

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
MA IN BRITISH FIRST WORLD WAR STUDIES

DISSERTATION

The 61st Division had the reputation of being a poorly performing formation. How did it acquire this reputation and was it a justified description?

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Abbreviations

AUS	Australian
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BL	Breech Loading
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
C in C	Commander in Chief
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
FSR	Field Service Regulations
GHQ	General Head Quarters (of the BEF)
GOC	General Officer Commanding
IWM	Imperial War Museum
Mk	Mark
MLM	(Rifle) Magazine Lee-Enfield
NA	The National Archive
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer
OH	Official History of the War
QF	Quick Firing
RAF	Royal Air Force
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
SAA	Small Arms Ammunition
SMLE	(Rifle) Short Magazine Lee-Enfield
TA	Territorial Army (Post 1920)
TF	Territorial Force

"I don't want Territorials - I want soldiers" Kitchener¹.

Introduction

It was a double misfortune that the 61st Division's first major action, at Fromelles on the 19th of July 1916, was a bloody failure, and that it involved the first Australian Division to go into battle on the Western Front. The attack and events surrounding the 5th Australian Division, on the left of the 61st Division, remain contentious, with the 61st Division subsequently the subject of criticism from both their own Corps commander² and the Australians.³ It was this criticism which condemned the Division to carry a reputation as a poorly performing fighting unit, even amongst its own men⁴.

The purpose of this research will be to show whether this judgement of the Fromelles action is accurate, and if the subsequent reputation of the 61st Division, is justified. As well as Fromelles the Division's performance at the Battle of Cambrai, and facing the German attack during the Spring Offensive in March 1918⁵, will be examined both individually and within the context of the "Learning Curve" of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The Division

¹ To the Rt Hon Jack Tennant MP, Under Secretary for War, when Tennant remarked that the Territorial Forces Association were ready to help to the utmost of their power. In: Alexander Barrie, *The War Underground*, Tom Donovan, London 1961.

² In his report on the Fromelles battle to First Army Advanced HQ Haking wrote: "*The 61st Division were not sufficiently imbued with the offensive spirit to go in like one man at the appointed time*" He goes on to say that: "*With two trained Divisions the position would have been a gift after the artillery bombardment; with these two new divisions there was a good chance of success but they did not attain it*". (NA WO 95/881).

³ Australian criticism has been levelled at Australian commanders, particularly the Divisional commander, Major General Sir James McCay, Lieutenant General Sir Richard Haking, the XI Corps commander, and at the commander of the 1st Army, General Charles Monro. For many Australian soldiers at the time they simply felt let down by a failure of "the British" when they continued the attack and the 61st Division did not. See: Robin S Corfield, *Don't forget me, cobber. The Battle of Fromelles*, Melbourne University Publishing, 2000, for numerous instances.

⁴ Lt W G Shipway's In his memoir of the battle, widely disseminated after the war Christopher Gallagher*, serving as the Medical Officer with the 2/5th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, wrote: in the Imperial War Museum (749 Box 90/37/1) recalls being: "*Posted to the 61st, 2/4 Gloucester's, (We called it the sixty worst)*". Care should be taken with this comment; it may just reflect the ironic humour of the British soldier.

⁵ The choice of battles is influenced by the existence in the literature of associated comments which could be regarded as critical of the 61st Division. These comments are identified in the text.

was a comparatively rare thing on the Western Front, a Second-Line Territorial Force Division. Recruiting from an area from the industrial South Birmingham and Coventry, in the North, to rural Gloucestershire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, in the South, the three Brigades⁶ of the 61st Division comprised battalions of the Royal Warwickshire, Gloucestershire, Royal Worcestershire, Royal Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Regiments.

The Territorial Force (TF) was formed in 1908 from the former Volunteer Force and Yeomanry units in order to provide a credible force to counter any invasion threat to the homeland when the Regular army was deployed to campaign abroad, a need which had seen the United Kingdom virtually defenceless between October 1899 and May 1902, during the Boer War.

Like the Yeomanry and the Volunteer Force, which they replaced, the Territorial Force was locally raised and was, essentially, a part-time local defence force.⁷ County based and administered by a County Association chaired by the Lord Lieutenant⁸, this local control, combined with the limited annual training commitment of its members caused some of the regular army and the War Office to regard the Territorial Force with suspicion and a level of contempt. Lloyd George claimed that, at the outbreak of war, Lord Kitchener described the TF as:

⁶ 182nd, 183rd and 184th Infantry Brigades.

⁷ Although a force of over 26,000 men, raised in 1899 and 1901 from the Yeomanry and the Volunteer battalions, had served in the Boer War as the Imperial Yeomanry and the City of London Imperial Volunteers when the Regular Army could not provide sufficient manpower.

⁸ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army. The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916*, Pen & Sword Military. 2007, pp. 10-11.

*Volunteers who were the joke of the Regulars – a few hundred thousand young men officered by middle aged professional men who were allowed to put on uniform and play at soldiers.*⁹

Haig, however, had a quite different view of the Territorials, and describes a conversation with Kitchener on the same evening in which he was struck by:

*K's ignorance of the progress made by the Territorial Army towards efficiency... I was very intimately acquainted, of course, with what the territorial had been doing. I was well aware how hard some units had worked and of the splendid patriotic spirit which pervaded the whole force*¹⁰.

Viscount Grey, whose friend Richard Haldane had organised the Territorial Force as part of his army reforms, records Kitchener's view as:

*He knew nothing of the Territorial Army (sic), and grievously under-estimated its value. "A Town Clerk's Army" was his estimate of it*¹¹.

Kitchener would have gained his perceptions largely from his experiences with the Imperial Yeomanry and the City Imperial Volunteers during the Boer War when the Regular Army

⁹Ibid, p 41

¹⁰ Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's diary entry for the night of the 4/5th August 1914. See: Gary Sheffield & John Bourne (Eds.) *Douglas Haig, War Diaries and Letters, 1914-1918*. BCA. 2005, p 55.

¹¹ Viscount Grey, *Twenty-Five Years, 1892-1916*. Hodder and Stoughton 1925, p 68. The Territorial Force was ignored by Kitchener in his formation of the New Armies, not only because, as well as doubts about its efficiency. He probably believed that, in addition to the Force not being entirely run by the War Office, the lack of an automatic commitment by Territorial soldiers to service abroad would simply delay the immediate need to create a large citizen army in the shortest possible time. He would have also been aware that, as well as providing a *voluntary* deployable force to support the Regular Army it also existed to provide a Home Defence force to counter any invasion threat to the United Kingdom mainland, a threat that was regarded as a real, if reducing, possibility, at least until the time of Kitchener's death in June 1916.

had been forced to rely on units they neither fully controlled, nor entirely approved of.¹² Most regular soldiers would probably regard the Territorial Force as a reworked version of the old Volunteer Battalions and Yeomanry (partly trained amateurs at best, a mere drinking club at worst), the Yeomanry officered by the country squires and the Volunteers by middle class professional men. Certainly a common theme in the accounts of Territorial officers is the perceived bias against them by their Regular counterparts. If such a perception existed in the Regular Army then any Territorial unit would have a great deal to do to prove its worth in the field.

It was, however, clear from the outset of war that those Territorial units that consented to overseas service would be needed to augment the Regular Army on the Western Front¹³. By allowing Territorial recruiting to continue, side by side with recruiting for the “New Armies”, Kitchener managed to provide both trained reinforcements to the Western Front, and to satisfy the needs of Home Defence, concurrently recruiting a quite separate and massive volunteer army which would be trained and able to undertake a major battle at the earliest possible moment.

As the Territorial Force was constituted members could elect to serve abroad, by accepting the *Imperial Service Obligation*¹⁴, or to stay in the UK as part of the Home Defence force. At the end of August 1914¹⁵, authority was given for the formation of a Territorial Force reserve

¹² Allied forces comprised 266,280 British regular troops, 109,048 British volunteer troops, 30,868 colonial troops and 52,414 South African troops. See: <http://www.angloboerwar.com> and Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979.

¹³ Or to replace Regular army garrisons in the colonies.

¹⁴ By signing Army Form E624.

¹⁵ In November 1914 it was decided that a TF Third Line would be formed while the Second-Line units would take over the First Line unit's tasks on the latter's deployment abroad. (The Third-Line was based in the Regimental Head Quarters and responsible for recruiting and supplying drafts to the First and Second-Lines, until direct recruiting into the TF was stopped in December 1915 and recruits (later conscripts) allocated as required. (See: Beckett & Simpson, *A Nation in Arms*, Manchester University Press, 1985)). No complete Divisions of the Third Line were ever formed.

(or Second-Line), formed. The Second-Line included those men who were under age, or had not volunteered for service abroad or were otherwise unfit or over age for service overseas¹⁶. These under resourced formations were responsible for recruiting and training Territorial Force soldiers and officers to provide drafts for the first line TF divisions serving abroad¹⁷.

However, the decreasing supply of volunteers forced the government into the imposition of conscription in early 1916. This made the whole of the Territorial Force, including those who had elected not to go abroad, liable to full deployment¹⁸.

At a time of critical manpower shortages manning the Second-Line units was a major challenge. While training to deploy overseas the Second-Line divisions still found themselves liable to supply drafts of trained soldiers to First-Line units¹⁹. Additionally, those divisions recruiting in industrial areas, found their existing manpower “combed out” for skilled men needed in the factories as war manufacturing increased output to fulfil military needs. Eventually drafts of men recently converted from Home Service, were drafted into Second-Line units to make up numbers²⁰. It would be remarkable if units with such a background were not regarded with a certain amount of scepticism by the BEF.

¹⁶ See: Charles Messenger, *Call to Arms, The British Army 1914-1918*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005, Chapter 5, pp.84-93.

¹⁷ In London alone 450,000 men were accepted (one-seventh of the total TF recruitment between 1914-1918). See: OH, *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 2B* Ed. Maj. A F Becke, HMSO, (Late 1930s), p i.

¹⁸ The Military Service Act of 27th January 1916, coming into effect on the 2nd of March, applied to single men between the ages of 18 and 41. The act was extended to encompass married men on the 25th of May 1916. This also applied to men serving with the TF. Second line TF soldiers were given a choice of either accepting the Imperial Service Obligation, or being discharged and conscripted. See: Footnote 33.

¹⁹ *A Nation in Arms*, See Ian Beckett, chapter 5, “The Territorial Force”, pp 127-163.

²⁰ Colonel Sir Geoffrey Christie-Miller. Christie –Miller papers. IWM 80/32/1.

In total seventy-four²¹ British infantry divisions²² were formed in the United Kingdom during the First World War, of which sixty-five were involved in combat. A further eight mounted divisions were formed, all of which saw combat. Of these combat divisions thirteen were Second-Line Territorial Force formations intended for service abroad. However, five never left the United Kingdom, leaving only eight, of which one served only in Ireland, one served in Salonika and Egypt, and six served on the Western Front²³. Consequently, as far as the 61st Division is concerned, there is little mention in the mainstream historical literature, either contemporary or modern, of what would have been regarded as a very ordinary division formed of men who may not have volunteered for the front at the outbreak of war, and which joined the BEF only in May 1916.

As recruiting for the Territorial Force proceeded permission was given to increase the Second-Line establishments, to 50% in late December of 1914, and to 100% in early 1915.²⁴

The 61st Division came into being as the 2nd (South Midland) Division²⁵. Many of the Second-Line battalions making up the Division had been in existence since September and October 1914, the soldiers living at home and with little in the way of uniform or equipment, since

²¹ There were Twelve Regular Army, fifteen 1st Line TF, thirty one New Army (including the Royal Naval Division) and, thirteen 2nd Line TF. there were also three Home Service Divisions (71st-73rd) and in addition one (75th) formed in Egypt and one (70th) was listed but never formed. The 2nd Line TF Divisions were very much the last scrapings from the manpower barrel. See: OH, *Order of Battle of Divisions Parts 1, 2A, 2B and 3*, Ed. Maj. A F Becke, HMSO, (Late 1930s).

²² A division is the basic, independent, manoeuvre unit of an army. The British infantry division in the First World War was, by 1918, 16,000 men strong on paper, with three infantry brigades. Divisions were often undermanned, particularly after late 1917. See: John Ellis & Micheal Cox, *The World War 1 Databook*. Aurum, 1993.

²³ Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions, parts 1-3b*, HMSO, 1934-1938.

²⁴ A Unit establishment table is published for each unit the Army is authorised to raise. This table accounts for each man in the unit by job and varies according to peace time (100%) manning and war-time (100% +) manning. Since establishment is linked to financial expenditure and resource availability the levels of manning as the army increased in size, were tightly controlled.

²⁵ The First Line units, which were already grouped in a pre war T F Division, the 48th (South Midland) Division, had already formed in Chelmsford and left for service in France in March 1915.

priority was, understandably, given to equipping and training the First-Line battalions for overseas service.

Uniforms arrived in October 1914 and in January 1915 the Division formed in its temporary war station at Northampton as part of the First Army, Central Force. Training consisted largely of route marches to improve fitness. Up to date rifles were in short supply. The Regular Army had first call on the new (1907) Short Magazine Lee Enfield (SMLE)²⁶, with some Territorial Force First-Line units going to war with the older, longer, Rifle, Magazine, Lee-Enfield (MLE). Second-Line Territorial Force units had no rifles at first, eventually being supplied with Japanese Arisaka rifles for initial musketry training during 1915.²⁷

Field gunners trained with obsolete French 90mm field guns and 5” British howitzers. By the end of 1915 a small quantity of obsolescent 15-pounder field guns given up by First Line Territorial Force gunners were being delivered but it was not until early in 1916 that the Second Line gunners got modern, 18 pounder, QF²⁸ field guns and 4.5” howitzers.

Initially transport was in such short supply that each battalion was issued with six unbroken mules.

In April 1915 the Division replaced their parent First-Line 48th (South Midland) Division in the Chelmsford area on the latter’s departure for France. While at Chelmsford the Division,

²⁶ Rifle, Short, Magazine, Lee- Enfield, A shortened rifle with a ten round box magazine developed by James Paris Lee and the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield Lock. Probably the best bolt action military rifle ever made, it survived in British service until 1957.

²⁷ During 1914 Great Britain purchased 150,000 Arisaka Type 30 and Type 38 rifles and carbines from Japan. These were issued to the British Army as the: 'Rifle, Magazine, .256in Pattern 1900' (T30) and 'Rifle, Magazine, .256in Pattern 1907' (T38) and used until 1916. In 1916 128,000 (almost all) of these weapons were sold/supplied to Russia. The Royal Navy were issued 20,000 Arisakas in June 1915 to free up SMLE rifles for Land service. These later being replaced by the doubtful Canadian Ross rifle! See: John Walter, *Rifles of the World*, Krause Publications, 2006, p 33.

