There is no doubt that the First World War shaped the world in which we live today. The number of countries that were involved made it impossible to not have a long-lasting effect, whether negative or positive. There are those who believe it should never have happened, those who feel it was absolutely necessary, those by whom it is respectfully celebrated and those by whom it is quietly remembered. Views will, naturally, differ between nations and individuals.

This book explores the battles, spotlights the soldiers, and considers significant figures as well as the people back home, examining what relationships were like between all involved.

The words and imagery are accompanied by historical artefacts that, combined, truly paint a picture of what life was like during the First World War.
# Map Key

Common symbols used on maps in this book

## National Colours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Nation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>British, Dominion &amp; Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>Belgian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Size of Military Units

- xxxx: Army
- xxx: Corps
- xx: Division
- x: Brigade
- III: Regiment
- II: Battalion

## Military Types

- ✉️: Infantry
- 🚋: Tanks
- 🔞: Cavalry

## Military Symbols

- xxxx: Army group boundary line
- xxx: Army boundary line
- xx: Corps boundary line
- x: Division boundary line
- ➡️: Troops attacking
- ➡️: Unsuccessful attack
- ←️: Planned withdrawal
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLIDE TOWARDS CONFLICT</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOBILIZATION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BATTLE OF THE FRONTIERS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONS AND LE CATEAU</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MARNE AND THE AISNE</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF TANNENBERG</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WAR AGAINST TURKEY</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAR IN AFRICA</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WAR AT SEA</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915 SPRING OFFENSIVES</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EASTERN FRONT BATTLES</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL WAR</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTUMN 1915 BATTLES</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRITISH COMMAND</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SALONIKA CAMPAIGN</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF VERDUN</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF VERDUN</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRELAND</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMPAIGNS IN MESOPOTAMIA</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE ITALIAN FRONT</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE EASTERN FRONT</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMPAIGNS IN PALESTIAN</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BATTLES IN ITALY</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAR IN THE ATLANTIC</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPIRES AT WAR</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN WAR</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERARY INFLUENCES</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE DIPLOMACY OF WAR</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRENCH CHANGE OF COMMAND</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF ARRAS</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE NIVELLE OFFENSIVE</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF MESSINES</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASSCHENDAELE</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRENCH LIFE</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCAL ACTIONS</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WAR IN THE AIR</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECOND BATTLE OF THE MARNE</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAMEL AND AMIENS</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPECIALISTS</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALLIES ON THE ADVANCE</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE USA ENTERS THE WAR</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE AMERICAN OFFENSIVES</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GRAND OFFENSIVE</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE FINAL BATTLES</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTERMATH AND LEGACY</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY &amp; CREDITS</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The single event that more than any other can be said to have shaped the world we live in is the First World War. The Second World War grew out of the First. It was not a “given” that a second great war would occur, but there was sufficient unfinished business from 1914–18 to make it likely. The global spread of the First World War was such that almost no part was left untouched, either directly or indirectly. The resources of great empires were mobilized to fight a total war. Soldiers came from tropical North Queensland and West Africa to fight for Britain and France against Germany in Belgium. Labourers from South Africa, China and Vietnam were sent to work on the Western Front. Men from the far reaches of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires battled each other in the Carpathians.

The war continues to affect us. In Britain, opinion is sharply polarized between those who see the war as a monstrous tragedy which should never have happened, and those who agree it was a tragedy but say that it was not of Britain’s making and Britain had no choice but to get involved. From a French or German perspective it can be seen as the second round in a Franco-German war that began in 1870 and only ended in 1945. An American might view it as the moment when the USA finally stepped onto the world stage; an Australian, New Zealander or Canadian as the time when their nations began to emerge from under the protective wing of the mother country. Citizens of states such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Latvia can look back to 1914–18 as the beginning of, in some cases an extremely prolonged, process of achieving national self determination. The powder keg that is the modern Middle East has its origins in British and French meddling in the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. German Nazism, Italian Fascism and Soviet Communism were all by-products of the First World War.

The generals of the war still excite passionate debates, with individuals lined up for and against. Haig and Pétain remain controversial figures, although for very different reasons; and historians still debate the merits of Conrad, Foch, French, Pershing, Brusilov, Kemel, Joffre, Currie and Monash as commanders. But increasingly the ordinary soldier has taken centre stage. And we should not forget the civilians – women, older men, and children – whose support for the war was critical. As historians are increasingly realizing, home front and battle front were closely intertwined.

This book enables us to explore the First World War through text, pictures and memorabilia. I hope that it gives readers some idea of the issues at stake, the strategies, tactics and battles, and the lives of the people who were there.

GARY SHEFFIELD, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
March 2014

OPPOSITE: Soldiers from 2nd Special Regiment at the Guet Post in the frontline trenches in front of La Pompeille in 1916.

BELOW: Canadian troops guard German prisoners as they use a stretcher and a light railway truck to transport wounded soldiers to get medical attention, Vimy Ridge, April 1917.
The origins of the war

The events that plunged Europe into war in 1914 moved with speed. On 28 June, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated by a young Serb, Gavrilo Princip. A month later, Austria declared war on Serbia, which Vienna blamed for the murder, and by 5 August the major states of Europe were at war. The immediate trigger for the First World War was thus rivalry between states in the Balkans. Russia backed Serbia, the latter state posing as the protector of the Serbs in the polyglot Habsburg Empire. Austria risked war with Russia to preserve its influence in the Balkans, having received on 5 July a promise of support from its ally Germany. Russia, alarmed by the threat to its security and prestige, mobilized its forces, followed by Germany and then France, Russia’s ally since 1892. The German attack on Belgium on 4 August brought Britain into the war. In retrospect, the war seemed to many to be almost accidental, with states slipping into an unwanted conflict.

However, there were wider issues at play. The German defeat of Napoleon III’s France in 1870–71 had destroyed the existing international balance of power. But Germany, despite its ever increasing economic power, chose, under the leadership of the “Iron Chancellor”, Otto von Bismarck, to live within the new situation it had created, and to avoid threatening its neighbours, while keeping France isolated. All this changed when the young and mentally unbalanced Kaiser Wilhelm II came to the throne in 1888. In 1890 Wilhelm dismissed Bismarck, and the system of treaties that the Chancellor had carefully constructed to protect Germany began to unravel. Wilhelm’s bellicose Weltpolitik (world policy) led to diplomatic encirclement, having thoroughly frightened Britain, France and Russia. The British government abandoned its policy of non-alignment and established an Entente – although not a formal alliance – with France and Russia in 1904.

By 1914, Germany had backed itself into a corner. Many historians agree Germany took
advantage of the situation in the Balkans to attempt to break up the Entente, even at the risk of a major war. Others argue that Germany actually desired and planned for war. Russia, defeated by the Japanese in 1904–05, was rapidly rebuilding its military strength, and some of the German elite favoured a war to prevent it from re-emerging as a rival. At the very least, the ambitious programme of annexations and the creation of de facto economic colonies across Europe that was drawn up by Germany shortly after the Russo-Japanese War began indicates that it was willing to take advantage of the opportunity to undertake aggressive expansionism. Likewise, there was nothing accidental about Austria-Hungary’s decision to crush Serbia, regardless of the risks of wider war. The Austrians, excluded over the previous century from spheres of influence in Germany and Italy, believed that they could not afford to be marginalized in the Balkans. Striking a blow against nationalism, a force that threatened to rot the multi-national Habsburg Empire from within, was also highly attractive.

There, were of course, other factors in the outbreak of the First World War. Although arms races do not in themselves cause wars, military competition before 1914 added to the sense of impending crisis. The Anglo-German naval rivalry was particularly dangerous. Britain’s primary defence force was the Royal Navy, and the German fleet-building programme initiated under Admiral Tirpitz posed a direct threat to the security of the British homeland and the British Empire. In response, the British drew closer to France and Russia and, in 1906, launched HMS Dreadnought. This revolutionary new battleship, the brainchild of Admiral Sir John “Jacky” Fisher, was superior to anything else afloat. It forced the Germans to respond, ratcheting the naval race to a new more dangerous level.

Domestic politics were also significant. Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, has been accused of failing to deter Germany by not sending strong enough signals concerning British intentions; yet his hand was weakened by the unwillingness of many of his Liberal colleagues in the Cabinet to contemplate war. In France, Germany’s decision to seize the province of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871 caused lasting resentment. In Germany, the rise of the Social Democrats alarmed the Imperial government and may have contributed to a desire for a popular war. Above all, a pan-European current of militarism, and a general belief in Social Darwinism – the idea that the survival of the fittest applied to nations and peoples – led to a feverish atmosphere in which resorting to war to settle disputes came to be seen as natural and acceptable. For all that, when article 231 of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles (that ended the war in the West) blamed Germany and its allies for the outbreak of the war, it encapsulated an essential truth.
Mobilization

The outbreak of war

For years before 1914, general staffs in Europe had prepared elaborate plans for mobilization in the event of war. During the nineteenth century, most states had adopted a system of conscripting men into the army for a set, often fairly short, period of time, then sending them back to civilian life. These reservists were then recalled to the colours in time of emergency. This arrangement allowed armies to put vast numbers of men into the field. Germany’s field army of 82 infantry divisions included 31 reserve formations; the French had 73 divisions, 25 of which were composed of reservists. The major exception was Britain, which relied on a long-service regular army backed up by a volunteer part-time Territorial Force, rather than on conscription. Shortly after the war began, the new Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener called for volunteers for a new, mass army. This ensured that by 1916 Britain had an army comparable in size to its allies and enemies. But in August 1914, Britain could only put a mere six infantry divisions in the field – in addition, of course, to the might of the Royal Navy.

The war plans of the Great Powers dictated that no time could be wasted between mobilizing and fighting. The German pre-war plan, developed under General Alfred von Schlieffen, was designed to compensate for the fact that Germany would face a war on two fronts. Hurling the bulk of its forces westwards, and invading neutral Belgium to outflank the French frontier defences, Germany would defeat France in a matter of weeks. Its forces would then redeploy via the strategic railway system to face the Russian Army, which the Germans calculated would be slow to move. That infringement of Belgian territory was likely to bring the British into the war was discounted. The operational concept was based on the idea of encirclement, a favourite German military gambit that served them well in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 (and was to be repeated on numerous occasions in the Second World War). If the French advanced into Lorraine, so much the better; the German trap would close behind them. The Schlieffen Plan, hotly debated by historians in recent years, stands as an example of a gamble of breathtaking proportions. If it failed, Germany would be in deep trouble.

The French army pinned its hopes on Plan XVII, a strategy developed by the French general staff under the leadership of General Joseph Joffre. Plan XVII was founded on the concept of the all-out offensive, an aggressive military doctrine associated with Lieutenant General (later Marshal) Ferdinand Foch. Both Joffre and Foch were to go on to play extremely prominent roles during the First World War. On the outbreak of war, major French forces would surge into Lorraine to recapture the provinces lost to Germany after the Franco-Prussian War, while others would advance farther to the north. Everywhere, the French would carry the war to

Entente Cordiale

In 1898, the Fashoda Incident, a confrontation between British and French troops in southern Sudan, brought the two countries close to war. A desire to settle colonial disputes and increasing fear of Germany brought the British and French together. An agreement (the “Entente Cordiale”) was signed in 1904, and by 1914 their military plans were being co-ordinated. The French navy deployed in the Mediterranean, leaving the Royal Navy to protect the Channel coast. The arrival in August 1914 of the BEF to fight alongside the French Army was the logical outcome of this rapprochement.
Mobilization

ABOVE: A large proportion of the British battalions that went to war in 1914 were composed of reservists, like these men.

BELOW: Among this crowd in Munich in August 1914 was the young Adolf Hitler, captured, by a remarkable coincidence, in this photograph.

BELOW: Alfred von Schlieffen died before he saw the disaster that his plan inflicted upon his country and Europe.

BELOW RIGHT: French poster of 1914 announces general mobilization, including requisitioning of animals and vehicles for service with the military.

The enemy. As the consequence of secret talks between the British and French staffs, it was decided that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), too small to carry out an independent strategy, would take its place on the left of the French Army, a decision reluctantly confirmed by an ad hoc war council of politicians and generals convened on the outbreak of war. The Belgian Army, less than 120,000 strong in 1914, could do little but resist the Germans as best they could until joined by Franco-British forces.

The French, British and German armies were armed with broadly similar weapons – bolt-action, magazine rifles capable of rapid fire; modern, quick-firing artillery; and a limited number of machine guns. All retained considerable numbers of cavalry, armed with both firearms and swords, for reconnaissance and the charge. Every army also had a small number of primitive airplanes. General staffs had studied the most recent military campaigns, in South Africa (1899–1902) and Manchuria (1904–05), and had incorporated the perceived lessons into their thinking. None were unaware of the devastating power of modern weapons, or the difficulty in overcoming fixed fortifications. To strike first and win quickly, before the front could congeal into trench warfare, seemed a logical extrapolation from recent wars; and the Russo-Japanese War apparently demonstrated that determined troops with high morale could overcome entrenched defenders, albeit at a heavy cost in casualties. The French were the most extreme exponents of the cult of the offensive and the “moral battlefield”, in which heavy emphasis was placed on morale (the words being used interchangeably at this time), but these concepts also influenced the British and Germans. These pre-war doctrines were not entirely wrong, but undoubtedly contributed to the huge “butcher’s bill” in the early months of the war.
BATTLE OF THE FRONTIERS
Lorraine and the Schlieffen Plan

The first shots of the war were fired by the Austrians against the Serbs on 29 July, but the outbreak of fighting in Western Europe was not long delayed. The first major clash came on 5 August with the German attack on the Belgian fortress of Liège, which held out until 13 August. This was highly significant, because the longer the Belgians could impede the German advance, the further behind schedule the Schlieffen Plan would fall. The Belgian Army held the line of the River Gette before retreating into the fortress of Antwerp on 20 August, and the Belgian capital, Brussels, was lost the same day. The Germans continued to advance, capturing the fortress of Huy (on the River Meuse) and beginning a short siege of Namur, which fell on 23 August.

Moltke, who had succeeded Schlieffen as Chief of the Great General Staff in 1906, was forced to deploy a sizeable force to mask Antwerp, and to protect the flank of the main German advance from a Belgian sortie. On 5 October, the port was reinforced by a British force, in a demonstration of British sea power. This further weakened and slowed the German main effort. Partly out of frustration, partly to discourage guerrilla activity, the Germans carried out Schrecklichkeit, a policy of terror that included sacking the medieval city of Louvain and killing civilians. The oft-mocked Allied propaganda about German atrocities, although frequently exaggerated, did have foundations in truth.

