional Light Horse to ensure a smooth flow of information. A Forward Reporting Station was set up under a 'spare' senior officer from 5th Australian Division HQ. No such system can be found

¹⁹³ See TNA: PRO, 8 Division war diary: January – June 1918, ref. WO95/1678, “*Narrative of Operations*”, Appendix 1. It must be presumed that a major proportion of those listed as ‘missing’ would have become prisoners-of-war.

for 8th Division. It must be said, however, that two of the Brigade HQs were established at the same location in an attempt to improve co-ordination.

From the outset of taking over the defences of the Villers-Bretonneux sector there were problems with the new 'defence-in-depth' tactics. At all levels, from battalion to army, there was a preoccupation with the need to man reserve lines even to the detriment of counter-attack forces. This meant that when forces were needed to counter-attack they had to come from elsewhere. Fortunately, the Australians were available. On the positive side, Heneker had the moral courage to refuse to counter attack across the open ground and his decision was respected by senior officers at corps and army level. This is perhaps a sign of maturity within the organisation. The British artillery was particularly effective bearing in mind the mixture of units not integral to 8th Division. However, from 1917 it became common that a division's artillery were left in the line after the infantry had been relieved as additional fire support. The artillery command systems were evidently now flexible enough to allow this. With regard to the counter-attack plan, the fact that so many laid claims to being the progenitor is a sign that decision making was now systematic enough so that the best solution was arrived at by most involved. This meant that there had to be staff training and direction and doctrine, at the higher level at least, that established such a systematic approach. The British use of tanks had mixed results. The heavy tanks appeared to have been used in groups that were too small. The tactic of lying in wait to then attack was considered wasteful and inefficient. Only in 58th Division's area, where Whippet medium tanks were used in a sizeable group, was there any serious disruption of a German attack in regimental strength (the equivalent of a British brigade).

The events demonstrated the resilience of many of the participants. The British divisions had barely recovered from the fighting of the previous month. Experience at all levels was lacking and sorely needed. The German use of tanks was a very unwelcome, and unforeseen, innovation. Despite all this the British managed to hang on and lay the ground for the successful predominantly Australian deliberate night counter-attack.

An examination of the battle shows that there were errors made by commanders at all levels but it must be remembered that modern industrial war was a bewildering, exhausting, strength sapping event that made rational decision making difficult at the best of times. The final words regarding the confused fighting at Villers-Bretonneux on the weekend of 24-25 April 1918 must go to General Montgomery-Massingberd who said, ‘...[there is a] necessity, in studying the battle, of keeping constantly in mind the human side, and of not being too academic...’.¹⁹⁴

* * * *

Compared to the successes achieved in the period of early to mid 1917, the subsequent twelve months were not as successful for 8th Division. Its participation in the attacks that make up the Third Battle of Ypres was hindered by the inability to make progress owing to the lack of success on the flanks. Though Heneker protested to higher command, he was unable to change the fundamentals that would have gained success for the attacking formations. The division’s part as BEF fire-brigade during the German offensives often showed that its command and control system was

¹⁹⁴ IWM: Page Papers, *1929 Staff College study*, ‘Section 16’.

unable to deal with the heavy stresses imposed upon it. However, against this is the fact that 8th Division did not disintegrate. Throughout the period, the losses in leaders and men who had gained skill through experience were heavy to the detriment of the division's capabilities.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMER AND AUTUMN 1918 - UPWARD AND ONWARD

The historiography of the period from August 1918 to the Armistice has seen much recent work. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson argue that what succeeded was the all-arms battle with all arms cooperating to dislodge or destroy the enemy's ability to fight.¹ Tim Travers continues to state that the BEF missed the opportunity to fight a purely technological battle, and that operations consequently degenerated into the old-style of battle fighting. He argues that the very success of the all-arms combined 'weapon system' meant that an opportunity to put into action a new way of warfare was missed.² Against this, Paul Harris and Niall Barr argue that the techniques used by the BEF had not been conceived before 1914 and that these proved effective even when tanks were not available.³ Such innovations include the widespread use of smoke and gas. They argue that the tank in 1918 was not a reliable war-winning weapon. The BEF had no alternative but to fight without them once they had become unavailable due to mechanical breakdown and crew exhaustion if operational tempo was to be maintained. Furthermore, they argue that there was not one all encompassing winning formula. Operational planning changed depending on circumstances. When surprise was not available, lengthier bombardments returned, for example the assaults on the main Hindenburg position on 29 September 1918 and

¹ See Prior and Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, especially pp. 322-3. The possession of integral fire-support such as mortars, rifle-grenades and light machine-guns is seen as especially important in achieving objectives.

² Travers, *How the War was Won*, pp. 170-1 and pp. 181-2.

³ Paul Harris and Niall Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice The BEF in the Hundred Days' Campaign 8 August – 11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998), especially pp. 294-300.

on the Selle on 17 October 1918.⁴ Above all, the British Army fought for the first time in its history a campaign where resources were not an issue. Ian Malcolm Brown details the lavish provision of weapons, such as artillery and of ammunition.⁵ He argues, as does Andy Simpson, that this meant that the BEF was able to switch attacks along the whole length of its front and even carry out multiple simultaneous attacks at short notice. This increase in tempo kept the enemy off balance.

Confidence in firepower support and in the tactics employed coupled with an increasing record of success meant that the morale of the BEF improved. This contrasted with that of an increasingly demoralised enemy. This allowed formations to attempt operations that were extremely daring. An example is 46th Division's seizure of Riqueval Bridge on 29 September 1918. Peter Simkins has studied how effective British divisions were, especially in contrast to the Dominion divisions.⁶ Another thesis examining a British line division's performance is Penny Richardson's work on 31st Division, perhaps unfairly labelled as ineffective.⁷ 8th Division's reputation was such that it was not reduced to cadre status or disbanded after its trials on the Aisne in May and June 1918. It was rebuilt and took part in the advance to victory, labelled by historians as the 'The Hundred Days of 1918'.

* * * *

The worst experience that befell 8th Division during 1918 is also the easiest to

⁴ Ibid, p. 298.

⁵ See Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914-1919* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), pp. 198-202, including figures 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3.

⁶ Peter Simkins, 'Co-Stars or Supporting Cast? British Divisions in the "Hundred Days", 1918' in Paddy Griffith, ed., *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), pp. 50-69.

⁷ Penny Richardson, "'Thirty-Worst': The poor reputation of 31st Infantry Division and its experiences during the fighting of 1918' (MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2009).

explain. 8th Division was posted to IX Corps, under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Hamilton-Gordon, together with 21st Division, 50th Division and 25th Division. All had suffered terribly since 21 March. IX Corps was sent south to the area of the Aisne, to relieve French units.

Since late 1917 the Aisne had become an area of tranquillity and peace. For the battered British formations, the area seemed almost like paradise after their tribulations on the Somme and on the Lys. Sydney Rogerson wrote:

...in May 1918, Nature had reasserted herself and hidden the grosser evidences of battle under a mantle of green [...] each shattered tree-stump had covered its wounds with a wealth of close foliage, In the shell-holes grass had grown and water plants; near the gun emplacements in the reserve line grew lilies-of-the-valley, forget-me-nots, larkspur and honeysuckle. The whole battle area had become a shrubbery, a vast garden fashioned by artillery...⁸

IX Corps were arrayed on the far bank, the enemy side, of the river Aisne. This river was canalised along much of its length. On their left was the French *II Corps* positioned along the ridge of the *Chemin de Dames*. The British began to realise that all was not well. German troop movements were seen. The enemy observation balloons became far more active. The German shelling of the British gun positions began to

...increase in steady, methodical 'crumping' of battery positions, one shell at a time. This was the more significant as the suspicious observer could only put it down to ranging or to calibration of guns. Further colour was lent to this view by the fact that once on target the shelling

⁸ Warwickshire County Record Office, Warwick: within Earl of Denbigh papers, ref. CR 2017/F196/2, Sidney Rogerson papers, typescript account by of the fighting on the Aisne-Marne, May-June 1918.

*ceased...*⁹

The French commanders in the area were divided as to which tactics to use. Pétain, the French Commander-in-Chief, had prescribed a tactic of elastic defence in depth. The French *Sixth Army* commander, Duchêne, believed in holding the front line strongly and in not surrendering an inch of ground. In this he followed the principles of Joffre and Foch.

The commanders of the British divisions had learned the benefits of elastic defence in depth over the past three months. They approached Hamilton-Gordon. He went and saw Duchêne, a man noted in the French Army for bad temper and rudeness. Duchêne treated his subordinate ally with predictable tactlessness. When his tactical disposition of placing almost all the British infantry and guns on the enemy side of the Aisne was questioned, "...All Hamilton-Gordon got was the rude reply, 'J'ai dit!' [Translation - 'I have said it!']..."¹⁰ All Hamilton-Gordon could do was inform Haig. He was a subordinate allied commander under a French commander in a French area of operations.

It came to pass. Warned only a few hours before, commencing at 1 am on Sunday 27 May 1918, the British and French were attacked by a very heavy, precise and methodical bombardment using some 4,000 guns and a like number of mortars, and some 300, 000 tons of shells. At 4 am, the enemy infantry attacked. Despite resistance by isolated pockets, such as 2nd Devonshires at Bois de Buttes, the Germans gained a salient some twenty-five miles wide at its base and nearly twelve miles deep.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Essame, *Battle for Europe*, p. 58.

Before the gap was stopped by French and American reserves, 8th Division ceased to exist as an effective coherent formation. By 6 June the Division was composed of two very weak composite battalions. Almost all its guns had been lost. Its losses were 366 officers killed, wounded and missing, and 7,496 other ranks killed wounded and missing.¹¹ Once again, 8th Division had been shattered. Another indication of how desperate the fighting had been was that another of 8th Division's brigade commanders, Brigadier-General George W.St.G. Grogan, GOC 23 Brigade, was awarded the VC.¹²

The remnants of 8th Division was sent to the coastal training areas around Gamache and Saint Valery, at the mouth of the Somme. The manpower crisis facing the BEF was solved by breaking up the residue of selected divisions, mainly New Army formations, and posting them to formations it had been decided to rebuild. 8th Division was one of those for rebuilding. Many of these new troops were discontented at what was perceived as the slighting of their old units and formations. It is to the credit of 8th Division's remaining senior officers, warrant officers and NCOs that divisional pride was recreated in such a short time. The organisation of the infantry platoons underwent change in the light of the experiences of the fighting that had taken place. Instead of specialist sections of bombers, rifle-grenadiers, Lewis gunners and riflemen, sections were mixed so that all-arms sections could move forward using fire and movement. In the 1st Sherwood Foresters, the number of sections was reduced. From two rifle and two Lewis gun sections, the platoon was now organised

¹¹ See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 238.

¹² The two 8th Division brigade commanders who won the VC, Clifford and Grogan, are to date the persons holding the highest rank when winning the award. As Peter Simkins has said, "...surely a unique distinction for any division..." See Simkins, 'Building Blocks', p. 155

into three sections, two of six riflemen each, including rifle-grenadiers and snipers, and one section of eleven men for the two Lewis guns.¹³ It is unclear whether this was general across the whole of 8th Division.

8th Division carried out intensive and thorough training to rebuild itself:

*...Combined training in the morning and specialised training, lectures etc. in the afternoon formed the usual routine. The ranges were in constant occupation; intensive wiring and digging were frequently practised; regular attention was given to gas drill; particular attention was laid upon training in manoeuvre and co-operation with artillery. Night operations and route marches took place at intervals. No one was idle, but at the same time the comfort and health of the troops were considered, and the fact that many of them had just been through a prolonged period of extreme physical and mental strain was not forgotten...*¹⁴

Hubert Essame, now returned to 2nd Northamptons, described Heneker at this time:

*...All this was done under the unrelenting, penetrating and ubiquitous eye of General Heneker; all units during the hours of daylight posted lookouts to ensure early warning of his approach. He expected to be saluted by everyone within range; his eagle eye could detect an unshaven chin, the need for a hair cut, a grease stain or an unpolished button at a considerable distance. His comments were unequivocally clear, vividly expressed and long remembered...*¹⁵

Being the British Army, there also took place the usual round of inter-unit sports, horse-shows and competitions concerning rifle shooting, cooking, unit efficiency and even the sale of National Savings certificates.¹⁶

¹³ See Wylly, *The Sherwood Foresters*, pp. 68-9.

¹⁴ Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, pp. 242-3.

¹⁵ Essame, *Battle for Europe*, p. 109.

¹⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division AA&QMG war diary, ref. WO95/1682, various entries in August 1918.

The period of the Great War that began on the Western Front with the Battle of Amiens on 8 August and ended with the armistice on 11 November 1918 has been called 'The Hundred Days', an evocation of 'The Hundred Days' campaign that led to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. It has also been titled 'The Advance to Victory'. The operations carried out during this phase were not a repetition of previous operations. They were not to take entrenched positions and then move forward to take the next position. The fighting now took place over areas where the terrain was very varied, ranging from fortified towns and villages to flooded stream valleys, forests and open fields. Tactics were necessarily more diverse than before, reaching a much higher level of sophistication than could have been envisaged even a year earlier.

Following its rebuilding, 8th Division returned to the front. It joined VIII Corps, still under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston. VIII Corps was part of First Army operating in the area of Vimy Ridge and the Plain of Douai.¹⁷ Initially, the front line was quiet. One feature was that both sides used heavy gas barrages to inflict casualties on the other side. The British deployment of the Livens projector in massed batteries demonstrated that they understood that the best principle for the successful use of gas was to deluge an area with the greatest possible volume in the shortest possible time.¹⁸ The Germans responded to these tactics. As a result, 8th Division had to put into place a very prescriptive procedure in order to avoid a

¹⁷ The GOC First Army was General Sir Henry Horne. Born 1861; educated at Harrow and the Royal Military Academy (Woolwich); commissioned into the Royal Artillery; Boer War, 1899-1902; CO Artillery Depot, Weedon, Northants., 1902-5; Inspector of Field Artillery then Horse Artillery, Irish Command, 1905-12; Inspector Horse & Field Artillery, 1912; BGRA I Corps, 1914; GOC 2 Division, 1915; Gallipoli, 1915; GOC XV Corps, Somme, 1916; GOC First Army, 1917; Substantive General, 1919; created Baron, 1919; GOC Eastern Command, 1919-23; retired, 1926; died, 1929.

¹⁸ The Livens projector was a simple steel tube about ten inches in diameter buried in the ground with its muzzle showing. The propelling charge was a small piece of guncotton. The missile was a drum about the size of a five-gallon oil drum with a small bursting charge and a large cargo of gas. Being fired by electrical generator, their discharge was almost silent. They were usually deployed in batteries often consisting of hundreds of projectors. See Hogg, *The Guns*, p. 123.

constant drain of gas casualties.¹⁹

Heneker used the relative quiet in which 8th Division now found itself to carry on the rebuilding of the Division, concentrating especially on training. One battalion of each brigade was brought back for instruction and all units even in the front line were encouraged to carry out some form of training. "...Even in the most difficult place I insisted that every man should fire 5 rounds at some mark. The Lewis Gun should fire one drum..."²⁰ Paddy Griffith has commented that by this stage of the war command and control had been devolved down to platoons and sections.²¹ Heneker recognised that leaders at this level needed especial instruction, as they were the foundation for tactical success. In the Division's Narrative of Events, he expounded how he carried this out:

...I felt that something had to be done in order to train the Platoon Commander and the Section Commander apart from the instruction they received with their battalions when out of the line. I formed therefore a Divisional Platoon School to which platoons were sent complete in every respect. Each platoon went through a course of 6 days intensive training under special instructors. Each battalion in the line had to send one platoon and so there were always 6 platoons training at the School. In all, before the School was closed, owing to our advance, 63 platoons in the Division were put through and I can safely say that the results obtained were surprising.

*Once an officer has arrived at a certain level of efficiency, to attempt to train him apart from his platoon is waste of time in my opinion...*²²

¹⁹ See TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', pp. 3-4, and Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 250.

²⁰ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 4.