²⁸ Quick Firing. Fitted with an interrupted screw thread breech which increased the speed of reloading and was an immense improvement over older Breech Loaded (BL) guns.

as part of Third Army, Central Force, was responsible for the manning and maintenance of fourteen miles of the London defences.

Equipment was still extremely scarce with the newly formed machine gun sections being equipped either with wooden Lewis guns or obsolete maxims. Horses continued to be in short supply and of varying quality²⁹. In August 1915 the Divisional CRA recorded the arrival of a draft of 300 riding horses, noting “*The general stamp of these horses cannot be looked upon as satisfactory.*” He also had concerns over accommodation for both men and horses:

Extra stabling is required to accommodate those horses at present in the open before the setting in of winter. The clay soil of Essex is particularly adverse to the health of horses in the open. Further hutting for R.A. for the winter is urgently required in view of the many and grave disadvantages of billeting³⁰.

The manning situation was also a cause for concern. The flood of recruits of late 1914 had largely gone³¹ and replacements were of less certain quality. Geoffrey Christie-Miller, a Territorial Force officer with the 2/1st Battalion the Buckinghamshire Regiment demonstrated the perennial problem this presented to those that train soldiers when, after a difficult meeting with a Regular Army staff officer, he records that:

(He).....could not be made to see that they were the class of men who, if their kit was completed and locked in a room with them for six hours, would be deficient of half of

²⁹ The 2/5th Gloucestershire Regiment receiving an assortment of mounts including race horses, cab horses, mules and at least one milk delivery horse, Old Tom, who stopped at every gate and could not be persuaded to go faster than a walk. A F Barnes, *The Story of the 2/5th Battalion Gloucestershire Regt* Crypt House Press 1930, Facsimile by Naval & Military Press, 2008, p 20.

³⁰ 61st Divisional Artillery war diary, August 1915. NA WO 95/3037.

³¹ By Nov 1915 the Divisions battalions had been reduced to an average of 600 men.

*it at the end of the time*³².

This situation was by no means unique as both the Territorial Force and the Kitchener Armies struggled to house, train and equip themselves, lacking both adequate training facilities and barrack accommodation,³³ during the unprecedented expansion of the British Army in the first two years of the war.

Training, however, progressed. The War Diary summary of the 2/4th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, for August 1915 was able to record that each company had carried out a course in trench digging, and spent 24 hours in trenches at Maldon, and that officers and NCOs had attended lectures on trench warfare, Staff lectures on the tactical handling of machine guns, map reading and the siting of outposts. The Battalion was inspected by the Divisional commander³⁴ on the 4th August and by Field Marshal Earl Kitchener on the 6th. In December 1915 the Japanese Arisaka rifles were replaced with British SMLE .303 rifles³⁵. Specialist sniper, machine gun and signal training are all recorded as being undertaken.

The Division suffered from the manning problems affecting all Second-Line Territorial Force units, exacerbated by recruiting in the heavily industrialised West Midlands area.

The continual need to furnish drafts for the First-Line, however, combined with the shedding of men unfit for foreign service, and those now required in the armaments industry, inevitably would have had a disruptive effect on training. In October 1915 the 2/6th Battalion, The Royal

³² Christie-Miller, op cit, Vol 1. This situation is neither unique nor, indeed, unusual. The writer has trained both TA soldiers in the 1970s and Regular Army recruits in the 1980s, of whom the same remarks could be made.

³³ The New Armies were, if anything, worse off. The Territorials were usually billeted in private houses until hutted camps were available but the New Army men often found themselves in leaking bell tents pitched in muddy fields as their camps were built during the autumn and winter of 1914. Eventually the War Office extended the billeting policy to the New Armies resulting in 800,000 soldiers being billeted in civilian premises during the winter of 1914-15. See: Simkins, op cit, chapter 9.

³⁴ Brigadier-General the Marquis of Salisbury.

Warwickshire Regiment, which recruited in Birmingham, was reduced to 600 men by having to supply drafts to the First-Line *before* being addressed by Ministry of Munitions representatives who were trawling for trained men to return to the armaments industry. This resulted in “many men”³⁶ leaving to return to the factories. In April 1915 the 2/4th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, had 927 other ranks. By the 25th of June 1915 its strength had dropped to 492 other ranks.

In February 1916 the Division, warned for foreign service, moved to Salisbury Plain in order to carry out final training before deploying to France. Some officers of the Division went on familiarisation visits to the Front during this period and musketry courses were fired with the new rifles³⁷. Training in the new skills of trench warfare and bombing were undertaken by the battalions while artillery, machine gun crews and signallers undertook specialist training to reach the necessary standards required³⁸.

At the same time battalions were made up to strength by drafts from the Third-Line and Home Service units that had been formed from those soldiers who had not initially undertaken the Imperial Service obligation, and who were now liable to deployment under the Military Service Act.³⁹ The Midlands men of the 61st Division found themselves

³⁶ J J Shannessy, *The History of the 2/6th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 1914-1919*, Cornish Bros, 1929, p. 14. See also: Simkins, *op cit*, p312. Over a 1.5 million men were subject to such addresses between late September and mid November 1915. By late 1916 almost 52,000 soldiers had returned to the munitions factories.

³⁷ The Mk III SMLE was sighted for use with Mk VII high velocity ammunition. During training older Mk VI ammunition was sometimes issued, which resulted in an 18” drop in trajectory at 200 yards range. Additionally much new ammunition bought from contractors new to its manufacture could be unreliable. The New Army and Territorials training hurriedly with their new rifles in early 1916 had little chance of achieving the marksmanship standard of the average pre war regular.

³⁸ As a result the Machine Gun companies did not move overseas until the 19th and 20th of June 1916, a month after the arrival of the rest of the Division.

³⁹ The First Military Service Acts, of course, also applied to men serving with the TF. Territorial terms of service were such that a man could not be compulsorily moved to a different cap badge. Those men who had voluntarily taken the Imperial Obligation immediately the First Military Service Act was announced had been promised both a month’s leave and service only with the Regiment they had joined. Such was the anger

reinforced by men from Scotland, Wales, the North of England, Liverpool and the West Country, few of whom could be expected to be up to the standard of training reached by the existing men of the Division, and many of whom were justifiably disgruntled at finding themselves in regiments for which they felt no territorial links.

In understanding the difficulties facing the BEF at this stage of the war it is necessary to acknowledge a fact too often ignored by critics of the way in which the war was fought, simply that the initiatives of the German army inevitably sought to exploit weaknesses in the allied forces. One such initiative was the major German offensive at the French at Verdun, begun on the 21st of February 1916. This meant that a battle of attrition had to be undertaken in France earlier than Haig either wished or was able to properly prepare for, forced on him by the need to support Joffre and the French army.

The Somme offensive was a joint initiative forced upon the French by the Germans, and upon the British by the consequent needs of the French for the allied army to undertake a “bataille d’usure” elsewhere on the Western Front. This, it was hoped, would reduce the German ability to continue attacking at Verdun, and would also result in the destruction of the Germans reserves⁴⁰.

In his diary entry for the 29th March Haig, writing of a meeting with Kitchener, says:

among this group when moved to deploying Second-Line units in other cap badges that Field Marshal Lord French (now GOC Home Forces), was ordered to tour each battalion effected and explain the urgency of the situation to the drafted men. These parades were not well received and the men in at least one of the Royal Warwickshire battalions displayed open dissatisfaction. Christie-Miller op cit. For a fuller explanation see: Ian Becket, *The Territorial Force*, in Beckett and Simpson (Eds.), *A Nation in Arms, A social study of the British army in the First World War*, Manchester University Press, 1985, chapter 5.

⁴⁰ Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (Eds.) *Douglas Haig, War diaries and letters, 1914-1918*, BCA, 2005, entry for 15th February 1916.

“I have not got an Army in France really, but a collection of divisions untrained for the field. (The actual fighting Army will be evolved from them).⁴¹

This was a blunt statement of fact. The New Army and Territorial Divisions being assembled for the fighting of Summer 1916 could not be regarded as anything more than partly trained, but Haig simply had no choice in the matter.

On the 25th of May, under its new General Officer Commanding, Major-General Colin John Mackenzie, the 61st Division landed at Le Havre, the first Second-Line division to arrive in France and the only one that would be committed to battle on the Western Front in 1916.

⁴¹ Sheffield & Bourne, op cit,

Chapter 1

Fromelles, Cambrai and the Spring Offensive 1918

As the BEF expanded during 1916 seven new Corps either arrived in France from other deployments, or were created from scratch, between the 15th November 1915 and June 1916. XIII Corps followed by XIV, XV, XVII Corps formed in France with VIII and IX Corps arriving from Gallipoli. Each of the three Armies⁴² kept a Corps in reserve composed of divisions under training, the XVII Corps forming as a general reserve.

The Official History remarks that:

The arrival of these reinforcements was slow and spread over a period of six months, and that after their arrival they had to be trained and gradually initiated into the methods of warfare on the Western Front⁴³.

The Battle of Fromelles (1916).

The 61st Division moved rapidly to the front line once it reached France on the 25th May 1916. Six days later, on the night of the 31st, elements of the Division were in the front line, under instruction⁴⁴, to the left of Neuve Chapelle as part of the XI Corps. It is hard to see

⁴² The Fourth Army formed in France in February 1916 and the Fifth Army (known as the Reserve Army until 30th October 1916) formed on the 22nd of May 1916. See: Becke, *OH, Order of Battle of Divisions, Pt 4*. June 1944 (in facsimile, The Naval & Military Press, 2007).

⁴³ *OH, Operations in France & Belgium 1916 (Vol. I), Sir Douglas Haig's Command to 1 July, Battle of the Somme.* pp.23-25.

⁴⁴ The 61st Division relieved the 38th (Welsh) Division, a New Army formation which had, itself, only arrived in France in December 1915. See: Becke, *Op cit*, Part 3. "Instruction" seems to have consisted of frequent raids

quite how this qualifies as “trained and gradually initiated”, although the XI Corps area was regarded as a quiet “nursery” sector. In a low lying area between Armentieres and Lens, in front of the small town of Laventie, the front lines were situated on ground with such a high water table that digging trenches was not a practical proposition. Both sides made use of breastworks, barriers of soil and sandbags, built six to seven feet above ground level. On the German side the low Aubers Ridge, running between the villages of Aubers and Fromelles, gave the Germans a considerable tactical advantage both for observation and artillery placement.

To the south the great battle of attrition on the Somme started on the 1st of July 1916. The Fromelles operation, originally scheduled for the 17th of July, was designed as a demonstration with limited objectives, to take and hold the German front line in the area in front of the Aubers Ridge, between Fromelles and Aubers⁴⁵.

An attempt to take the Aubers Ridge itself, a year earlier, in May 1915, had met with complete failure⁴⁶. The northern part of this attack, took place in almost exactly the same sector of the line that would be occupied by the 5th Australian Division in July 1916. After some initial success the attack bogged down on areas of uncut wire, undamaged German

on the German front lines to foster “The offensive spirit”. While undertaken with some enthusiasm they caused consistent casualties within the Division.

⁴⁵ With the aim of dissuading the Germans from deploying divisions from the Artois front to reinforce their forces on the Somme.

⁴⁶ The attacking 8th Division was composed almost entirely of seasoned Regular army battalions, most of which had been acting as garrison troops throughout the Empire at the outbreak of war. It had been fighting in France since November 1914, mainly in the Artois area. It had fought twice at Neuve Chappelle before taking part in the Battle of Aubers Ridge. See: Becke, *Order of Battle of Divisions. part 1, The Regular British Divisions*. The assault brigades were the 24th Brigade, under Brigadier-General R S Oxley, and the 25th Brigade, under Brigadier-General A W G Lowrey Cole (who was to die on the forward parapet of the British breastworks attempting to stem a retirement by British troops). The 39 guns and howitzers of No. 2 Heavy Artillery Regiment, supporting the attack, had considerable accuracy problems caused by barrel wear and faulty ammunition. There were particular problems with the 4.7 inch shells, some dropping up to 500 yards behind the British support line. Shells were also still in very short supply in early 1915. See: OH, *Operations in France & Belgium, 1915, (Vol. II) Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos*, p33.

breastworks⁴⁷ and excellently sited German machine guns⁴⁸. Those areas of German front line initially penetrated by the British were quickly isolated and the attackers destroyed.

In 1915 Douglas Haig was GOC, First Army, and his conclusions on the outcome of the Aubers Ridge battle, noted in his diary on the 11th of May, included:

1. The defences in our front are so carefully (and strongly made), and mutual support with machine guns is so complete, that (in order to demolish them a) long methodical bombardment will be necessary (by heavy artillery [guns and howitzers] before infantry are sent forward to attack)⁴⁹

Whether the planners of First Army or of XI Corps bore these problems in mind in June 1916, as planning went forward for the Battle of Fromelles, is not clear. Haking, by now commanding XI Corps, had been the GOC of the 1st Division on May 1915, and involved in the Southern portion of the Aubers Ridge attack, which had failed for similar reasons to that in the North. Moreover, in 1916, XI Corps was facing the same enemy, the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division, which had occupied the position in front of Fromelles since the advent of trench warfare stabilised the front, in late 1914, and which had been industriously developing its defences ever since. Unusually the Germans had chosen to develop the ridge line itself, a mile or so behind the front line, where the German artillery observers had excellent views of the British lines. The front line breastworks had no real second line in the normal sense, any attacker having to traverse an area heavily covered by machine guns, often in concrete

⁴⁷ Experiments using 18 pounder guns firing HE shells at short range had shown they were effective at destroying breastworks, but only two guns were brought forward (to within 350 yards of the German line), and one was unable to fire accurately. See: Sheffield and Bourne, Op cit, pp. 111 and 116, and OH Op cit, p 34.

⁴⁸ These destroyed the attackers, while an effective bombardment of the British breastworks and no man's land prevented reinforcements getting forward or attacking troops withdrawing, and caused chaos in the British front line.

⁴⁹ Sheffield and Bourne, Op cit, p 122.

bunkers⁵⁰, and covered by artillery fire before reaching the secondary defensive positions on the front of the ridge itself. This was such a well sited defensive system that it remained in German hands until the eventual German retreat to the Hindenburg Line in 1918.

It is clear that, as planning for the limited diversionary attack proposed at Fromelles, proceeded, Haig, now C-in-C of the BEF, was concerned about the level of artillery support proposed for this operation. However, at the same time he was also dealing with the early, and mixed, results of his great battle on the Somme, and would have been mindful of the guidance of Field Service Regulations as to giving latitude to “the man on the spot”, in allowing his commanders to make their own decisions.