Plan XVII was initiated on 6 August with the movement of a French corps into Alsace, only for it to be repulsed by the defenders. A follow-up attack under General Paul Pau resulted in the capture of Mulhouse on 8 August. The French troops were greeted by cheering crowds, glad to welcome their liberators. However, shortly afterwards the victorious French were ordered to abandon their gains so that troops could be switched to meet the growing crisis to the north. The major French offensive into Lorraine commenced on 14 August with two Armies (First and Second). This was a complex undertaking, as the further the French advanced, the wider their frontage of attack became. In spite of the fact that, according to the Schlieffen Plan, the German forces should have kept to the defensive, they went onto the attack and on 20 August defeated the French in the twin battles of Morhange and Sarrebourg, and then pushed on to the French frontier. Some French formations fought well. General Foch’s XX (“Iron”) Corps held its ground stubbornly at Morhange, and

ABOVE: BELGIAN CARABINEERS RETREATING TO ANTWERP ON 20 AUGUST 1914. NOTE THE ANTIQUATED UNIFORMS AND MACHINE GUNS DRAWN BY DOGS.

Joffre, Chief of the French General Staff 1911–14 and Commander-in-Chief 1914–16, oversaw the development and implementation of Plan XVII, but then was able to rescue the French army from the consequences of that plan. His legendary calmness reflected ability of a very high order to cope with the shocks of war. Joffre, the ruthless sacker of subordinates, was himself removed from command at the end of 1916, having failed to break the deadlocked Western Front over the previous two years.
Battle of the Frontiers

was preparing to counter-attack, when to Foch’s
astonishment it received orders to pull back.
“You don’t know what is happening to the
neighbouring corps”, his Chief of Staff, General
Denis Duchêne, sourly commented. XX Corps,
weary but in good order covered the retreat of
Second Army. A few days later, Foch’s son, a
junior officer with 131st Infantry Regiment, was
killed in battle just a short distance away.

The French stabilized the situation, just as a
new German offensive was getting underway.
Joffre, the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) had
ordered two armies to attack into the hilly,
wooded terrain of the Ardennes in the belief that
the German forces in this sector were weak. This
misapprehension was based on an intelligence
failure: the French had not realized the extent
to which the Germans would use reserve
troops to create new divisions. In encounter
battles (unplanned meeting engagements) at
Neufchâteau and Virton on 21–22 August, the
attackers suffered further heavy losses and were
pulled back behind the River Meuse.

Plan XVII was proving a bloody failure.
Around 300,000 French soldiers became
casualties in the Battle of the Frontiers. A report
from Second Army in Lorraine stated: “The
troops, infantry and artillery have been sorely
tested. Our artillery is held at a distance by
the long-range artillery of our enemy; it cannot
get close enough for counterbattery fire. Our
infantry has attacked with élan, but have been
halted primarily by enemy artillery fire and by
unseen enemy infantry hidden in trenches.” In
spite of the setbacks, “Papa” Joffre remained
imperturbably calm, although he energetically
sacked incompetent, or perhaps merely unlucky,
commanders. In little more than a month, he
removed 50 generals, including no less than
38 divisional commanders, and promoted
talented, and by now battle-hardened leaders
from further down the military hierarchy. One
such officer was Ferdinand Foch, promoted to
command Ninth Army.

By mid-August, both Joffre and Moltke were
less focused on Alsace-Lorraine. Now they
looked towards Belgium. For it was there, as the
Germans advanced, a major crisis was brewing.

Helmuth von Moltke
“the Younger”
(1848–1916)

Von Moltke was the nephew of Helmuth von
Moltke “the elder”, the German victor of the
1870–71 Franco-Prussian War. Although a belligerent advocate of war in
the summer of 1914, he lacked his uncle’s
qualities of self-belief and ruthlessness. On
campaign, finding it increasingly difficult
to control the vast German armies, he
collapsed with a nervous breakdown after
the Battle of the Marne. He was blamed by
contemporaries and some historians for
meddling with Schlieffen’s original plan.
This is unfair as the plan was likely to fail
on logistic grounds alone.
MONS AND LE CATEAU
First actions of the BEF

The Kaiser, in an order of 19 August, referred to “General French’s insignificant little army”. The word “insignificant” was translated into English as “contemptible”. Revelling in the insult, the BEF of 1914 acquired its nickname: the “Old Contemptibles”. Wilhelm II’s order illustrated how casually the German High Command regarded the British Army’s presence on the Continent. In fact, Moltke welcomed the opportunity to defeat the BEF as well as the French Army. Given the disarray of the Allies, it seemed that this was a distinct possibility. Lanrezac’s French Fifth Army pushed into Belgium with Sir John French’s BEF on its left. But as French Third and Fourth Armies fell back, the flank of Lanrezac’s Fifth Army was uncovered, and it found itself threatened by three German armies: from the east by Third Army (von Hausen); to the front by von Bülow’s Second Army; and von Kluck’s First Army to the west. In the Battle of the Sambre (21–23 August), the French met defeat. However, the manoeuvres of the three German armies were
poorly synchronized and they were unable to profit fully from their successes.

On Lanrezac’s left, on 23 August the British fought their first battle in Western Europe since Waterloo, 99 years before. The problems encountered by Sir John French and Lanrezac – neither of whom was fluent in the other’s language – in attempting to co-ordinate their operations reveals much about the challenges posed by fighting alongside allies, and the British and French in effect fought two separate but adjacent battles. Mons was a mining area of slag heaps and chimneys – not an ideal place to fight a battle. By the following day, 3rd and 5th Divisions had taken up positions along the banks of the Mons-Condé canal, in Mons itself and in outlying villages. The Cavalry Division was held in reserve. When German First Army appeared on the scene, they were taken by surprise, as Kluck believed the BEF was at Tournai. Mounting clumsy frontal assaults, the attackers were bloodily repulsed in most places. The sheer pressure of German forces and heavy artillery fire meant that the outnumbered BEF could not hold on indefinitely. Mons was not an affair in which generals calmly manoeuvred troops as if on a giant chessboard. Rather, individual units and sub-units fought a series of almost private battles. The machine gun section of the 4th Royal Fusiliers conducted a rearguard action at a bridge that resulted in the award of two Victoria Crosses, one posthumous.

Late on 23 August, II Corps began to fall back to a new position. Lanrezac’s Fifth Army was in full retreat. When French discovered this, the BEF too disengaged and slipped away from the Mons battlefield. Mons was a tactical victory for the British at the cost of 1,600 casualties (which was very light by later standards), but strategically the Germans had the upper hand and continued to drive forward. Command and control was fragile. British I Corps, under General Sir Douglas Haig, remained in touch with Lanrezac’s French Fifth Army, but Haig lost contact with Smith-Dorrien; and Sir John French at General Headquarters (GHQ) was able to exercise little control over the BEF’s two corps. On 26 August, a German advance briefly threatened I Corps headquarters at Landrecies, causing some short-lived panic.

For the BEF, the retreat from Mons was a gruelling experience. Apart from the hard march under a hot sun, retreating from an enemy they believed they had defeated was demoralizing for many British soldiers. Spirits rose when, on 26 August, the order was given to halt and deploy for battle. With the Germans in pursuit, Smith-Dorrien was forced to turn and fight at Le Cateau, 50km (30 miles) south of Mons. Once again, II Corps inflicted a sharp tactical defeat on the Germans, who were as tired as the British. But this time British losses were much heavier – some 7,800. 1st Gordon Highlanders were accidentally left behind when the rest of the Corps retreated and were forced to surrender. The Germans, too, suffered badly and Smith-Dorrien was able to resume the retreat. The BEF was battered but intact and had fulfilled a vital role on the flank of French Fifth Army. French, however, temporarily lost his nerve and wanted to pull out of the line to refit. Kitchener had to cross over from England to forbid it. The end of August neared with the campaign still in the balance.
By the end of August, Joffre had decided his force should go onto the defensive, and formed a new Army (the Sixth, under General Maunoury) to plug the gap on the left of the BEF. However, local offensives continued. At Guise on 29 August, French Fifth Army mauled the flank of German Second Army, which caused Bülow to halt his advance for two days. Lanrezac, shortly to be replaced by Franchet d’Esperey, had pulled back after the battle. Kluck, believing that Fifth Army was vulnerable and that the BEF no longer posed a threat, decided to wheel his army in front of Paris, rather than adhering to the letter of the Schlieffen plan and encircling the French capital. On 3 September, Allied aircraft spotted that the direction of Kluck’s advance had changed. The French now had a golden opportunity to seize the strategic initiative by striking the German flank.

In Lorraine, the French were on the defensive. Crown Prince Rupprecht’s forces advanced towards the 65-km (40-mile) gap between the fortresses of Épinal and Toul. Hampered by a stream of contradictory orders from Moltke’s headquarters, Rupprecht’s advance was slowed by a tough fight near Nancy. In late August, at Verdun, the German Crown Prince, Friedrich Wilhelm’s Fifth Army forces were battered by the French Third Army under General Sarrail. On 9 September, the Germans gave up and fell back to their starting positions of 17 August.
General Gallieni built his reputation as a commander in colonial conflicts in Africa, Madagascar and Indochina. Appointed military governor of Paris in August 1914, when he became aware that Kluck’s army was exposing its flank he immediately grasped the possibilities, and his foresight and energy deserve a share of the credit for the success in the battle of the Marne. Gallieni became Minister of War in October 1915, but was shut out of high-level decision making by his rival Joffre. He resigned in March 1916.

Maunoury’s forces attacked on 5 September. The rest of Sixth Army, plus Fifth Army and the BEF joined the battle on the following day. What became known as the First Battle of the Marne was a hard struggle. At one stage the French were reinforced by “the taxis of the Marne”, which ferried a brigade of troops from Paris. The battle was ultimately decided not on the ground, but in the minds of the German High Command. Moltke was startled by the reappearance of the BEF, which he had thought destroyed, advancing alongside French Fifth Army into the lightly defended gap between Bülow’s and Kluck’s forces. As the result of the visit of one of Moltke’s staff officers, Colonel Hentsch, it was decided that German Second Army would retreat if the Allies crossed the Marne. On 9 September, the BEF did just that. Bülow fell back, with Kluck conforming to the retreat. The Germans had been stopped at the Marne. It was a great strategic victory. Some called it a miracle.

The Allies followed the retreating Germans and briefly victory seemed in sight. On reaching the heights above the River Aisne on 12–13 September, however, the Germans were discovered to be occupying primitive trenches. Joffre on 15 September realized that it was “no longer a question of pursuit, but of methodical attack”. The Aisne was another strategic victory, this time for the Germans. Had they been unable to hold the line there, they would have retreated some 65 km (40 miles). As a by-product of the Aisne, trench warfare was begun – it was to endure for another four years.

Moltke was sacked on 14 September, and his successor, Erich von Falkenhayn, went on to the offensive by attempting to outflank the Allied left. Joffre replied in kind, and there followed a series of attempts to turn the enemy’s flank as the centre of the struggle moved steadily to the north. This is erroneously known as the “Race to the Sea”; the generals were not seeking to reach the coast, but to get round their opponent’s flank. One such action took place at Dixmude in Belgium towards the middle of October. Here, the defenders included French marines and Tirailleurs Sénégalais (Senegalese light infantry). Between 2 and 15 October, the BEF was transferred to Flanders, and from 10 October onwards its corps came into battle in places whose names were to become dreadfully familiar over the next four years – La Bassée, Messines, Armentières. The fall of Antwerp on 10 October released German troops for use in Flanders. These, together with some newly raised divisions, allowed the Germans to make one last attempt to smash through the congealing trench lines.
In August 1914, Germany faced the nightmare of fighting on two widely-separated fronts. The Schlieffen Plan gambled that France could be defeated in the west before Russian forces attacked Germany in strength in the east. The assumption was that the “Russian steamroller” would be slow to mobilize, and massive forces could be rushed from France by rail. But the Russian mobilization proved to be surprisingly swift, and in mid-August two armies struck against East Prussia. The German plan was unravelling.

The commander of German Eighth Army, Maximilian von Prittwitz, had been planning to retreat before the Russian advance into East Prussia but an aggressive corps commander, Hermann von François, attacked Paul von Rennenkampf’s Russian First Army at Gumbinnen (20 August 1914). After initial success, the Germans were forced back, and Prittwitz lost his nerve. Fearing that he was about to be encircled by Alexander Samsonov’s Russian Second Army, he ordered a retreat that would have meant abandoning large tracts of East Prussia. He was promptly sacked by Moltke, and a retired general, Paul von Hindenburg, was sent to replace him, with Erich Ludendorff, who had recently come to prominence at the siege of Liège, as his chief-of-staff.

In spite of their success, the Russians were facing severe problems. The strategic challenges of coordinating enormous armies across multiple fronts across hundreds of miles would have taxed the most efficient general staff in the world, and the Russian army’s was far from that. The infrastructure of the Russian empire was poorly developed, which presented serious problems.
logistical problems. One of the attractions of invading East Prussia was that it was rich territory, but the presence of the Augustów Forest and the Masurian Lakes forced the Russians to split their forces to move either side of these two awkward obstacles in the border area, as a result of which they could not offer mutual support.

Two factors exacerbated this problem. First, Russian communications were primitive even by 1914 standards. This meant that, by default, much responsibility was devolved to formation commanders; the commander-in-chief, Grand Duke Nicholas, could do little to influence the East Prussian campaign once it had begun. Moreover, the highest echelons of the Russian officer corps was riven with factionalism. Unfortunately, Samsonov and Rennenkampf were bitter rivals, and there was no effective overall commander to keep them all in check.

Alerted that Rennenkampf had failed to capitalize on his success, the new German command team – and Colonel Max Hoffman of Eighth Army - saw the opportunity to win an offensive battle of manoeuvre by attacking Samsonov, who was pushing forward, oblivious to any possible German threat. On 27 August, the Germans struck.