²¹ See Griffith, *Battle Tactics*, pp. 21-2,

²² TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', pp. 4-5. The sixty-three platoons that went through the Platoon School comprised forty-three per cent of the Division's infantry platoons.

Until early September 1918, 8th Division took no great part in the offensive. By the end of August, the main area of operations had extended further north from Fourth Army's initial assault on the Somme to the old Arras battlefield of 1917. The Canadian Corps was on the right flank of First Army working with 51st (Highland) Division (TF), of XVII Corps, Third Army. Among the places captured were Monchy-le-Preux, Roeux village and Greenland Hill, places over which the formations involved had fought bitterly in the fighting of 1917. There had been minor operations in an attempt to put pressure on the Germans. These had ended as the Germans had withdrawn to their main defensive position in the area, known as the Rouvroy - Fresnes Line.

Between 27 and 29 September 1918 the BEF broke the German defences on the *Canal du Nord* and the Hindenburg Line to the south. 8th Division took part in operations, under VIII Corps, to cover from enemy counter-attack the northern flank of the British main area of operations. Operating in an area to the north-east of Arras, the intention was that the Division was to advance easterly towards Douai and Mons. The area consisted of the semi-urban region of the Plain of Douai crossed by railway lines, canals and watercourses.

The Assault on the Rouvroy-Fresnes Line, 7 October 1918

The attack on the German positions known as the Rouvroy-Fresnes Line, though meriting only one paragraph in the British official history, is an example of the highly developed tactics employed by 8th Division, in particular, and by the BEF, as a

whole, at this time.²³ It was 8th Division's first deliberate attack on a prepared position since its operations in the vicinity of Teal Cottage in December 1917.

The area to be attacked was to the east of Arras with its southern boundary the River Scarpe, in part canalised as the Scarpe Canal. As part of a general rearrangement, 8th Division's operational area was moved to the right, taking two sectors, Greenland Hill and Plouvain, over from 51st (Highland) Division. 8th Division was now on the extreme right of VIII Corps' area of operations. On the other side of the Scarpe was XXII Corps.

The operational planning demonstrated that control of operations was now far more devolved than in 1916. With 8th Division having been *in situ* since the end of August, Heneker had examined the area in some detail. He thought that the Rouvroy-Fresnes Line could be best taken by rolling it up from the south rather than by carrying out a frontal attack. He wrote in his after action report:

...I had mentioned this, but the Division holding the GREENLAND and PLOUVAIN Sections at this time did not care for the scheme. In order to really carry it out with success, it was preferable for the Division which held the OPPY and GAVRELLE Sections to be also in possession of the line right down to the Scarpe, so that success could be exploited without delay. I now had that opportunity. On 2nd October the Army Commander came to see me and I mentioned the matter to him and asked what he thought of it. He at once saw the possibilities and told me to mention it to the Corps Commander and find out whether he agreed. This I did, and on 3rd, as the result of a conference at VIII Corps H.Q. I was told to prepare the

²³ See Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds and Lieutenant-Colonel R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918, Volume V: 26th September – 11th November: The Advance to Victory* [henceforth *British Official History 1918, Vol. V*] (1947; London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), p. 130.

*operation and to carry it out as soon as I was ready...*²⁴

The initial warning order was issued by VIII Corps on 4 October 1918.²⁵ It was intended to be a two-phase operation. The first phase was to be the break in to the Rouvroy-Fresnes Line and the second phase to be the exploitation northwards. This demonstrated that the tempo of operations was vastly different from 1916. Instead of the months of planning and preparation that preceded 1 July 1916, there were now only a few days of planning and co-ordination. Furthermore, there was no repetition of the clumsily hurried planning that had been typical of the later actions on the Somme from August to October 1916.

The artillery programme that was put in place to support the attack was abundantly resourced. As well as its integral field artillery brigades, 33 and 45 Brigades, 8 Division's artillery was augmented by 126, 175 and 311 Army Brigades, Royal Field Artillery. Also attached was 40 Brigade, Royal Garrison Artillery, which provided medium 60-pounder guns.

Preparations included a request for supporting fire from XXII Corps to the south of 8th Division.²⁶ This request was especially suitable because it had advanced further eastwards than VIII Corps. Therefore, its artillery was well positioned to enfilade the

²⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 17. The GOC 51st (Highland) Division, TF, who had not gone along with Heneker's ideas, was Major-General G.T.C. Carter-Campbell. He had commanded 2nd Battalion, Scottish Rifles, 23 Brigade, 8th Division in 1915.

²⁵ See TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, and VIII Corps War Diary & Narrative of Operations: January 1918 – December 1918, ref. WO95/822, 'VIII Corps Order No. 18', dated 4 October 1918.

²⁶ TNA: PRO, XXII Corps GOC Heavy Artillery war diary & narrative of operations: January 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/975, 'XXII Corps H.A. Order No. 10', dated 6 October 1918.

enemy position. Heneker went in person to see Sir Alexander J. Godley, GOC XXII Corps. Godley promised to provide sizeable support from his corps artillery assets.²⁷ Additionally, XXII Corps machine-gun units also participated.²⁸ In order to provide additional support south of the River Scarpe, 169 Army Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, was also attached to 8th Division. This formation was joined by 126 Army Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, and the howitzer battery of 33 Brigade. Artillery control and communications were now proficient enough to allow these units to operate out of not only the Divisional tactical area but also in the area of another Corps.

The artillery plan was designed to deal with enemy barbed wire, machine guns, mortars and artillery. On 5 October, the artillery concentrated on cutting the enemy barbed wire and this continued into the next day. The 8th Division narrative recorded:

*...Frequent reports from the infantry, as well as from the Artillery, as to the progress in wire-cutting were received each day, and by the evening of 5th the reports were so satisfactory that I decided after consultation with Brig.-Gen. G. W. St. G. GROGAN, V.C., C.M.G., D.S.O., to carry out the attack at dawn on 7th [October 1918]...*²⁹

The fire plans used were complicated. The VIII Corps heavy artillery order for the operation had some forty fire tasks, covering timings, rates of fire, fuse types and so on. Many of these include the use of gas in order to reduce enemy effectiveness. It

²⁷ Godley promised two 6-inch howitzer batteries, one 8-inch or 9.2-inch battery, one or two 60-pounder batteries and a brigade of field artillery 18-pounds and 4.5-inch howitzers. See TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, ‘Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918’, p. 17. For Godley, see entry in Bourne, *Who’s Who*, p. 107.

²⁸ See TNA: PRO, XXII Corps war diary: January 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/974, entry for 7 October 1918.

²⁹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, ‘Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918’, p. 18.

was attempted to cover possible events. If gas could not be used, the gas fire tasks were to be replaced with high explosive shells using 106 'graze' fuses to reduce cratering.³⁰ This showed an emphasis on neutralising the enemy as distinct from destruction as had been the case in the battles of 1916 and much of 1917. As an example of the complexity of the artillery plan, 6 Siege Battery, part of XXII Corps heavy artillery, had its six 9.2-inch howitzers firing at three different points on the map. Firing was to take place from Zero to plus 240 minutes, i.e. for four hours, changing fire rates, from rapid to slow to stop, at set intervals.³¹ The results of the artillery programme were analysed in the heavy artillery's daily reports.³²

8th Machine Gun Battalion pushed three batteries, each of eight machine guns, into disused trenches forward of the British outpost line. Their task was to provide overhead fire for the advancing infantry. The remainder of the guns were either part of the fire plan or ready to advance with the forward troops.³³

Before the operation took place, vigorous patrolling was ordered. The patrols were especially directed towards the communication trenches leading to the main enemy position. As a result, following the capture of prisoners, intelligence on 4 October 1918, indicated that the enemy did not intend to withdraw from the village of Oppy

³⁰ TNA: PRO, VIII Corps Heavy Artillery war diary: April 1916 – January 1919, ref. WO95/825, 'VIII Corps Heavy Artillery Order No. 78', dated 6 October 1918.

³¹ TNA: PRO, XXII Corps Heavy Artillery war diary: January 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/975, 'XXII Corps H.A. Order No. 10', dated 6 October 1918.

³² See TNA: PRO, VIII Corps Heavy Artillery war diary: April 1916 – January 1919, ref. WO95/825, 'VIII Corps Hostile Artillery and Counter Battery Report' for 6 October to 12 October 1918, references IR/158 to IR/162 inclusive, and TNA PRO, XXII Corps Heavy Artillery war diary: January 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/975, 'Daily Report for 6th-7th October 1918', dated 7 October 1918. They often included the results of RAF directed shoots. The XXII Corps reports of enemy activity were detailed enough to include sighting of relatively small parties of the enemy. They also often included the results of RAF directed shoots.

³³ See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 258.

situated in front of the main German trenches. The next day, 1st Sherwood Foresters, of 24 Brigade, took control of the enemy communication trenches in the rear of Oppy. On 6 October, one platoon advanced from the north and one from the south, separating Oppy from the main enemy position. Oppy was cleared and a number of the enemy captured, together with four machine guns. This allowed the Division to operate without hindrance along the southern portion of the Rouvroy – Fresnes Line.

The Main Assault

The orders for the main assault were issued at 2.30 p.m. on 5 October 1918.³⁴ The area to be attacked was divided into two sectors. 25 Infantry Brigade had the sector to the north. 23 Infantry Brigade had the adjacent most southerly or right hand sector. This included the village of Biache St Vaast, which acted as an anchor for the southernmost part of the Rouvroy – Fresnes Line.

The assault was launched at dawn, which was at 5 am. By 8 am, all objectives had been seized. Infantry from both brigades began bombing up or down the enemy trenches to link up with the other units that had entered the enemy lines. Patrols were pushed out beyond the forward posts. Biache St Vaast had been dealt with in a particularly innovative way by the CRA 8th Division, Brigadier-General John Lamont. He put into operation two independent but co-ordinated barrages, which swept the whole position. ‘A’ barrage, which was fired from the west, ran along the northern edge of the village, while ‘B’ barrage, fired from the south-east by the

³⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, ‘8th Division Order No. 319’, dated 5 October 1918. From 1 October 1918, the BEF operated the 24-hour clock. However, following the custom of earlier references, the timings here are given by 12-hour clock.

batteries in XXII Corps area south of the Scarpe, commenced along the western edge of the position (see Diagram 6.1 below). 'A' Barrage then moved in a southerly direction as 'B' barrage moved eastwards. Both barrages crossed then finally came to rest respectively on the southern and eastern edges of the village. The infantry followed the barrages from the north-western corner and spread out behind the moving curtains of shell fire.

Lamont recorded that the reasons why the barrages took such a complicated form was that aerial photographs indicated that the area appeared to be very strongly held:

...as a matter of fact this position was considerably occupied with scattered dumps of engineering material, but it was also strongly organised. So, although we may have read the photos erroneously in taking some of the above dumps for strong points, it most certainly deserved special treatment.

The barrage was so arranged that the attack developed from the North. Whereas the defence was organised to deal with one coming from the west [...] It was so synchronised that A reached Eastern limit at the same time as B reached Southern limit. This required careful construction as a special party was working along the CANAL BANK to deal with POWER STATION...³⁵

Lamont added that the area beyond the two barrages was also covered by what he called 'switches' of smoke and high explosive shells. He described a 'swirch' as a combination of shelling that swept, searched and switched across the area.³⁶

³⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Record of the Divisional Artillery. July 20th, 1918 to November 11th, 1918', p. 6.

³⁶ Ibid.

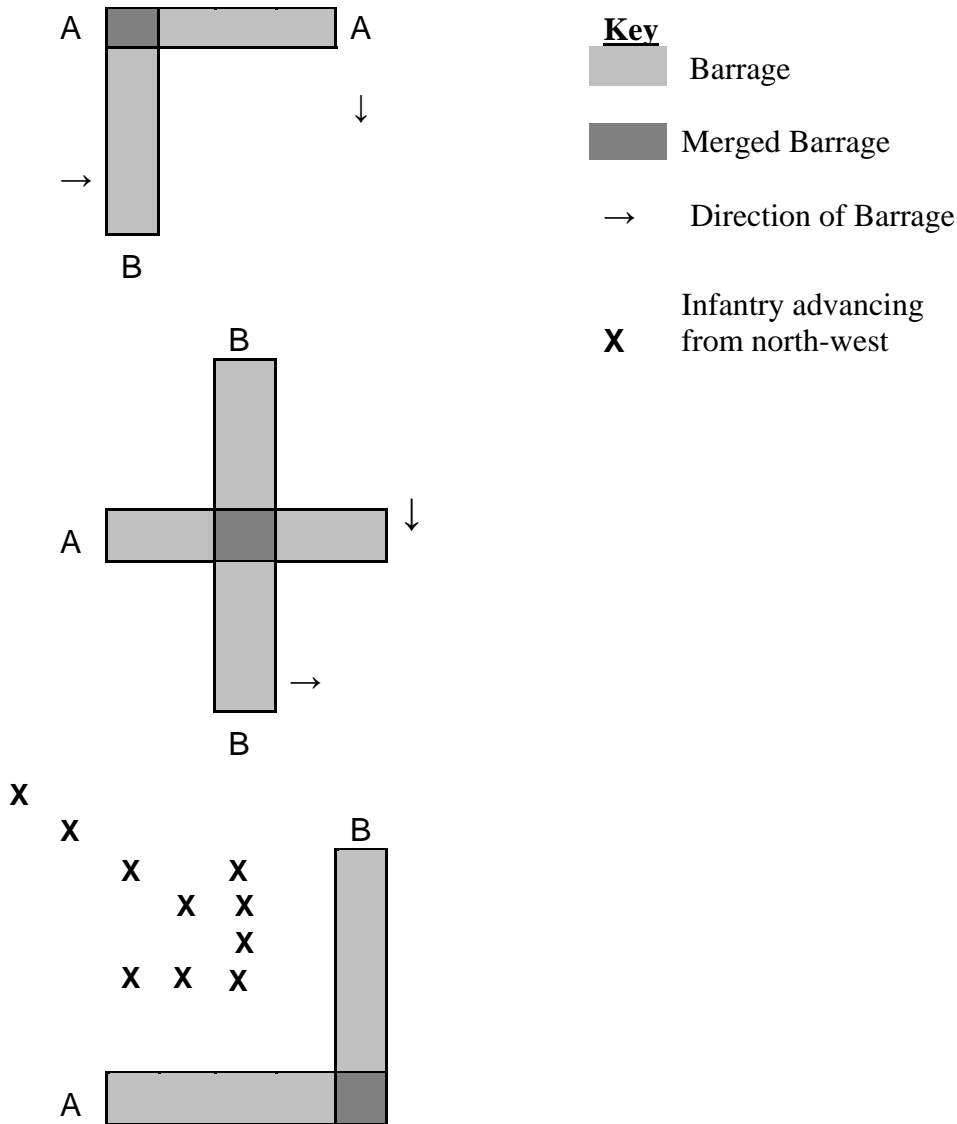


Diagram 6.1: The Double Barrages Employed at Biache St Vaast - 7 October 1918

Lamont's chief staff officer, W.E.Duncan, commented on his superior:

...He was a clever and brave soldier, but ruthless and vindictive to those he disliked, and I did not really enjoy serving under him [...]. During this period I had great enjoyment in working out artillery fire plans with General Lamont. One in particular, for the attack on BIACHES was, I think, ingenious. I had been obsessed from my experiences on the Somme with the value of enfilade artillery. Now we were able to place our batteries so as to provide two simultaneous enfilade barrages.

'A' Barrage was fired from the West along the Northern face of the village, while 'B' barrage fired from the N.E. [North-east] along the western face. The infantry entered the shattered village at the N.W. [North-west] corner and fanned out, keeping close behind the two barrages. Casualties were few

*and many prisoners taken...*³⁷

24 Infantry Brigade, in the northern-most sectors, had not been involved in the planned assault. However, using its own initiative, it took advantage of opportunities offered and 1st Battalion Worcestershires cleared a complex of trenches south east of Oppy, capturing thirty-eight prisoners and six machine guns. They then began to bomb south to meet up with 2nd Royal Berkshires of 25 Infantry Brigade who had already linked with 23 Infantry Brigade. 1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters to their north pushed forward and began to clear the Rouvroy – Fresnes Line to their front and north.