On the 15th of July he had read, and approved, the plan of attack. At the bottom, in his trademark blue pencil he wrote:

CGS;

Approved, except that the infantry sh(oul)d not be sent in to attack unless an adequate supply of guns & am(munitio)n for counter battery work is provided – This depends partly on what guns enemy shows. DH⁵¹

On July the 16th Major-General R H K Butler, Haig’s Deputy Chief of General Staff, met General Sir Herbert Plumer, Major-General Charles (Tim) Harington, Plumer’s Major-General, General Staff, General Sir Richard Haking, Commander XI Corps and Major-General G de S Barrow (Monro’s Major-General, General Staff, Monro himself not

⁵⁰ OH *Military Operations, France & Belgium, 1916, Vol 2*, p 121. The industrial city of Lille, only eleven miles away, was (and is) a major producer of cement. The substantial and numerous concrete fortifications still on the Aubers Ridge show that the Germans made extensive use of this local resource.

⁵¹ NA WO 158/186.

attending.) at First Army headquarters. Butler's report to Haig opens with the statement that he had pointed out that he (Haig):

...did not wish the infantry attack to take place unless it was considered that the artillery preparation had been adequate and that the Commanders were satisfied they had sufficient artillery and sufficient ammunition not only to make the success of the attack assured but to enable the troops to retain and consolidate the trenches gained⁵²

This point was discussed at length.

After this meeting a conversation took place between Monro, Plumer, Haking and Butler, in which Monro stated that he did not wish to cancel the attack, a view endorsed by all the commanders present. Haking questioned whether, if the attack was a success, he could go on to attempt to take the Aubers Ridge. Harrington's reply was a simple "No", followed by a reminder that the C in C's intention was strictly limited to the planned objectives.

On the following day, in a covering letter from GHQ, accompanying the notes of Harrington's meeting of the previous day, Haig's wishes are made clear, for the third time, to Sir Charles Monro. Haig wishes the attack to take place:

Providing always that General Charles Monro is satisfied that the resources at his disposal, including ammunition, are adequate both for the preparation and execution of the enterprise⁵³

Despite Haig's obvious concern the supporting gun-fire on the 19th proved inadequate to destroy all the German front line defences and cut all the wire in front of them. In particular

⁵² Memorandum of visit to First Army dated Sunday 16th July 1916. NA WO 158/186, First Army File No. 4, 5 July – Mid November 1916.

⁵³ . NA WO 158/186. (Author's underlining).

the machine guns were left largely intact and un-neutralised in two key locations, known as the Sugarloaf and the Wick Salient⁵⁴. As in 1915 carefully sited machine gun fire would prove the decisive factor in British failure.

The defences on the Sugarloaf, at the boundary between the British and Australian divisions were neither penetrated nor entered. Some reports suggest that machine gun fire from this location continued throughout the preparatory barrage. Situated with a field of fire enabling the German machine gunners to enfilade both the whole of the Australian front line and most of the 61st Division front, the destruction or capture of this strongpoint was crucial to the success of the attack.

A second strong point, in front of the right hand brigade of the 61st Division attack, the Wick Salient, also remained in action and was not entered by the attacking force. Able to enfilade the area attacked by the right hand two British brigades, it had an ideal tactical placement and could produce interlocking and overlapping fire in conjunction with the Sugarloaf⁵⁵. Without the destruction of at least one, and preferably both, of these emplacements any advance by the five left hand battalions of the 61st Division attack were bound to take severe casualties as long as the German machine gunners could keep their guns in action.

In the event only on the extreme left and right of the whole attack front was any real success gained. In the centre the front lines were nearly 400 yards apart, giving the Germans ample time to prepare once the preparatory barrage lifted. German riflemen and machine gunners, firing from the top of the breastworks, prevented any attacker who had survived the sustained machine gun fire sweeping no man's land from entering the German front line.

⁵⁴ See: Appendix A, maps 1 & 2.

⁵⁵ See: Appendix A, map 3.

On the left of the 61st Division attack both the 2/4th Battalion the Royal Berkshire Regiment and the 2/1st battalion the Buckinghamshire Regiment, which had been in the front line trenches since 9am, had already incurred heavy casualties before the attack started.

Geoffrey Christie-Miller, an officer with the Buckinghamshire Regiment, recalled the battalion's experience:

Our front line was battered about and being packed with troops during this 7 hours counter bombardment (while waiting to attack), the casualties were heavy and in our case estimated at over 100.

... no effective destructive (sic) or neutralising of the Hun infantry, Artillery or M.G.s took place. The total effect of our artillery preparation on the Hun resistance was Nil⁵⁶.

When the time came.....for the assaulting infantry to move out the sally ports⁵⁷ were effectively covered by machine gun fire and progress was impossible⁵⁸.

The Berks (2/4th Royal Berkshire, on the immediate left) lost a lot of men persevering, and few of the Battalion were seen to reach "no man's land"⁵⁹

As well as the sally ports Christie-Miller's battalion also made use of Rhonda sap, a trench previously dug across no man's land towards the Sugarloaf, and succeeded in forming up:

⁵⁶ IWM. 80/32/1 Papers of Col Sir Geoffrey Christie-Miller.

⁵⁷ The Australians went over the top of the breastworks. The 61st Division were ordered to use sally ports, access tunnels broken through the breastworks onto no man's land.

⁵⁸ The sally ports had been dug by the engineers, but had not broken through the front of the breastworks, which was done immediately prior to the deployment into no man's land. Delays in breaking through and congestion as the engineers tried to get back as the infantry tried to get forward led to delays, while German machine gunning of some sally ports meant they could not be used, hence Haking's comment on the Division not going forward "like one man". The instruction to use sally ports was Haking's.

⁵⁹ Christie-Miller, Op cit.

*At zero the Battalion advanced. The advance has been described to me as magnificent, not a man was seen to waver. The fire brought to bear was annihilating. Hardly a man if any, reached the German parapet.*⁶⁰

This hardly supports the suggestion that the Division lacked offensive spirit. Christie-Miller estimated that 300 men went forward and less than 100 got back.

On the 61st Division's centre sector the 2/4th Battalion, the Gloucestershire Regiment, attacked as the left hand battalion of 183 Brigade. J D Wyatt, a regular officer from the Northamptonshire Regiment, wounded at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 and posted to the 2/4th Gloucesters on his recovery in early July 1916 wrote⁶¹:

*Attacking Companies had started to go over the parapet⁶² when the bombardment lifted and were met immediately by a very heavy machine gun fire. The leading platoons were practically wiped out at once and no one could get any further. The other Regiments on our flanks got it worse if anything.*⁶³

Wyatt's account is confirmed by his Commanding Officer's account to Brigade Headquarters:

5.50pm. At this point in the operations a heavy machine gun fire was opened on D Coy in the open and the men were driven back into the Sally Port of sap 9 where I

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ IWM, 83/12/1 Papers of Lt Col J D Wyatt.

⁶² Here a figure of speech. Most of the 61st Division deployed, as ordered, through the sally. The Australians, in contrast, went "over the top" by climbing over the breastworks, thus avoiding bunching.

⁶³ 183 Brigade would have been in the overlapping zone of fire from machine guns on the Wick Salient and the Sugarloaf. See map 3 Appendix A.

was standing. This machine gun fire was particularly heavy and appeared to come from the Front and Right Front from at least 5 or 6 M.G.s⁶⁴

The battalion lost 162 men in the attack. Together with those already lost during time in the line the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel J A Tupman, goes on to note:

I consider that as the casualties during the recent operations are approaching 50% of our trench strength, an opportunity should be taken, as soon as possible, to give the time necessary for a complete re-organisation⁶⁵.

Only on the extreme right of the attack, where the front lines were only 200 yards apart, and the German breastworks severely damaged, did a party of 2/7th Battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment succeed in crossing the German front line and penetrating the German position. The failure of the 2/6th Battalion, on their left, to penetrate the Wick Salient left them open to infiltration attacks by the defenders on both flanks. Once the Germans had retaken the front line the 2/7th men furthest forward were isolated and surrounded. All were subsequently killed.⁶⁶

On the extreme left of the 5th Australian Division attack, where the front lines were also close together, the 8th Australian Brigade had succeeded in crossing the German front line only to find no second line trenches to consolidate on, only water filled ditches. With consolidation impossible the Australians on the extreme left, like the British on the extreme right, were vulnerable to flank attack and infiltration while the German domination of no

⁶⁴ NA WO 95/3060. CO's report to 183 Bde. Attachment to War Diary, 2/4th Gloucestershire Regiment, July 1916.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ These men are almost certainly those buried by the Germans three days later behind the village of Aubers, in what is now the Aubers Commonwealth War Graves cemetery. The first block of 100 graves on the left as the cemetery is entered are almost certainly those of the 2/7th R Warwicks killed in and beyond the German front line.

man's land made reinforcement impractical. Over the next twelve hours the Australians were driven back to their own lines.

In common with most battles on the Western Front, once the troops went forward commanders lost the ability to read the battle and exert control. What information did get back to Battalion and Brigade Headquarters was often partial or simply wrong. Once failure to take the German front line was confirmed all that could be done was to get the survivors back into their own front lines. The war diary of the 61st Divisional artillery⁶⁷ contains a tragic narrative of messages from artillery Observation Posts which illustrate the confusion in the heat of battle, and the consequent difficulties caused in the decision making process:

6.5 pm R.G. (Right Group,[Guns supporting 182 Brigade]) report infantry rushing forward to German parapet. Infantry are in.

6.12 pm .C.G. (Centre Group, [Guns supporting 183 Brigade]) report infantry are advancing.

6.20 pm. L.G. (Left Group, [Guns supporting 184 Brigade]) report that in the right of left group attack does not seem to have started.

6.25pm 184th Brigade in and consolidating.

6.30pm R.G. Germans standing on parapet and firing rifles from WICK.

6.41pm R.G report 6th Warwicks not across. Have turned the 18 pounder batteries on to WICK.

6.51pm L.G. report Germans holding their parapet strongly all along. No sign of our people.

⁶⁷ NA WO 95/3037. War Diary HQ RA 61st Division July 1916.

7.10pm C.G. report that the left battalion (2/4th battalion, the Gloucestershire Regiment) sent message saying they had been repulsed by MG fire, but that we occupy trenches on either side.

7.20pm WICK SALIENT will be assaulted at 8.10pm.

7.50pm Orders received from 61 Division that bombardment of WICK and whole of left sector to continue to 9pm.

One hour and forty five minutes separate the first message from the last, which is the last message recorded during the action.

Aftermath.

The results of the 61st Division's first battle have always been overshadowed by a remark in the XI Corps Commander's after action report to the GOC First Army⁶⁸, seeking to explain the failure of the attack, Lieutenant General Sir Richard Haking, wrote:

The 61st Division were not sufficiently imbued with the offensive spirit to go in like one man at the appointed time⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Haking's motive for attempting to blame the 61st Division for the failure at Fromelles may well have been informed by the events at Gommecourt surrounding the 46th Division on the 1st of July. The planning of that battle, as at Fromelles, was flawed and the Corps Commander, [Lieutenant General Thomas D'Oyly Snow](#), saw fit to blame the 46th, reporting that "the 46th Division ... showed a lack of offensive spirit", then going on to criticise the Divisional Commander personally. As a result the Army Commander, Allenby, sacked the 46th Division Commander, [Major General](#) Edward James Montagu-Stuart-Wortley, five days later. Haking did not name Mackenzie, but was very possibly seeking to avoid criticism of his planning and conduct of the battle, in a climate where sackings for bad performance led to considerable scope, on the part of senior commanders, to "scapegoat" subordinates.

⁶⁹ XI Corps report to Advanced Headquarters First Army, NA WO 95/3055. It was this comment, which would have been seen by officers in the 5th Australian Division, which caused many Australians to jump to the conclusion that the 61st Division, by failing to take the Sugarloaf, had also caused the failure of their part of the attack. Australian soldiers on the Western front were not noted for reticence and it may be assumed that the, less than justified, Australian opinion of the 61st Division would be widely known.

Haking also stated that:

*...I am quite convinced with two good divisions we can carry and hold the line whenever it is required.*⁷⁰

And:

*With two trained Divisions the position would have been a gift after the artillery bombardment.*⁷¹

Haking had, however, begun his report with what might be regarded as a defensive statement:

*Briefly speaking, the Artillery preparation was adequate, there were sufficient guns and sufficient ammunition. The wire was properly cut and the assaulting Battalions had a clear run into the enemy's trenches*⁷²

He had good reason to be defensive. Not only had he repeatedly given assurances that his artillery preparations were adequate, he had personal experience of what was required of artillery on the same battlefield and certainly should have known that the battle he had promoted was based on flawed planning.

The question of guns is crucial to an understanding of the outcome in 1916, and to Haking's immediate response to that outcome. On the 9th of May 1915 two experienced infantry brigades had attacked on a frontage of 1400 yards. While the guns and ammunition were poor the gunners were practiced. The attack had foundered on well sited German machine guns combined with a German artillery barrage on the British front line and no man's land. In

⁷⁰ Ibid..

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

1916 six infantry brigades attacked on a front of 4500 yards. The infantry were inexperienced⁷³ and while the guns were generally good they were hardly more plentiful, and the field gunners were totally untried. The attack would fail for precisely the same reasons as that of 1915.

When a comparison of artillery and weight of ammunition per yard of front⁷⁴ is carried out it is clear that the 1916 attack was supported by little more artillery than was used in 1915, delivering less weight of shell. The likelihood, therefore, that well sited German machine guns, in emplacements with good overhead cover, would be neutralised or destroyed, was extremely low.

At no point in either of Haking's two after action reports to Monro, (one on the performance of each of the divisions involved), and sent as covering letters to the Division's own report⁷⁵, do the words "machine guns" occur. This is a remarkable omission given that machine gun fire was probably responsible for the majority of British casualties during the attack, and for its ultimate failure⁷⁶.

Monro himself was also open to criticism. His experience as an Army commander on the Western Front was lacklustre and he does not seem to have had the ability to both cast a critical eye over planned operations or to have detected and countered Haking's misplaced

⁷³ The Australians 5th Division had a leavening of Gallipoli men, but, for many of the Australian troops, Fromelles was their first attack.

⁷⁴ See Appendix B for comparison of artillery between the Battle of Aubers Ridge in 1915 and the 61st Division sector of the Battle of Fromelles.

⁷⁵ NA WO 95/3055.