The Germans outflanked Samsonov’s army, cutting the roads. François’s I Corps was moved by rail around the Russian left. XX Corps fixed Samsonov to the front, and XVII Corps marched around the Russian right flank. It was a classic example of the favourite German operational gambit of encircling the enemy. The Germans knew, because the Russians sent radio messages without being encoded, that Rennenkampf would not be able to support his rival; he was marching away from Samsonov. The German assault achieved surprise, and on 28 August Samsonov tried to retreat. But the Russians found themselves facing enemy forces on three sides. Many of the soldiers were demoralized and the army soon began to disintegrate. Faced with catastrophe, Samsonov consequently committed suicide.

Tannenberg was a great German victory. For fewer than 20,000 losses, the Germans inflicted losses of 130,000, including 100,000 prisoners. Despite the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, the Russian threat to East Prussia was halted, and the Germans had gained the initiative in the East. And in Hindenburg meanwhile, Germany had a new hero.
The German attack of 20 October 1914 initiated a series of engagements that have become known to history as the First Battle of Ypres. It was an offensive on a large scale, from the Béthune area to the coast. Rupprecht’s Sixth Army, recently transferred from Lorraine, attacked towards the northeast from the direction of Lille. The newly created Fourth Army moved west on a front between Ypres and Nieuport. In an extremely fortuitous piece of timing, Haig’s I Corps arrived at Ypres from the Aisne on 20 October and helped stabilize the situation there. In the La Bassée-Messines sector, II and III Corps also repulsed German attacks. The heavy losses among young and inexperienced German volunteers caused the fighting to be dubbed the Kindermord (“massacre of the innocents”). The attackers had far more success against the Belgians on the River Yser: Nieuport and Dixmude were held (the former by French 42nd Division, the latter by the French marines); but elsewhere the Belgians were forced back to hold the line of the Dixmude-Nieuport railway. This terrain is extremely low-lying, and in desperation, in

Sir Douglas Haig (1861-1928)

General (later Field Marshal) Haig made his name as a corps commander at First Ypres. He became Commander-in-Chief of the BEF in late 1915. The most controversial general in British history, Haig has been condemned for the attritional battles of Passchendaele and the Somme, but rarely given the credit for the victory in 1918. He claimed that without the wearing down of the German army in 1916–17, the final victory would have been impossible, an argument that has never been satisfactorily refuted by historians.

ABOVE LEFT: Civilian buses, complete with incongruous advertisements for soap and whisky, pressed into service to transport troops on the Western Front.

BELOW LEFT: French soldiers in Ypres, October 1914. First Ypres was a genuinely Allied battle, involving the French, British and Belgian armies.

LONDON SCOTTISH

Cap badge of the 14th Battalion the London Regiment, or London Scottish. The 1/14th was the first Territorial infantry battalion to go into action, at Messines, on Halloween 1914.
The First Battle of Ypres

late October, the sea defences were deliberately breached and the sea allowed to flood the land. This created a highly effective barrier to a further German advance; so much so, that for the rest of the war this was a relatively quiet sector of the Western Front.

On 31 October, the Germans tried again. This time they concentrated on Ypres, using seven divisions commanded by General von Faberck to assault the front between Messines and Gheluvelt. Under the cover of a heavy bombardment, the Germans made good progress. Haig’s I Corps and Allenby’s cavalry were in the path of the attack and, exhausted, began to give way. The Germans seized and held Messines Ridge, a battle in which the London Scottish became the first battalion of the Territorial Force, a reserve army of part-time soldiers originally raised for home defence, to go into battle. Further north, a chance shell fatally wounded the commander of British 1st Division and stunned his 2nd Division counterpart. Haig, receiving information that his line had been broken, mounted his horse and rode forward to the front. Briefly, Ypres was within the reach of the Germans army, but they had failed to grasp the opportunity.

Delays in bringing forward troops and the general chaos of battle allowed the 2nd Worcesters to counter-attack at Gheluvelt and restore the situation. Foch, appointed by Joffre as commander of the French left wing, fed in reserves, including French XVI and IX Corps, and put General D’Urbal in command of all French troops in the Ypres sector. The Allies had survived the crisis – for the moment.

While the fighting did not die away entirely, both sides spent the next few days regrouping, a breathing space for which the Allies were profoundly grateful. On 1 November, the new commander of 1st Division reported to Haig that his men could not resist an “organized attack”. Over the next few days, more Allied troops reached Ypres, but the Germans, too, brought up another corps, which attacked on 11 November. South of the Menin Road, the British fought off the attacks, but north of it a fresh crisis developed. Once again, Haig’s I Corps was brought to the point of defeat as the Prussian Guards smashed through the weakened defenders. In the process, the attackers were themselves weakened and the impetus of the assault diminished. The artillery of 2nd Division, its covering screen of infantry having vanished, continued to pound away at the attackers. A force of batmen, cooks, headquarters staff and other “odds and ends” mounted a desperate counter-attack that did just enough, just in time, and then the 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry made a decisive intervention. The battle dragged on until 22 November, but the Allied line had been stabilized and Ypres, one of the few Belgian cities still in Allied hands, had been held. The French and British held an awkward salient around the city, surrounded on three sides by the Germans.

The campaigns in the West since August 1914 had been shockingly costly: perhaps 300,000 Frenchmen had been killed; the BEF had lost 86,000 men killed, wounded and missing; the Germans lost at least 134,000 (19,600 of them dead) at First Ypres alone. The attempt to win a rapid war of movement had ended in trench deadlock. A French offensive that began on 14 December (the First Battle of Artois) did nothing to break it. But there was a common belief that this was only a temporary phase. As British, French and German soldiers held their trenches, their generals planned for a resumption of mobile warfare in the New Year.

The Christmas Truce

Over Christmas 1914, a number of British and German – and to a lesser extent, French – units observed strictly unofficial truces. The Christmas Truce has been much mythologized. It was by no means universal; 2nd Grenadier Guards were involved in some tough fighting on Christmas Day. But it is clear that in some places fighting ceased, soldiers fraternized in No Man’s Land, and, according to a persistent story, German and British soldiers played football. Although a truce on such a scale never recurred, low-level fraternization took place throughout the war.
The entry of the Ottoman empire (Turkey) in November 1914 opened up glittering prospects for the Allies. Turkey had long been regarded as the “sick man of Europe”, its territories ripe for dismemberment. Russia had ambitions to take over Constantinople: the seizure of the Ottoman capital would allow its ships to pass unhindered from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Britain and France wanted to enlarge their respective Middle Eastern empires at Turkish expense.

The Turks had mostly performed poorly in the Balkan Wars (1912–13), and their vast empire suffered from inadequate railways and roads, but the Ottomans were to prove a tougher enemy than expected. Supported by German officers, some Turkish commanders were highly competent; their soldiers tough and resourceful.

On 21 December 1914 the Turks launched a major offensive against the Russians in the Caucasus. The Ottoman Third Army, comprised of three weak corps (about 66,000 fighting men), had to struggle against the harsh environment, mountainous terrain and appalling weather, as well as the enemy. Ottoman logistics were poor in the extreme, and their soldiers often lacked basic necessities such as warm clothing.
In August 1916, an Ottoman force, which included some German and Austro-Hungarian elements, all under the overall command of German General Kress von Kressenstein, made a determined advance towards the Suez Canal. It was opposed by the British 52nd (Lowland) Division and the Anzac Mounted Division. The Ottoman plan was to secure Romani, close to the coast. Capturing it would bring the Canal within artillery range. However, in heavy fighting on 4 August, the British Empire troops first halted the Turkish advance and then drove the enemy back. The Turks never again posed a serious threat to the Canal.

At another extremity of their Empire, in February 1915 the Turks tried to take the Suez Canal. Egypt was critical to the security of the British Empire, as possession of the Canal meant that ships sailing for Britain’s southern hemisphere possessions could avoid a long detour around the southern tip of Africa. This meant that when the Turks moved along the central route across the Sinai desert, it was a potentially serious development, especially as a British defeat might have triggered an uprising in Egypt by Arab dissidents. In the event, the attack on the Canal was easily defeated. Subsequently, it made strategic sense for the British to carry out forward defence, and a fresh Ottoman advance was smashed 32 kilometres (20 miles) from the Canal at the Battle of Romani (August 1916). The scene was set for the British advance westwards across the Sinai into Palestine.
The Battle of Chunuk Bair, 8 August 1915 (Ion Brown), vividly depicts the Wellington Battalion's desperate fight on the crest. Not since 25 April had any Anzacs — and there were only a handful even then — laid eyes on the Narrows, which can be seen in the background.
WAR IN AFRICA

The clash of imperial ambitions

By 1914, the “Scramble for Africa” was long past and almost the entire continent was controlled by the European imperial powers. Rivalries were fierce. A clash of ambitions in Africa had almost caused war between France and Britain in 1898, while Germany had stood by with ill-concealed satisfaction when Britain suffered a series of embarrassing defeats at the hands of the white Boer republics in the South African War (1899–1902). Given the competing imperial ambitions, it was no surprise that Africa became a battlefield during the 1914–18 war. Apart from immediate objectives – such as securing wireless (radio) stations – the British and French sought to expand their empires at German expense, partly to achieve security for existing territories, but also from force of habit.

Germany was at a major disadvantage in the war for Africa. Allied – principally British – sea-power cut Germany’s colonies off from the Fatherland, making it almost impossible to reinforce them. It seemed that they could be captured at the Allies’ leisure. As early as 6–7 August 1914, German Togoland was invaded by British and French-officered African troops from neighbouring colonies, with the campaign being over 20 days later. Modern Namibia (German South-West Africa) was attacked in September 1914 by forces from the Union of South Africa. The invasion was compromised by a rebellion in South Africa of 12,000 Boer “bitter enders”, who had never been reconciled to the 1902 peace settlement with the British. Thirty thousand Union troops were deployed before the uprising was crushed at the end of January 1915. Led by the South African Prime Minister, General Louis Botha, the Union forces resumed the offensive in South-West Africa and by mid-July 1915 had conquered the territory.

It took from late August 1914 to February 1916, nearly 18 months of hard campaigning by British, French and Belgian troops – again mostly Africans officered by Europeans – before the German West African colony of the Cameroons was subdued. As in all the campaigns in Africa, in addition to the fighting troops the armies employed many African “porters” to carry supplies – perhaps 40,000 in this case. The harsh climate and disease were...
Colonel (later General) von Lettow-Vorbeck’s four-year guerrilla campaign in East Africa tied down a greatly superior force of British Empire troops that could otherwise have been used more profitably elsewhere. His “army” was never larger than 14,000 strong, of whom 11,000 were African Askaris and 3,000 were German. In 1915, he was reinforced by the crew and guns from the German cruiser Königsberg, which had been scuttled. His campaign included an audacious raid into British-held Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in 1918. Lettow-Vorbeck was undoubtedly one of the finest guerrilla leaders in history.

Things were very different in German East Africa. Here, in Tanganyika, African troops (Askaris) under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck waged a brilliant guerrilla campaign against the invading forces of the British Empire. He maximized the advantages which the difficult terrain bestowed on the defender and skilfully manoeuvred his lightly-equipped Askaris, consistently wrong-footing his British pursuers, who suffered badly from diseases such as malaria. The campaign was marked by poor British generalship,

including the humiliating failure to capture the port of Tanga from 3 to 5 November 1914. Thereafter, Imperial forces increased steadily in size but could not inflict a decisive defeat on Lettow-Vorbeck. The campaign only ended when he voluntarily surrendered after he heard about the Armistice – two weeks after the end of the war in Europe. The German African empire had proved to be a far tougher nut than originally anticipated by the Allies.
A German poster of Allied uniforms from 1914. The drab khaki clothing of the British, the product of experience in colonial warfare, contrasts with the colourful French and Belgian uniforms.
The active service French book for soldiers & sailors

An English-French phrase book used by soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force fighting in France.
PRECAUTIONS continued.

77. SHARPSHOOTERS (Tirailleurs).

Il y a des tirailleurs eel-yah dai treh-
dans le jardin, rah-yer dahm ler
zhah-dah
Derrière les haies derry-ray leh hay;
Ils sont là, depuis ce eel son leh, der-peh-
maan;
tirez, ou prenez-les! teer-ray, oh pay-ray!

There are sharp-
shooters in the
garden.
Behind the hedges;
They have been there
all the morning!
Fire, or take them!

78. SPY? (Espion).

Je ne le suis pas! yah neh lay seew pah I'm not!
Je suis anglais, zher see-nz zahn glay, I am English,
Simple soldat. sahn-pl sol-dah. A private (soldier.)

79. PRISONER? (Prisonnier?).

Et pourquoi? ehr poor-ko kwa? And why?
Je suis ami, zher see-zay zay, I am a friend,
Anglais! Soldat! ahng-blay sol-dah! Englishman! Soldier!

80. HUNS ARE THERE, THE (Les Boches sont la).

Venez avec moi vor-nay-zav ek mwah Come with me,
Et ne parlez pas! ehr neh parr leh pah! And don't speak!
Marchez à quatre man-reh-zah four, Go on all fours,
Les boches sont là lah boh son lah. The Germans (brutes)
are there.

81. COVER, SEEK (Cherchez un abri).

Traversez par ici travehr-say par sees Cross this way
Et cherchez un abri, ehr sahn-zeen abree,
Les Allemands nous lai-zalmahn noo
volent! yah whal! The Germans see us!
Silence aussi: see-lahnss ooh seey Silence, too!

WAR GRIES.

82. VICTORY! TO! (A la victoire!)

A la victoire! ah lah vik-twah! To victory!
Vive le drapeau! veev leh drap oh! Success to our flag!
Combattons bien con-batohn byan Let us fight well
Pour le drapeau! poor leh drap oh! For our flag.

83. KING, LAW AND LIBERTY (Le Roi, la Loi, la Liberte).

Le Roi, la Loi, leh roh, lah lay,
La Liberte! leh libair tay!
Nous nous battons noo noo baton poor
pour les trois, lai twah!
Nous tous Allies! noo too-zal yeh! All we Allies!

84. LONG LIVE FRANCE, etc. (Vive la France, etc.)

Vive la France, la veev lah frahn sah,
Belgique, day bel-gyek,
Et la Russie! leh lah rehsay,
Vive l'Angleterre veev lahn-gler tay,
Et l'Italie! leh lah teel ah leh.

WATER, SUPPLY OF.