Heneker wrote in the Divisional narrative:

*...I had arranged that the operation for the capture of the Northern portion of the ROUVROY – FRESNES LINE [...] should commence at daylight on 8th. 24th and 25th Inf. Bdes. reported, however, that the bombing operations for clearing it were progressing very satisfactorily and leave to continue was given while good progress could be made...*³⁸

Lamont commented in his report on 8th Division's artillery:

*...Preparation had been made for Artillery support in the direction of a 'swinging' barrage working from the North and from the South along the FRESNES – ROUVROY Line North of FRESNES – GAVRELLE Road, under which our Infantry were going to work along this line, keeping to the trenches. This Artillery support was, however, unnecessary, as by bold exploitation and initiative the Infantry of 24th and 25th Infantry Brigades carried out the task without Artillery assistance...*³⁹

³⁷ Liddle Collection: W.E. Duncan Papers, p. 68.

³⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 19.

³⁹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Record of the Divisional Artillery. July 20th, 1918 to November 11th, 1918', p. 6.

8th Division, once the initial objectives had been cleared, continued to attempt to move to the east, towards the Drocourt – Queant Line.⁴⁰ This was a very strong defensive line. The southern portion, near the junction with the Hindenburg Line, had been taken by the Canadians in early September.⁴¹ However, the system facing VIII Corps was still comparable to the Hindenburg Line in its complexity and strength, with large belts of barbed wire in front of it. Owing to the withdrawal of one of the attached Army field artillery brigades and the problems caused by the enemy's deliberate flooding of low lying areas, it was decided to attack the Drocourt – Queant Line on a one brigade front only. A noteworthy innovation was that the initial creeping barrage then turned into an enfilade barrage and then moved north along the enemy trench line allowing the units of 25 Infantry Brigade to widen the breach. The attack was launched at 5.10 a.m. on 11 October 1917. In the very early stages of the assault, it was ascertained that the enemy had been caught in the process of withdrawing further to the east and 8th Division's attack had severely dislocated this process.

Devolved Operations

Following the German abandonment of the Drocourt – Queant Line, 8th Division operated on a diminishing frontage. At times it operated on a two-brigade front and sometimes on a one-brigade front. The change was due to the narrowing of the front, which meant that brigades could be echeloned behind the one in front.

⁴⁰ The Drocourt – Queant Line north-east of Arras, where 8th Division were now fighting, was labelled by the Germans, in their obligatory Wagnerian fashion, the 'Wotan Position'. See Atkinson, *Devonshire Regiment*, p. 412.

⁴¹ See J. P. Harris, with Niall Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice: The BEF in the Hundred Days' Campaign, 8 August – 11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998), pp. 151-7 and pp. 162-8.

From 18 October, the Division was allocated one platoon of the VIII Corps cyclist unit. The following day 'C' Squadron, 4th Hussars was also put under divisional command. The additional units were used in two main ways. The cavalry were given a section of field guns and reconnoitred the stages by which the infantry had been directed to advance. The cyclists came under the direct command of the infantry brigades and were used for road reconnaissance.

This solution highlighted one major problem for the Division in particular and the BEF in general. The tactics initially used by the army in the last phase of the war in France and Flanders had been the ones developed over the previous two years. These were based on the tactic of 'bite and hold', of all arms working together to take German positions. From August 1918 the success of the Allied armies had been achieved by combining these tactics into operations all along the front line. The cumulative effect was to keep the Germans off balance, unable to react in such a way as to counteract effectively. From now on the Germans danced to the Allied, especially the British, tune. This ability to increase the speed of battle, so planning and actions were carried out faster than the enemy, has been called by John Kiszely 'high tempo' activity.

From the early part of October 1918 onwards, the Germans abandoned positions that before would have taken weeks or months to capture. The dilemma for the BEF was that the Germans moved rearwards so fast that contact was lost with them. 'Bite and Hold' was ineffective with attacks 'punching' into empty space. Another solution had

to be found for what was again becoming a war of movement when compared to the deadlock of previous years. The solution was the use of mobile columns, what was called in *FSR, Part I*, 'the advance guard'. The use of mobile formations had been standard operational procedure in the army of the Empire. Columns had been used on the North-West Frontier of India, in the Sudan, in the Zulu and Boer Wars, and in West Africa. The subalterns and junior field officers taking part in these operations were now the general officers of 1918.

The art of open warfare had been always practiced away from the peculiar conditions of the Western Front. An officer who had been a subaltern in Mesopotamia in 1917 wrote years afterwards:

...I do not believe Napoleon himself ever felt so Napoleonic as I did that early spring morning in 1917 when I watched the first mixed force I had ever commanded defile before me. The khaki clad British infantry trudged past, two companies of them, with a grin and a joke, as they have trudged across history. After them came a section of machine-guns on pack, with here and there a bobbish mule swinging sideways from the ranks; and then, O pride of a subaltern's heart, two jingling, rattling, rumbling 18-pounders...⁴²

The continuity of this experience cannot be overemphasised. Warfare in the open field was what the Army had practiced for before 1914. *FSR, Part I* stated, "...In order that the pursuit may be continued until the enemy is finally crushed, it will usually be necessary to re-form a part of the force at least, and to replenish ammunition and supplies. The pursuit must, therefore, be taken up by as a large a body of mounted troops as possible so that the enemy may be allowed no respite..."⁴³

⁴² Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, *Unofficial History* (1959; London: Corgi, 1970), p 12.

⁴³ *Field Service Regulations, Part I (Operations), 1911* (HMSO, London, 1913), p. 156. From a copy held in LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd papers.

FSR, Part I went on to state: "...4. All pursuing troops should act with the greatest boldness and be prepared to accept risks which would not be justifiable at other times..."⁴⁴ In the open warfare of late 1918, this was accomplished by bodies of troops advancing not in lines at right angles to the front but in blobs, wedges or columns with fire support right up at the front or not far behind. It was usually a mixed formation of infantry and field artillery, with perhaps cavalry, light armour or armoured cars attached, and with supporting arms and services, that is engineers, signals, field ambulances and supply.

In the 8th Division war diary there is a copy of a report regarding lessons learned from the recent fighting, circulated at a conference held at the Canadian Corps HQ on 30 August 1918.⁴⁵ Shane Schreiber has written that the Canadians had studied the problems of open warfare. However, so had the other formations in First Army, the conference having taken place at the request of the GOC First Army, General Sir Henry Horne. The BEF at this time did not use the word 'column'. The phrases used were "Advance Guard" & "Main Guard".

Worth noting is that the tactics are similar to those used by 8th Division in the Spring of 1917 when the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg Line. This was one happy consequence of Heneker still being GOC 8th Division and the Division was now carrying out a type of warfare that he had analysed and thought deeply about.

⁴⁴ Part I, *FSR* 1911, p. 157.

⁴⁵ See TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations: July 1918 – June 1919, ref. WO95/1679.

Heneker's main tactical concerns were fire support and information. This was echoed by the training philosophies being put forward at this time.

Command and Control

The command and control methods used depended on the situation at the time or that was unfolding. A deliberate attack on a prepared position required centralised command and control at the highest possible level, especially with regard to the artillery. Once, the advance became more mobile, command was devolved in accordance with the ethos of *FSR, Part I*, which said the commander on the spot as the best able to make effective decisions.⁴⁶ In the open phases that now arose, 8th Division was organised so that specific firepower assets, artillery, machine gun and mortars, became integral parts of the infantry brigades, which became in effect all-arms brigade groups.⁴⁷ Heneker was a great believer in the devolution of command and that the commanders of these units had to live cheek by jowl with their brigade commanders. He issued an instruction to the formation and unit commanders:

...I wish to give Brigadiers as much independence (to run their own show) as I can.

I issue general lines and policy in order to coordinate the work of the Brigades. At times I have to take all Artillery and M.G's. under my own hand in order to carry out special work, but I try to hand back, as soon as possible, to Brigadiers their affiliated arms [...] When the operation is over I give out the general limits of the protective barrage or S.O.S. line, and then Brigadiers should, bearing these limits in mind, cover their front by their artillery and M.G's. as they consider best. I get their orders and co-ordinate as I consider necessary.

⁴⁶ See Simpson, *Directing Operations*, p. 175.

⁴⁷ It is a paradox that the very success of these led to, in effect, the break up of divisions in the Western Desert in 1941-2 with a commensurate decline in command and control. See, for example, Ian V. Hogg, *Barrage: The Guns in Action* (London: Macdonald, 1970), pp. 62-3; Bidwell, *Gunners at War*, pp. 173-90; Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, pp. 222-25.

In order to carry out the above decentralisation, Artillery and M.G. Group commanders are nominated, and these Group Commanders must live at the H.Q. of the Infantry Brigade to which they are affiliated. [...]

Whenever he [the Brigade Commander] moves his H.Q. these Group Commanders must accompany him [...] it is only by living with the Brigadier and not in telephone communication with him that true liaison and effective work can be carried out...⁴⁸

Fire Support

From the start of fighting on the Western Front, the Royal Artillery had provided direct fire support when it could. The defensive stand at Le Cateau in September 1914 and the emplacement of 18-pounder field guns in the front line trench to provide direct fire support at Fromelles on 9 May 1915 and at Bois Grenier on 25 September 1915, had been carried out by men like John Wedderburn-Maxwell of 8th Division, who were now battery and artillery brigade commanders.⁴⁹ Many senior commanders now relished the return to direct fire. One way of looking at the tank was that it was an attempt to provide a more mobile type of direct fire that was less susceptible to enemy fire.

Training pushed the need to provide mobile fire at the front of the advance. The various Training Notes published by the many & varied training bodies unified by the Inspector-General of Training in 1918 said, for example, "...Fresh Divisions...will be pushed through...supported by mobile groups of artillery, including 60-pounders and 6-inch howitzers detailed in advance and prepared to move forward by selected

⁴⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 22. The underlining in the quote is in the original text.

⁴⁹ Wedderburn-Maxwell had been a lieutenant with 5 Battery (XLV Brigade), RFA in 1915 and on 11 November 1918 was a major commanding 36 Battery (XXXIII Brigade), RFA. Both brigades were with 8th Division throughout the war. See Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, p. 49 and p. 291 (Appendix II, The Order of Battle).

notes...’’⁵⁰

Training Leaflet No 551 dealt specifically with “The Action of Artillery in Close Support of Assaulting Battalions”. It emphasised the need for quick decisive action, to support flanking units, to protect advancing tanks and to move position quickly to avoid enemy retaliation. Above all it emphasised the need for an accurate information flow to and from the infantry. Another pamphlet dealt with artillery officers carrying out mounted “information” patrols providing the information required for the required artillery support.⁵²

Information

As training emphasised the need for a timely and accurate flow of information so did commanders’ conferences and reports. Above all, the role of aircraft contact patrols was seen as most important. Techniques used included telegraph lines from aerodrome to divisions and the realisation that these links needed to be quickly re-opened when the RAF moved forward. Many Corps used a Corps ‘dropping ground’. From here messages would be telephoned to Divisions.⁵³ The use of aircraft allowed not just the movement of information in almost real time but gave the advancing

⁵⁰ Inspector-General for Training, BEF [then BAOR], March – September 1918 Pamphlet SS 135, ‘*Training the Division in Attack, 1918 Revision*’, p. 40. Copy in LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers.

⁵¹ Training leaflet No. 5, ‘*The Action of Artillery in Close Support of Assaulting Battalions*’, Collected Training Notes, 1918, Inspector-General for Training, BEF [then BAOR], March – September 1918, Copy in LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers.

⁵² Training leaflet No. 8, ‘*Artillery Mounted Patrols with Infantry*’, Collected Training Notes, 1918, Inspector-General for Training, BEF [then BAOR], March–September 1918. Copy in LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers.

⁵³ Training leaflet No. 8, ‘*Artillery Mounted Patrols with Infantry*’, Collected Training Notes, 1918, Inspector-General for Training, BEF [then BAOR], March–September 1918. Copy in LHCMA: Montgomery-Massingberd Papers.

troops the ability to see what was over the other side of the hill. Heneker was particularly complimentary of the RAF following the action on the Drocourt – Queant Line on 11 October 1918:

...At 8 a.m. a contact aeroplane of No. 16 Squadron, RAF flew over the Divisional front and reported our troops holding the DROCOURT – QUEANT LINE between VITRY and QUIERY-La-MOTTE and in the old gun pits East of the line. The aviator communicated with our troops and flew over the retreating enemy on whom he fired, killing some. This reconnaissance was carried out at times at a height of only 20 feet and was of a great assistance to us...⁵⁴

At the end of August 1918, during the period of waiting before the offensive moved into 8th Division's area, Heneker, always a most exacting commander, complained that the sending back of information by every means available, in quantity and constantly, was not being carried out. He perhaps appears to be justified when he went on, "...I find that pigeons are still being used for sending back test messages. Test Messages! – while active operations are going on and real messages can be, and should be, sent! It is perfectly incredible..."⁵⁵ Heneker went on to say that, while other methods were being ignored, the runners were being run off their legs.⁵⁶ Consequently, he complained, information was scanty and the troops doing the fighting could not call for what was required to continue fighting the battle.

Above all, commanders were allowed and encouraged to use initiative. Tactical

⁵⁴ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, ref. WO 95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 24.

⁵⁵ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, ref. WO 95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 7.

⁵⁶ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918 – January 1919, ref. WO95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 8. It is not clear whether Heneker's phrasing was an intentional pun or not. Perhaps his use of the dramatic phrase was another habit taken from his old mentor, Lieutenant-General Sir Ivor Maxse. See entry regarding Maxse in Bourne, *Who's Who*, p. 201.

innovation was encouraged. Brigadier-General John Lamont, CRA 8th Division, stated:

*...the policy was invariably to train the enemy to a certain course of artillery events, by putting down crashes either of H.E. or gas or prepared duds at certain intervals. In this way he was induced to expect gas proceeded by a H.E. crash or vice versa. In this instance when the attack was launched the enemy was found to have his masks on, as a result of previous 'training'...*⁵⁷

In order to counteract German tactics of suddenly shelling previously untouched areas, Lamont stated it was advisable to select, "...the improbable position rather than the obvious reverse slope [...] since the enemy before retiring had marked down all probable positions for special treatment..."⁵⁸

All weapons were used aggressively. An example was the emplacement of machine guns in the upper stories of houses as referred to by Lieutenant-Colonel Angell, CO of 8th Division's machine-gun battalion. Other tactics used were the use of machine-guns to snipe or in a barrage at night in conjunction with artillery.⁵⁹ Alternative methods used included pushing forward Stokes mortars to deal with isolated German posts. Enemy flanks were turned wherever possible.

What was not encouraged was lack of dash or the absence of initiative. Heneker in his report on the fighting of September 1918 wrote:

⁵⁷ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, ref. WO 95/1679, 'Record of the Divisional Artillery. July 20th, 1918 to November 11th, 1918', p. 3.

⁵⁸ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, ref. WO 95/1679, 'Record of the Divisional Artillery. July 20th, 1918 to November 11th, 1918', p. 9.

⁵⁹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, TNA, WO 95/1679, 'General Narrative of the action of 8th Bn. Machine Gun Corps, 20 July 1918 to 11 November, 1918'.

...Are Brigade Commanders assured that their Staff Captains are seeing to the supply of their troops as regards water, food, ammunition, bombs, rifle grenades etc. etc.?