⁷⁶ There was still an opinion held by some officers in the BEF that sheer offensive spirit could overcome well sited machine guns. The lesson to the contrary was, however, being learned. Three of the five reasons that Rawlinson gave, speaking of the attack on the Transloy line in October, for attacks failing also apply to Fromelles. They are: absence of surprise, failure of the creeping barrage, and, hostile machine gun fire. See: Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *The Somme*, Yale University Press, 2005, p.269-270. Haig had said as much in 1915, speaking of the Aubers Ridge position and the machine gun problem.

and headstrong enthusiasm for the Fromelles attack, despite Haig giving him full authority to cancel the operation if he wished to.

Probably the fairest assessment of the 61st Division's performance was that given by its GOC, Major-General Colin Mackenzie. In his comprehensive report to Haking he summed up his Division's performance:

I am of (the) opinion that the infantry attack was carried out with the greatest gallantry, and that everything possible was done by all ranks, as well as by Bds., Commanders and Staffs to make it a success.....

A final comment on Haking's verdict against the 61st Division is that of casualty figures. It could be expected that men not intent on carrying through an engagement with the enemy would be intent on saving their own lives. It follows then that, if the men of the 61st Division were reluctant to do their duty they would take fewer casualties than those intent on following orders. This is simply not the case.

The casualty figures for the six attacking battalions of the 61st Division equate to 43% of their strength⁷⁷, three attacking battalions taking between 40-50% casualties and one 60%. The lowest casualties, 27-29% were taken by the three battalions unable to fully deploy forward of the sally ports⁷⁸ into no man's land⁷⁹.

On the left the Australian casualties, if those taken as POWs⁸⁰ are discounted, amount to about 5,000⁸¹. The Australians eventually deployed 11 battalions, giving a casualty rate of

⁷⁷ See: Appendix C.

⁷⁸ The use of sally ports was, according to Christie-Miller, dictated by Corps, so delays caused by their use is directly attributable to Haking. See: IWM 4776 Box 80/32/1 Papers of Col Sir G Christie-Miller Diaries, Vol. 2, p.188.

⁷⁹ These were the three battalions between the Wick Salient and the Sugarloaf, where machine gun fire prevented troops moving through the sally ports once the British artillery barrage lifted.

⁸⁰ No significant numbers of 61st Division men were taken prisoner. A small number may have been taken from the party of 2/7th Warwicks who penetrated the German positions on the left. This can be no more than 20 if

56%⁸². On the Somme the rates vary. 30 of the 203⁸³ infantry battalions present on the 1st of July had casualty rates of over 50%⁸⁴. Some were extraordinarily high, such as the 85% of the Newfoundland Regiment⁸⁵. Many were below 50%. Typical are the figures for the 8th (Service) Battalion, Kings Own Yorkshire Light infantry at 45%, 15th (Service) Battalion, Durham Light Infantry at 44% and the 7th (Service) Battalion, Green Howards at 43%. Neither the 61st Division, nor the 5th Australian Division, therefore, took remarkable casualties at Fromelles. Instead they took casualties commensurate with the level of tactical and operational development reached by the British Army in mid 1916, when what Cyril Falls referred to as Britain's "two legions of amateurs"⁸⁶ faced their first real test by fire. Nor are the figures for the 61st Division indicative of any lack of resolution or discipline. If they had been then the Divisional Commander, Colin Mackenzie, would have been unlikely to avoid sacking. His survival in post shows that GHQ believed that any fault lay at other levels⁸⁷. Two battalion commanders and the Brigadier of 184 Brigade were sacked⁸⁸. Haking

the numbers lost and the numbers subsequently buried at Aubers by the Germans are taken into account. See: Paul Cobb, *Fromelles 1916*, Tempus, 2007, p. 122, Account of 855 Sgt R Collett, 32nd Bn, AIF .

⁸¹ Between 470 and 492 members of the 5th Australian Division became prisoners of war. See Cobb, Op cit. pp. 108, 117, 118.

⁸² Compare this with the 49% casualties taken, by the mainly regular, battalions of the 8th Division, over the same ground, 14 months previously.

⁸³ Taken from Imperial War Museum, *Order of Battle Infantry Units, 1 July 1916*, at: <http://iwm.org.uk/somme>. Not all battalions would have attacked on the first day.

⁸⁴ These rates have been arrived at assuming a normal battalion battle strength as 800, except where stated otherwise. Casualty figures have been drawn from the 61st Division War Diaries, appropriate volumes of the Official History, and Malcolm Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme*. Pan Books, 2002.

⁸⁵ Casualty rates in the infantry and artillery in the First World War have always seemed shocking but they had been predicted. In *Field Service Regulations, Part II*, chapter V, battle casualty rates per annum had been calculated as 80% and 70%, respectively, during the first year of war. FSR Part II, Chapter V, p.56. Also see Appendix F.

⁸⁶ Referring to the New (Kitchener) Armies and the Territorials. Quoted in: Malcolm Brown, Op cit, p.36.

⁸⁷ At lower level Brigadier-General C H P Carter (184th Brigade), Colonel H M Williams of the 2/1st Battalion the Buckinghamshire Regiment and Colonel W H Ames of the 2/4th Battalion the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were removed.

remained at Corps Commander level for the rest of the war and Monro's tenure as an army commander was short, being posted away from operational command after just seven months and posted to India.

61st Division at the Battle of Cambrai.

The Battle of Cambrai, between the 20th November and the 7th December 1917, marked a radical shift in the tactical and operational development of the British army on the Western Front. Cambrai was by turns a triumph, a lost opportunity and a disaster.

Cambrai is remembered as a tank attack, although it was far more than that. It marked the point at which the British artillery, which had undergone a long period of technological development during the previous two years, was able to achieve complete surprise by using predictive fire in a complex and wide ranging fire-plan. German batteries were neutralised and the attack by massed armour and infantry of Byng's Third Army moved forward over ground undamaged by the huge and crude barrages familiar in 1916.

New infantry tactics in which the platoon, with its specialised rifle grenadiers, bombers and Lewis gun crew, moving forward using fire and manoeuvre, aided by armour to clear wire and deal with strong points, combined with the neutralisation of the German artillery, saw the attack sweep across the Hindenburg Line while air support provided deep interdiction strikes against the German rear areas.

⁸⁸ Geoffrey Christie-Miller approved of the removal of Carter who, he said, had lost the confidence of his Brigade. He saw the removal of Williams and Ames as completing a process of removing all Territorial Force battalion commanders within the Division. See: IWM 4776 Box 80/32/1 Papers of Col Sir G Christie-Miller, Diaries, Vol 2, pp180-190.

Early successes were good, but as the attack moved forward troops became increasingly exhausted and the key point of the Brouillon Ridge remained untaken, while the failure of the initial Cavalry Corps plan to advance across the St Quentin canal began to open an avenue for German counter attack.

The failure to realise this increasing weakness, and prepare for it, meant that Byng's Third Army was ill prepared when the German counter attack fell in the North and South sectors of the salient⁸⁹, the largest effort being against the VII and III Corps sectors, where seven German divisions attacked in the morning mist using infiltration tactics and achieving complete surprise. The attack penetrated the VII Corps front and drove across the III Corps communications zone, catching many formations in the rear of their right flank.

On the 2nd of December Haig ordered Byng to retire to a sound defence line for the winter and by the 4th of December the withdrawal commenced. By the 7th of December the battle was officially declared over. The British still held a small salient of about 2 miles and part of the Hindenburg Line in the North while the Germans held a corresponding salient and part of the old III & VIII Corps front line in the South.

The involvement of the 61st Division, which had been through the mill of Third Ypres with heavy losses in August⁹⁰, began on the 30th of November as the German counter attack reached its climax. In a hurried move the Division, released from the XVII Corps, arrived by train at Gonnelleu to be immediately moved by bus to the area west of Havrincourt Wood,

⁸⁹ This was the first occasion that the Germans had mounted a major offensive against the BEF since the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. This is possibly a contributory factor to Third Army's failure to prepare for a major counter attack.

⁹⁰ The 61st Division fought as part of XIC Corps in the Langemark – St Julien area during August and September. On the 22nd of August 1917, at the Battle of Langemark, 184 Brigade lost 955 casualties. OH, *Military Operations, France & Belgium 1917 (Vol. II). Messines and Third Ypres (Passchendaele)*. chapters VI-XIII.

where most of the Division spent the bitterly cold night of the 30th November /1st December in open fields as part of the Third Army reserve. On the afternoon of the 1st December the Division moved forward to a feature known as Welsh Ridge, on which the village of La Vacquerie was being barely held by remnants of the 12th, 20th, and Guards Divisions. These Divisions had all been heavily engaged over the previous two days in uncoordinated III Corps counter attacks and were now holding a line consisting partly of a section of Hindenburg line, facing the wrong way, partly the ruins of La Vacquerie and partly half dug trenches and shell holes.

Between the 1st and 2nd of December the 182nd and 183rd Brigade relieved the exhausted troops of the 12th, 20th and Guards Divisions and spent the next four days attempting to hold the German advance in the face of repeated and intense attacks. Short of small arms ammunition (SAA) and Mills bombs they were forced at times to use German grenades to defend their positions⁹¹. Elements of the 184th Brigade, in reserve, were drawn into the battle during the 3rd of December⁹². The 182nd Brigade was eventually forced out of the ruins of La Vacquerie during the 4th of December. On the afternoon of the 5th December two companies of the 9th (Service) Battalion, The Inniskilling Fusiliers, part of the 36th (Ulster) Division, were deployed to aid the hard pressed men of the 61st Division during the re-taking of the “Corner Work” position by the remaining men of the 2/4th Battalion the Royal Berkshire

⁹¹ An excellent account of this battle is the Narrative of Operation drawn up by Lieutenant-Colonel W E St John, Commanding Officer of the 2/7th Battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, as an annex to the war diary. NA WO 95/3056.

⁹² The 2/4th Battalion the Royal Berkshire Regiment taking over an area known as “Corner Work”, on the N West corner of La Vacquerie village, during the night of the 2nd/3rd of December, were forced out of the position on the 4th and recovered it on the 5th.

Regiment. The 61st Division were relieved during the night of the 5th December, having lost 1916 casualties in four days⁹³.

During the first days of the German counter attack at Cambrai there were undoubtedly those who, in the inevitable confusion and with the German attack making ground, did their best to get out of the battle zone, and reports circulated of “unarmed infantry streaming to the rear.”⁹⁴ The Official History goes on to say that these accounts were exaggerated and that many of the men moving to the rear were men captured by the Germans who had subsequently escaped in the confusion, gunners, pioneer working parties, transport men, and others who might fairly be called “non combatants⁹⁵”. It is against this background that a recent book quotes a member of the 9th Inniskilling Fusiliers mentioned above, Lance Corporal J Riddel, as recalling:

*I think Jerry must have seen us coming for he put up a great barrage and the 61st, or sixty worst, Division which was in the line stampeded out of it, so we had to rush up and take it again.*⁹⁶

⁹³ At this stage of the war most infantry units were undermanned. Consequently casualty figures represent a far higher percentage of the unit strength than might be assumed. 2/6th Battalion the Gloucestershire Regiment, lost 325 casualties between the 3rd and 5th of December, the 2/4th Battalion 303 between the 1st December 1917 and the 1st January 1918. The 2/5th, showed losses of 149, the 2/6th Battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment 147 and the 2/7th 218. In all cases these represented a substantial proportion of the unit's trench strength.

⁹⁴ OH, Military Operations, France & Belgium 1917 (Vol. III), The Battle of Cambrai, p.301

⁹⁵ OH Ibid.

⁹⁶ W J Canning, *A Wheen of Medals*, W J Canning 2006, p.228. Lance Corporal James Riddel MM, writing in November 1918. Riddel may have confused the 61st Division with another Territorial division, Jeudwine's First-Line territorial 55th. Jeudwine saw the need to defend his division, in writing, against allegations that it had bolted at Cambrai. See: G D Sheffield (Ed) *Leadership & Command, The Anglo-American Experience since 1861*, Brassey's, 1997.p. 103.

An observation which is counter not only to the war diary entries of the 182nd Brigade, but also to the account of Captain Densmore Walker⁹⁷, quoted in the same volume, and talking of events on the afternoon of 6th December:

*We went up the main from the Hindenburg Line. This really was a filthy place. Corpses were touching, laid along the fire-step, all men of the 61st Division.*⁹⁸

This is compelling evidence that men of the 61st Division had died where they stood and that no “stampede” from the front line had taken place.

Riddel’s account can be dismissed as erroneous and his use of the sobriquet “sixty worst” should be regarded as an example of cap badge rivalry, an understandable by-product of pride in one’s own unit, contempt of all others. Any disorganised retreat which had occurred on the Cambrai battlefield during the 30th November was quickly controlled and could not, in any event, have involved the 61st Division, which only entered the line on the 1st December.

The 61st Division and the German Spring Offensive, 1918

The decline in available manpower was becoming an increasing problem for Douglas Haig throughout 1917. Before the closing stages of the Third Battle of Ypres many of Haig’s divisions were undermanned, the drafts of replacements being insufficient to replace losses⁹⁹. Haig had warned, in his memorandum to the War Cabinet of the 8th October, that the French

⁹⁷ Ibid. Walker was a member of 109 Machine Gun Company.

⁹⁸ Canning, Ibid, p,161. These were almost certainly men of the 2/6th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, who were among the 325 casualties recorded in the 2/6th war diary of the previous day.

⁹⁹ For a full account See: OH, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 191 8, (Vol. I.. The German Offensive and its preliminaries*, Macmillan & Co 1935, pp. 13-56. The BEF had observed that units made up to strength by drafts of new men quickly retained their morale and efficiency, and units left undermanned for longer periods suffered a loss of morale and efficiency even when made up to strength.

were incapable of going onto the offensive and that in order to continue the BEF's offensive operations he needed not less than the existing 62 Divisions in France, that manpower numbers must be brought up to strength¹⁰⁰, that he should be supplied with the full establishment of materiel that he had applied for, that troops should have the maximum training, rest and leave, and that no more line should be taken over from the French¹⁰¹. Lloyd George and The War Cabinet ignored Haig's advice, leading him to the conclusion that the BEF could only stand on the defensive in the Spring of 1918, while the Germans moved forces released by the collapse of Russia up to the Western Front and inevitably became capable of seizing the initiative.

The necessity to create new defence works, required by the change of stance from offensive to defensive, put enormous pressure on the men of the BEF. The de-skilled army of 1917 was used to offensive action and was not trained in the new defensive tactics.¹⁰² The additional training and labour burdens came at the expense of leave and rest for Haig's troops, particularly the infantry.