85. WATER, PURE (De l'eau, pur).

Etes-vous bien sûr ait-voo bee zair
Que cette eau soit ker seet ow seen Completely pure?
Est-elle empoisonnée ait del ahm-pwah
nay? zohn neh? Is it poisoned?
Pouvez-vous pouvay noo lahn l employer pour poy say noo lahn
l emplosh poor leh? use it for tea?

86. WATER-BOTTLE FILLED (Bidon rempli).

Je veux remplir zher ver rahm pler I wish to fill
Ma gourde d'eau mah goord daw
Donnez-moi de l'eau donay moh doh-lay give me some water
Dans un seau dash-zohn so In a pail.

WOUNDED (RED CROSS).

87. HAND BROKEN (La main cassée).

Main mahl Hand
Cassée! kassay! Broken!
Écharpe, eh-sharper Sling,
S'il vous plaît! ses al play! Please!
ITEM 2 (CONT'D)

The First World War – The Exhibits

FRENCH

HOW TO SAY IT.

WOUNDED (RED CROSS) continued.

101. DOCTOR, FETCH THE (Allez chercher le médecin).
Mon camarade est blessé.
Touche au bras.
Allez chercher le médecin.
Et venez avec moi.

My comrade is wounded.
Hit in the arm.
Fetch the doctor.
And come with me.

102. BULLET WOUND (Touche par un balle).

Êtes-vous touché par une balle?
Où avez-vous mal?
Il vous faut aller.

Were you hit by a bullet?
Where have you pain?
You must go.

Bien vite à l'hôpital.

Quickly to the hospital.

103. WOUND, DRESS THE (Paisez la plaie).

Blessé;
Au pied;
Faissez;

Wounded;
In the foot;
Dress;

La plaie.

The wound (sore).

104. FOOT, WOUNDED IN (Blessé au pied).

Blessé?
Oui!
Où?
Au pied.

Wounded?
Yes!
Where?
In (at) the foot.

105. ARM, WOUNDED IN (Blessé au bras).

Blessé au bras?
Pas grave, je crois!
Je vais le bander;
Et guérir le bras.

Wounded in the arm?
Not serious, I think!
I am going to bandage it;
And heal the arm.

106. SHRAPNEL WOUND (Blessé par un obus).

J'ai été blessé.
Par un obus.
A la jambe;
Et au pied, Monsieur!

I was wounded.
By a shell.
In the leg.
And in the foot, Sir!

L'ORAISON DOMINICALE.

The Lord's Prayer.

Notre Père, qui (vous) êtes aux cieux:
Our Father, who (you) are in the heavens

Que votre nom soit sanctifié:
That Your Name be hallowed:

Que votre règne arrive:
That Your Kingdom come:

Que votre volonté soit faite sur la terre comme
will be done on the earth as

au ciel:

Donnez-nous aujourd'hui
in the heaven:

notre pain quotidien:
And our bread of every day (daily):

et pardonnez-nous nos offenses,
And forgive us our trespasses,

comme nous avons offensés:
as we have offended:

Et ne nous laissez pas succomber:
And do not give way to the temptation;

à la tentation;
mais délivrez-nous
but deliver us

de mal:
Amen.
from evil.
Amen.
**FORCE ORDER**

**(SPECIAL).**

General Headquarters,
21st April, 1915.

Soldiers of France and of the King!

Before us lies an adventure unprecedented in modern war. Together with our comrades of the Fleet we are about to force a landing upon an open beach in face of positions which have been vaunted by our enemies as impregnable.

The landing will be made good, by the help of God and the Navy; the positions will be stormed, and the War brought one step nearer to a glorious close.

“Remember” said Lord Kitchener when bidding adieu to your Commander, “Remember, once you set foot upon the Gallipoli Peninsula, you must fight the thing through to a finish.”

The whole world will be watching our progress. Let us prove ourselves worthy of the great feat of arms entrusted to us.

IAN HAMILTON,
General.
Instructions for the General Officer Commanding the Expeditionary Force proceeding to France.

Owing to the infringement of the neutrality of Belgium by Germany, and in furtherance of the Entente which exists between this country and France, His Majesty's Government has decided, at the request of the French Government, to send an Expeditionary Force to France and to entrust the command of the troops to yourself.

The special motive of the Force under your command is to support, and co-operate with, the French Army against our common enemies. The peculiar task laid upon you is to assist the French Government in preventing, or repelling, the invasion by Germany of French and Belgian territory, and eventually to restore the neutrality of Belgium, on behalf of which, as guaranteed by Treaty, Belgium has appealed to the French and to ourselves.

These are the reasons which have induced His Majesty's Government to declare war, and these reasons constitute the primary objective you have before you.

The place of your assembly, according to present arrangements, is Antwerp, and during the assembly of your troops you will have every opportunity for discussing with the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army the military position in general and the special part which your Force is able, and adapted, to play. It must be recognised from the outset that the numerical strength of the British Force - and its contingent reinforcements - is strictly limited, and with this consideration kept steadily in view it will be obvious that the greatest care must be exercised towards a minimum of losses and wastage.

Therefore, while every effort must be made to coincide most sympathetically with the plans and wishes of our Ally, the gravest consideration will devolve upon you as to participation in forward movements.
movements where large bodies of French troops are not engaged and where your Force may be unduly exposed to attack. Should a contingency of this sort be contemplated, I look to you to inform me fully and give me time to communicate to you any decision to which His Majesty’s Government may come in the matter. In this connection I wish you distinctly to understand that your command is an entirely independent one, and that you will in no case come in any sense under the orders of any allied General.

In minor operations you should be careful that your subordinates understand that risk of serious losses should only be taken where such risk is authoritatively considered to be commensurate with the object in view.

The high courage and discipline of your troops should, and certainly will, have fair and full opportunity of display during the campaign, but officers may well be reminded that in this— their first—experience of European warfare a greater measure of caution must be employed than under former conditions of hostilities against an untrained adversary.

You will kindly keep up constant communication with the War Office, and you will be good enough to inform me as to all movements of the enemy reported to you as well as to those of the French Army.

I am sure you fully realise that you can rely with the utmost confidence on the whole-hearted and unswerving support of the Government, of myself, and of your compatriots, in carrying out the high duty which the King has entrusted to you and in maintaining the great traditions of His Majesty’s Army.

10th August, 1914.

[Signature]

The Exhibits
2nd Lieutenant Maxwell's 1914 Christmas letter

A letter from 2nd Lieutenant John Wedderburn-Maxwell, 5th Battery, XLV Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, describing the 1914 Christmas Truce.

---

26 XII 14

My dear Father,

Many thanks

for your last and also for the Xmas presents. Very little time to write but most tell you the most wonderful thing of the war. I don’t think there was a time when the Germans lined their trenches with lights and had several Xmas trees all lit up. Of course we stopped in the middle of it. I heard them say “come over, Ours have not access to this town. They gave them a box of cigars and how happy they were. They wanted to have a good ball match, but couldn’t get a ball. How strange all this.”

---

Come over. Our RIR Sergeant came across to their lines to give them back a box of cigars. They gave them back and asked to be given the cigars back. They were all happy and asked for a ball. How strange.
Very glad to reply that this was up, and a very good job. It is going as well as it can be.

They say we are very good fighting men and our artillery does its best. They were quiet, steady and well fed. They had discovered a less muddy place where they would like to be. They think it is the most extraordinary thing they ever heard of. I must believe it because, after all, Wally O'Sullivan says.

Yet was up here yesterday afternoon or Monday, these German held a bottle up in their lines, upon which C. H. was off out of our trenches like a startled cat, only to find the bottle empty! He was a waiter at the hotel and wanted to go home to London, they say we are their friends, and would push him up. Of course he couldn't, but Peace, without friends or CO's, my dear! any way in the matter.

She was very young, 16 or 17, I only hope she had a chance of talking it over and with them. They used to have this morning and yesterday, but it's the 8th of the month, and we must have a luch somewhere. Off to lunch with R. W. P., or have tea at the post office thing.
The German gas attack at Ypres in April 1915 took the Allies by surprise. In this telegram Sir John French asks the War Office to provide anti-gas equipment for British troops.

Gas attack telegrams

The German gas attack at Ypres in April 1915 took the Allies by surprise. In this telegram Sir John French asks the War Office to provide anti-gas equipment for British troops.
TO: Troopers No. 2

Troops should be immediately provided with means of counteracting effects of enemy gases which should be suitable for use when on the move. As a temporary measure am arranging for troops in trenches to be supplied with solution of bicarbonate of soda in which to soak respirators.

Chief JNG 5.50 p.m.
In 1914, Britain’s Royal Navy (RN) had dominated the oceans for more than a century. At the beginning of the war, the Navy’s traditional strategy had swung into place. Germany was blockaded to prevent goods getting in or out of enemy territory. Ships that were heading for enemy or neutral ports were boarded and contraband – anything from munitions to food – was seized. In November 1914, the British formally classified the North Sea as a war zone, giving notice that action might be taken against ships that entered the area. The French navy mounted a similar blockade of Austro-Hungarian ports in the Adriatic.

Although the blockade began to bite, and ultimately proved a critical factor in winning the war for the Allies, the British did not have it all their own way in the war at sea. In August 1914, two German cruisers, Goeben and Breslau, eluded the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean and escaped to Constantinople, where they played a role in bringing the Ottoman Empire into the war. On 28 August, three German light cruisers were sunk off the German island of Heligoland, but among the embarrassing British naval losses were the antiquated cruisers Aboukir, Hogue and Cressy, torpedoed off the coast of the Netherlands on 22 September. Partly as a result of these setbacks, but also because of an outcry against his German background, Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg was forced out of his position as head of the Royal Navy and replaced by the veteran Admiral “Jacky” Fisher. But more embarrassment was to follow: on 16 December, three towns on the east coast of England were shelled by German battlecruisers.

Across the globe the Royal Navy, supported by the Royal Australian Navy and the navy of Britain’s ally Japan, mopped up German merchant and naval vessels, cut off from home with no hope of penetrating the British blockade. One such force was Admiral von Spee’s Pacific Squadron, which preyed on Allied shipping with some success: off Coronel (Chile) on 1 November, Spee destroyed an inferior British force. Vengeance was swift. At the Battle of the Falkland Islands (8 December 1914) Admiral Sturdee, reinforced with two state-of-the-art battlecruisers, destroyed all but one of von Spee’s ships. The single escapee, the cruiser Dresden, was tracked down and sunk in March 1915.
The War at Sea

Naval bombardment of British towns

The German High Seas Fleet posed a threat not only to its Royal Naval counterpart but also to British civilians. On 3 November Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft were shelled from the sea, with little effect, but on 16 December it was the turn of Whitby, Scarborough, and the Hartlepool area. One hundred and twenty-seven people were killed, the victims’ ages ranging from six months to 86 years. British propagandists made much of German barbarity, which helped to deflect criticism of the Royal Navy’s failure to catch the raiders. Raids continued intermittently, with Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth again shelled in April 1916. Forty houses were destroyed and four people killed.

The main focus of the war at sea in 1915 was the submarine war and the struggle at the Dardanelles, but there was one major clash between surface fleets. On 24 January, Admiral von Igenohl sent four armoured cruisers, supported by two flotillas of torpedo boats out on a raid into the North Sea. The ever-aggressive Admiral Sir David Beatty attacked the German force off Dogger Bank with his battlecruisers and sunk an armoured cruiser, Blücher. Igenohl was replaced as commander of the High Seas Fleet by a more cautious admiral, von Pohl. For over a year, the two battle-fleets eyed each other warily, until in May 1916 the long awaited major battle took place, off Jutland.

ABOVE: The ruins of a house in Scarborough destroyed during the 500 shell bombardment on 16 December, 1914.
CENTRE: SMS Nurnberg at Valparaiso, Chile, after the Battle of Coronel.
RIGHT: Vice Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee, on the quarterdeck of HMS Hercules.
The end of mobile warfare in 1914 left the Germans in control of most of Belgium and some of the most important industrial areas of France. The opposing lines stretched from the Channel coast near Nieuport all the way to the Swiss frontier. At the beginning of 1915, the trench system was still fairly rudimentary – sometimes little more than holes in the ground hastily joined together. In some places the terrain was unsuitable for the digging of trenches. In the Vosges mountains they sometimes had to be cut into rock with explosives. At this stage the French provided by far the largest Allied army, although the BEF grew as new formations arrived.

French offensives continued over the winter. Joffre’s strategy was one of constant offensives, “nibbling” (as he called it) the enemy. He aimed to pinch out the great bulge in the German line – the Noyon Salient – by attacking in Artois and Champagne. But the First Battle of Artois (27 September–10 October 1914), an ambitious attempt to capture key objectives, including the dominating heights of Vimy Ridge that overlooked the German-held Douai plain, made little headway and was ended in early January.

Another offensive was begun in Champagne on 20 December 1914, which continued in stages until the end of March. Again, despite fierce fighting, the French had little to show for this effort except 240,000 casualties. The Germans captured the high ground of the Chemin des Dames (“Ladies’s Road”, named after Louis XV’s daughters) running east and west in the département of the Aisne in November 1914, and in January 1915 a German attack seized the last French position on the plateau, Crete farm (later known as the Dragon’s Cave). In the Vosges, a bitter struggle for the Hartmannswillerkopf peak resulted in 20,000 French losses over four months before they secured the heights in April.

The early fighting in 1915 demonstrated how important heavy and accurate artillery fire was to battlefield success, particularly now the armies were faced with siege warfare. The British offensive at Neuve Chapelle on 10 March gave further evidence confirming this reality. The battle was well planned by Haig’s First Army staff: the initial bombardment, which was heavy by contemporary standards and lasted only 35 minutes, mostly overwhelmed the German infantry and allowed the British to take the front-line trenches. But resistance on the flanks, the difficulty of following up the initial success and the arrival of German reserves meant the battle soon bogged down. A mere 1,100 m (1,200 yds) was gained for 13,000 British and 12,000 German casualties.

With the exception of the the German attack at Ypres in April, it was the Allies who remained on the offensive in Spring 1915. French First and Third Armies fought a bloody and unsuccessful battle to reduce the St-Mihiel salient (5–18 April), and Joffre launched another hammer blow in Artois in May. Bad news from the Eastern Front – the Central Powers inflicted a major defeat on the Russians at Gorlice-

ABOVE: NO MAN’S LAND, BOIS GRENIER SECTOR, JUNE 1915. BRITISH POSITIONS ARE MARKED WITH AN “O” AND GERMAN LINES WITH AN “X.”