One Brigade informs me that only 2 Stokes Mortars can be employed to aid the Infantry because ammunition cannot be got up, while another has all its eight Stokes Guns forward and has ample ammunition. The Staff Captain of the former Brigade is not doing his duty...⁶⁰

The formations deployed were now able to operate in such a manner that they were able to support adjacent units and formations that were held up by German defences, even if this meant operating out of their area of tactical responsibility. For example, on 11 October, 23 Infantry Brigade went to the assistance of the Canadian Corps. Platoons of 2nd Middlesex crossed to the other side of the River Scarpe and fired upon and cleared a number of enemy positions in hills near Vitry:

...Word was at once sent to 1st Canadian Division informing them what had been done and asking them to send troops to take these hills over from us. This they did and they were able to advance their whole line accordingly for as soon as the party of the 2nd Middx.[...] opened fire, the enemy began to stream away to the Eastwards and evacuated the high ground in front of 1st Canadian Division...⁶¹

What must be remembered is that all operations were affected by the nature of the ground. VIII Corps was operating in difficult country. It was operating across the Lens-Douai Coalfield, then across the Plain of Douai towards Mons - a country dissected by coalmines, towns, small villages and, above all, canals, streams and watercourses. Furthermore, the area east of Vimy Ridge had been the scene of almost

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, TNA, WO 95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 8.

⁶¹ TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, TNA, WO 95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 24. The history of 2nd Middlesex, says that one of the platoons was led by the 23 Infantry Brigade commander, Brigadier-General Grogan, and the battalion CO, Lieutenant-Colonel E.F. Baker. See Wyrall, *Die-Hards*, p. 277.

incessant fighting over the previous four years and the infrastructure for logistical support had been severely damaged. Roads were mined, railways destroyed or used to strengthen defences. Efforts were made to improve communications. The Divisional after-action report recorded, "...the work done on the broad-gauge [...] as well as on the light railways joining up our system to that of the Germans was magnificent..."⁶²

During the last phase of its operations on the Western Front, the British Army showed tactical innovation and operational maturity. Lessons were digested for the future. Lamont, CRA 8th Division, ended his report on the divisional artillery with:

...As the fighting assumed the proportion of open warfare, the Artillery of necessity, came more and more under the immediate command of the man on the spot, i.e., the Infantry Commander.

Owing to the demolitions effected by the enemy, there was in this country of canals, rivers and ditches, delay and difficulty in getting the Artillery forward. On the whole, we may say it was well handled.

*I should like, however, to see the use of single guns and howitzers considerably developed; and would suggest that this department deserves special treatment in our hand-books and future teaching...*⁶³

The advances of the Hundred Days were not uniform. Different tactics and operational art were used depending on the commander, troops, equipment and terrain. What the formations of the BEF had in common, of which 8th Division was an example, was that their operations were the culmination of four years of war. Skills honed by experience were put into practice. 8th Division was part of an army that had developed out of all recognition to the army on the Somme in 1916. It bore little

⁶² TNA: PRO, 8th Division War Diary & Narrative of Operations, July 1918 – June 1919, TNA: PRO WO 95/1679, 'Narrative of Events from 20th July 1918', p. 25.

⁶³ TNA: PRO, 8th Division war diary: July 1918-July 1919, ref. WO 95/1679, 'Record of 8th Division Artillery, 20/07/ to 11/11/1918'. The debate within the Royal Artillery over mobility versus firepower was to bedevil the British Army until the middle of World War 2. See Bidwell & Graham, *Firepower*, especially Chapters 11 to 14.

resemblance to the division that had gone to war in 1914 in its operational capabilities. The tempo of operations was faster than those of the enemy. From first orders to completion, the assaults on both the Rouvroy – Fresnes and the Drocourt – Queant Lines took place in only eight days. This was warfare at such a speed that the enemy was left bewildered and with no alternative but to withdraw. The Germans were unable to react fast enough, in such a manner that could halt or even delay the BEF's actions. British planning was more pragmatic than the Germans. As David T. Zabecki has written, the British operations of late 1918 were more practical in their planning and execution than the German offensives of spring and early summer 1918.

...When the Allies went on the offensive from 18 July 1918 on, they operated within the limitations of the speed of a marching infantryman or a horse team pulling a field gun. Rather than launching deep-penetration battles in an attempt to reach the ever-elusive open warfare, the Allies conducted a series of limited objective but logistically sustainable and sequenced attacks on a broad front designed to push the German Army steadily back while inflicting heavy losses. It was one of history's first successful operational campaigns in the modern sense...⁶⁴

The main exponent of these new methods, in fact bearing the brunt of the effort, was the BEF.

Some things had not changed. What was in common with the formation of 1914 was that 8th Division in the Hundred Days had the same traditions, belief in discipline as a virtue, close bonds between officers and men and the belief that their company, battalion, brigade and division was superior to every other in the whole British Army.

⁶⁴ Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, p. 323.

* * * *

8th Division's triumphs in the Advance to Victory during the Hundred Days seem miraculous, following on as they do the damage wrought upon the division during the preceding months. However, the division was rebuilt with care. The tactics used by the division in advance demonstrated the use of all arms combined with effective coordination with adjacent formations even across corps boundaries. Decision-making was devolved and unit and formation commanders allowed great freedom in order to achieve the objective.

CONCLUSION

8th Division's war on the Western Front lasted exactly four years, from 11 November 1914 to 11 November 1918. The Division did not take part in any great victories, such as the breaching of the Hindenburg Line. Its fate rather was to be present during the struggle to come to terms with positional warfare, to participate in assaults that failed and then endure the German onslaughts of 1918. Even in the 'Advance to Victory' its role was principally as support to the main players.

How useful is the concept of the 'learning curve' when examining the experience of 8th Division on the Western Front? With the opening of the war diaries and reports from the late 1960s, historians have been able to show that the BEF did attempt to analyse its experience and put lessons learned into practice. The aim of British commanders was to create a military force that could defeat the German army in the main arena, the Western Front. That the German army was in retreat when the Armistice was signed in November 1918 cannot be questioned. That much of this was due to the success of the British and Empire forces is also true. The BEF was clearly a more effective instrument by the end of the campaign than it had been on the Somme in 1916 or in the early struggles of 1915. The phrase 'learning curve' has been criticised, however, as implying that progress was continuously upward in a smooth parabola. This was equally clearly not the case. Historians such as Paddy Griffith and John Lee have identified the Somme fighting as the key to the BEF's learning process. However, many operations during the later stages of the battles of Arras and Third Ypres, in particular, can be viewed as regression. Lessons learned on the

Somme appear to be employed inconsistently. The defensive battles during the German Spring offensives cannot be viewed as the full and correct application of the German defensive doctrine encountered in the previous year. Thus the path of the BEF should, perhaps, not be viewed as a smooth curve but as a series of difficult steps, which went down as well as up, as Christopher Duffy has argued. Even so, the concept of a learning curve has proved to be a useful template for examining the experiences of the 8th Division.

How effective was 8th Division? The winter of 1914-15 saw the first hesitant attempts to organise the experience of trench warfare. The use of specialists, such as bombers, was an attempt to come to grips with the problem, as was the use of new tactics, such as raiding. The Division had to endure failure on 1 July 1916 after the false optimism of its build up and preparation. Operationally it could not match aspirations with the poor main weapon system at its disposal, namely the artillery and its fire-plan. It was cumbersome, unresponsive and ineffective. This was aggravated by an inflexible command and control system that made it difficult to deviate from the plan. It can be argued that at Le Transloy in the autumn of 1916, 8th Division was just one of many formations that failed to achieve its objectives in the disjointed battles on the Somme in the autumn of 1916. However, the division that relieved it succeeded in taking the same objectives.¹

How effective was the GOC in leading change? The changes in the performance of 8th Division are at their most noteworthy in the spring of 1917. 8th Division's performance was at a higher level than anything it had accomplished before and,

¹ 17th Division was the successful formation. See *British Official History 1916, Vol. II*, p. 471.

perhaps, was to achieve again. What is more remarkable is that this was at a time when the BEF allegedly performed very poorly in 'open' warfare. 8th Division's methods and tactics would not have been out of place in the 'Advance to Victory'. Much of this success was due to the personality of its new GOC, William Heneker, aided by the new GSO1, Edward Beddington. There were also other senior officers willing to try new ideas. An example was Brigadier-General H.G. Lloyd, the CRA, who believed in neutralisation rather than destruction of enemy defences. It must be said that 8th Division were allowed to operate during this time by an enemy who knew they were retiring to the prepared defences in the rear. Once these defences were reached the Germans were not prepared to give the British any opportunity to gain an advantage.

If the path of the learning curve was smoothly upward then the rest of 1917 and 1918 should have been more successful than the previous six months. However, the Division's operations at Third Ypres were not successful. It could be argued that the operations on the Gheluvelt Plateau were too dependent on the success of divisions operating on the flanks. Here, personality was important as demonstrated by the fact that Brigadier-General Clifford Coffin became the first two of 8th Division's brigade commanders to win VCs for leadership. But Coffin's courage and leadership would not have been necessary had the attack been more effectively planned, resourced and executed.

Did 8th Division perform poorly on the defensive? 8th Division's defensive operations in the German offensives of 1918 were momentous for being desperate fights for survival. This downward step had no single cause but rather a combination

of reasons. Heneker was certainly not as effective as formerly. In 1918 his guiding principle appeared to be that smartness equalled efficiency. According to George Roupell this damaged the operational effectiveness of the division. When Roupell joined the divisional headquarters staff the division was rebuilding whilst moving to the Aisne in May 1918:

...the battalions really needed to be left on their own for some time so they could absorb the new intake and train them for whatever particular role they were selected e.g. riflemen, machine gunners, section leaders, signallers, transport etc. The Division was out of the line when I joined them and I soon got the impression that my General [Heneker] was rather too keen on spit and polish and outward appearance at the expense of efficiency with the weapons with which the men were armed.

The Battalions made a fine show when they marched past but were not so good with their weapon training, minor tactics, trench discipline etc...²

Heneker had been in command of 8th Division for eighteen months by the end of the battle of the Aisne in June 1918. It may be inferred that he was exhausted by this time.³ He has been criticised for not controlling the division effectively. Given the nature of the tactical situation this is not surprising.

The formations and units and formations of Fifth Army, having recently taken over a length of line from the French, were too overstretched to act efficiently. This must be compared with the success of Third Army in its prepared positions around Arras and Vimy Ridge, which caused the German *Mars* offensive to fail. From its landing in France until the end of 1917, 8th Division was engaged almost entirely in offensive operations. For at least the first half of 1918 the BEF was on the defensive. This had not happened to the BEF since the desperate battles of First and Second Ypres in the autumn of 1914 and early 1915. 8th Division had not been involved in either of these

² IWM: Department of Documents: Brigadier G.R.P. Roupell papers, ref. PP/MCR/56.

³ In William Moore's book, *See How They Ran: The British Retreat of 1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1970) a photograph of Heneker is used to illustrate the effects of stress produced by the events of 1918 on a divisional commander. See photograph 17 opposite p.185.

actions. It had no collective experience, however far back, to draw on. The defensive operations of March to June 1918 demonstrated that 8th Division, though grievously damaged, did not suffer a collapse in morale as happened in the French Army in 1917 and 1940.

8th Division's defensive operations do not show any great tactical innovations. Its performance has been criticised for indicating an obsession with the need to keep reserves intact when risks should have been taken. Reserves should have been pushed forward to take advantage of any opportunity to put the Germans off balance. This lack of tactical initiative contrasts with the risks taken a year before, in the spring of 1917. What must be recognised is that the month before, serious difficulties had occurred in the German *Michael* Offensive because reserves were not available. 8th Division was attempting to use its experience as a template for future operations. Unfortunately, owing to the circumstances in which it found itself, different tactics were required. It was the Australian élan in counter attacking at night on unknown terrain across ground covered with wire that demonstrated what could have been done.

The offensive operations of the late summer and autumn of 1918 demonstrated how far 8th Division had progressed. The speed in which operations were mounted and carried out and, above all, the tactical initiative employed overwhelmed the German defenders. The level of tactical decision-making was allowed to devolve so units were allowed to use initiative to achieve success.

What Heneker appears to have achieved throughout his time in command was to foster an atmosphere where subordinates were allowed to be innovative tactically. He had encouraged this from the onset of his time as GOC. For example see his correspondence with Lieutenant-Colonel Buckle, CO 2nd Northamptonshires, after the battle of Bouchavesnes. During the attack on the German defences around Fresnes in the autumn of 1918, such an atmosphere allowed the infantry of the Division to seize the initiative and act without instruction. An example is the decision of the CO of the 2nd Royal Berkshires, during the operations on the Rouvroy–Fresnes Line on 7-8 October 1918, to exploit the information brought back by his patrols. This would have been unthinkable on the Somme on 1 July 1916. All this took place when the Division had rebuilt itself thrice over after its struggles on the Somme, at Villers-Bretonneux and on the Aisne.

Was 8th Division's learning process initiated from within or from outside? This is difficult to answer with any certainty. From the onset of trench warfare, the Division attempted to learn lessons from its experiences and to disseminate them to the rest of the BEF and the training units in the UK. These analyses were not always self-generated. There were constant requests for reports and conferences from higher formations. Certainly, Stephens' report on lessons learned at Bois Grenier was circulated quickly not only within the BEF but also in the UK training commands. New methods and systems for the whole BEF were synthesised into pamphlets such as SS 135, *Instructions for The Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, and SS 143, *Instructions for The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*. A particular problem with 8th Division is that the records of divisional conferences for the period when Heneker was in command have not been kept in the divisional records. Thus it

cannot be said that new solutions were explicitly imposed from outside the division. However, there are enough references to the new use of weapons systems, tactics and organisation to indicate that 8th Division conformed to the practices adopted by the rest of the BEF.

It can be argued that once Corps and Division had established the scope of operations, the brigade and battalion commanders showed that, at the very least in practice, initiative was used if not explicitly prescribed. The devolution of decision-making in the infantry units complimented the centralising of artillery command and control. This meant that an increasing amount of artillery could be used more precisely. Though in the advance artillery sections were detached to act in the advance guard, the flexibility of tactics and control meant that the whole system of artillery firepower could be deployed when required.⁴

Another factor had also changed by late 1918. The German forces in the field were not the paragons they had been since 1914. It has been argued by historians, like John Terraine, that the German Army degenerated while the British Army improved until the effectiveness of the latter surpassed the former.⁵ As has been said previously, 8th Division did well in the spring of 1917 because the Germans were retreating to the Hindenburg Line. When the German decided enough was enough the BEF advanced no further. In its operations of the autumn of 1918 the BEF did as well because its operational tempo kept the German defence on the back foot.

⁴ See Sanders Marble, *The Infantry cannot do with a gun less": The Place of Artillery in the BEF, 1914-18* (e-book. Published by e-Gutenberg, the University of Columbia, USA. See <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/mas01/> Last accessed at 21.45 hrs, 19.01.2010).

⁵ John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War 1861-1945* (1980; London: Leo Cooper, 1992).

Finally, what does 8th Division's experience bring to the idea of the 'learning curve'? It can be seen in this thesis that the evolution of 8th Division's operational effectiveness was not a smooth process. This does not mean that the general direction was not upwards and forward. The process can be said to be a series of steps up or down formed from a combination of different personalities, terrain, weather, enemy effectiveness and many other varied causes.

In 1915 the initial triumph at Neuve Chapelle was misread. The volume of artillery fire, rather than its intensity, was mistakenly seen as the cause of success, while the initial success was hindered by a break down in communications causing the command and control system to become ineffective. The consequences of this could be seen at Aubers Ridge. The British failed to realise that the Germans were learning as well. The loss of Neuve Chapelle taught the Germans that there was a need for more than one trench line. The enemy, being intelligent and sophisticated, constantly sought to parry any development in tactics made by their opponents. 1915 was a case of the BEF trying to do too much with too little too soon, a general experience that was certainly mirrored in the case of 8th Division.

By the early Summer of 1916 the German defences on the uplands of the Somme comprised two systems, each consisting of a number of mutually supportive trench lines and posts, with a third system in the rear in an advanced state of planning and construction. The defenders realised that even these were vulnerable and began to seed the areas between with machine guns, often using shell holes provided by the attackers' bombardments. In 1917 the defences put in place were to become even more sophisticated so that the attackers could be slowed and then dislodged by a

finely judged counter-attack. The use of heavily fortified posts, often using reinforced concrete, and the use of dedicated counter-attack formations became the established mode of defence during this time. The Germans, however, realised that there was never going to be one solution. When it became difficult to deploy counter attack divisions due to the weather and the strength of the British artillery they improvised other defensive tactics, often reverting to pushing forward machine gun detachments in linked systems of shell holes.