In January 1918 the Army council was made aware of the findings of a Cabinet Committee¹⁰³ which had decided that the outcome of the war was reliant on the allies safeguarding their "staying power" while waiting for American forces to arrive in numbers sufficient to ensure a

¹⁰⁰ The War Office response was to confirm figures which would actually result in a reduction in BEF strength of 250,000 men by the 31st March 1918 and 460,000 by 31st October 1918.

¹⁰¹ OH, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918, (Vol. I). The German Offensive and its preliminaries.*

¹⁰² In particular, musketry skills had declined markedly.

¹⁰³ This body contained not one soldier and took no War Office advice.

decisive superiority over the Central Powers. And the suggestion was made that manning on the Western Front could be reduced¹⁰⁴.

The response of the military members of the Army Council was a strong protest which ended with the observation that:

*(The) Council would regard the acceptance of the recommendations in the draft report, without further effort to provide the men they consider necessary for the maintenance of the forces in the field during 1918, as taking an unreasonably grave risk of losing the War and sacrificing to no purpose the British Army on the Western Front.*¹⁰⁵

Despite these objections the manpower reduction was approved by the War Cabinet. On the 10th January 1918 the War Office issued orders to reorganise divisions along the lines suggested. One can only imagine how Haig and his Commanders must have regarded this order. It certainly adds veracity to the observation that:

*The British soldier can stand up to anything except the British War Office*¹⁰⁶.

The reorganisation was made less straightforward because it was laid down that no Regular, First-Line Territorial or Yeomanry battalions were to be disbanded, consequently the first to

¹⁰⁴ The committee concluded that not only allied armies but also the economies of the allied countries must be safeguarded. The priorities for available manpower should, therefore, be, in order: The Navy, The Air Force, shipbuilding, tank and aircraft production, food production, lumber production and the provision of food storage facilities to free up shipping. The requirements of the army were not mentioned. The Committee observed that the Ministry of National Service would, therefore, only be able to provide 100,000 of the BEF requirement for 615,000 grade A men for 1918, and suggested the army “reduce wastage” and make a larger proportion of the army into front line soldiers. An extraordinary suggestion since the Germans were responsible for manpower “wastage” and that going on the defensive, an inevitable outcome of the BEF manpower reduction, inevitably meant a huge increase in the requirement for labour to create defensive works. A further suggestion was that the number of infantry battalions in each division be reduced from twelve to nine.

¹⁰⁵ OH, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918. (Vol. I), The German Offensive and its preliminaries*, Macmillan & Co 1935, p.53.

¹⁰⁶ George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple*, 1897.

be disbanded were New Army and Second-Line Territorial formations. The process was a complex one and affected 145 battalions across 47 divisions. Some divisions had as many as six battalions to be disbanded, some none. Considerable movement took place between divisions, corps and armies. Many ties forged within divisions since 1914 had to be broken. The Midlanders of the 61st Division found themselves joined by highly indignant Scots from the 51st Highland Division¹⁰⁷.

Of the 61st Division's own battalions, in the 182nd Brigade, the 2/5th and 2/8th Battalions, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment were broken up and used to make up numbers in the 2/6th and 2/7th Battalions, the remainder going to the 24th and 25th Entrenching Battalions¹⁰⁸, respectively.

Three battalions (Gloucestershires and Worcestershires) of the 183rd Brigade were broken up, The 2/8th Battalion, the Worcestershire Regiment being made up to strength with men from the broken up 2/7th Battalion and moved to 182 Brigade. The remainder of the 183 Brigade men went either to the 24th or 25th Entrenching Battalions, or were posted to the No. 55 Infantry Base Depot. The Brigade subsequently took on what must have seemed a startling character change with the arrival of the Scottish battalions from 51st (Highland) Division.

The 184th Brigade suffered least, with only the 2/1st Battalion the Buckinghamshire Regiment, being broken up and surplus manpower being transferred to the 25th Entrenching Battalion.

This upheaval was carried through, as it was in all the other infantry divisions affected, as the BEF attempted to prepare for a type of warfare almost completely unknown to its soldiers

¹⁰⁷ The 1/9th Battalion, Royal Scots; 1/5th Battalion, Gordon Highlanders and the 1/8th Battalion the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, all of which would move to 15th (Scottish) Division in June 1918.

¹⁰⁸ The Entrenching Battalions were a purely temporary measure, being used to construct defences and other labouring tasks, until required as battle casualty replacements.

and junior officers. To an army whose members' experience, by the end of 1917, was almost entirely gained in the close confines of trench warfare the moves to a more open type of war-fighting and preparing for defensive battle were major changes. As tactics evolved soldiers, both British and German, had to get used to the idea of more open warfare. The 61st Division had been transferred to Ivor Maxse's XVIII Corps, part of Gough's Fifth Army, shortly after the end of the Cambrai battle. In the Fifth Army area, only shortly before taken over from the French, there was little possibility of completing the works required and the Green Line remained undeveloped, since the Fifth Army had neither time nor men enough to complete and garrison the new defence lines¹⁰⁹.

After the reorganisation of the Division's brigades preparations of the defences continued. While the bulk of the work concentrated on preparation of the Battle Zone, which was lightly held, reserves being kept further to the rear for counter attack, the Forward Zone remained manned, by means of a battalion sized "redoubt" forward of each brigade. Maintaining morale remained important. Leave continued, as did sports competitions and concert parties. Leave in particular was regarded as having a:

*"....great restorative effect, and the probably long-drawn out character of the coming German offensive."*¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ In XVIII Corps General Sir Ivor Maxse, ever an innovator, developed a scheme to improve digging output described in the 2/6th Battalion history, as:

The battalion worked extraordinarily hard on the entrenching and generally carrying out General Maxse's system of intensive digging, of three men to one spade, and hurricane work.

¹¹⁰ OH, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918, (Vol. I) The German Offensive and its preliminaries*, Macmillan & Co 1935, p.125, footnote 1.

Those returning from leave were regarded as reinforcements¹¹¹. The overall impression given by reading either the unit histories or the Official History at this stage of the war is that the BEF was now both well enough run and enough of its men so experienced that coping with a profound change in the war was just normal business. For the soldiers it was, as ever, a routine of hard unrelenting work, digging, manning the Forward Zone redoubts and patrols interspersed with church parades, baths, sports, long route marches and the all too rare home leave. One welcome effect of the recent re-organisation was that drafts of new men were often from the recently broken up battalions, and so arrived not only with experience but some familiarity with the Division.

In March 1918 the 61st Division, facing St Quentin, held 6000¹¹² yards of the 16000 yard front allocated to XVIII Corps, with the three brigades in line, each deployed with one battalion in the Forward Zone, one in the Battle Zone and one in the Rear Zone.

The attack, when it came, was not entirely unexpected. Christopher Gallagher, an American doctor serving as MO in the 2/5th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment¹¹³, recorded:

The next day we got word the Germans were going to attack on the morning of March 21. Apparently some German prisoners, taken in one of the night raids, had tipped us the date. Everyone seemed completely confident that any attack the Germans might

¹¹¹ An apparent surplus of manpower which was only made possible because of the re-deployment of 25% of the front line infantry troops.

¹¹² Compare this with the 700 yards per battalion front at Fromelles in 1916.

¹¹³ Gallagher was one of a number of American Expeditionary Force (AEF) doctors sent to assist the BEF medical services at the end of 1917. He had been the MO of the 2/5th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment at the Battle of Cambrai, moving to the 2/4th Battalion after the 2/5th was broken up during the re-organisation in February 1918.

*make on our front would be easily repulsed. Though the front line was expected to fold..... we would whip them in our support line, or battle position, as it was called*¹¹⁴.

On the night of March 20th / 21st, Lieutenant Harrison of A Coy, the 2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, led a raid near Fayet¹¹⁵ in which, fifteen prisoners were taken, some of which confirmed details of the attack on the 21st¹¹⁶. Forewarned the Division was ordered to battle stations at 2.00 am.

What followed was a set piece infiltration attack by the Germans in overwhelming strength, through a thick mist which concealed their movements. An artillery bombardment containing large amounts of gas¹¹⁷ forced the defenders in the Battle Zone into respirators for as much as six hours while the attackers bypassed the strong points in the Forward Zone and attacked the Battle Zone. In the XVIII Corps sector The 36th, 61st and 60th Divisions were attacked by fourteen German divisions. Some redoubts in the Forward zone fought on until early evening until overwhelmed. Few of the men manning the Forward Zone managed to fight their way back. Within twelve hours the Corps lost a third of its infantry battalions and a large proportion of its Vickers and Lewis guns.

¹¹⁴ C Gallagher (Ed M Gallagher), *The Cellars of Marcelcave, A Yank doctor in the BEF*, Burd St Press, 1962. Gallagher's observations are of interest since he was not only an MO (and therefore something of an independent observer, in any case), but an American to boot.

¹¹⁵ The history of the 2/6th Battalion The Royal Warwickshire Regiment 1914—1919 Cornish Brothers Ltd 1929, p 72. And OH, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918. The German Offensive and its preliminaries*, Macmillan & Co 1935, p.164.

¹¹⁶ Confirmed by the Divisional Commander's "*Official Narrative of Operations... March 21st to April 2nd, 1918...*" Reproduced in: A F Barnes, *The Story of the 2/5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, 1914-1918*, Naval and Military Press, facsimile edition, pp 98-111.

¹¹⁷ Cylinder gas was also released by the 61st Division in order to impede the German advance. See: OH, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918, (Vol. I), The German Offensive and its preliminaries*, Macmillan & Co 1935, p161. The use of non- persistent lachrymatory gas by the Germans was an indicator that they intended to advance through the XVIII Corps area.

The Battle Zone of the 61st Division, well placed on the reverse slope of a ridge running North-South, remained intact by nightfall, although the eight battalions holding the Forward Zone had been virtually annihilated. During that night and the following morning the Germans continued to infiltrate the British line.

Just after mid-day on the 22nd of March the 61st Division was ordered to withdraw some four miles to the Rear Zone (Green Line)¹¹⁸, and a difficult withdrawal in contact with the advancing enemy was made. In his memoir of the battle, widely disseminated in the United States after the war Christopher Gallagher¹¹⁹, serving as the Medical Officer with the 2/5th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, wrote:

For the first time, I saw British soldiers crack. Many seemed to feel they were in a hopeless situation; they dropped their guns, and ran for the cover of the woods. Then something extraordinary, unreal, “stuff of legends” happened right before my eyes. Colonel Lawson¹²⁰ turned around, drew his pistol, walked back out in front of the trench, in full view of the enemy, and ordered his men to stick to their positions. Lawson's own fearlessness restored the men's courage, and the men did stick.¹²¹

This was not an isolated incident and was hardly surprising given the losses units in the withdrawal were sustaining and the speed of the enemy advance. In the narrative of the battle,

Maxse quickly ordered a withdrawal across the Somme to prevent flank attacks on his Corps and reach a defensible line. See: John Baynes, *Far From a Donkey, The life of Sir Ivor Maxse KCB, CVO, DSO, Brasseys, 1995*, p 195.

¹¹⁸ Trenches here were only 18” deep and the position capable, at best, as a base for rearguard action.

¹¹⁹ Gallagher was later captured, tending wounded in his Regimental Aid Post at Marecelcave, on the 28th of March.

¹²⁰ Lieutenant-Colonel A B Lawson DSO and Bar, killed 24th June 1918. His Brigadier said of him: This officer was only approached by one other as a battalion commander among the many I met in France. He was absolutely fearless.

¹²¹ C Gallagher, *Op cit.* p. 163.

attached to the war diary of the 2/7th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment is the following account of events on the 28th March near Marcelcave:

6.00pm. Enemy attacked the Eastern end of the village and the troops on our right poured into the cutting. Every effort was made to force these units to return to their defences or to take up position North and South of the railway line, but it was quite useless and they continued to pour into the cutting. The Battalion received very little of the attack and was able to hold its ground. Enemy M.G. fire was now directed from the E. along the cutting and casualties were incurred.

All units in the cutting were now organised and forced to take up position, outside, North and South of it.¹²²

It is clear that there was no loss of control. These events were not peculiar to the 61st Division. Elsewhere in the same narrative is this:

23rd March 1.45 pm. The 11th K.R.R¹²³. on our left also now, showed signs of withdrawing and by 12 noon were coming back on our front in numbers. I ordered Major Waterworth forward to order them to return to their positions.

Between the 22nd and the 26th of March the withdrawal continued until the German offensive finally came to a halt in front of Amiens. The 61st Division, relieved on the 30th March, and finally withdrawn for re-fitting on the 2nd April, had been severely depleted, having taken 5,933¹²⁴ casualties¹²⁵.

¹²² NA WO/95/3056. This battalion had lost 469 men at the Battle of Cambrai, and had taken 443 casualties at this point in the current battle. It would eventually come out of the line with just 89 survivors.

¹²³ Kings Royal Rifle Corps, this would have been the 17th, 18th or 19th Battalion, part of the 89th Brigade of the 30th Division, a New Army formation.

¹²⁴ 66% assuming that the 12 battalions in the re-organised Division were at full strength.

A fighting withdrawal is probably the most difficult operation an army can undertake. For a great many of the troops involved it would be their first battle. The examples given above are not evidence of a beaten or demoralised force, but of soldiers both uncertain and nervous. What enabled them to continue was sound and firm leadership from officers and experienced NCOs.

As to the overall performance of the 61st Division in the March Offensive the XVIII Corps Commander, General Sir Ivor Maxse, was in no doubt. On the 23rd of March he submitted a special report to Fifth Army headquarters. It included:

During the last three days of severe fighting many heroic acts have been performed and many Germans have been killed in consequence.....I venture to select the following units for immediate recognition in the next communiqué and beg that the Army Commander will forward them for consideration¹²⁶.

At the top of the list was the 61st Division.

Maxse was so impressed with the performance of the 61st Division that he later took the unusual step of writing a detailed valedictory farewell¹²⁷ when it left XVIII Corps, in recognition of the distinction with which the Division had performed throughout the period from the 21st - 30th March 1918.

¹²⁵ From the Divisional Commander's ,*“Official Narrative of Operations. March 21st to April 2nd, 1918....”* Reproduced in: A F Barnes, *The Story of the 2/5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, 1914-1918*, Naval and Military Press, facsimile edition, pp 98-111.

¹²⁶ John Baynes, Op cit. p.198.

¹²⁷ NA WO 95/881 and see Annex D.

Chapter 2

The 61st Division in the context of the BEF learning curve

When the BEF deployed to France during August 1914 it was, in the words of Brigadier-General James Edmonds:

“In every respect the Expeditionary Force of 1914 was incomparably the best trained, best organised and best equipped British Army which ever went forth to war¹²⁸.”