BELOW: THE LIVERPOOL SCOTTISH ATTACK BELLEWIERDE ON 16 JUNE 1915.

The Liverpool Scottish at Hooge

One of the myriad of minor actions fought in the first half of 1915 was at Hooge, near Ypres, in June 1915. One of the units involved was the Liverpool Scottish, a Territorial unit. The Medical Officer of the Liverpool Scottish, Captain Noel Chavasse, was given the Military Cross for his exploits at Hooge, and subsequently was awarded the Victoria Cross twice; sadly, the second award was posthumous. Chavasse was one of only three men in the history of the decoration to have been honoured in this way.
The Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 10 March 1915

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle was the first major British offensive of 1915. Before the action, the Royal Flying Corps carried out photo-reconnaissance missions over the German trenches to produce maps that improved the accuracy of the British bombardment. The principles of traffic control, a mundane but essential facet of modern warfare, began to emerge as a result of the battle. The attack was carried out by IV Corps and Indian Corps, the latter consisting of Indian, British and Gurkha troops under Lieutenant-General Sir James Willcocks.

Tarnow in early May – lent particular urgency to this offensive. It also offered an opportunity to strike in the West while the Germans were heavily committed in the East. Joffre ordered D’Urbal’s Tenth Army to smash through the German defences in Artois and re-open mobile warfare. On 9 May, Tenth Army, with 1,075 guns (including 293 heavies), attacked Vimy Ridge and positions flanking it. The main attack in the centre was assigned to Philippe Pétain’s XXXIII Corps. The defenders wilted under the weight of the bombardment, and within 90 minutes, the 77th and Moroccan Divisions had pressed forward onto the crest of Vimy Ridge. Then, the problems of trench warfare reasserted themselves. Lacking modern radio communications, reserves could not be summoned forward to exploit the gains. When they did arrive, it was too late as German reserves first shored up the front and then drove the attackers back.

On 9 May the BEF again attacked over the Neuve Chapelle battlefield after another brief bombardment. In a day’s fighting Haig’s First Army achieved nothing apart from casualties of 11,000 in what became known as the battle of Aubers Ridge. Sir John French was pressed by the French to continue offensive operations, and, after reverting to a bombardment that lasted four days, on 15–16 May, First Army attacked at Festubert with the aim of inflicting heavy casualties on the Germans and pinning their forces to this front. This brought some modest gains, but again at the price of heavy losses. Festubert was the first time the British fought a deliberately attritional battle, and the limited success helped to create the idea that “artillery conquers, infantry occupies” that was to have terrible repercussions in July 1916.

“Je les grignote”
(“I keep nibbling them”)
Joffre

LEFT: A BINOCULAR PERISCOPE. SINCE IT COULD BE LETHAL TO LOOK OVER THE PARAPET, TRENCH PERISCOPEs WERE VERY COMMON. MANY OF THE EARLY ONES WERE IMPROVISED FROM WHATEVER MATERIALS WERE AVAILABLE.

BELOW: Two typical fantassins – French infantrymen – loaded with kit. Such men were the backbone of the French army in the war.

BELOW: A FRENCH STAFF OFFICER IN THE TRENCHES, NEAR SOUCHEZ, 15 MAY 1915. THIS AREA WAS HEAVILY Fought OVER IN 1915.

BELOW: A French staff officer in the trenches, near Souchez, 15 May 1915. This area was heavily fought over in 1915.

RIGHT: A BINOCULAR PERISCOPE. SINCE IT COULD BE LETHAL TO LOOK OVER THE PARAPET, TRENCH PERISCOPEs WERE VERY COMMON. MANY OF THE EARLY ONES WERE IMPROVISED FROM WHATEVER MATERIALS WERE AVAILABLE.
THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

The first use of poison gas

In their search for a way to break the deadlock on the Western Front, the belligerents made ample use of new technologies. Gas had first been tried on the Eastern Front at Bolimov in January 1915 and gas canisters had been used in shrapnel at Neuve Chapelle. The French had also previously used tear gas canisters but at the Second Battle of Ypres this search saw the first use of poison gas on a large scale. The fighting of October–November 1914 had left the Allies holding a vulnerable salient jutting out 8 km (6 miles) into German-held territory. Falkenhayn ordered a limited offensive at Ypres in April 1915 that would test a recently developed weapon, chlorine gas, and - it was hoped - would divert attention from the Eastern Front, where the main German effort was taking place. Fourth Army had 11 divisions in the area, but as this was not intended as a major attack, no further reserves were provided. The attackers faced two French, four British and the 1st Canadian Division, the latter having arrived on the Western Front in February 1915.

The German attack achieved almost complete surprise, no less than 5,830 metal cylinders containing the gas having been installed on the front lines without attracting attention. This represented a substantial intelligence failure on the part of the Allies. A German deserter had warned the French several weeks earlier of a plan to use gas, and similar reports arrived from other sources. Suspecting a deception operation, and rather naively believing that the Germans would abide by the international law that forbade the use of such weapons, the French High Command ignored the warnings. The Germans relied on the wind blowing in the right direction for the gas to be effective, and in the late afternoon the atmospheric conditions were judged to be right. At 17:00 the defenders came under intense artillery fire, and the 45th (Algerian) and French 87th Divisions – the latter consisting of overage territorials – holding the northern part of the Ypres salient saw mist - described by some as bluish-white, by others as yellow-green – drift over from the German trenches. Utterly unprepared for a chemical attack, the French troops gave way and fled in rout. Faced with a 3.25-km (2-mile) gap in their line, the Allies seemed to be on the verge of a major defeat.

However, the Germans followed up their success with some hesitation, cautiously advancing about 3.25 km (2 miles) and then, on reaching the gas cloud, digging in. This uncharacteristic lack of drive was probably related to the rudimentary anti-gas protection with which the German troops were provided. This German failure to exploit the Allied crisis bought valuable time for British and French reinforcements to reach the battlefield. The inexperienced Canadians, suddenly finding that their flank was open, were particularly vulnerable to a renewed German advance. Improvising gas masks out of cloth soaked
in water or urine, ten British and Canadian battalions plugged the gap. On 23 April, the French and Canadians were able to link hands across the salient. The following day saw the Canadians again engulfed by a gas cloud, but they held their ground, their staunch behaviour proving that any fears that British regulars might have had about the reliability of this largely citizen force were groundless. The defensive actions of the French, Canadians and British helped hold the Allied position together. French reinforcements arrived, but nonetheless the situation was growing serious as the salient became steadily compressed.

On 27 April, Smith-Dorrien, the local army commander, sensibly told Sir John French that he wanted to fall back to a more defensible position 4 km (2.5 miles) in the rear. French, who hated Smith-Dorrien, used this as an excuse to remove him from his command. Smith-Dorrien’s replacement, V Corps commander Sir Herbert Plumer, recommended the same course of action, but more tactfully, and the French agreed to a retirement. Plumer, described by one historian as “almost an ideal general for siege warfare”, was to command in the Ypres Salient for the majority of the next three years.

Although any chance of the Germans achieving a clean breakthrough had somewhat vanished, the Second Battle of Ypres had not yet finished. A French attack on 30 April gained around 180 m (200 yds), while on 8 May the Germans mounted a major assault on Frenzenberg Ridge. British 27th and 28th Divisions took the main force of this attack, and had to be reinforced by dismounted cavalry. In a week of intense fighting, the defenders were gradually forced back about 1,100m (1,200yds). One last spasm of fighting erupted around Bellewaarde on 24–25 May, and then the battle burned out. The Germans had forced the Allies back towards Ypres, but had failed to capitalize on the surprise gained by the initial gas attack. It was a great opportunity missed.

Logistics

Logistics – the art and science of moving and supplying troops – is an unglamorous but vital facet of warfare. During the First World War, armies used a combination of horse-drawn and motor transport, backed up by light- and standard-gauge railways. Vast quantities of material had to be moved: before the French Sixth Army’s attack on the Somme in July 1916, ammo for 522 heavy guns had to be stockpiled. In the autumn of 1918, a robust and flexible logistic system would give the BEF an important advantage over the Germans.
The Eastern Front battles of 1915 were on a huge scale and enormously bloody, but they are little known in the West. In October-December 1914, a series of clashes in Poland ended with the Tsar’s armies in the ascendant, the Austro-Hungarian armies having suffered particularly badly. However, at the end of the year the German army in the east was reinforced, and in February 1915 an offensive finally cleared the Russians out of East Prussia, although an attempt to encircle and destroy the retreating Russians only partly succeeded – there was to be no second Tannenberg.

Further south, on 23 January, the Austrians, supported by German forces, began an ambitious attempt to expel Russian forces from the Carpathian mountains. The Russian advance in 1914 had captured much Austrian territory. But Fortress Przemysl held out behind Russian lines, and the offensive aimed to relieve the 120,000-strong garrison. Mountain warfare is always testing; but fighting in mid-January, troops had to contend with dreadful weather while wearing wholly inadequate uniforms and

**ABOVE:** A Cossack patrol occupying a town in Poland shortly after it was evacuated by the Germans.

**BELOW:** An Austrian Skoda 305mm howitzer and crew in action in the Carpathian Mountains in 1914.
lacking even basic equipment. The logistical problems of fighting in the mountains were a quartermaster’s nightmare. The decision by Conrad, the Austrian de facto Commander-in-Chief, to launch and then continue this battle rates as one of the worse strategic decisions of the war.

Worse was to come. On 22 March 1915 Przemsyl finally surrendered, releasing three Russian corps for a counter-offensive in the Carpathians. The ground captured at such great cost by the Habsburg troops was lost. The Russian advance in turn was halted in mid-April as supply lines lengthened and German troops arrived. Austrian losses amounted to 800,000, including many irreplaceable experienced soldiers. Although there was some suspicion of the loyalty of non-ethnic German soldiers in Austrian forces, for the most part the army proved remarkably cohesive, enduring until the very end of the war.

The Germans were deeply worried about the poor performance of their ally. A process of colonization of the Austrian army began, with German soldiers taking key positions from high command downwards. General Falkenhayn, the German Commander-in-Chief, decided to send troops east to make a major push to take the pressure off their allies. Von Mackensen’s Eleventh Army was the spearhead formation, with the Austrian Fourth Army on the flank. Although lip-service was paid to Austrian sensitivities, the Germans were firmly in control.

The Gorlice-Tarnów campaign began with a crushing artillery bombardment on 2 May 1915. Russian Third Army rapidly crumbled under the assault, as Mackensen’s forces surged forward to the River San. By 10 May, 140,000 Russians were prisoners. The arrival of Russian reinforcements and inevitable logistic problems slowed the German-Austrian advance, but Russian counter-attacks were ultimately fruitless, in spite of good progress made by Ninth Army. Przemysł was recaptured (this time, for good) on 4 June and two weeks later the Russians abandoned Galicia, with Central Powers troops capturing Lvov on 22 June. It was a stunning victory that stood in sharp contrast to the deadlock in the West.
TOTAL WAR

The Home Fronts

Civilians, not just soldiers, sailors and airmen, were critical to the waging of the First World War. The war was a “total” conflict that required states to mobilize their economies and populations as well as their armed forces. Industrial production was vital, and factories producing war materials sprang up across the belligerent countries. In particular, France, which lost most of its industrialized areas in the initial German advance, performed wonders in manufacturing munitions. Many women entered the workforce to replace men who were sent off to fight. Maintaining Home Front morale was all important, and all these factors led to the industrial working classes flexing their muscles and in some cases – more notably in Britain – achieving significant social advances.

The popular image of Europeans celebrating the outbreak of war in August 1914 and rushing lemming-like to destruction is a caricature.

While there was some enthusiasm, for the most part war was greeted warily. However, those actively opposed to the war made little headway – socialist hopes of a Europe-wide general strike by workers were quickly dashed. Instead, competing groups within states made a show of unity, agreeing not to engage in active opposition to their governments’ war policy. In France this was known as the “Sacred Union”; while Germany had the “Fortress Truce”.

Although industrial peace and an end to class conflict came under great strain in the years to come, one of the striking things about all the Home Fronts, with the exception of Russia, was how stable they were. Even the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire, which contained many minority groups who longed to be independent, still held together until the end of the war.

Civilians in all the European belligerent states had one thing in common: shortages of goods...
which had been easily available before the war. Rationing was commonplace, but Germany was particularly badly affected by the British naval blockade and many civilians went hungry. Ersatz (substitute) food, such as coffee made from acorns, became common, and 1916–17 was remembered as the “Turnip” winter. Failure of the German government to ensure the supply of basic foodstuffs to cities (increasingly farmers held on to the food they produced) was a significant factor in the decline of support for the Kaiser’s regime.

The logical extension of the mobilization of civilians for the war effort was that they became targets. That was the rationale behind the British hunger blockade of German food supply lines, and also the bombing of enemy cities. The German Zeppelin raids against British cities that began in 1915 were succeeded by use of Gotha aircraft in 1917–18. The British Independent Air Force dropped 540 tons of bombs on Germany in 1918. The casualties that were caused were small in comparison to those of the Second World War, but they were seen at the time as shocking.

In 1917–18 the peoples of Europe were war-weary. In Germany, the overambitious Hindenburg Programme of economic mobilization made thing worse, alienating many. By contrast the new, charismatic leaders in France and Britain, Clemenceau and Lloyd George, led a successful “re-mobilization” of their people. The War was won and lost on the Home Front as well as on the battlefront.

**The trend to Total War**

Total war involves mass mobilization and ruthlessness in the conduct of war. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) showed signs of totality, as did the American Civil War (1861–65), but 1914–18 was the first war in which modern industrialized states engaged in all-out conflict. Yet the Second World War was even more a total conflict in this regard. Many leaders in that war, including Winston Churchill, drew upon their experiences in 1914–18. Unlike in the First World War, the Second ended with the unconditional surrender of the beaten powers, Germany and Japan.

**LEFT:** A German Gotha G IV. These heavy bombers were integral to the Gotha raids on London.
Although the summer of 1915 was relatively quiet on the Western Front, there was still plenty of fighting in “minor operations”. In the Argonne in late June, a German offensive penetrated 225 m (250 yds) into the lines of XXXII French Corps and took Fontaine-aux-Charmes. French counter-attacks prevented any further major advance, but by mid-July they had suffered 32,000 casualties. Near Ypres, the Germans used flamethrowers on 30 July to capture Hooge from the British. Actions such as these were in addition to the everyday grind of trench warfare.