8th Division's experiences confirm that the concept of a learning curve, if applied uncritically, does not fairly reflect what was a complicated and sometimes contradictory process. At a wider level, every division had such different experiences on the Western Front, that the totality of their experiences can be viewed best as a patchwork made up of different materials rather than being a seamless piece. There is no one 'typical' experience either at a personal, unit or formation level.

If the experiences of other divisions are examined then differences between each other can be seen. Of the divisions that were on the Aisne in May 1918, 50th Division was reconstituted but with new units.⁶ 15th (Scottish) Division had a happy experience when 'embedded' with the French Army, especially the *17eme Division*.⁷ There were also more fundamental operational differences. The 1st Buffs, part of 6th Division, operated at a high tempo in September 1916 in operations near Lesboeuufs.⁸ This contrasts with 8th Division's poor showing a month later at Le Transloy. 6th Division,

⁶ See Everard Wyrall, *The Fiftieth Division 1914-1919* (1939; Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, n.d.), pp. 352-3.

⁷ See Lieut.-Colonel J. Stewart & John Buchan, *The Fifteenth (Scottish) Division 1914-1919* (Reprinted Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, n.d. First published London: Blackwood, 1926), pp. 254-9.

⁸ See Connelly, *Steady the Buffs!*, p. 116.

being 'Regular Army' in origin was also more aggressive between battles, organising raids, than the New Army 12th Division.⁹ In August 1918, 38th (Welsh) Division experienced immense communication difficulties when crossing the old Somme battlefields of 1916.¹⁰ This did not apply to 8th Division over the same period. Apart from having attached tanks employing defensive tactics at Villers-Brettonneux in April 1918, 8th Division never operated with armoured vehicles even in the 'Hundred Days'.¹¹

That other formations experienced a different war did not mean there were not similarities. In the 'Hundred Days' of 1918, a brigade of 38th (Welsh) Division also fought in the 'area' of a division from a different Corps as had units of 8th Division on the Plain of Douai.¹² At a general level, what was different in the summer and autumn of 1918 is that the BEF now was able to move formations around and try innovative tactics in the face of a weakened enemy. The BEF now had the skills and amount of weapons to conduct simultaneous multiple offensives keeping the enemy on the back foot.

8th Division was not one of the well-known formations of the BEF. It did not have the glamour of the Anzacs or Canadians. It was never as well known as the Highlanders of the 51st Division. Even in modern times it is in the shadows behind more prominent formations like the 9th Division or 18th Division. If the Division has any reputation it is for suffering vast casualties, for example on 1 July 1916 or at Villers

⁹ Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁰ See Brosnan, 'Tactical Development of the 56th (London) Division', pp. 177-80.

¹¹ For example, James Jack, who had spent almost all his service from 1915-1917 with 8th Division, did not operate with tanks until he was a brigade commander with 9th Division in late 1918. See John Terraine (ed.), *General Jack's Diary: The Trench Diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack, DSO* (London: Cassell paperback, 2000), p. 257.

¹² Ibid, p. 176.

Bretonneux or on the Aisne in 1918. The Division's casualties were immense. In its four years on the Western Front, 8th Division suffered 63,858 casualties, which were almost five times its original establishment.¹³ If 8th Division's progress through the 'learning process' is not a smooth curve, then in the face of such horrendous losses, especially in 1918, it is an achievement that it was ever more that a uniformed militia. That 8th Division maintained its ethos and its cohesion through four long years in a most traumatic arena are indications that there was something in place other than mere technical proficiency. In that respect, an examination of 8th Division must take into account that for success in battle there are determinants other than the development of technology led weaponry and technical systems. These include 'cultural' factors, such as morale and leadership.¹⁴ That 8th Division was ultimately a leading part of a British Army that decisively defeated what was considered to be the world's premier military power was due as much to its character and its leadership as to its adaptation of new methods of war fighting.

A relatively brief study of an infantry division over four years cannot cover everything in depth. A weakness is the lack of detailed statistical analysis of casualties, ground gained or enemy casualties inflicted. Further study of minor actions would also be of benefit. However, to give balance this would have to be matched with further work on training and the reorganisation of weapon systems such as the artillery and the machine gun units. By concentrating on the performance of the higher command of the Division no study was made of the introduction of weapon systems such as rifle-grenades. Furthermore, these were not mentioned in divisional

¹³ This figure is based on Boraston & Bax, *8th Division*, Appendix III, p. 296. This is calculated using a basis that the establishment was 13,000. However, by 1918, the usual establishment was often not more than 8,000. See *British Official History 1918, Volume V*, p. 477.

¹⁴ See Jeremy Black, 'Rethinking Military History', *RUSI Journal*, 150 (3) (2005), pp. 60-3.

conferences or no evidence was to be found in the archives. A concentrated search at battalion or brigade level would be required to substantiate this.

A study could be made of the careers of commanders and senior staff after they left 8th Division. A major difficulty is the loss of service records, especially those of the military secretary's department, due to enemy action in 1940. Another document known to be lost is Heneker's original wartime diary. Other figures, such as the other two GOCs. F.J. Davies and Hudson, appear to have left no papers.

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APPENDIX 1

ORDER OF BATTLE: 8th DIVISION HEADQUARTERS¹

General Officer Commanding	<i>Date of assuming duty</i>
[GOC] – Divisional commander	
Major-General F. J. Davies, C. B.	19 October 1914
Major-General H. Hudson, C.B., C.I.E.	01 August 1915
Major-General W. G. C. Heneker, D.S.O., ADC.	09 December 1916
Infantry Brigade Commanders	
<u>23 Infantry Brigade</u>	
Brig.-General R. J. Pinney	September 1914
Brig.-General T. E. Travers-Clarke	28 July 1915
Brig.-General H. D. Tuson, C. M. G.	08 September 1915
Brig.-General E. A. Fagan, D.S.O.	27 August 1916
Brig.-General G. W. St. G. Grogan, D.S.O.	12 March 1917
<u>24 Infantry Brigade</u>	
Brig.-General F. C. Carter	September 1914
Brig.-General R. S. Oxley	16 March 1915
Brig.-General A. J. F. Eden, D.S.O.	08 July 1916
Brig.-General H.W. Cobham, D.S.O.	14 January 1917
Brig.-General R. Haig, D.S.O.	24 November 1917
Brig.-General L. M. Stevens, D.S.O.	04 June 1918
Brig.-General R. O'H. Livesay, D.S.O.	06 September 1918
<u>25 Infantry Brigade</u>	
Brig.-General A. W.C. Lowry Cole, C.B., D.S.O. ²	September 1914
Brig.-General R. B. Stephens	09 May 1915
Brig.-General J. H. W. Pollard, C.M.G.	01 April 1916
Brig.-General C. Coffin, D.S.O.	11 January 1917
Brig.-General R. H. Husey, D.S.O., M.C. ³	08 May 1918
Brig.-General J. B. Pollok McCall, C.M.G, D.S.O.	03 June 1918
Brig.-General Hon. R. Brand, D.S.O.	09 October 1918
<u>70 Infantry Brigade [23rd Infantry Division]⁴</u>	
Brig.-General L. F. Phillips, D.S.O.	in command on transfer
Brig.-General H. Gordon, D.S.O.	8 November 1915 ⁵

¹ Boraston & Bax, *Eighth Division*, p.283 *et seq.*

² Killed in action, Aubers Ridge, 09 May 1915.

³ Died of wounds 30 May 1918, following capture on the Aisne 27 May 1918.

⁴ From 23 October 1915 until 16 July 1916, 24 Infantry Brigade was exchanged with 70 Infantry Brigade of 23rd Division

⁵ Still in command when formation returned to 23rd Division.

Commander Royal Artillery [CRA]

Brig.-General A. E. A. Holland, D.S.O., M.V.O.	01 October 1914
Brig.-General G. H. W. Nicholson, C.M.G.	21 July 1915
Brig.-General H. G. Lloyd, D.S.O.	03 January 1917
Brig.-General J. W. F. Lamont, C.M.G., D.S.O.	19 March 1918

Commander Royal Engineers [CRE]

Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Rotherham	November 1914
Lieut.-Colonel P. G. Grant, C.B., C.M.G.	January 1915
Lieut.-Colonel F. G. Guggisberg, C.M.G., D.S.O.	December 1915
Major A. Hanbury Brown, D.S.O., M.C.	22 July 1916
Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Browne, C.M.G., D.S.O.	06 September 1916
Lieut.-Colonel D. S. Collins	April 1917
Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Browne, C.M.G., D.S.O.	May 1917
Lieut.-Colonel C. Russell-Brown, D.S.O.	09 November 1918

General Staff Officer, Grade 1 [GSO1]

Brevet Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Anderson, <i>psc</i>	22 September 1914
Brevet Lieut.-Colonel H. Hill, D.S.O., M.V.O. ⁶	27 October 1915
Brevet Lieut.-Colonel R. E. H. James	17 September 1916
Lieut.-Colonel E. H. L. Beddington, M.C., <i>psc</i>	30 November 1916
Lieut.-Colonel H. S. Adair, D.S.O.	14 December 1917
Brevet Lieut.-Colonel C. C. Armitage, D.S.O., <i>psc</i>	28 February 1918
Lieut.-Colonel A. G. B. Bourne, D.S.O., M.V.O., <i>psc</i>	14 June 1918

Assistant Adjutant and Quarter-Master General [AA & QMG]

Brevet Lieut.-Colonel A. R. Hoskins, D.S.O., <i>psc</i>	19 September 1914
Lieut.-Colonel H.M. de F. Montgomery, D.S.O., <i>psc</i>	12 November 1914
Lieut.-Colonel P. P. de B. Radcliffe, D.S.O., <i>psc</i>	22 March 1915
Brevet Lieut.-Colonel H. L. Alexander, D.S.O., <i>psc</i>	19 July 1915
Lieut.-Colonel R. Q. Crauford, <i>psc</i>	15 October 1916
Lieut.-Colonel Lord R.E.A. Feilding, D.S.O.	25 February 1917
Lieut.-Colonel Hon. P. G. Scarlett, M.C.	03 November 1917

⁶ Killed in action 10 September 1916, Loos area.

APPENDIX 2**ORDER OF BATTLE: 4 NOVEMBER 1914 – THE ARRIVAL IN FRANCE****8th Division Headquarters**

General Officer Commanding [GOC]: Major-General F. J. Davies, C. B.

General Staff (operations)

GSO1: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Anderson, *psc*

GSO2: Major G. V. Hordern, *psc*

GSO3: Captain H. E. R. R. Braine, *psc*

Adjutant & Quarter-Masters' departments (administration, supply and transport)

AA & QMG: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel A. R. Hoskins, D.S.O., *psc*

DAAG: Captain R. F. Uniacke, *psc*

DAQMG: Captain H. L. Alexander, *psc*

Infantry Brigades

23 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General R. J. Pinney

Brigade Major: Captain L. F. Renny

Staff Captain: V. A. H. Daly

2nd Devonshires: Lieut.-Colonel J. O. Travers, D.S.O.

2nd West Yorkshires: Lieut.-Colonel G. F. Phillips

2nd Scottish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel W. M. Bliss

2nd Middlesex: Lieut.-Colonel R. H. Hayes

24 Infantry Brigade – GOC: Brig.-General F. C. Carter, C.B.

Brigade Major: Captain J. E. Turner

Staff Captain: Captain W. V. Hume

1st Worcestershires: Lieut.-Colonel A. E. Lascelles

2nd East Lancashires: Lieut.-Colonel C. L. Nicholson

1st Sherwood Foresters: Colonel W. R. Marshall

2nd Northamptonshires: Lieut.-Colonel C. S. Prichard, D.S.O.

25 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General A. W.C. Lowry Cole, C.B., D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain J. G. Dill

Staff Captain: Captain H. E. Franklyn

2nd Lincolnshires: Lieut.-Colonel G. B. McAndrew

2nd Royal Berkshires: Lieut.-Colonel E. Feetham

1st Royal Irish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel G. B. Laurie

2nd Rifle Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel R. B. Stephens

Mounted Troops

Northamptonshire Yeomanry: Lieut.-Colonel H. Wickham

‘A’ Squadron: Captain C G Middleton

‘B’ Squadron: Captain Sir C. B. Lowther Bt.

‘C’ Squadron: Captain Miller

Cyclist Company: Captain R. M. Heath, D.S.O.

Royal Artillery

CRA: Brig.-General A. E. A. Holland, D.S.O., M.V.O.

Brigade Major: Major R. H. Johnson

Staff Captain: Captain V. Asser
 V Brigade RHA: Lieut.-Colonel H. C. C. Uniacke
 'G' Battery : Major H. M. Davson
 'O' Battery: Major N. E. Tilney
 'Z' Battery: Major E. H. H. Elliot
 Ammunition column: Captain E. M. D. H. Cooke

XXXIII Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel I. Graham
 32 Battery: Major W. Stirling
 33 Battery: Major I. C. L. Oldfield
 36 Battery: Major D. B. Stewart
 Ammunition column: Captain C. T. S. Paul

XLV Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel A. H. S. Goff
 1 Battery: Major A. E. M. Head
 3 Battery: Major C. F. P. Parry
 5 Battery: Major C. B. Thackeray

Heavy Artillery Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel H de T. Phillips
 118 Battery: Major F. A. Twiss
 119 Battery: Lieut.-Colonel C. L. Hicking

Divisional Ammunition column: Lieut.-Colonel F. A. Elton

Royal Engineers

CRE: Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Rotherham
 2 Field Company RE: Major C. E. G. Vesey
 15 Field Company RE: Captain P. K. Betty
 8 Signal Company: Captain O. M. T. Frost

ASC

Divisional Train: Lieut.-Colonel A. K. Seccombe, D.S.O.

RAMC

ADMS: Colonel J. Meek, M.D.
 24 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel R. Pickard, M.D.
 25 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel A. B. Soltau, M.D.
 26 Field Ambulance: Major A. Milne-Thompson

APPENDIX 3**ORDER OF BATTLE: 25 SEPTEMBER 1915 – BOIS GRENIER****8th Division Headquarters**

General Officer Commanding [GOC]: Major-General H. Hudson, C.B., C.I.E.

General Staff (operations)

GSO1: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Anderson, *psc*

GSO2: Major GH. A. Walker, D.S.O., *psc*

GSO3: Captain W. T. T. Torr

Adjutant & Quarter-Masters' departments (administration, supply and transport)

AA & QMG: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel H. L. Alexander, D.S.O., *psc*

DAAG: Captain Hon. P. G. Scarlett

DAQMG: Major A. G. Pratt

Infantry Brigades

23 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General H. D. Tuson, C.M.G.

Brigade Major: Captain W. B. F. Rayner

Staff Captain: J. C. Blackburn

2nd Devonshires: Lieut.-Colonel J. O. Travers, D.S.O.

2nd West Yorkshires: Lieut.-Colonel T. P. Barrington

2nd Scottish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel V. C. Sandilands

2nd Middlesex: Lieut.-Colonel R. H. Hayes, C.M.G.

24 Infantry Brigade – GOC: Brig.-General R. S. Oxley

Brigade Major: Major R. M. Lucock, D.S.O.

Staff Captain: Captain F. St. J. Tyrwhitt

1st Worcestershires: Lieut.-Colonel G. W. St. G. Grogan

2nd East Lancashires: Lieut.-Colonel E. M. Hill

1st Sherwood Foresters: Colonel R. L. Sherbrooke

2nd Northamptonshires: Lieut.-Colonel A. C. Buckle.

25 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General R. B. Stephens.

Brigade Major: Captain G. D. Pike

Staff Captain: Captain E. P. Lloyd

2nd Lincolnshires: Lieut.-Colonel S. FitzG. Cox

2nd Royal Berkshires: Lieut.-Colonel G. P. S. Hunt

1st Royal Irish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel R. A. C. Daunt

2nd Rifle Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel F. H. Nugent

Royal Artillery

CRA: Brig.-General G. H. W. Nicholson, C.M.G.