It was equipped with the latest artillery, machine guns and rifles, its men trained marksmen, many with experience of combat gained in service throughout the Empire¹²⁹. Its officers were, schooled in the Staff College, familiar with the art and practice of war and with each other.

¹²⁸ OH, *Military Operations. France and Belgium 1914, Vol 1*. Sir J E Edmonds, Macmillan & Co., 1933. p 10.

¹²⁹ Most notably on the North West Frontier of what is now Pakistan, in Egypt between 1896 -1897and South Africa between 1899 -1902.

The BEF was, however, extremely small, at 120,000 strong. The total peacetime strength of the British Army was 247,500, rising to 733,500 on mobilisation. Germany, in comparison, had a mobilised strength of 4.5 million, and France, 3.78 million¹³⁰. Moreover the BEF arrived equipped to fight a mobile war, not the static trench warfare that would be the pattern on the Western Front from the end of 1914 until the end of 1917.

The British Army, therefore, faced two monumental problems in the Autumn of 1914, that of building and training a citizen army of unprecedented size, and that of developing a methodology to fight a war unlike any it had prepared for, or was equipped to undertake. In particular the war would put immense pressure on technological development, especially the development of gunnery, as the infantry of both sides burrowed into the ground and the war became one in which guns became the major deciding factor.

During the first two years of the war essential weapons, unique to trench warfare, had been invented or, in some cases, re-invented. By the end of 1915 trench mortars, hand and rifle grenades had already been developed and were in the process of being refined. Flame throwers and war gases had been used by the Germans, while the British had invented the Bangalore torpedo for clearing wire. The introduction of the Lewis Gun¹³¹ in late 1915 gave the infantry its first really portable platoon based automatic weapon¹³².

¹³⁰ All data in this paragraph drawn from: John Ellis & Michael Cox, *The World War 1 Databook*, Arum Press, 2001.

¹³¹ American designed in 1911, manufactured by BSA in the UK firing the British .303 cartridge, magazine fed and air cooled with a weight of 28 pounds. It had a rate of fire of between 500-600 rounds per minute. A reliable and robust weapon it was also used in various roles in the Second World War.

¹³² Additionally enormous efforts were taking place to expand and develop the air arm, mainly driven by the need to aid the artillery war by directing friendly artillery, locating enemy batteries and aerial photographic survey for ordnance mapping.

By mid 1916, when the 61st Division arrived in France both the manpower of New Armies, and the equipment designed to break the stalemate of the trenches, aid the soldier in the field or simply to counter the latest German innovation, was arriving in large quantities on the Western Front, as industry reached a peak of munitions and equipment output. Each battle resulted in new lessons and, consequently, changes in the ways in which the war was being fought while the introduction of new technology continually changed the way it could be fought¹³³.

The key to these changes in tactical thought was the development of artillery. By the end of the 1916 the artillery had the experience and equipment, to provide reliable creeping barrages¹³⁴ which enabled attacking infantry to close with an objective covered by a slow moving artillery barrage a mere fifty metres ahead of them, thus ensuring the survival of significant numbers of attackers on the enemy side of no man's land.

By the end of Somme the way in which the war was fought had undergone profound changes. The survivors were now battle hardened, however, their numbers were constantly dwindling. By 1917 it was not only the Territorial and New Army battalions which found themselves manned by untried and hastily trained replacements.

¹³³ The Battle of the Somme, in particular, became a catalyst for change. The way in which the Infantry operated within the increasingly accurate and complex support now available from the artillery, and, after September 1916, the tank, changed steadily as the ability of the Company, and later the Platoon, to operate independently, improved. An added impetus to change in tactical thinking was the continued inability of senior commanders to influence the battle once combat began. The ability of the infantry to operate in smaller groups had to be underpinned by a tactical doctrine which allowed independent action by junior commanders within a preset framework of orders and procedures.

¹³⁴ See: Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power, The British Army Weapons of War 1904-1945*, Pen & Sword, 2004, pp. 82-86. The major advance in infantry/artillery co-operation was the creeping barrage. By 1917 the new weaponry carried by the infantry meant that a platoon, with its Lewis guns and rifle grenades, could dominate a radius of 100 yards. The ability to arrive at an objective within 100 yards of a suppressive barrage meant that infantry could counter the risk of destruction in no man's land without the means of retaliation, so familiar from previous years. An added advantage was the 106 fuze, which enabled more reliable wire cutting. See: Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare, Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918*, University of Toronto, 1992, chapter 4.

The command structure of the front line Regular battalions too were reduced to just a few regular officers as the attrition of front line officers, and the need to supply experienced officers to the Staff and to the New Army and Territorial battalions, combined to sap the old Regular army leadership at battalion level. This dilution of skill, as the “regular leavening” of experienced soldiers progressed further up the chain of command, while most evident among the commissioned ranks, also applied to the soldiers. Experienced non-commissioned and warrant officers were pressed to take commissions¹³⁵ so the quality of those NCOs available for training posts declined, and, consequently, the quality of training was reduced. Writing in late 1916 Lord Moran, then Regimental Medical Officer with the 1st Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, a regular battalion, wrote:

“The average subaltern, if he comes out now for the first time, does no more than sample war. A few, and these are the more fortunate, were hit, happily before they showed signs of wear, and some went on leave and did not return, and some were discarded to trench mortars or in drafts to other Fusilier battalions.”¹³⁶

Dr J C Dunn¹³⁷, the Regimental Medical Officer of the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers¹³⁸, was also aware of the de-skilling of the army as the veterans of 1914 became fewer. In his diary for May 8th 1917 he remarked:

¹³⁵. See particularly *Old Soldiers Never Die*, Ch. XXIII. Cpl T M Richards MM, 2 RWF, declined a temporary commission in March 1918, was granted a regular commission in mid April 1918 and was commanding a company of the 11th (Service) Bn. The Cheshire Regiment by the end of May.

¹³⁶ Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage*, Constable, 1945, p. 117.

¹³⁷ Captain J C Dunn RAMC, DSO, MC and Bar, DCM. Served as a cavalry trooper during the Boer War, and as a Doctor with the 2nd Bn. The Royal Welch Fusiliers for the whole of WW1.

¹³⁸ The application of the archaic spelling of “Welch” was not officially sanctioned until 1920. However, the Royal Welch themselves consistently used the correct spelling despite the War Office’s best endeavours until the latter saw sense (an attempt to remove the Regimental Flash in the First World War was also successfully resisted). The Commanding Officers of Royal Welch battalions in the First World War stuck to the correct spelling, as can be seen in the Regimental war diaries. As an ex Royal Welch Fusilier so do I. See: Frank Richards (Ed. Krijnan and Langley) *Old Soldiers Never Die*, Krijnan & Langley, 2004, p.1, footnote 2.

“A battalion shooting competition proves how appallingly bad our shooting is, and how awkward many, if not most, of the men are in handling a rifle¹³⁹.

And in his entry for June 4th:

“Training is most elementary; we have only six officers all told, and not a specialist among them.”¹⁴⁰

The army that came out of the Somme was less skilled, in the wider sense, than the BEF of 1914 and 1915, but had gained much battle experience. During and after the Somme the army learned from that experience, and developed new methods of dealing with trench warfare, while at the same time being forced to accept a reality in which the constant loss of men, and consequent need for replacements, meant that both officers and other ranks could only be given limited training. This limited training, while focussing on the specialised area of trench warfare, would not address the depth of military knowledge carried by the Regular army veteran. However, this was not an experience unique to the British.

“A German soldier writes: ‘The tragedy of the Somme battle was that the best soldiers, the stoutest-hearted men were lost; their numbers were replaceable, their spiritual worth never could be’¹⁴¹

The new tactics for both attack and defence being formulated by all three major combatants on the Western Front by the end of the Somme battle were driven by the enormous attrition both of attacking infantry and massed defenders in the front line trenches. The Germans had been experimenting with small group infiltration tactics (*Stosstrupptaktiken*)

¹³⁹ Captain J C Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1919*, Jane’s, 1987p. 342.

¹⁴⁰Ibid p.354.

¹⁴¹ In: Moran, p. 115. Also: *The Official History of the Great War, Operations in France & Belgium*, HMSO 1947, Vol. V, p. 581.

since the end of 1914, while the French had been influenced by the writings of Captain Laffargue¹⁴², as had the British.¹⁴³

Training for these new infantry tactics, which were made possible by the development of light machine guns and reliable rifle grenades¹⁴⁴, together with increasing support from accurate artillery, seems to have been more successful in the British army than the equivalent process in the German¹⁴⁵. A new Training Directorate was instituted by GHQ in early 1917 and training made more unified throughout the BEF as the responsibility for training moved from Divisions to Corps under GHQ direction¹⁴⁶. The difficulty remained that of training officers and men sufficiently to take part in battle at all:

“The trained officers were irreplaceable.....officers cannot be improvised. Many of the original regimental officers of the New Armies had no training, as such. Courses of instruction, all too short, were gradually introduced, and behind the line in France schools of all kinds were organized”.

And:

“Even the few commanders and staff officers who were fully trained had no experience of a force of more than a division and they found the handling of new

¹⁴² Andre Laffargue, (In translation). *The Attack in Trench Warfare*. D Van Nostrand & Co. New York 1917. Online at: <http://www.archive.org/stream/attackintrenchw00laffgoog#page/n4/mode/1up>.

¹⁴³ According to Paddy Griffith Laffargue’s pamphlet was issued to the French army in August 1915, translated for the British (twice) around the end of 1915 and obtained by both the Germans and Americans in 1916. See: Paddy Griffiths, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, Yale University Press, 1994, pp.53-56.

¹⁴⁴ Particularly the introduction of the No. 23 grenade which was essentially a Mills No. 5 fitted with a rod to enable it to be fired from a rifle using a ballestite cartridge, a marked improvement over previous rifle grenades, this grenade made possible the use of one section in the infantry platoon to provide indirect fire support in the assault.

¹⁴⁵ German *Stosstrupptaktiken* were not used in any major way until the German Second Army counter attack at Cambrai on November 30th 1917. While the Germans were aware of these tactics by 1914 application was patchy; moreover special assault units had to be formed, at the expense of expertise elsewhere, in order to carry them out.

¹⁴⁶ Of the three energetic commanders of the Training Directorate between 1917 and the end of the war a great deal of credit should go to Arthur Solly-Flood and his successor, Brigadier Charles Bonham Carter, who presided over the GHQ training effort between January 1917 and July 1918, and whose contributions are often overshadowed by the later, and larger than life, presence of Ivor Maxse.

corps and Armies a novelty, even without the added new condition that they had to deal with improvised bodies of intelligent amateurs”¹⁴⁷

The key words here are “intelligent amateurs”. At lower levels two crucial training pamphlets, SS 135 in Dec 1916,¹⁴⁸ and SS 143 in February 1917¹⁴⁹, demonstrated a major shift in training doctrine. SS135, significantly, contains comprehensive guidance on artillery / infantry co-operation, working with tanks, use of gas and smoke, the tactical deployment of Stokes mortars, machine guns and Lewis guns. SS143 recognises both the change in emphasis from the Company to Platoon as the smallest manoeuvre unit in an attack. The platoon is now seen with its own formations and tactics devised around the increased capability and firepower of rifle grenades, hand grenades and Lewis guns with which it was now equipped, in addition to the SMLE.

Pamphlet SS143 consists of only twenty small pages, yet it has the tone of a complete “self help” guide to its subject and recognises that the platoon was “the unit of attack”, thus placing the platoon commander in direct control of, and responsibility for, his battle, it stated:

“It is not possible to lay down a correct line of action for all situations which may arise on the battlefield, but it is hoped that a careful study of the instructions herein contained may assist subordinate commanders to act correctly in any situation”¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁷Both: *OH*, Vol V, pp 592-593.

¹⁴⁸ *Instructions for the training of Divisions for offensive action*. Dec. 1916. This built on lessons learned during the first month of the Somme battle and embodied in SS 119, *Preliminary Notes on the Tactical Lessons of the Recent Operation*, July 1916.

¹⁴⁹SS 143. *Instructions for the training of Platoons for offensive action*, General Staff. Feb 1917.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*: Introduction.

At higher levels divisional and corps command was often held by professional officers who might not have held such posts in peace-time. They too had to learn as best they could, the worst being removed and sent elsewhere while others tried their hands.¹⁵¹

An additional change to the way in which the Army functioned and regarded itself was brought about by the introduction of conscription. For the first time unit strengths were made up of drafts of new soldiers who had been compulsorily brought into the Army, many of them motivationally and physically inferior to the volunteers of 1914 and 1915.

After the Somme the British Army, now at the peak of its size and hardened in battle, would refine infantry tactics, especially those regarding the combination of artillery and infantry in the assault, and the increasing use of weapons carried within the infantry platoon to enable independent action¹⁵².

The British Army on the Western Front after autumn 1916 was one where the quality of manpower in the infantry divisions underwent a process of homogenisation as drafts of reinforcements changed from volunteers to conscripts and the local ties between serving soldiers and the cap badges they wore became increasingly blurred.

¹⁵¹ For example, General Sir Charles Monro commanded First Army for only six months and presided over a series of five lacklustre battles and engagements (a mere 5 of First Army's total of 55). He was clearly a most able general, his assessment and advice to Kitchener on the Gallipoli campaign, for instance, being rapid, clear and correct, but he was equally obviously not suited as a field commander and was quickly moved on.

¹⁵² Once the army had mastered the pains of expansion attention was turned to the dissemination of new tactics and technology through training. Training for the new conditions meant training instructors, then the instructors training the men, by which time the training requirement had frequently changed. Moreover the inception or enlargement of unique specialisations, such as the Machine Gun Corps, the Tank Corps, the Special Brigade (Gas specialists), and the RFC/RAF meant that, as the specialists refined their particular style of warfare within their own training organisations, even more training was needed throughout the army in general, in order for the ordinary soldier or officer to understand the way in which the new weaponry would fit in to the war he was fighting.

Divisions were committed to battle, worn down and then removed to refit and retrain on a regular basis so that fighting quality after the Somme had less to do with whether the division was Regular, New Army or Territorial, than with the quality of its leadership and training. Good divisions were well led and well trained. Most divisions were adequately led and adequately trained especially after GHQ began to take more control of the content of training throughout the BEF in January 1917 with the appointment of Arthur Solly-Flood to head the new Training Directorate¹⁵³.