Joffre’s strategy for the autumn offensive aimed not so much at a clean breakthrough, but at pushing the enemy out of key positions and thus disrupting the continuity of his defences, compelling the Germans into a major retreat. In its final form, Joffre’s strategy sought to pinch off the great German salient that had Noyon at its head by attacking from Artois, to the north – Vimy Ridge being a key tactical objective – and from Champagne, to the south. After heated debate, the BEF was committed to a simultaneous supporting attack at Loos, near Lens, despite the opposition of both French and Haig. This was coal-mining country, and the terrain of slag heaps and pit villages would be difficult ground for the British infantry to traverse. Nonetheless, Lord Kitchener, who was still the chief at the War Office, was persuaded that the problems being experienced by the Russians, and the threat of the current French government falling and being replaced by a ministry that would seek peace with Germany, meant that Loos had to go ahead. Haig, whose First Army would carry out the attack, warmed to the concept as he came to believe that the use of poison gas made a victory possible by compensating for lack of artillery. On the other side of No Man’s Land, the Germans built additional defences, and waited.
Expectations were high on the day of the great offensive, 25 September 1915. The Allies had a numerical advantage, but the battle demonstrated the extent to which the odds were stacked in the favour of the defender. On some sectors in Champagne the French infantry made some substantial gains. XIV Corps of Pétain's Second Army, attacking across a narrow strip of No Man's Land, punched through the first belt of German defences to a depth of 4 km (2.5 miles), II Colonial Corps in Second Army gained about 3 km (2 miles). At the end of the first day, there was good reason for optimism in the French High Command. On the second day, some more gains were made, although not of the order of those gained on 25 September, and at the inevitable cost in heavy casualties. Thereafter, the battle reverted to attritional slogging.

In Artois, too, there was disappointment for the French. D’Urbal’s Tenth Army attacked in bad weather, and took some positions on their left, around Arras. But the German positions were very strong, and on the right, south of Arras, the French infantry sustained heavy losses for paltry gains. On 26 September, d’Urbal decided to reinforce success rather than attempt to rescue failure, and attacked on his left. Souches fell, and on 28 September French troops fought their way on to the crest of Vimy Ridge but were driven back. Fighting continued into October, but the French made no further important gains.

For the BEF’s attack at Loos, much depended on the wind’s blowing in the right direction to carry chlorine gas over the German trenches. In the early morning of 25 September, Haig had to decide whether or not to order the gas to be released from the 5,000 cylinders that had been installed, and, despite worries about the wind, at 05:15 he gave the order. At 06:30, six British divisions attacked the enemy positions, only for the advancing infantry to find that, on the left and centre, the gas cloud had not delivered the anticipated benefits – indeed, in some places, such as the extreme left, it drifted back on to the attacking troops. For all that, Haig’s troops did well. The 9th (Scottish) Division, part of Kitchener’s New Army which was raised from volunteers in 1914, seized the powerful Hohenzollern redoubt, while another captured the village of Loos. The German defences were in disarray, and the timely arrival of British reserves could have been devastatingly effective. But the reserves did not reach the battlefield until the following day, when they were decisively repulsed. Loos, like the offensive in Artois and Champagne, ended in disappointment. The outnumbered Germans held off the Allies with relative ease.

"Votre élan sera irrésistible" ("Your élan will be irresistible")
JOFFRE TO HIS ARMY,
SEPTEMBER 1915.

Vimy Ridge is about 8 km (5 miles) from Arras. Some 7 km (11 miles) long, it rises to a height of 145 m (475 ft) and dominates the surrounding countryside. The Ridge was fiercely contested between French and German troops in 1915, the near success of Pétain’s XXXIII Corps in May helping to consolidate this commander’s growing reputation. This whole area was the scene of heavy fighting in 1915. Nearby is the French National Memorial and cemetery at Notre-Dame de Lorette, vital high ground which was captured in stages during 1915.

ABOVE: An excellent shot of French soldiers in a trench, c. 1915. Note the varied choices of winter clothing.

BELOW: The attack of 46th (North Midland) Division on Hohenzollern Redoubt, 13 October 1915. Note smoke and gas in the centre and left.

RIGHT BELOW: Scots Guardsmen in Big Willie Trench, Loos, October 1915. Three are preparing Mills Bombs (grenades) others look at the camera.
Sir John French’s reputation had been in decline through 1915, and the failure at Loos was the final blow. The last stage, the attack of 13 October, had produced, in the words of the official historian “nothing but the useless slaughter of infantry”. French’s misuse of the reserves – two New Army Divisions – which were held back well behind the lines on 25 September under his personal control, was seen as a major mistake. French publicly blamed Haig, a charge that Haig indignantly rebutted. In truth, Haig aimed for a decisive breakthrough while French anticipated a more methodical battle, in which there would be plenty of time to deploy the reserves when needed. The tension between these two concepts was never resolved.

French’s clumsy attempt to pass the buck was followed by his replacement by Haig, who became Commander-in-Chief of the BEF on 19 December 1915. A few days later General Sir William Robertson became the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), the professional head of the British Army. He was elevated as a means of marginalizing Kitchener’s influence as Secretary of State for War, and in tough negotiations Robertson insisted on receiving enhanced powers before he would take the job. Both “Wully” Robertson and Haig were “Westerners” – men who believed in the primacy of the Western Front. They formed a powerful team that in 1916 came into conflict with David Lloyd George, the Liberal politician who succeeded to the War Office after the death of Lord Kitchener in June 1916.

This clash grew more serious when Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916. Lloyd George, although a proponent of total war, shrank from Haig’s insistence on fighting attritional battles in the West, and at various times tried to clip Haig’s wings by attempting to transfer the main effort away from the Western Front; placing him under a French general; and withholding troops from the BEF. Haig and Robertson became more distant in the course of 1917. Robertson had wider strategic vision than Haig, and his job...
required him to oversee the global British war effort, not just the Western Front. Haig unfairly blamed the CIGS for dispersing troops away from the West, and refused to stand by him when Lloyd George sacked Robertson early in 1918. The Prime Minister’s relations with Robertson’s replacement, Sir Henry Wilson, deteriorated over time as they too clashed over civil-military issues.

Lloyd George would have liked to sack Haig, but the latter enjoyed support from the Press and the Conservative members of the Coalition government. After the disappointment of the battle of Cambrai that took place in late 1917 (see pages 136–137), and the near disaster of the German Spring Offensive of 1918 (see pages 138–139), Haig lost all support and his position became weaker. Curiously, Lloyd George still refused to move against him. In the 1930s, after Haig was dead, Lloyd George in his War Memoirs inflicted lasting damage on the Commander-in-Chief’s reputation.

Today, there is a popular perception that First World War generals presided over a series of failed battles in which the same outdated tactics were tried over and again. In reality, soldiers at all levels of the British, French and German Armies responded to the unexpected stalemate by experimentation and innovation, whether it was methods of improvising hand grenades from jam tins, developing techniques of trench raiding or ordering, deploying and working out the tactics for sophisticated new weapons. Haig is often accused of being a military Luddite. Nothing could be further from the truth. He was very keen on technology, being an enthusiastic supporter of tanks and the Royal Flying Corps. If anything, the problem was that Haig expected too much of primitive technology; witness his belief that poison gas could help overcome the major disadvantages faced by the BEF at Loos.

Underpinning the narrative of the battles on the Western Front was a struggle by the armies to out-think the enemy by using new technology and tactics. In the process, the warfare of 1914 – which essentially looked back to Napoleonic warfare – was transformed into something recognizably modern. The BEF was some way down this track by the time Haig took over.

The great battles of 1916 and 1917 were to result, by 1918, in an all-arms team that included tanks, infantry, artillery, airpower, machine guns and chemical weapons, bound together by modern – if primitive – wireless communications and supported by effective logistics. By then, the Allies had moved decisively ahead of the Germans in the sophistication of their fighting. An updated version of this form of warfare remains in use to the present day.
A complex mix of diplomacy, politics and strategy led to what was perhaps the most bizarre campaign of the war. The genesis of the “Salonika” campaign was the defeat of the invading Austrian forces by the Serbs in 1914. In the following year, the Germans sent substantial forces to support the Austrians and Bulgarians in crushing Serbia. In response, in October 1915 the British and French sent an initial two divisions, which were quickly reinforced, to the Aegean port of Salonika (or Thessaloniki), in neutral Greek Macedonia, with the intention of advancing to the aid of the Serbs. It was too little, too late. The Serbian army was defeated, the king and government forced into exile, and the Allied force retired to Salonika.

Although the Greek government that had invited in the Anglo-French forces had fallen, and its successor was less friendly, the Allied commander, the French general Maurice Sarrail, built trenches around the port. Salonika remained an Allied enclave for the rest of the war, outside the control of the Greek authorities (indeed, providing a base for anti-government dissidents). Much to the disgust of some British commanders, the numbers of Allied troops in Salonika grew to some 160,000 by early 1916, and reached a huge 600,000 a year later. Sarrail’s force included a British corps under General George Milne. Sarrail was an influential general and the politics of the French army demanded that he had an army-sized command away from the Western Front.

During 1916 and 1917 the “gardeners of Salonika” saw only limited action. A Bulgarian incursion at Florina in August 1916 disrupted Sarrail’s plan for a major attack, but in November the Serbian town of Monastir was taken by the Allies. A further push in April 1917, in the Monastir sector, was intended to support Nivelle’s imminent offensive on the Western Front. It was a failure, not least because of the problems of co-ordinating a multi-national force which by this stage included Serbian, Russian and renegade Greek formations, as well as British and French. The German and Bulgarian defenders held on and by May the offensive had ground to a halt, with Russian and French forces affected by mutiny.

In June 1918 the Frenchman Franchet d’Esperey, took command. Supported by a strong Greek contingent, his Vardar offensive,

Salonika was known as the Germans’ biggest prison camp because of the large number of Allied troops tied up there, apparently to no good purpose. A humble member of these forces was Stanley Spencer (1891–1959), an artist in civilian life who served in the ranks of the Royal Army Medical Corps. One of his finest achievements is the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Berkshire. Built to commemorate Harry Sandham, a Salonika veteran, the chapel houses Spencer’s extraordinary wall paintings of scenes from Salonika. These paintings are among the most important cultural artefacts to result from the British campaigns of the war.
The Salonika Campaign

BELOW LEFT: digging a drainage channel to counter the danger posed by malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

ABOVE: General Franchet d’Esperey landing at Constantinople on 8 February 1919.

BELOW RIGHT: A section of Spahis (French colonial cavalry from Morocco) on parade in Salonika.

launched in September, shattered the weak Bulgarian defences; the Germans had been transferred to France. A sustained advance began that ended on the Danube, with the Central Powers collapsing. It was a stunning victory that reinforced “Desperate Frankie’s” reputation as one of the best generals of the war.

Salonika was a difficult theatre in which to fight. Logistic challenges were compounded by an unhealthy environment. It could be very hot – up to 46°C (115°F). Malaria was prevalent: 10th (Irish) Division recorded 7,000 cases in August 1916. All this, and the lack of achievement until the very end of the war, had prompted many to ask whether the forces would have been better off deployed elsewhere, as Douglas Haig and others believed.
A 22 April postcard from E. Didelot of the 90th Infantry Division to his “Godmother” or “Marraine de Guerre”. He describes the hell of fighting on côte 304 as a “terrible bombardment on a grand scale”.

Soldier’s postcard from côte 304

A 22 April postcard from E. Didelot of the 90th Infantry Division to his “Godmother” or “Marraine de Guerre”. He describes the hell of fighting on côte 304 as a “terrible bombardment on a grand scale”.

The First World War – The Exhibits
Fleury-Douaumont map

The 17 May Operations map used by General Costantini at the HQ of the Fleury-Douaumont sector on the right bank at Verdun.
Major Raynal’s last message, which was sent by carrier pigeon from Fort Vaux on 4th June 1916.

Pétain’s “On les aura” Message

Pétain’s order of the day of 10 April 1916, which contains the phrase that passed into history – “On les aura” – “We’ll get ’em!”

Fort Vaux message

Major Raynal’s last message, which was sent by carrier pigeon from Fort Vaux on 4th June 1916.

Translation

The 9th of April is a glorious day for our armies. The furious assault of the Crown Prince’s soldiers were overcome everywhere. Foot soldiers, artillery, sappers and aviators of the 2nd Army rivalled for heroism. Honour to all!

The Germans will doubtless attack again. Everyone must work and ensure that the same success as yesterday is achieved. Take courage. We’ll get them.

[signature] Pétain

Translation

We are still holding on, but we are coming under attack from gas and dangerous fumes.

We urgently need to disengage – send me an immediate visual communication via Souville, which isn’t responding to my calls.

This is my last pigeon

Raynal
East Surrey objectives map

A hand-drawn map of the East Surrey Regiment's 1 July objectives near Montauban.
2nd Battalion, The Gordon Highlanders' report of 1 July attack on Mametz

A handwritten report on the successful 1 July attack on Mametz by 2nd Battalion, the Gordon Highlanders.

The casualty rate for the battalion from 1 to 4 July was 56.9 per cent.
The Exhibits

second line of 3/8th lines across the centre.
At 6 p.m. BAYETS VILLAGE was captured by a force consisting of 2/8th Lines, 2/8th Lines & 2/8th Lines and 3 machine gun sections went forward to the N. side of BAYETS VILLAGE to consolidate the position.

The distribution was as follows:

2 Coys 2/8th Lines held the line from the left of the 19th Bn. up to the right of the 3/8th Highlanders who linked up with the 2/8th Lines in the left.

The position was consolidated. 3 strong points made and 3 machine gun sections placed in each strong point.

At 10 p.m. 2 Coys 2/8th Lines came up and were formed a close support. R.H.O. Bn. in 3/8th Lines.

The job of the Bn. worked throughout the night in assisting in consolidating the position. During the night a good deal of enemy high explosive shells burst over BAYETS VILLAGE but little damage was done.

The whole of July 2nd the position remained unbreached and on the 3rd about 11 a.m. orders were received for the Bn. to turn over the line occupied by the 3/8th Lines and consolidate in that area. We remained here for the 1ST week of July 3rd remaining on the 3rd, moving on 4th July.