Brigade Major: Major C. R. Gover

Staff Captain: Captain F. E. Spencer

V Brigade RHA: Lieut.-Colonel A. T. Butler

‘O’ Battery: Major W. Stirling

‘Z’ Battery: Major E. H. H. Elliot

XXXIII Brigade RFA: Colonel L. Graham, C.M.G.

32 Battery: Major R. Archer-Houblon

33 Battery: Major I. C. L. Oldfield, D.S.O.

36 Battery: Major C. T. S. Paul

XLV Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel A. H. S. Goff, C.M.G.

1 Battery: Major A. E. M. Head

3 Battery: Major N. P. R. Preston

5 Battery: Major C. B. Thackeray

CXXVIII Howitzer Brigade: Major J. O. Seagram

55 Battery: Major H. C. Simpson

57 Battery: Major H. A. W. Webber

Divisional Ammunition column: Colonel F. W. Boteler

Royal Engineers

CRE: Lieut.-Colonel P. G. Grant

2 Field Company RE: Captain A. Hanbury Brown

15 Field Company RE: Major P. K. Betty, D.S.O.

490 Field Company RE: Major C. C. Bryan

8 Signal Company: Major O. M. T. Frost.

ASC

Divisional Train: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. I. Hull

RAMC

ADMS: Colonel H. N. Dunn, M.D.

24 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel R. Pickard, M.D.

25 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel A. B. Soltau, M.D.

26 Field Ambulance: Major A. Milne-Thompson

APPENDIX 4**ORDER OF BATTLE: 1st July 1916****8th Division Headquarters**

General Officer Commanding [GOC]: Major-General H. Hudson, C.B., C.I.E.

General Staff (operations)

GSO1: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel H. Hill, D.S.O., M.V.O

GSO2: Major J. C. Freeland

GSO3: Captain A. A. H. Hanbury-Sparrow, D.S.O.

Adjutant & Quarter-Masters' departments (administration, supply and transport)

AA & QMG: Lieut.-Colonel H. L. Alexander, D.S.O., *psc*

DAAG: Captain Hon. P. G. Scarlett

DAQMG: Captain C. J. B. Daubeney

Infantry Brigades

23 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General H. D. Tuson

Brigade Major: Major W. B. F. Rayner, D.S.O.

Staff Captain: Major H. Eardley-Wilmot

2nd Devonshires: Lieut.-Colonel A. J. E. Sunderland

2nd West Yorkshires: Lieut.-Colonel L. Hume-Spry, D.S.O.

2nd Scottish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel V. C. Sandilands, D.S.O.

2nd Middlesex: Lieut.-Colonel E. T. F. Sandys

25 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General J. H. W. Pollard, C.M.G.

Brigade Major: Major H. Lloyd

Staff Captain: Captain H. N. Swann

2nd Lincolnshires: Lieut.-Colonel: R. Bastard, D.S.O.

2nd Royal Berkshires: Lieut.-Colonel A. M. Holdsworth

1st Royal Irish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel R. A. C. Daunt, D.S.O.

2nd Rifle Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel Hon. R. Brand, D.S.O.

70 Infantry Brigade – GOC: Brig-General H. Gordon, D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Major W. C. Wilson

Staff Captain: Captain E. R. A. C. Cox

11th Sherwood Foresters: Lieut.-Colonel H. F. Watson, D.S.O.

8th KOYLI: Lieut.-Colonel: H. E. Trevor, D.S.O.

8th Yorkshire & Lancasters: Lieut.-Colonel M. L. Hornby, D. S. O.

9th Yorkshire & Lancasters: Lieut.-Colonel A. J. B. Addison

Royal Artillery

CRA: Brig.-General G. H. W. Nicholson, C.M.G.

Brigade Major: Major C. R. Gover

Staff Captain: Captain K. S. Hunter

V Brigade RHA: Lieut.-Colonel A. T. Butler, C.M.G.

‘O’ Battery: Captain J. T. Wallace

‘Z’ Battery: Major Sir T. P. Larcomb Bt.

‘D’ Howitzer Battery: Captain H. E. Barkworth

XXXIII Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel T. St. A. B. L. Nevinson

32 Battery: Captain R. Archer-Houblon

33 Battery: Major W. V. Packe, D.S.O.

36 Battery: Major C. T. S. Paul

55 Howitzer Battery: Major W. E. Duncan, M.C.

XLV Brigade RFA:

1 Battery: Major C. B. Rich

3 Battery: Major M. M. Magrath

5 Battery: Major J. M. Moore

57 Howitzer Battery: Major E. Sherlock

Divisional Ammunition column: Colonel F. W. Boteler

Royal Engineers

CRE: Lieut.-Colonel F. G. Guggisberg, C.M.G., D.S.O.

2 Field Company RE: Captain A. Hanbury Brown

15 Field Company RE: Major C. V. Strong

490 Field Company RE: Major C. C. Bryan, D.S.O.

8 Signal Company: Major O. M. T. Frost.

22nd Durham light Infantry (pioneers): Lieut.-Colonel C. B. Morgan

ASC

Divisional Train: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. I. Hull

RAMC

ADMS: Colonel H. N. Dunn, M.D.

24 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel R. Pickard, C.M.G.

25 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel A. B. Soltau, C.M.G.

26 Field Ambulance: Major A. Milne-Thompson, C.M.G.

APPENDIX 5**ORDER OF BATTLE: 17 MARCH 1917****8th Division Headquarters**

General Officer Commanding [GOC]: Major-General W. G. C. Heneker, D.S.O., ADC.

General Staff (operations)

GSO1: Lieut.-Colonel E. H. L. Beddington, M.C., *psc*

GSO2: Major D. F. Anderson, D.S.O.

GSO3: Captain R. W. Brooke, M.C. (TF)

Adjutant & Quarter-Masters' departments (administration, supply and transport)

AA & QMG: Lieut.-Colonel Lord R. E. A. Feilding, D.S.O.

DAAG: Captain Hon. P. G. Scarlett

DAQMG: Captain L. D. Luard

Infantry Brigades

23 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General E. A. Fagan, D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain F. C. Roberts, D.S.O.

Staff Captain: Captain F. A. Vernon

2nd Devonshires: Lieut.-Colonel A. J. E. Sunderland

2nd West Yorkshires: Lieut.-Colonel J. L. Jack

2nd Scottish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. H. Stirling, D.S.O.

2nd Middlesex: Lieut.-Colonel J. H. Hall, D.S.O.

23rd Trench Mortar Battery: Captain T. B. Duncan

24 Infantry Brigade – GOC: Brig.-General H.W. Cobham, D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain A. Holmes-Scott, M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain F. C. Wallace

1st Worcestershires: Lieut.-Colonel G. W. St. G. Grogan, D.S.O.

2nd East Lancashires: Lieut.-Colonel C. E.M. Hill, D.S.O.

1st Sherwood Foresters: Lieut.-Colonel R. L. Sherbrooke

2nd Northamptonshires: Lieut.-Colonel C. G. Buckle, M.C.

24th Trench Mortar Battery: Captain P. B. M. Powell

25 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General C. Coffin, D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain N.P. Birley

Staff Captain: Captain D. L. Gray

2nd Lincolnshires: Lieut.-Colonel R. Bastard, D.S.O.

2nd Royal Berkshires: Lieut.-Colonel R. Haig, D.S.O.

1st Royal Irish Rifles: Lieut.-Colonel E. C. Lloyd

2nd Rifle Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel Hon. R. Brand, D.S.O.

25th Trench Mortar Battery: Captain A. C. Taylor

Royal Artillery

CRA: Brig.-General H. G. Lloyd, D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Major C. R. Gover, D.S.O.

Staff Captain: Captain K. S. Hunter

XXXIII Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel T. St. A. B. L. Nevinson

32 Battery: Major R. T. H. Davison
 33 Battery: Major C. F. T. Lindsay
 36 Battery: Major C. T. S. Paul, D.S.O.
 55 Howitzer Battery: Major W. E. Duncan, M.C.

XLV Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel C. A. H. Campbell
 1 Battery: Major S. D. Bulteel
 3 Battery: Major M. M. Magrath
 5 Battery: Major H. E. Barkworth
 57 Howitzer Battery: Major E. Sherlock, M.C.

Divisional Ammunition column: Colonel F. W. Boteler

Divisional Trench Mortar Officer: Captain W. G. J. Walker, M.C.
 Heavy Mortar Battery:

W/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Captain G. H. Morris

Medium Mortar Batteries

X/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Lieutenant R. L. C. Brown

Y/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Lieutenant C. Ellis

Z/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Lieutenant G. R. P. Brown

Royal Engineers

CRE: Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Browne, C.M.G.

2 Field Company RE: Major A. Hanbury Brown

15 Field Company RE: Captain G. Lambert, M.C.

490 Field Company RE: Major C. C. Bryan, D.S.O.

8 Signal Company: Major V. A. C. Clery, M.C.

22nd Durham light Infantry (pioneers): Lieut.-Colonel C. B. Morgan, D.S.O.

ASC

Divisional Train: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. I. Hull, D.S.O.

RAMC

ADMS: Colonel H. N. Dunn, D.S.O., MB.

24 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel R. Pickard, C.M.G.

25 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel T. P. Puddicombe

26 Field Ambulance: Major A. Milne-Thompson, C.M.G.

APPENDIX 6**ORDER OF BATTLE: 23 MARCH 1918****8th Division Headquarters**

General Officer Commanding [GOC]: Major-General W. G. C. Heneker, D.S.O., ADC.

General Staff (operations)

GSO1: Brevet Lieut.-Colonel C. C. Armitage, D.S.O., *psc*

GSO2: Captain J. H. T. Priestman

GSO3: Captain R. W. Brooke, M.C. (TF)

Adjutant & Quarter-Masters' departments (administration, supply and transport)

AA & QMG: Lieut.-Colonel Lord R. E. A. Feilding, D.S.O.

DAAG: Captain H. Ramsbotham, M.C.

DAQMG: Captain E. C. Nicholson, M.C.

Infantry Brigades

23 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General G. W. St. G. Grogan, C.M.G., D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Major P. C. Vellacott, D.S.O.

Staff Captain: Captain P. A. Ledward

2nd Devonshires: Major A. H. Cope

2nd West Yorkshires: Lieut.-Colonel A. E. E. Lowry, M.C.

2nd Middlesex: Lieut.-Colonel C. A. S. Page, M.C.

23rd Trench Mortar Battery: Captain J. C. Holberton

24 Infantry Brigade – GOC: Brig.-General R. Haig, D.S.O..

Brigade Major: Captain F. C. Wallace, M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain: T. B. J. Mahar, M.C.

1st Worcestershires: Lieut.-Colonel F. C. Roberts, D.S.O., M.C.

1st Sherwood Foresters: Lieut.-Colonel T. H. Watson, M.C.

2nd Northamptonshires: Lieut.-Colonel S. G. Latham, M.C.

24th Trench Mortar Battery: Captain W. B. Greensmith

25 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General C. Coffin, D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain B. C. Pascoe, M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain L. S. Greening, M.C.

2nd East Lancashires: Major D. W. Hollingsworth

2nd Royal Berkshires: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. H. Stirling, D.S.O., M.C.

2nd Rifle Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel H. S. C. Peyton, M.C.

25th Trench Mortar Battery: Captain C. J. Olive

Machine Gun Corps

8th Battalion: Lieut.-Colonel R. L. Sherbrooke, D.S.O.

Royal Artillery

CRA: Brig.-General J. W. F. Lamont, C.M.G., D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Major H. G. Lee Warner, D.S.O., M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain C. E. Venning

XXXIII Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel H. G. Fisher, D.S.O.

32 Battery: Major A. G. F. Ramsden
33 Battery: Major C. F. T. Lindsay
36 Battery: Major N. Southern
55 Howitzer Battery: Captain R. L. Palmer, M.C.

XLV Brigade RFA: Major C. W. Cripps, D.S.O.
1 Battery: Major E. H. Wenham
3 Battery: Major D'A. V. Carden, D.S.O.
5 Battery: Major J. C. Griffiths, M.C.
57 Howitzer Battery: Major R. M. Wilkinson-Jones, M.C.

Divisional Ammunition column: Captain C. E. Vivian, M.C. (acting)

Divisional Trench Mortar Officer: Captain T. Wingate, M.C.

Heavy Mortar Battery:

W/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Captain G. R. P. Brown

Medium Mortar Batteries

X/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Lieutenant C. H. Haskins

Y/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Lieutenant L. F. Stamp

Z/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Lieutenant A. J. Mack

Royal Engineers

CRE: Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Browne, C.M.G., D.S.O.

2 Field Company RE: Major A. Hanbury Brown, D.S.O., M.C.

15 Field Company RE: Major R. M. Taylor

490 Field Company RE: Major D. L. Herbert, M.C.

8 Signal Company: Major H. C. Crone, M.C.

22nd Durham light Infantry (pioneers): Lieut.-Colonel C. B. Morgan, D.S.O.

ASC

Divisional Train: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. I. Hull, D.S.O.

RAMC

ADMS: Colonel G. J. A. Ormsby, D.S.O.

24 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel R. Burgess, M.C.

25 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel T. P. Puddicombe, D.S.O.

26 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel E. Alderson, D.S.O.

APPENDIX 7**ORDER OF BATTLE: 11 NOVEMBER 1918****8th Division Headquarters**

General Officer Commanding [GOC]: Major-General W.C.G. Heneker D.S.O. ADC.

General Staff (operations)

GSO1: Lieut.-Colonel A.G. Bourne D.S.O., M.V.O., *psc*

GSO2: Major E.O. Sewell M.C.

GSO3: Captain E.H. Smythe M.C.

Adjutant & Quarter-Masters' departments (administration, supply and transport)

AA & QMG: Lieut.-Colonel Hon. P.G. Scarlett M.C.

DAAG: Captain H. Ramsbotham M.C.

DAQMG: Captain D.L. Gray M.C.

Infantry Brigades

23 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General G.W. St.G. Grogan C.M.G., D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain H.T.T. Harris

Staff Captain: Captain E.A. Slade M.C.

2nd Devonshires: Lieut.-Colonel G.E.R. Prior M.C.

2nd West Yorkshires: Lieut.-Colonel A.T. Champion

2nd Middlesex: Lieut.-Colonel E.E.F. Baker M.C.

23rd Trench Mortar Battery: Captain H. Woodward

24 Infantry Brigade – GOC: Brig.-General R. O'H. Livesay D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain F.C. Wallace M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain: N. Marshall

1st Worcestershires: Lieut.-Colonel F.C. Roberts V.C. D.S.O. M.C.

1st Sherwood Foresters: Lieut.-Colonel J.D. Mitchell D.S.O.

2nd Northamptonshires: Lieut.-Colonel S.S. Hayne D.S.O.

24th Trench Mortar Battery: Captain R. E. Barringer

25 Infantry Brigade - GOC: Brig.-General Hon. R. Brand D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Captain R.B. Stones M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain H.E. Seth-Smith M.C.

2nd East Lancashires: Lieut.-Colonel H.J. Miers

2nd Royal Berkshires: Lieut.-Colonel A.G.F. Issac M.C.

2nd Rifle Brigade: Lieut.-Colonel T.R. Eastwood M.C.

25th Trench Mortar Battery: Captain H.K. Honey

Machine Gun Corps

8th Battalion: Lieut.-Colonel J. Angell M.C.

Royal Artillery

CRA: Brig.-General J.W.F. Lamont C.M.G. D.S.O.

Brigade Major: Major W.E. Duncan M.C.

Staff Captain: Captain T.F. Monks M.C.

XXXIII Brigade RFA: Lieut.-Colonel D.E. Forman C.M.G.