The 61st Division, like many of the New Army divisions, arrived mid way through the learning process. Its first battle at Fromelles, was more complex than the early attacks of trench warfare. The use of light and heavy trench mortars, the use of 18 pounders brought forward to close range in order to destroy enemy breast works, and the employment of Lewis Guns in the assault were all recent developments. However, the massed movement of battalions across no man's land behind a gun barrage that had not destroyed key points, working in lifts that left infantry exposed in no man's land, together with a lack of appreciation of the danger to the assault of enfilade machine gun fire, ensured that the outcome was failure. In this respect the experience of Fromelles in 1916 was not greatly different from that of many divisions on the left flank of the Somme attack on the 1st July, and it is against this yardstick that the battle should be judged.

¹⁵³ Major-General Arthur Solly-Flood, who had moved to GHQ in a training capacity in October 1916, built on the recent, and seminal, pamphlet *SS135 'Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action'* and soon issued what was to become a stream of important instructional pamphlets starting with *SS143 'Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action'*. He unified training across the Armies of the BEF, closed down the Divisional Training Schools and put Corps Training Schools on a sound footing.

The 61st Division continued to hold the line in front of Laventie while refitting. Routine raids¹⁵⁴ on the German trenches continued and it is clear that, as the Division recovered, interest in these raids was expressed at the highest level. In a report¹⁵⁵ on a successful raid carried out by the 61st Division in August, Haking wrote, on the 25th of August:

I think that the fighting efficiency of the Bns. that had Companies engaged will be really improved by the operation.

This report was sent to HQ First Army where it was forwarded to GHQ, whence it returned ten days later with the comment:

*The Commander-in-Chief has noted this favourable report with satisfaction*¹⁵⁶

This note was added personally by Lancelot Kiggell, Haig's Chief of the General Staff.

This demonstrates the care with which divisions were assessed and morale monitored, and that this careful husbandry extended to the top of the BEF. Both "Moral" (morale) and the "Offensive Spirit" were fostered throughout the BEF for the whole of the war.

The daily routine of individual battalions also shows the requirement to constantly change and learn were being addressed. A typical period in the line was recorded in the war diary of the 2/4th Battalion. The Gloucestershire Regiment, for August-October 1916:

¹⁵⁴ Raiding the German lines on a frequent basis was XI Corps policy, and in line with the BEF requirement to show aggressive action. In notes on the XI Corp Commander's Conference for the 12th April 1916 can be found the following:

"The Corps Commander cannot consider any division a fighting unit until it has raided the German trenches opposite its front..... Raids should be looked upon as part of the ordinary duty of every battalion when it goes into the trenches. By this means we are maintaining and improving our moral and breaking down the German defences". NA WO 95/881, XI Corps, General Staff Jan – Dec 1916.

¹⁵⁵ NA WO 95/3033, 61st Infantry Division.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

August:

Days in the line 16, Training 5, Working parties & admin 8, Moving 2 = 31

Sept:

Days in the line 16, Training 6, Working parties & admin 7, Sports 1 = 30

October:

Days in the line 15, Training 11, Working parties & admin 3, Moving 1 = 31

This routine, typical of battalions in the line, shows 51% of time spent on manning the line or in the process of relief, 24% training, 20% providing working parties or in routine administrative tasks and 5% on other activities such as travelling, sports days, etc. For every 2 days manning the line roughly one day would be spent on training, a clear indication of the importance with which training was regarded.

A simple reading of the record of the dates of battles in which a division took part¹⁵⁷ does not give a wholly realistic picture of the life of a Western Front infantry division. Unless a division was being refitted after an action it was most likely to be holding a part of the line somewhere or other. The 61st Division spent nearly four months in the Artois sector in 1916, moving to the Somme area and becoming part of IV Corps at the end of December, taking over an area between Grancourt and Courcellette on the 20th, and eventually taking part in the "Operations on the Ancre" between the 11th – 15th January 1917¹⁵⁸. Training

¹⁵⁷ i.e: The lists of battles and actions shown in the OH *Order of Battle of Divisions* volumes.

¹⁵⁸ During these operations first use was made by the artillery of the 106 graze fuze, a major step in artillery technique, as it provided a sensitive and reliable fuze that was safe to fire and would detonate as soon as it hit wire, thus exploding above the obstacle and reliably cutting the wire obstacle. These fuzes were available in quantity for the Battle of Arras and were so successful they remained in the army inventory into the 1920s.

continued and a revealing extract from the war diary of the 2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, shows an interesting mix of subjects being studied, such as;

close order drill and musketry.....box respirator drill, practise in moving through woods, bombers and snipers (training) under specialist officers, tactical school for platoon officers and NCOs, practise in night patrolling, and Instruction of NCOs in magnetic compass¹⁵⁹.

The clear implication is that the infantry was constantly maintaining old skills and learning new ways of going about its business.

In February 1917 the 61st Division was moved from the Fifth to the Fourth Army, in the Amiens area, and got its first experience of open warfare during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, between the 14th March and the 15th April. The Official History makes some interesting observations of this period that, despite the lack of shelter and the cold:

There was at least partial compensation in the raised morale created by escape from the water logged trenches and in the exhilaration of pursuing the enemy across open country. ...the spirit of the troops rose and their tactical skill rapidly increased.

Nevertheless it was once more proved that experience under fire, in whatever conditions, is one of the most important features of training. It was not the newly

¹⁵⁹ NA WO 95/3056. 2/6th Battalion The Royal Warwickshire Regiment war diary for December 1916. From this period on there are frequent references to Lewis gunners, snipers and bombers undergoing specialist training.

*arrived formations*¹⁶⁰, *trained mainly for open warfare, but the “Somme divisions” that showed the greatest aptitude and most quickly learned the new lessons.*¹⁶¹

The increase in tactical skill was certainly evident, and proof of the increasing capacity of the infantry can be seen in a small operation undertaken by the 2/7th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, to take the village of Fresnoy le Petit on the night of April 8/9th 1917.¹⁶²

Orders for a night attack, including an outline plan for the attack and the artillery barrage details and timings, were issued by 182nd Brigade Headquarters at 1am on the 8th.

At 1pm on the 8th the Battalion Operation Order was issued by the battalion’s adjutant. This order added detail to the Brigade order and allocated troops to task. That this was a well understood and practised procedure is obvious in the brevity of instruction, and the limited time allowed, to mount the operation. The orders of both Brigade and Battalion occupy just one sheet of foolscap for what is a complex phased attack with two separate attacking elements, to be carried out during the hours of darkness. The Brigade instructions give considerable lassitude to the Battalion and both Brigade and Battalion instructions assume that all will understand and act on them without further clarification. Consider paragraphs 9 and 10:

¹⁶⁰ These included the rest of the Second-Line TF divisions, the newly arrived 59th and 66th, now placed in reserve, and the recently arrived 57th, 58th and 62nd, which had arrived in January and February, and, like the 61st before them, put into the line almost immediately. See: OH, *Military Operations, France & Belgium, 1917, (Vol. I), The German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the battle of Arras*, IWM/Battery Press, 1992,p.64.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p.162.

¹⁶² See appendix D for 182 Brigade Order No. 95 of 8th April 1917, 2/7th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment Order No.32 of 8th April 1917 and after action report by Commanding Officer , 2/7th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment, dated 10th April 1917. It was clear that, in the 61st Division, the contents of SS 143, *The Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*, were already being applied in the field.

9. Normal arrangements for the carrying of tools forward and material for consolidation will be carried out.

10. Officer Commanding Machine Guns will arrange barrage and protection for Right Flank from M.33.c to M.28.d.6.5¹⁶³.

The total time from the Brigade instruction being issued until the attack began was just 18 hours.

The Commanding Officer's report on the battle, written on the 10th April, shows a fluid and well carried out operation. A forward "battle HQ" aided communication and when progress was stalled fire and manoeuvre was used to continue the attack. Sensible consolidation of ground taken was carried out throughout and communication with the artillery maintained so that the fire plan could show flexibility, more "on call" fire being delivered between 8.58 and 9.15pm to aid the attack. Reserves were committed in a timely fashion as needed, and the objective taken before dawn on the 9th with 53 casualties. These losses showed the German's determination to force the British to fight as they advanced.

Finally, the Commanding Officer's recommendations show that individual initiative and resourcefulness were displayed at all levels. Of fifteen individuals commended seven were privates, three were junior NCOs, one senior was a NCO and three were second lieutenants.

This attack shows an almost astonishing maturity in the 61st Division a mere nine months after the Fromelles attack, and a professionalism that is not limited to any particular level within the rank structure.

¹⁶³ NA WO 95/3056. 2/7th Bn. The Royal Warwickshire Regiment Operation Order 32 dated April 8th 1917. See: Appendix D. which contains the Brigade and Battalion Operation Orders and the Commanding Officer's after action report.

On the 1st of August the 61st moved again, to the Ypres Salient where it took part in operations in the Langemarck area during the Third Battle of Ypres. By this time man power shortages were beginning to affect the BEF and the 61st Division was considerably depleted. In June¹⁶⁴ the three battalions for which records have been found¹⁶⁵ reported their strengths as:

2/5th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 37 Officers and 672 Other Ranks

2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 36 Officers and 644 Other Ranks

2/4th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, 42 Officers and 723 Other Ranks

In July, however, the Division was withdrawn from the line and rested for a month in the Quoeux / Haut Mainil, area inland from Boulogne. During this time they were re-manned and, at the end of the month reported strengths as:

2/5th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 37 Officers and 938 Other Ranks

2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 40 Officers and 915 Other Ranks

2/4th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, 39 Officers and 964 Other Ranks

This represents an increase of 28% in one month and demonstrates one of the difficulties of training and fighting at the same time. By August nearly one man in three was a newcomer, to be trained and accepted by his particular battalion. At the same time the old hands would be getting fewer and fewer. This process had happened after Fromelles and would be a regular occurrence as the war went on. Constant losses posed considerable leadership

¹⁶⁴ In all three Battalions these figures had been at similar levels over the three months: April/May/June 1917 .

¹⁶⁵ Of the five battalions over this period studied only three record unit strength on a routine basis. However, since the three battalions for which records are available show consistency it is likely that their numbers reflect those of the wider organisation.

challenges and it is a tribute to the BEF, and the men that served it, that it continued to function and indeed improve, as the war progressed.

By the end of August the Division was, once more, in the Ypres area and took part in the Battle of Langemarck before moving to the Arras area in mid September. As ever the casualty figures rose inexorably, by small numbers when the front was quiet, but by larger numbers when an action took place. By the 30th of October the 2/7th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, reported a strength reduced from 39 Officers and 953¹⁶⁶ Other Ranks to 790¹⁶⁷ all ranks.

In December 1917 the 61st Division was drawn into the Battle of Cambrai, as the German counter attack drove against the exhausted troops of Byng's Third Army. The 2/7th, which had been fully engaged, was reduced to 12 Officers and 254 Other Ranks by the 12th December.

The 2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, not as heavily engaged, reported 26 Officers and 653 Other Ranks on the 30th of December, down from 38 Officers and 740 Other Ranks at the end of November.

The 61st Division's casualties, between the 30th of November and the 8th of December totalled 1,916, probably around 25% of its total battle strength at the end of November.

¹⁶⁶ NA WO 95/3056, War diary for September 1917.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, , War diary for October 1917.

The losses shown in the 61st Division would suggest that they took casualties amounting to about 750 men per battalion per year¹⁶⁸.

Frank Richards reckoned that, by the Armistice, only two or three of the men of the Second Battalion, The Royal Welch Fusiliers, who had come to France with the BEF survived. This underlines the constant renewal of infantry divisions in the BEF, and the consequent need for sound leadership of a high order, both by commissioned and non commissioned officers regardless of background. Reliance moved from regular to amateur soldiers between 1914 and 1916, and to conscripted men after 1916. It would have been a singular test of leadership just to maintain an army in the field under these conditions. To actually improve the fighting capability as the war went on was an extraordinary achievement.

¹⁶⁸ 2/5th Bn The Gloucestershire Regiment lost 1763 casualties killed and wounded in the course of the war, an average turnover of just under, 200 men every three months. This represented a loss rate of about 20-34% of fighting strength depending on the manning state at the time, or between 80-100+ % each year. See: Barnes, Op cit.

Chapter 3

Leadership, Command and Morale in the 61st Division

The scale of casualties suffered by infantry divisions in the First World War meant that group cohesion and identity, two essential building blocks in individual morale, would have been difficult to maintain as the war progressed, particularly in the infantry battalion, that basic component of a Regiment from which group identity and a sense of belonging are drawn. The quality and intelligence of recruits underwent a decline as the war progressed, and “wastage” wore down the available population of men faster than it could be replaced. Morale, however, remained surprisingly high¹⁶⁹.

There are two factors which account for this. The first is the underpinning of the army by a civilian society in which a social order and deference were accepted by the majority of those

¹⁶⁹ During the reorganisation of the 61st Division in Spring 1918, when some battalions had been disbanded, men from the Buckinghamshire Regiment had been posted into the 25th Entrenching Battalion. After the fighting during the retreat from St Quentin the badly mauled battalions of the Division were withdrawn early in April 1918 to refit.

The 2/4th Battalion, The Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry was sent to the small village of Avesne, behind Amiens. When they arrived they were surprised to find the 25th Entrenching Battalion waiting for them. The 25th Entrenching Battalion had been engaged in fighting in the Nesle area. On being withdrawn, and in the absence of orders, they simply took advantage of the confusion and marched back to the 61st Division. See: G K Rose, *The Story of The 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*, Blackwell, 1920, pp. 174/175.

in it as laudable and right¹⁷⁰. The second is the high quality of leadership which those civilians brought into the army received, in order for the army to function as it did.

The qualities required by the army commissioned officer and non commissioned ranks were well understood by the regular army, based as it was on an army recruited from the bottom stratum of society and led by officers from the top layer.

Both the Territorial Force, with its leadership based in a more informal relationship between officer and man, and the unknown quantity of the New Army officers, based on a middle class almost unknown to the regular army, tended to be a matter of concern to the Regular officers who would run the war¹⁷¹. In this the Regular Army itself was as isolated and peculiar in custom and belief as a monastic order¹⁷².

The leadership principles which the army used¹⁷³ were, however, grasped and understood by temporary officers and temporary soldiers alike and served well to provide a glue of trust and

¹⁷⁰ There were undercurrents of discontent within British society. Irish nationalism was an issue as was socialism and the control of the means of production. However, the vast majority of the population had a sense of personal identity with Britain and Empire and believed in the war as a good, and often noble, thing. The extraordinary spontaneous demonstrations of popular support at the outbreak of war and the unprecedented number of volunteers that came forward in the first few months of the War are evidence of National approval for it. See: Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army, The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916*, Pen & Sword, 2007, and Charles Messenger, *Call to Arms, The British Army 1914-1918*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005.