The casualties amounted to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affairs</th>
<th>Wounded</th>
<th>Missing</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The bulk of the original 60p was re-arranged, one machine gun being 300 yards from the right machine gun. The position captured consisted of 115°. J.G. N.E. plus 25° N.N. 11 P.M. June 29th.

A signal station was established at 300 yards of BAYETS VILLAGE at 10 a.m. and communication was established with 3rd Brigade.

B.G.R. Gordon 2nd Battalion

6-7-16

A party under the command left the day side of the Bn.

P.S. A party under Pte. Bonser marched all the day side of the 5th, carrying a message to the police.
20th Brigade war diary

The official war diary of 20th Brigade, 7th Infantry Division, describing minute-by-minute the 14 July dawn attack and operations on the following day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Summary of Events and Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 15th 11 p.m.</td>
<td>7th Division reports 8th Division position.</td>
<td>5:00</td>
<td>2 small batches of prisoners reported coming in from BAZENTIN LE GRAND WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th A.M.</td>
<td>14th S.11</td>
<td>6:00</td>
<td>9th Infantry Brigade report 'left and right battalions continuous 3rd line, and right 9th Infantry Brigade written by wire in front of 3rd line. Troops reported obliterated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:45</td>
<td>5 lines going up on west edge of BAZENTIN LE GRAND WOOD and appeared to meet with no opposition. About 50 prisoners seen coming back from west edge of the wood.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:50</td>
<td>8th Division reports 8th Division position.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00</td>
<td>Communication through to 2nd Border Regt.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:50</td>
<td>Orders sent to 2nd Border Regt (S.W.293)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:45</td>
<td>Adjutant 8th Devon Regt reports situation (W.276)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:15</td>
<td>Lieutenant Layley, S.M.G., reports going down at night, killing one man, taking from BAZENTIN LE GRAND WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:15</td>
<td>Brigade General STEVENS, 8th Infantry Brigade, reports that he has captured BAZENTIN LE PETIT.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30</td>
<td>9th Infantry Brigade reports they have gained BAZENTIN LE GRAND. 9th Division reports by 7th Division to have captured JORGEBY.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:35</td>
<td>9th Division report 150 Regiment supposed to be in reserve.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### WAR DIARY

**INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY**

*Issue heading not required.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Summary of Events and Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>14th</td>
<td>6:40</td>
<td>Captain Compton Smith reported seen wounded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Major General Watt, 7th Division arrives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21st Infantry Brigade mustered and fitted up for attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7th Division order 1 Battalion to BAZENTIN LE GRAND WOOD, one to CATERPILLAR WOOD and two about FONKES REDECT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3rd Division order 32nd Infantry Brigade to send one battalion to BAZENTIN LE GRAND WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Commanding Officers at Brigade H.Q. for instructions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Border Regt arriving in FONKES REDECT. 8th Devon Regt arriving in WHITE TRENCH.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Summary of Events and Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>14th</td>
<td>9:45</td>
<td>Adjutant, 14th Brigade R.M.A. reports at BAZENTIN LE PETIT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th T.R.T. Battery told to remain for the night at MARLBOROUGH WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visual touch established with 2nd Gordon Highlanders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21st Battery G.T.R. reports Infantry have reached S.M.B. and S.M.B.S. with little resistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Border Regt sent in captured documents and an automatic rifle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8th Devon Regt reports capture of 2 - 8th Howitzers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lieut Col Gordon, 2nd Gordon Highlanders reports his battalion holding LE PETIT WOOD and North edge of BAZENTIN LE PETIT VILLAGE. Casualties 2 officers wounded, 5 men killed and 20 men wounded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brigade returns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>C.O. D/16 reports Infantry missing behind HIGH WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brigadier General Seely called at Brigade H.Q. states &quot;Canadian Cavalry Brigade behind BAZENTIN LE PETIT and one troop South of MARCHY WOOD. At 10:45 am I Regiment (7th D.G.) decelerated - Cavalry Brigade was seen by General Seely South of MARCHY WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22nd Infantry Brigade report a large number of enemy advancing from HIGH WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enemy attacking CEMETERY and WINDMILL. Divisional Artillery shooting at them with observed fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lieut Morehead, Brigade Signal Officer, returns from BAZENTIN LE GRAND and brought back sketches from 8th Devon Regt and 2nd Border Regt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Our Infantry seen on WINDMILL HILL Ridge. Situation appreciated that 2 battalions 22nd Infantry Brigade were carrying out an attack towards HIGH WOOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;2&quot; battery reports message intercepted &quot;enemy advancing from HIGH WOOD&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lieut LAWLEY, 10th H.C.O. reports the original Brigade objective strongly consolidated at the strong points detailed in orders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Situation reported to 7th Division.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Gordon Highlanders reported by 22nd Infantry Brigade to be holding 200 yards N.O. BAZENTIN LE PETIT VILLAGE, and in BAZENTIN LE PETIT WOOD.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE BATTLE OF VERDUN

Even by the standards of the First World War, Verdun has an evil reputation as a battle of pure attrition. In his December 1915 “Christmas Memorandum”, Falkenhayn identified Britain as Germany’s most dangerous enemy. At that stage the German High Command had little regard for the British Army, and Falkenhayn saw the French Army as “England’s best sword” without which Britain would be neutralized. The final plan – Operation Gericht, or “Law Court” – pitted the German forces against Verdun, a fortress-city which represented the strength and spirit of France, a place with enormous symbolic as well as strategic importance. Historians still argue about Falkenhayn’s true aims, but it is probable that, believing a clean breakthrough was impossible, he intended to grind the French down in a series of attritional battles that would force France to come to terms. Historian Jehuda Wallach described this calculated use of attrition as “the degeneration of the art of war”. It certainly involved the application of total, ruthless methods to achieve a limited aim – to force France to come to a separate peace and thus destroy the cohesion of the Allied coalition.

The city of Verdun had for many years been an important frontier position which had been fortified by the great engineer and siege-master Sébastien Le Prestre, Seigneur de Vauban in the seventeenth century. After the Franco-Prussian War, Verdun became a key part of the French defences against Germany, blocking the way to the Champagne region and, ultimately, Paris. In 1916, the main fortifications of Verdun consisted of a belt of forts some miles from the city. The French population may have believed that Verdun was a mighty fortress, but the truth was different. Much of its artillery had been removed and sent elsewhere on the Western Front to feed the high demands of the field armies for guns, and the infantry garrison was thinly spread.

Falkenhayn entrusted the attack to Fifth Army, commanded by the Kaiser’s eldest son, Crown Prince Wilhelm, with General von Knobelsdorff, as his chief-of-staff and the army’s military brain. The offensive began on 21 February 1916. At 07:15, a nine-hour artillery bombardment was heralded by a shell from a heavy naval gun that overshot its target and landed near the Bishop’s Palace in Verdun. The guns were able to rain shells onto the Verdun salient from three sides, creating the heaviest bombardment of the war so far, and the defenders suffered terribly. At 17:00, the German infantry began to push forward cautiously,
probing for weak spots in the French positions. The plan was for the main infantry attack to begin on the following day, when it was hoped that the French defences would be thoroughly weakened. In the event, the Germans were overly wary, and a major assault might have paid off. General von Zwehl’s VII Reserve Corps, which had ignored the instructions for caution and attacked in greater strength than the other two corps, captured the Bois d’Haumont and thus made a significant dent in the French lines.

As it was, the French put up strong resistance. In the Bois des Caures, Colonel Emile Driant’s Chasseurs (light infantry) – who were virtually destroyed in the first days of the battle – succeeded in holding up the attacks of German XVIII Corps. Ironically, Driant, a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, had previously raised the issue of the weakness of Verdun’s defences, much to Joffre’s fury. He was killed on 22 February.

By the following day, the French were reaching crisis point. Divisions were simply crumbling under the German pressure, having taken huge losses, and the French second position was falling into enemy hands. General Langle de Cary, Central Army Group commander, decided to abandon the right bank of the Meuse. While this was a sensible military decision, he was overruled by Noel de Castelnau, Joffre’s chief-of-staff, acting on his superior’s behalf, who saw the potentially disastrous political impact of such a retreat. Instead, Pétain was placed in command of Second Army and began his dogged defence of Verdun.

Recognizing the central place of artillery on the modern battlefield, Pétain brought up additional guns and located them west of the Meuse to help counter the weight of German firepower. He also paid careful attention to logistics. The Verdun sector was supplied by a narrow gauge railway and by the minor road to Bar-le-Duc, the Voie Sacrée (the “Sacred Way”). Pétain, offered solid, unflashy leadership, understood the poilu (the ordinary French soldier), who in return trusted him. His appointment was a turning point in the battle.

**RIGHT:** FORT DOUAUMONT EARLY IN THE BATTLE FOR VERDUN. THE FORT IS ALREADY SHOWING SIGNS OF DAMAGE FROM ARTILLERY FIRE.

**BOTTOM:** A FRENCH MILITARY BAND MARCHING ALONG LA VOIE SACRÉE, THE ROAD THAT RAN FROM BAR-LE-DUC TO VERDUN.

**THE LÉGION D’HONNEUR**

The Légion d’honneur is a decoration dating back to Napoleon I. Over 50,000 were awarded during the First World War. Major Sylvain-Eugene Raynal was awarded the Légion d’Honneur after he volunteered to defend Fort Vaux although he realized it meant almost certain death.

**RIGHT:** THE GERMAN STICK GRENADE WAS KNOWN TO THE BRITISH AS THE “POTATO Masher” BECAUSE OF ITS SHAPE.

**BELOW:** THE COVER OF A WARTIME BOOK SHOWING TROOPS GOING TO THE FRONT ALONG THE “SACRED WAY”. A PIONEER IS REPAIRING THE ROAD.
They shall not pass

The fact that the Germans never made a serious attempt to cut the Voie Sacrée, added to the limited numbers of troops committed to the battle and that the Germans attacked only on the right bank of the Meuse, provides strong circumstantial evidence that Falkenhayn had indeed always intended to fight an attritional battle rather than to capture Verdun. If the Germans had put the supply route out of use, the effect on the French Army would have been catastrophic. At the height of the battle, 50,000 tons of supplies and 90,000 troops travelled to Verdun every week along the Voie Sacrée, while trucks took wounded and troops heading out of the line in the opposite direction. This was dubbed the “noria” system, after the word for a bucket water-wheel.

On the day Pétain arrived to take command, the Germans seized one of the key fortifications, Fort Douaumont. Its capture was largely because of a bizarre accident whereby the fort had been left almost defenceless. The Germans seemed on the verge of victory, but Pétain's arrival and massed French artillery fire helped to retard the German advance. Now attention switched to Le Mort Homme (“the Dead Man”), a French-held hill on the left bank side of the Meuse from which guns wreaked havoc among the Germans.

By attacking at Verdun, Falkenhayn disrupted Anglo-French preparations for their offensive on the Somme and forced the Allies to dance to his tune. Yet Falkenhayn in turn was about to lose his tenuous grip on events. He sanctioned an attack on the left bank of the Meuse, which not only expanded the geographical scope of the battle, but undermined the whole concept of a limited battle as it played into the hands of Falkenhayn’s critics, who sought an outright victory. The fresh attack brought the Germans some territorial gains, but the defenders clung tenaciously to the Mort Homme. A new phase of the battle began on 9 April when the Germans attacked simultaneously on both banks of the Meuse, but the battle remained, in the Crown Prince’s words, a “stubborn to-and-fro contest for every foot of ground”. By the end of April, he had come to believe that “a decisive success at Verdun could only be assured at the price of heavy casualties, out of all proportion to the desired gains”. Von Knobelsdorff disagreed, and for the moment the Germans continued their attacks. The Mort Homme and the neighbouring Hill 304 fell at last in May, after a huge and concentrated bombardment.

Pétain was promoted to command Central Army Group, and was replaced at Verdun by Robert Nivelle, whose aggressive subordinate

Below: Crown Prince Wilhelm speaks to a stretcher-bearer at Verdun. To the British, “Little Willie” was a figure of fun. Right: Bodies in a trench at Le Mort Homme, April 1916. The Germans saw the capture of this position as an essential step.
Charles Mangin attempted, unsuccessfully, to retake Douaumont in late May. A fresh German push, Operation “May Cup”, opened on the right bank on 1 June. Fort Vaux was captured after an epic, seven-day long defence led by Major Raynal, who was forced to surrender as his men were running out of water. The Ouvrage de Thiaumont, one of the last fortifications blocking the way to Verdun city, was captured by the Germans on 8 June. It was promptly retaken, and then captured and retaken another 15 times in the course of the battle. The Germans now went all out to take Fort Souville, 4 km (2.5 miles) from Verdun. On 23 June, after saturating the defenders with new phosgene gas, the German attack broke against the fort, which remained tantalizingly just beyond their reach.

One last effort, on 11 July, also failed and the Germans went on to the defensive.

By then, the Allies had regained the strategic offensive. The Russian Brusilov offensive, launched on 4 June, forced Falkenhayn to detach divisions to the Eastern Front, and on 1 July the British and French attacked on the Somme, beginning the offensive that Joffre had been demanding for months. The pressure on the French at Verdun eased, but the fighting continued. The failure at Verdun contributed to Falkenhayn's replacement by Hindenburg and Ludendorff at the end of August, and von Knobelsdorf was posted to the Eastern Front. Nivelle, employing massed guns and sophisticated artillery tactics to fight limited battles, retook the Ouvrage de Thiaumont and Douaumont in late October. Fort Vaux fell on 2 November and in one last spasm of action, bemoaned by the Crown Prince as “this black day”, on 15 December the French advanced 3 km (2 miles) past Douaumont. The battle was over. It had cost 377,000 French and 337,000 German casualties.

The Battle of Verdun
73
In August 1914, civil war in Ireland seemed imminent. Since 1910, the British Liberal government had relied on the mainly Catholic Irish Nationalist Party to keep it in power, and as part of the deal tried to introduce Home Rule – devolved government that fell short of complete independence. This was opposed by Ulster Protestants led by Sir Edward Carson, who demanded that at least part of the north of Ireland should be excluded from the measure. By contrast more radical nationalists such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) wanted complete independence and were prepared to fight for it. The situation deteriorated rapidly, with private armies – the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Irish Volunteers – being set up. The Buckingham Palace conference in July 1914 failed to bring about agreement, and tensions were high, when faced with war in Europe, an uneasy truce began.