32 Battery: Major H.F. Buckley

33 Battery: Major O.F. Herold

36 Battery: Major J. Wedderburn-Maxwell M.C.
 55 Howitzer Battery: Major H.T. Michelmores M.C.

XLV Brigade RFA: Major C.B. Thackeray D.S.O.
 1 Battery: Major H.B. Taylor
 3 Battery: Major C.W. Cripps D.S.O.
 5 Battery: Major J.C. Griffiths M.C.
 57 Howitzer Battery: Major H.C. Terry
 Divisional Ammunition column: Major T.H. Davison M.C.

Divisional Trench Mortar Officer: Captain C.G. Higgins M.C.
 Medium Mortar Batteries
 X/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Captain R.A. Darling
 Y/8 Trench Mortar Battery: Captain S.L. Bibby

Royal Engineers

CRE: Lieut.-Colonel C. Russell-Brown D.S.O.
 2 Field Company RE: Major J.H.F. Kendall
 15 Field Company RE: Major L. Napier
 490 Field Company RE: Major L.C. Chasey M.C.
 8 Signal Company: Major H.C. Crone M.C.

1/7th Durham Light Infantry (pioneers): Lieut.-Colonel J. S. Turcan, M.C.

ASC

Divisional Train: Lieut.-Colonel C. R. I. Hull, D.S.O.

RAMC

ADMS: Colonel A. M. Maclaughlin
 24 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel R. Burgess M.C.
 25 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel T.P. Puddicombe D.S.O.
 26 Field Ambulance: Lieut.-Colonel E. Alderson D.S.O.

APPENDIX 8
Infantry Deaths 1915

Unit	Total OR casualties	No. of NCO & WO deaths (% of total casualties)	Total number of officer casualties¹	Lieut.-Colonels [C.O.]	Majors	Captains
2nd Middlesex	217	44 (20%)	10 (3)	0	0	4
2nd Scottish	265	45 (16%)	21 (5)	1	3	7 (2)
2nd Rifle Brigade	505	71 (14%)	29 (13)	0	1	5 (3)

The fatal casualties of three infantry battalions were analysed for the period 10 March to 27 September 1915.² This time included the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, The Battle of Fromelles / Aubers Ridge and the Action at Bois Grenier in their entirety. The battalions chosen were those most heavily involved at Neuve Chapelle.

An infantry battalion at full strength was composed of about 30 officers and 977 warrant officers, non commissioned officers and men.³ The deaths of between a quarter and a half of a battalion's Other Ranks was serious. Even more so was the loss of long service officers and NCOs. An indication of this is the presence of Special Reserve [SR] officers in the rank of Captain. Regular Army battalions would have only had SR officers in such ranks if there had not been Regular commissioned officers to fill the vacancies. The number of personnel lost to the units would have been even higher as perhaps as many again would have been wounded and unable to serve in the front line for some time.⁴

¹ Figure in brackets indicates the total number of Special Reserve officers.

² The databases contained in *Soldiers and Officers Died in the Great War* were used. Officer casualties were only included if the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database indicated that the casualty was an officer of the battalion or from a Special Reserve unit attached to the battalion. See the Records Search facility at <http://www.cwgc.org/> (last accessed 15.30 hrs, 10.01.2010). As neither database is accurate the numbers of Special Reserve officers may be under represented.

³ See *Field Service Pocket Book 1914*, p. 7.

⁴ See John Baynes, *Morale*, p. 82.

APPENDIX 9
Infantry Deaths 1918

Unit	Total casualties (NCOs & ORs)	Other Rank deaths					
		Ages known	Age: 18-20 years	21-23 years	26-30 years	31-35 years	35- +40 years
2nd Devonshires [23 Brigade]	200	106 (of 168)	68 (64%)	14 (13%)	6 (7%)	8* (7.5%)	8 (7.5%)
1st Worcestershires [24 Brigade]	52	28 (of 46)	8 (28.5%)	9 (32.5%)	3 (11%)	5 (18%)	2 (7%)
2nd Rifle Brigade [25 Brigade]	121	73 (of 168)	43 (64%)	5(8%)	4 (6%)	9 (13.5%)	3 (4.5%)

Table A: Deaths 24/03 – 02/06/1918: Ages known

Unit	Arm	Age 18-20 years	21-23 years	26-30 years	31-35 years	35- +40 years
2nd Devonshires [23 Brigade]	Infantry	2	0	0	1	0
	Services ⁺	0	0	0	0	0
1st Worcestershires [24 Brigade]	Infantry	2	3	3	1	2
	Services	0	0	0	0	0
2nd Rifle Brigade [25 Brigade]	Infantry	4	0	0	1	1
	Services	7	0	0	0	1

Table B: Deaths 24/03 – 02/06/1918: Served with other units (age known)

Unit	No. of NCO / WO casualties	As % of total casualties
2nd Devonshires [23 Brigade]	32	16%
1st Worcestershires [24 Brigade]	6	11%
2nd Rifle Brigade [25 Brigade]	9	7.4%

The purpose of these tables are to indicate the different composition if infantry units even within one division by mid-1918.

The fatal casualties of three infantry battalions were analysed for the period 24th April to 3rd June 1918.¹ This time included the Action at Villers-Brettonneux and the

* Included one soldier who had served for 11 years with 2nd Devonshires.

⁺ Services – ASC, AOC, RE etc.

¹ The database contained in *Soldiers and Officers Died in the Great War* was used. See CD-rom, *Soldiers Died in the Great War, Version 2* (Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, n.d.). The age of

Battle of the Aisne until 8th Division was officially withdrawn on 3rd June 1918. Id. A battalion was chosen from each of the three infantry brigades.

NB. Unfortunately, for each unit there were a large number of deaths where the ages could not be established. These casualties are left out of the tables. The number can be calculated from the total number of Other Ranks in the Total Age Known column in Table A.

Table A: As can be seen the casualty rates varied greatly – compare the 1st Worcestershire to the other two units. The 1st Worcestershires do not show that by this stage of the war British battalions were made up almost entirely of young conscripts.

Table B: Among the youngest age group in particular can be found a number of soldiers transferred from non-infantry units i.e. the ASC, AOC and even the RE. The greatest number can be found in 2nd Rifle Brigade. In contrast, in all age groups of 1st Worcestershire there are a number of soldiers who had previously served with other infantry regiments. Taken together with the lower percentage of fatalities being found from the youngest age groups perhaps indicates there was a conscious policy of trying to obtain experienced older infantrymen, from whatever source. 2nd Devonshire has a far lower number of soldiers who have transferred in.

Table C: The percentage of NCO and warrant officer fatalities tend to be lower as a percentage than the like statistic in 1915 (see Appendix Casualties in 1915). The anomaly is 2nd Devonshires whose figures are affected by its stand at Bois de Buttes on the Aisne.

An infantry battalion at full strength was composed of about 30 officers and 977 warrant officers, non commissioned officers and men.²

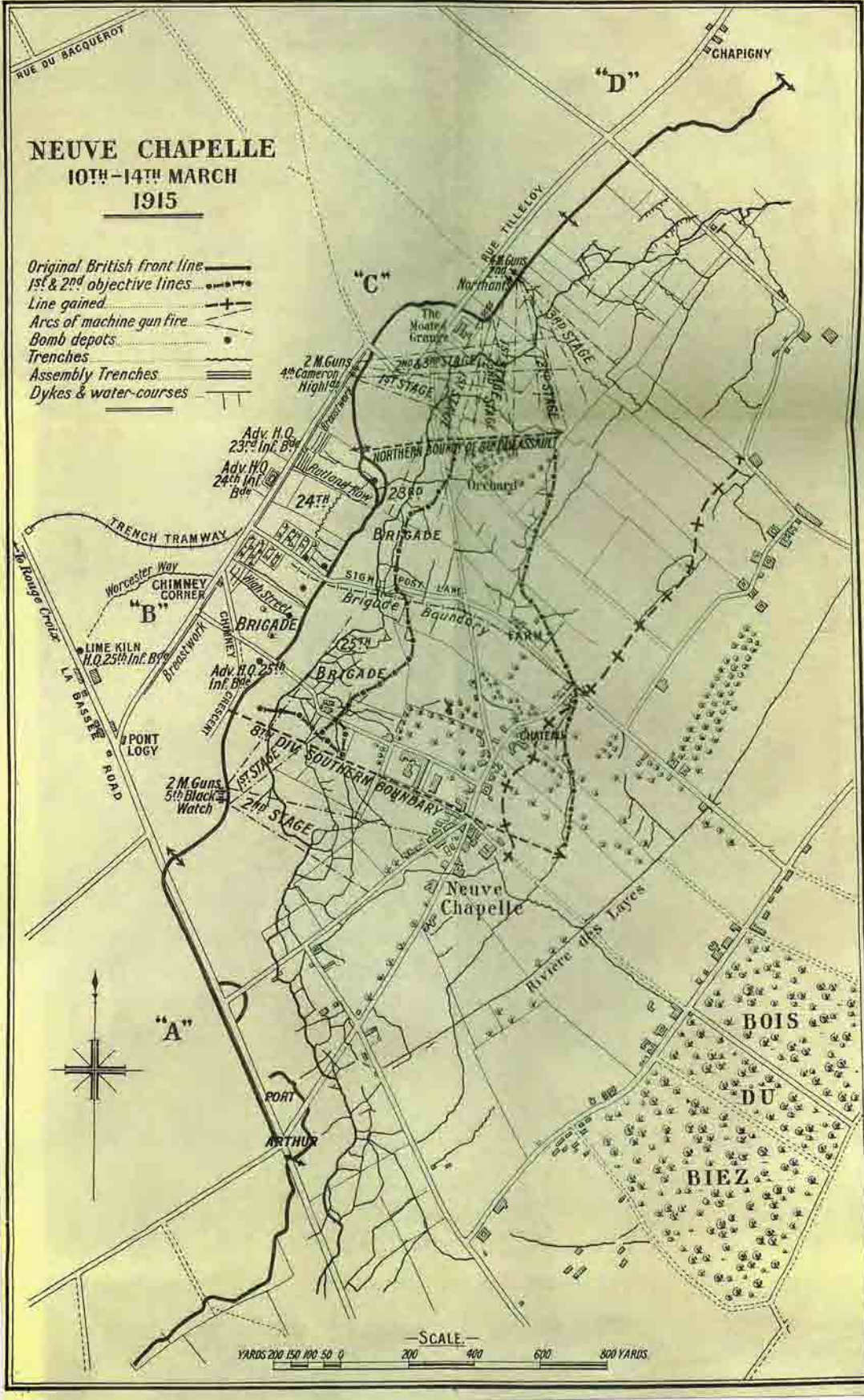
the casualty at death was checked using the website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. See the Records Search facility at <http://www.cwgc.org/> (last accessed 15.30 hrs, 10.01.2010).

² See *Field Service Pocket Book 1914*, p. 7.

NEUVE CHAPELLE

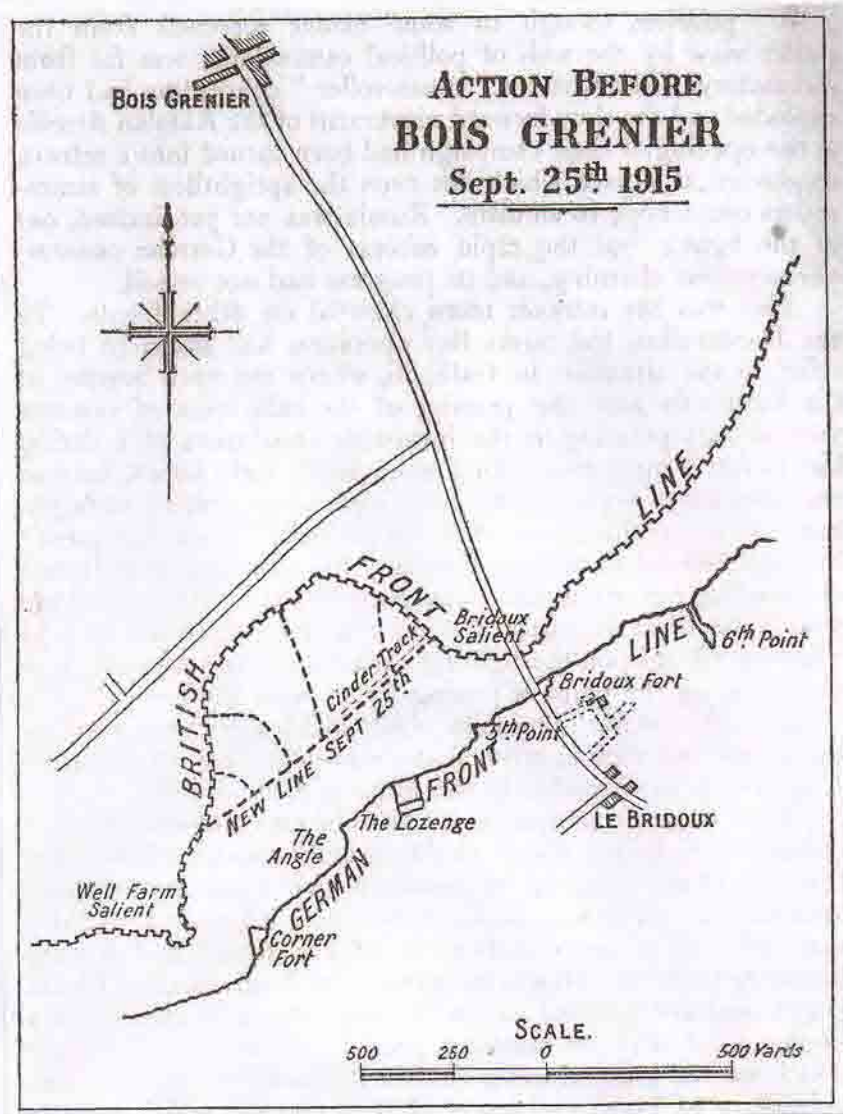
10TH - 14TH MARCH 1915

- Original British front line ———
- 1st & 2nd objective lines - - - - -
- Line gained ———
- Arcs of machine gun fire ———
- Bomb depots ———
- Trenches ———
- Assembly Trenches ———
- Dykes & water-courses ———



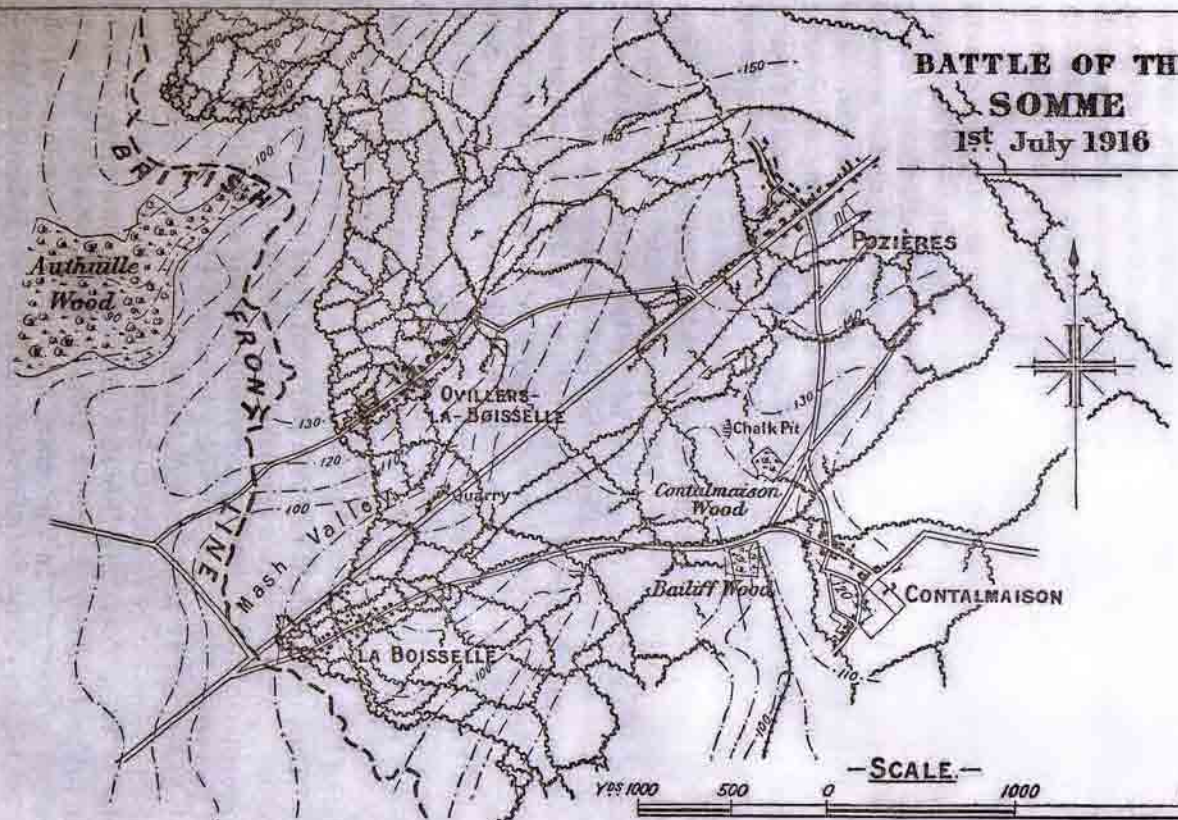
—SCALE—
 YARDS 200 150 100 50 0 200 400 600 800 YARDS