¹⁷¹ Few New Army or Territorial officers rose above Battalion Command. There were only ten Territorial Brigade Commanders in 1918, but key appointments remained the preserve of the Regular Army: See. Ian Beckett: *The Territorial Force*, in Ian F W Beckett and Keith Simpson (Eds), *A nation in arms. A social study of the British army in the First World War*. Manchester University Press, 1985.

¹⁷² Captain J C Dunn recounted how, after an inspection of the regular 2nd Battalion The Royal Welch Fusiliers, General Sir Richard Haking the new commander of XI Corps, having chatted to the men as he inspected them, said to the CO: "That's been a treat. That's the sort we've known for thirty years". At this point, in March 1916, the 2nd Royal Welch were still composed almost entirely of Regulars, Reservists and Special Reservists. J C Dunn, *The War The Infantry Knew, 1914-1918*, Janes, 1987, p. 185. Quoted in: Gary Sheffield (Ed.), *Leadership & Command, The Anglo-American Military Experience Since 1861*, Brassey's, 1997.

¹⁷³ "...he requires a clear mind and a strong character which commands the respect of his subordinates, with whom he should be in close touch and sympathy..... A capacity for promptly grasping a situation and deciding how best to meet definite military problems.....He needs imagination in order to have the power of anticipating probable future requirements and developments, and organising ability in order to make the necessary provision to meet them.....a capacity...for coming at once to a correct decision ,which he must be able to translate forthwith into clear and concise orders." *Field Service Regulations, Part 1*, HMSO. 1909(Reprinted 1914).

care which bonded men together both in the militarised citizens of the Territorial Force and the eager civilians of the New Armies. Regardless of the social mannerisms of an individual unit men looked to their platoon commander and platoon sergeant for orders, hoped for the approval of their Company Commanders and regarded the Commanding Officer as a father figure with the power both to praise and to punish.

Beyond that family unit lay the Brigade and Division commanders, who the average soldier would probably rarely see, but could probably recognise and with whom, as part of the Brigade or Division, he could feel a common identity beyond the immediate one of the Battalion and Regiment¹⁷⁴.

The capacity of: “temporary gentlemen” to command, and command well, was not found wanting. Most of the Regular Army did not understand the way in which either the Territorial, New Army or Conscript officers¹⁷⁵ functioned without the benefit of long training in the field, and in the Officer’s Mess. That they did function is incontrovertible. What became important, as the Regular component of the BEF became more and more watered down, was the experience carried by survivors, regardless of which part of the Army they originated from.

The presence in a unit of a cadre of men who had been in it for a considerable time carried with it the shared experience both of combat and of the unit identity.

It was at battalion level that the “old hands” were most noticeable. Frank Richards, in the 2nd Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers, recalled:

¹⁷⁴ The Regiment does not exist as an infantry fighting unit. The infantry Regiment includes Regular and Territorial battalions and Army Cadet Force units sharing the same cap badge. In the First World War there were always two regular battalions, as well as various Territorial Force and New Army (Service) battalions.

¹⁷⁵ It should not be forgotten that, by the end of the war, 41% of officers had been commissioned from the ranks, as opposed to 2% before the war. See: J M Bourne, *British Generals in the First World War*, in Gary Sheffield (Ed.), *Leadership & Command, The Anglo-American Military Experience Since 1861*, Brassey’s, 1997.p.98.

Coming out of the Aid Post I met one of our old officers who enquired if I had a fever. I replied that I had and was going to hospital. I packed my haversack and returned to the Aid Post : the Doctor then informed me that he had decided to keep me in the Aid Post for a few days to see how I got on..... The Aid Post Sergeant told me that while I was packing my haversack the officer had come in and had a chat with the Doctor about me and that was the reason I was not sent to hospital. Later in the War it was very nearly impossible for old hands who was sick to get sent to hospital , and during the time that Dr Dunn¹⁷⁶ was with the Battalion and we were out of action, whenever an old hand went sick he would doctor him himself and do his utmost to keep the man in the Battalion¹⁷⁷.

It is these “old soldiers” who carried much of the group experience and were often a steadying influence on the newer men around them.

In the 61st Division numbers of men who served throughout the war were also small¹⁷⁸. While numbers for other ranks are not known, only two officers and warrant officers of the 2/4th Battalion, the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry who went overseas with the Battalion remained in it at the Armistice, namely Major G K Rose MC, and the Regimental Quartermaster-Sergeant, W C Hedges¹⁷⁹.

In the 2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment only one officer, Lieutenant D Gee MC, survived from the original officers who deployed to receive the King’s Colour, early in

¹⁷⁶ Dr J C Dunn, author of *The War The Infantry Knew, 1914-1918*.

¹⁷⁷ Frank Richards; *Old Soldiers Never Die*, Krijnan & Langley, 2004, p.80. See also Lord Moran, *Anatomy of Courage, Constable*, 1945, pp.117-118.

¹⁷⁸ Not all those who did not serve with a unit throughout its history on the Western Front became casualties. Many left to join other parts of the army, or to be commissioned, able officers were posted to the Staff. Many others just became worn out and were posted to jobs out of the battle zone.

¹⁷⁹ In: G K Rose, *The Story of The 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*, Blackwell, 1920.

1919. In the Battalion history¹⁸⁰ a useful account is given of the casualties inflicted on the Battalion which serves to demonstrate the reality of war on the Western Front¹⁸¹, and the consequent problems for commanders.

Lieutenant-Colonel J D Wyatt, a regular infantry officer of the Northamptonshire Regiment, who had joined the Division when it arrived in France, and Colonel Geoffrey Christie-Miller, a Territorial Force officer who had been with the Division since its formation, both survived and served throughout in various battalions within the Division. Both left informative memoirs, now in the Imperial War Museum¹⁸².

Command at Brigade and Divisional level, on the Western Front in the First World War was probably less remote from the front line than in any war before or since. The difficulties of communication meant that commanders needed to be well forward to have any idea of what was happening, so that, while the line remained static from 1914 to 1917, a brigade commander was likely to have his headquarters no more than a few hundred metres behind the front line. This meant that soldiers were likely to know their Brigade commanders and his staff by sight, and to take a personal interest in the performance of their Brigadiers. Turnover of Brigade commanders was brisk on the Western Front and the 61st Division had a total of fourteen different Brigadier-Generals during its period of active service¹⁸³.

¹⁸⁰ Anon, *The History of the 2/6th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 1914-1918*, Cornish Brothers. 1919.

¹⁸¹ See: Appendix F.

¹⁸² IWM 4776 Box 80/32/1, and 4160 Box 83/12/1.

¹⁸³ This total excludes temporary and “acting” commanders.

The 61st Division was particularly lucky in having one Divisional Commander for most of its time in France¹⁸⁴. Brigade command was more turbulent, with 182 Brigade having six, 183 Brigade three and 184 Brigade eight commanders during the Divisions time on active service¹⁸⁵.

A comparison of time Divisions were deployed on the Western Front, and the numbers of commanders at Divisional and Brigade level during that time is shown below:

Division	57th ¹⁸⁶	58th	59th	61st	62nd	66th
Time deployed on the Western Front (Months).	22	21	21	30	22	20
No. of Divisional Commanders	2	4	4	2	2	3
No. of Brigade Commanders	9	12	8	14	7	8

The quality of Brigade Commanders in the 61st Division should also be noted. Only one, Carter, commander of 184 Brigade was sacked, in the aftermath of Fromelles.¹⁸⁷ A number of others were notable:

¹⁸⁴ Second-Line Territorial divisions had between two and four commanders, (excluding temporary or “acting” commanders), during their time on the Western Front, the 61st Division had two with one, Major-General Colin Mackenzie, commanding for over two years, until May 1918.

¹⁸⁵ The highest number of any Second-Line Territorial Division and probably a reflection of the greater length of time the 61st Division spent in France than the others.

¹⁸⁶ This Division spent ten months in Ireland having been deployed there during the Easter Rising of April 1916.

¹⁸⁷ C H P Carter, who had assumed command in May 1916, was not regarded as fit for the job by at least some of his subordinates. Christie-Miller wrote of him: “...*the Brigade were heartily glad to be rid of a Commander in whom they had no confidence, who demonstrated daily his ignorance of the requirements of war.*” See: Christie-Miller papers, IWM 80/32/1, Diary, Vol. 2, p.190.

In the 182nd Brigade, A F Gordon,(13th Feb 1916 – 18th October 1916) was a Gordon Highlander and a veteran of the North West Frontier who had also served in Central and South Africa, holder of the DSO, six times Mentioned in Despatches during his service on the Western Front.

F N Burnell-Nugent, (18th October 1916 – 18th January 1917), had a distinguished career in the Rifle Brigade, retiring as a Brigadier-General with a DSO, OBE and CB.

The Hon C J Sackville-West (12th Mar 1917-14th Sept 1917), had already been wounded commanding the 21st Infantry Brigade and again while subsequently commanding 190th Brigade of the 63rd, (Royal Naval), Division. He left the 61st Division on promotion to Major General eventually retiring in 1929. His successor, W D Croft, had a DSO with three bars and was ten times Mentioned in Despatches for his service in the First World War.

In 183rd Brigade C G Stewart, (13th February 1916 until wounded on the 18th October), had served in Egypt (he was present at the battle of Khartoum) and South Africa, and had a number of awards for bravery prior to the First World War including Mention in Despatches and the DSO.

A H Spooner (30th July 1916-18th September 1918), was a former Lancashire County cricketer eventually to be DSO and CMG and would command the 1st Battalion, the Lancashire Fusiliers after the war.

B D L G Anley, (21st Sept 1918- until the end of the war), was another South African Veteran and a graduate of the Staff College. Wounded commanding the 1st battalion the Manchester Regiment in 1915 and previously GSO1 of the 41st Division, he eventually retired in 1928 after his last posting as Commandant of the Senior Officer's School, Sheerness.

In the 184th Brigade the sacked Carter's successor was W J Dugan, (31st July 1916-8th September 1916 – wounded), another Boer War veteran who would finish the First World war with a DSO and six Mentions in Despatches. He retired in 1934 as a Major-General, Commander 56(1st London) Division, Territorial Army before becoming Governor of Victoria and eventually as Baron Dugan of Victoria, GCMG, CB.DSO,KStJ.

A F A N Thorne, (14th October 1918- 30th July 1919) was a regular Grenadier Guards officer. He won the DSO in 1916, with a bar in 1918 and again, at the end of the war. He also had seven Mentions in Despatches. Remaining in the army, he commanded the Territorial 48th (South Midland) Division in France in 1940.

From the foregoing it is quite obvious that the GHQ was careful to appoint the best men it could to Brigade command, at least in the 61st Division. The examples given are limited by the amount of biographical detail available, but these men were clearly an outstandingly talented and highly professional group.

As a Divisional Commander Colin Mackenzie is something of an enigma. A regular officer from a military family¹⁸⁸, and son of Major-General Colin Mackenzie, Mackenzie was an extremely experienced infantry officer who had soldiered in Egypt, Burma, the North West frontier and South Africa before attending Staff College, graduating as a full Colonel at the early age of 38. He had been Chief of Staff of the Canadian Army for three years¹⁸⁹ and entered the First World War at the age of 53, taking over command of the 3rd Division on

¹⁸⁸ His own son, Colin Hercules was badly wounded with the Scots Guards at the end of the First World War, losing a leg. In the Second World War, Colin Hercules went on to set up and run the Far East mission of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), known as Force 136, which eventually ran 30,000 agents in SE Asia.

¹⁸⁹ Mackenzie left post early after differing with Sam Hughes, the somewhat cantankerous Canadian Minister of Militia and Defence. They disagreed on a number of issues, including the suitability of the Ross rifle. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colin_John_Mackenzie.

the death of its commander in October 1914, but being removed only two weeks later. Despite this setback Mackenzie must have had considerable ability, since he was appointed to the command of the 61st Division on the 4th of February 1916 and remained with the Division almost continuously until evacuated sick at the end of May 1918¹⁹⁰. This comparatively long period of command, combined with a quiet efficiency was inevitably a major factor in forming the character of his Division.

Mackenzie's successor, for the last five months of the war, was Major-General F J Duncan, a Boer War veteran and Scots Guards officer. In a now familiar pattern he was holder of the DSO, had been three times Mentioned in Despatches and was an experienced infantry Brigade commander before taking over the 61st Division.

The last 100 days

At the battle of Amiens the British army launched an offensive, in conjunction with the French, Belgian and American armies, which resulted in the whole of the German armies on the Western Front going onto the defensive. After Amiens the British launched a series of attacks, stopping each as opposition began to stiffen and launching another elsewhere. This high intensity mobile war was, in spirit, closer to the fighting of the second World War than that of the preceding four years. The 61st Division fought further engagements during the Battle of the Selle, on the 24th/25th of October, and the Battle of Valenciennes on the 1st/2nd of November finishing the war just South of Valenciennes along the line of the river Ecaillon.

¹⁹⁰ Mackenzie retired in 1920 and was Colonel of the Seaforth Highlanders from 1924-1931. He left no known papers, an approach to his family by the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies in 1987 having received no reply.

Between the 12th of September and the 11th of November the Division had lost 1,072¹⁹¹ casualties.

On the 30th of July 1919 the Divisional headquarters closed and the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division passed out of existence.

Conclusion

The 61st Division was lucky in both its commanders on the Western Front. Both were experienced infantry soldiers with a long history of command experience. The Brigades which worked for them were led by capable professional officers and this combination enabled the Division to withstand the initial shock of battle and grow in confidence and quality throughout the remainder of the war. By 1917 the 61st Division was a sound and reliable formation, well led at all levels and capable of undertaking offensive operations and rebuilding itself rapidly.

In this it was in no way unique. The New Army and Territorial divisions on the Western Front were not trusted by the majority of the, instinctively conservative, Regular Army, until they had proven themselves. Moreover, an unfortunate and inaccurate remark, which might well

¹⁹¹ Casualties for Third Army Divisions in this period vary from 807 (52nd Division) to 4,116 (63rd Division). Two Divisions had less than 1000 casualties, five had between 1000-2000, six had between 2000-3000 one had between 3000-4000 and one had over 4000. Once again the 61st Division was an average Division.

not have been remembered at all, (had the Division's neighbours at Fromelles not been the almost equally untried 5th Australian Division), has clouded their reputation for over 90 years.

The 61st Division should be remembered for what it was; a well led, sound and workmanlike formation, part of a citizen army raised and tested in the most difficult circumstances. It was an army which, by 1918 was, itself, the most capable and resilient army in Europe and which had, quite simply, been the principal instrument of the defeat of the German army and the winning of the war on the Western Front.