Map 2: The Action Before Bois Grenier - 25 September 1915



BATTLE OF THE SOMME

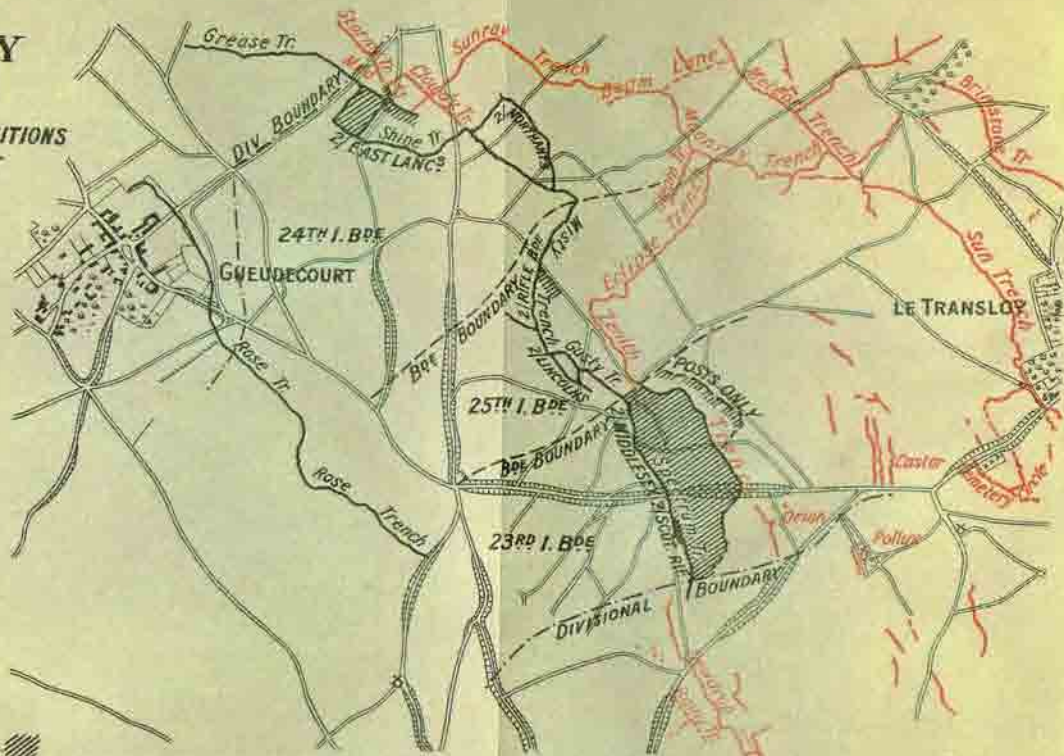
1st July 1916




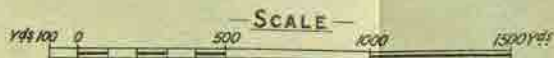
LE TRANSLOY

23RD. OCT. 1916

SHOWING FRONT LINE DISPOSITIONS
PRIOR TO THE ASSAULT
AND GROUND GAINED






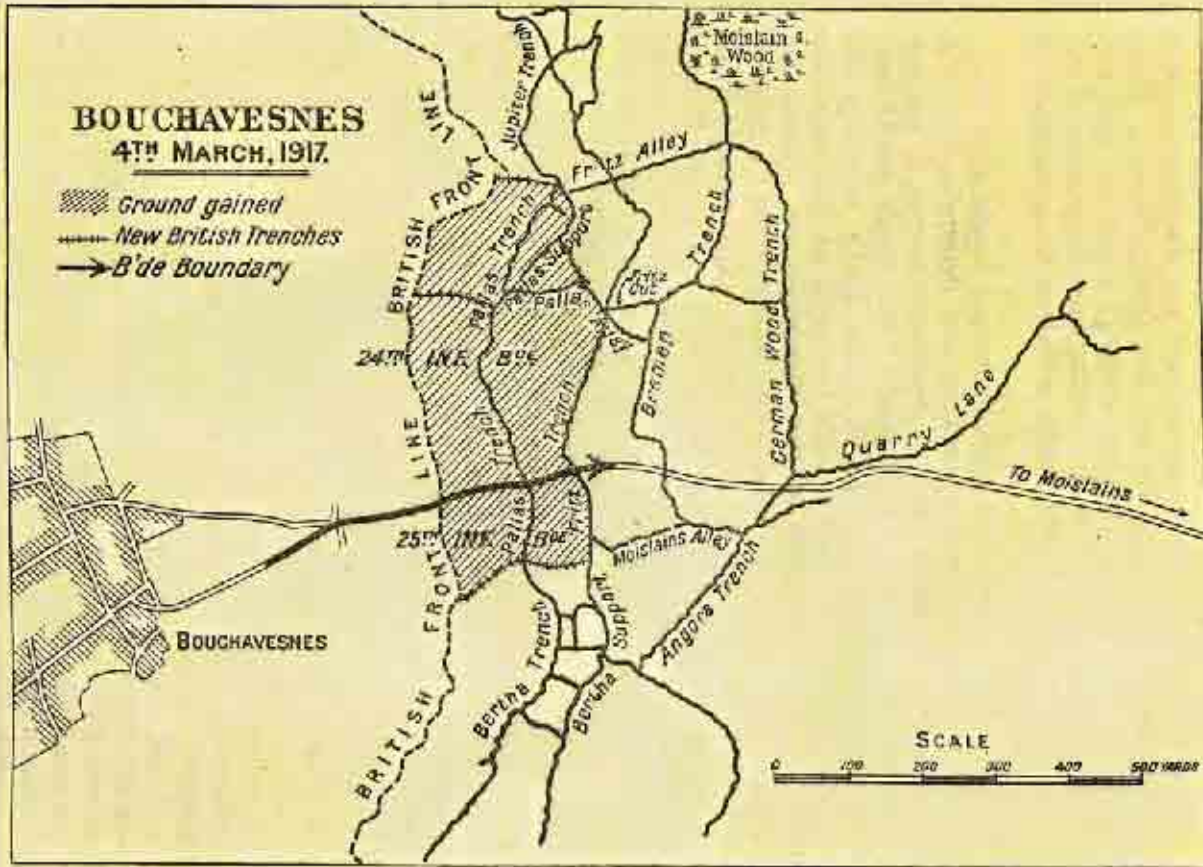
Ground gained shown thus 



BOUCHAVESNES

4TH MARCH, 1917.

-  Ground gained
-  New British Trenches
-  B'de Boundary

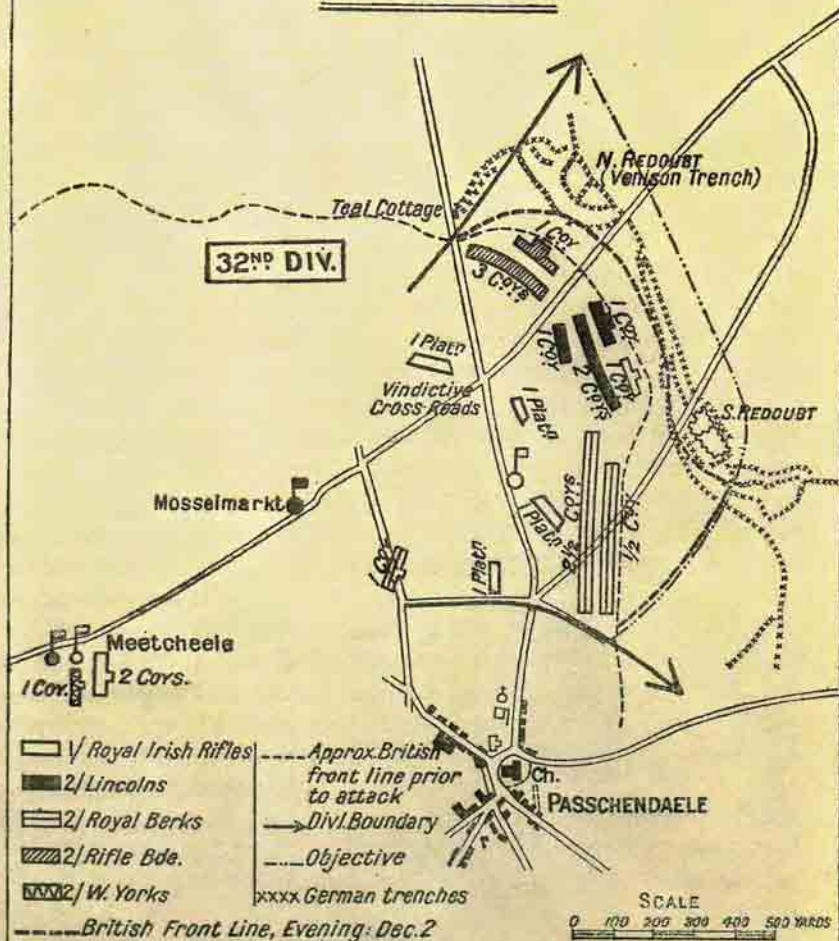


SCALE



PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE

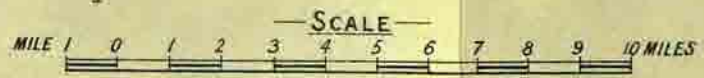
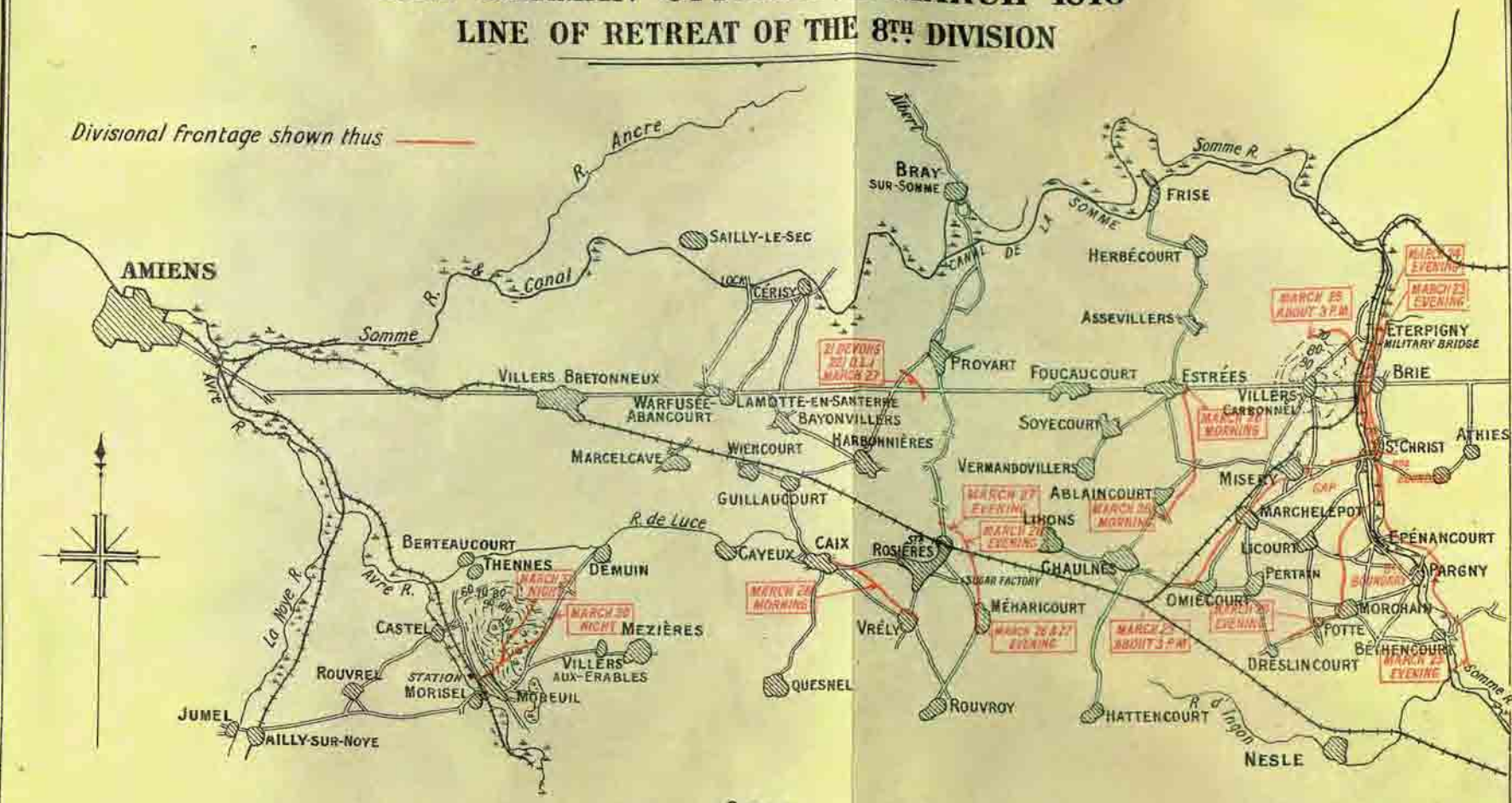
1/2 DECEMBER, 1917.



THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE MARCH 1918

LINE OF RETREAT OF THE 8TH DIVISION

Divisional frontage shown thus —



AUBIGNY





FOUILLOY

60
80

HAMEL

SITUATION 3.45 A.M. 24TH APRIL 1918.

5TH AUSTRALIAN DIV^N

-  Indicates 1 Company (unless otherwise stated)
-  Contours
-  Indicates 2ND Line Trenches
-  ARROWS Show direction and extent of German penetration.

CORPS NORTHERN BOUNDARY

APPROXIMATE FRONT LINE

← 2 Coy's 22ND D.L.I. AND 1ST Bn SHEPWOOD FORM. at Stangy Tronville 1 1/4 miles.

2ND D.L.I. less 2 Coy's

2ND ST. BERKS

2ND RIFLE B^Ns

VILLERS BRETONNEUX

2 PLATOONS

To Amiens 8 1/2 miles

To Foucaucourt

2ND NORTANTS

2 PLATOONS

2ND E. LANCS.

2ND MIDDLESEX

SWITCH 2ND DEVONS

1ST WORCESTERS

2ND W. YORKS.

To Chauines 11 miles

8TH DIVISION CACHY

SOUTHERN BOUNDARY

4TH B^N.

MARCELCAVE

58TH DIV^N

BRIGADE

2ND B^N.

173RD ST. LEVY

3RD B^N.

RESERVE CENTELLES SWITCH

Amiens-Roye Road

BRITISH SOUTHERN BOUNDARY

AUBERCOURT

DOMART

HANGARD

IGNAUCOURT

FRENCH AREA

St. LUCE


DEMUIN

COURCELLES

60

ROUVROY-FRESNES LINE

7TH-8TH OCT. 1918.

Area captured 21ST and 22ND Sept. 

SCALE

0 100 200 300 400 500

1000 YARDS