In September, the Home Rule Act was passed but it was promptly shelved until the war was over. John Redmond, the leader of the constitutional Irish nationalists, believed that enthusiastic participation in the British war effort would help Home Rule to become a reality. The Catholic, nationalist 16th (Irish) Division was formed, alongside 36th (Ulster) Division, which was recruited from the UVF. In 1914–15 there was some enthusiasm for the war in Ireland. Some 200,000 volunteers from Ireland served in the army during the war. Sergeant O’Leary of the Irish Guards won the Victoria Cross and became a national hero.

On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, a small group of IRB radicals led by Patrick Pearse staged an uprising in Dublin. Standing on the steps of the General Post Office, Pearse announced the birth of an Irish republic. In
a few days the British crushed the rebellion, which had little popular support. Four hundred and fifty people were killed. Of these 64 of were insurgents, 116 British military, 16 police, 254 civilians. What happened next helped to radicalize the population. Fifteen captured ringleaders were executed, the shootings being dragged out over a period of days. The rebels became martyrs, and support for Redmond’s constitutional nationalists – and their policy of supporting the British – began to drain away. The British politician David Lloyd George tried and failed to stitch together a deal which was in retrospect the Home Rulers’ last chance of success, but by the end of July it had failed.

The radical nationalist Sinn Féin (SF) party began to overtake the Redmondites in popularity, and British authority in Ireland began to crumble. In the 1918 election, Redmond’s party was smashed as an electoral force, and the victorious SF set up a separate Dáil (parliament) in Dublin. A bloody guerrilla war began, and the British attempted to regain control. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 gave independence to 26 of the Irish counties, while six counties remained within the UK as Northern Ireland. Despite the troubles at home, Irish units in the British army had continued to fight well, although recruiting from Ireland had become increasingly difficult.
“Mission creep” is a well known phenomenon by which military operations grow steadily more ambitious, absorb ever more resources, and last far longer than anyone had initially envisaged. The term is a modern one, but the idea is not. The British Empire’s campaign in the Ottoman province of Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) in 1914–18 was a classic example of this tendency. It began in November 1914, when an expedition sent from British India arrived at the head of the Persian Gulf. This was a sensible and limited operation to secure Britain’s supplies of oil – particularly important given that the Royal Navy’s reliance on it for fuel. But the temptation was to advance further inland. Basra, 32 kilometres (20 miles) away, was soon taken, and another advance of 90 kilometres (55 miles) brought the British and Indian troops to the confluence of the two great major rivers in the region, the Euphrates and the Tigris on 9 December 1914.

Lulled into a false sense of security by feeble Turkish resistance, the British sent out substantial reinforcements and a new Commander-in-Chief, General Sir John Nixon. Then, in spring 1915, twin pushes were launched along the two rivers. A riverine expedition – Major-General Townshend’s “Regatta” – captured Amara on the Tigris (3 June) and Major-General Gorringe took Nasiriya on the Euphrates at the end of the following month.
Nixon then ordered Townshend to improve the strategic position by taking Kut, further up the Tigris. He did so in late September, and then pursued the beaten Turkish forces to Ctesiphon. Here the Ottoman army inflicted a defeat on Townshend, who on 25 November 1915 was forced to retreat to Kut. Exhausted, the British-Indian force halted and on 7 December was besieged by the advancing Turks. The siege was to last for five long months. More Imperial reinforcements reached Mesopotamia, but attempts to relieve the Kut garrison failed. On 29 April 1916, Townshend surrendered his 13,000 strong force. It was the greatest humiliation suffered by the forces of the British Empire in the entire war.

This was not the end of the Mesopotamia campaign, however. In December 1916, the British once more took the offensive with extra forces under a new Commander-in-Chief, Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude, and with much work having been carried out improving logistics and rebuilding morale. Maude’s careful planning paid off: having steadily driven back the Turks, in March 1917 he captured Baghdad, where in November he died of cholera. His successor was Lieutenant-General Sir William Marshall, who began a major drive on the oil-rich area of Mosul in October 1918, to take advantage of the disaster suffered by the Turks in Palestine. In a week of fighting the British Mesopotamian forces won a significant victory over the Ottoman Sixth Army, which was forced to surrender on 30 October.

The extreme heat and inhospitable conditions made Mesopotamia a nightmarish place for an army to fight in. A tough and resourceful enemy and the logistic difficulties of the theatres were twin challenges that British forces eventually overcame – but a limited strategy that avoided mission creep would probably have been much more preferable.
“Attrition” is a term usually associated with killing grounds such as Passchendaele and Verdun on the Western Front. But some of the worst attritional fighting took place on the Italian Front. In the course of 1915, having carried out four offensives over much the same ground against the Austro-Hungarians, the senior Italian commander, General Luigi Cadorna, had made minimal gains, but sustained massive losses.

Since 1882, Italy had been an ally of Austria and Germany, but Rome chose to stay neutral on the outbreak of war. Many believed that the formation of the Kingdom of Italy in the nineteenth century was unfinished business. Territory inhabited (at least in part) by Italian speakers was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including the Adriatic port of Trieste, and the Trentino, or southern Tyrol. Italy’s foreign policy was described in a memorable phrase by Prime Minister Antonio Salandra as “sacred egoism”, which not only indicates that Italy, like all other states, put its national interests first, but hints at the passions inherent in nationalism.

With Europe at war, the position of neutral Italy was of interest to both sides. Vienna refused to pay a bribe of territory to keep Rome neutral. By contrast, the Entente powers, in the secret
Treaty of London (26 April 1915) traded away Austrian land in the event of victory. On 23 May, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, and a month later the very First Battle of the Isonzo commenced.

This was an attack by Italian Third Army (Duke of Aosta) and Second Army (Frugoni) into the highland, stone-strewn wilderness of the Carso, which aimed for Gorizia and ultimately Trieste. The tactical conditions of the Western Front were replicated and magnified. The Austrian defenders held trenches cut out of the rock, making the job of the attacker even less enviable than in Flanders. There was a short break from 7 July, in which more artillery was deployed, and then the Second Battle of the Isonzo began on 18 July. Still hampered by insufficient artillery, the Italian assault ended on 3 August. Another pause followed, and then Cadorna began Third Isonzo (18 October–4 November). The final attack of the year was the Fourth Battle of Isonzo (10 November–2 December).

At the end of the year’s efforts, the Italians had edged forward, but at the cost of 250,000 men. To take one example, the 48th Regiment lost around 2,300 men in four months of fighting. The Austrians fought stubbornly, lost heavily and switched 12 divisions from the Eastern Front, but contained the Italian offensives with relative ease.

At first, 1916 saw more of the same: Fifth Isonzo was conducted in terrible weather during 11–15 March. The attention then switched to the Trentino front, to which the Austrians had moved divisions from the Isonzo. From 15–20 May, the Austrians advanced 8 kilometres (5 miles), but then halted in response to developments on the Russian front, and eventually pulled back. With the Austrian defenders on the Isonzo being weakened, the Italians made some real progress in the Sixth Battle (6–7 August), capturing the town of Gorizia and establishing a bridgehead on the Isonzo River itself. Fleetingly, a major breakthrough seemed possible, and Italian morale was high. But the high hopes of August were to be disappointed. The Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Battles of the Isonzo, fought by stages from September to November, saw attempts to build on the success at Gorizia. The Austrians had been defeated but not destroyed, and their new positions were very strong. Consequently, Italian gains were slight, and once again, casualties were immense. As on the Western Front, 1916 ended in stalemate in Italy.

Although overshadowed by the Isonzo front, the Dolomite mountains were the scene of fierce fighting. H. G. Wells, who visited the Alpine front in 1916, described the “grim and wicked” mountains; nonetheless, men contrived to fight there, battling at high altitudes over rocky outcrops and mountain ledges, often in the snow. The logistical challenges were truly formidable, and the dangers included avalanches – “white death” – which killed thousands.
THE EASTERN FRONT
The Brusilov Offensive and Romanian Campaign

Following their victory in the Gorlice-Tarnów campaign in May–June 1915, the Austro-German forces pushed on into Russia. When the offensive came to a halt in late September, there had been an advance of 240 kilometres (150 miles). Having lost about a third of a million soldiers as prisoners of war, and seen over 3,000 guns captured by the enemy, Russia seemed on the edge of defeat. The Russians were able to bounce back in the following year, launching their own offensives, one of which brought about some dazzling success.

At the end of 1915 Britain, France and Russia agreed to coordinate their offensives during the following year. Despite their problems, the Russians remained loyal to their allies, beginning in March 1916 an ultimately stalemated struggle around Lake Naroch to try to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun. The main offensive of the year was to begin in late May when three “Fronts” (Army Groups) were to attack. In the event, on 14 May, the Italians appealed to their Russian allies for help after they were attacked by the Austrians. The only force ready to assault was General Alexei’s Southwestern Front, consisting of four armies. Brusilov would attack on 4 June, and General Evert’s Northwestern Front would join in 10 days later.

Brusilov kept the Austrians guessing as to where he would attack by defying conventional military wisdom that forces should be massed at the decisive point. In spite of having only a small margin of numerical superiority (600,000 men to 500,000), Brusilov decided to attack simultaneously all along the line. Such bold methods might not have worked against German troops, but he faced five Austrian armies, all of which were suffering from morale problems. The artillery bombardment came crashing down at 4 a.m. on 4 June and some preliminary infantry assaults went in that morning. The defenders suffered badly from the shelling, but the main attack was still to come. The storm broke in the early hours of 5 June, and threw the Austrians into confusion. As the Russians pushed forward, some of the defenders were ordered to retreat, but thousands simply surrendered – eventually half a million prisoners were captured. The Austrians suffered a cataclysmic defeat. On 16 June, the Germans mounted a counter-offensive. But it could have been even worse for the Central Powers. The Russians did not build on their initial success. Reserves were not made available in sufficient numbers, or in a timely fashion either, and the iron chain of logistics brought Brusilov’s advance to a complete halt by late June. Fighting continued into October, but for the Central Powers the crisis had passed. In the early summer, faced with Brusilov’s offensive, the British-led attack on the Somme, and fighting at Verdun and in Italy, the forces of the Central Powers were under immense strain. Conceivably, had Romania joined the Allies in early summer, rather than late August (see the box on page 81), the Austro-German line might have actually given way somewhere.
Romanian Campaign 1916

Romania declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 27 August 1916 and then invaded Hungarian Transylvania with three armies. The reaction of the Central Powers was swift. In September, led by the experienced German generals Falkenhayn and Mackensen, German, Austrian and Bulgarian forces counter-attacked on several fronts. Transylvania was quickly retaken and Romania itself was conquered in a brilliant campaign, the capital Bucharest falling on 6 December. The Anglo-French force at Salonika was unable to help the Romanians. Once again, the German army had demonstrated how effectively it could conduct mobile operations in the relatively open conditions of the Eastern Front.
For years before 1914, there had been expectations of a “New Trafalgar”, a decisive clash in the North Sea between the British and German battlefleets. In reality, although both navies wanted battle, both behaved with caution. Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Grand Fleet, was, in Churchill’s later words, “the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon”. The British had the upper hand in the surface war, and to retain it merely needed to keep the Fleet intact so that it could blockade Germany and bottle up the German navy. However, it was hoped to ambush the German High Seas Fleet and thus bring on a battle with the odds stacked in the Royal Navy’s favour.

Nearly two years of the two fleets tiptoeing around each other and engaging in minor clashes came to an end on 31 May 1916. Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer, appointed in early 1916, continued with the basic strategy, but brought more vigour to the German campaign.

He sent out Vice-Admiral Hipper’s battlecruisers (ships that were as heavily armed as battleships, but faster, having less armoured protection) towards the Skagerrak, the straits separating Norway from Denmark. The plan was to lure the British into action by offering up an apparently unsupported target, but then to bring his battleships into action.

Room 40, the British Admiralty’s decoding section, was able to read German signal traffic, and thus warned, the Grand Fleet set sail four hours before Scheer. However, a mistake resulted in Jellicoe being led to believe that the main German fleet was still in harbour at 12.30 p.m. As a result, he failed to make haste.

Vice-Admiral David Beatty’s Battlecruiser Fleet of six battlecruisers made contact with the destroyers supporting Hipper’s fleet of five battlecruisers at 2.20 p.m. The German
The Battle of Jutland

battlecruisers manoeuvred to the south-east and headed towards Scheer’s battlefleet, followed by Beatty. The British got much the worse of the subsequent action. HMS Indefatigable and HMS Queen Mary both exploded and sank, and three other ships were damaged. Although pummelled by British guns (Von der Tann had two turrets put out of action), none of Hipper’s ships were sunk. Had not an error delayed four fast British battleships into coming into action, the result could have been very different.

Around 4.30 p.m., Scheer’s battleships came in sight and Beatty disengaged, with the Germans following up. Unexpectedly, Scheer found Jellicoe’s battleships waiting for him. Although a third British battlecruiser, Invincible, was sunk, it was the Germans’ turn to disengage, only to turn back, and run the gauntlet of British fire. The second withdrawal was covered by a salvo of torpedoes fired by light vessels. Controversially, Jellicoe ordered the fleet to turn away from the torpedoes, thus allowing the German ships to escape.

Tactically, the Germans were more successful at Jutland, as the British called the battle: for the loss of one battlecruiser (Lützow), one old battlecruiser, four light cruisers and five destroyers, they had inflicted losses of three battlecruisers, four armoured cruisers and eight destroyers. In morale terms, the Germans felt victorious and the British were disappointed. But strategically, which is what mattered, the British were the clear victors. The Germans had failed to inflict a decisive defeat on the Grand Fleet; the German navy was as securely bottled up in the North Sea as before; and Jellicoe’s fleet remained substantially intact, the ultimate guarantor of the security of the British Isles.

ABOVE LEFT: A German warship firing.

ABOVE RIGHT: ‘Situation in the morning, 9.17 hrs.’ A contemporary painting by Claus Bergen, showing the sea battle at Skagerrak.

BELOW: Admiral Beatty’s battlecruiser squadron regarded themselves as the elite of the Royal Navy, but had mixed fortunes at the Battle of Jutland.
One of the most romantic figures to emerge from the First World War was Colonel T. E. Lawrence – “Lawrence of Arabia”. A complex, troubled figure, Lawrence was an archaeology student in peacetime who was given a temporary commission in the British army and was sent to the Middle East. In late 1916, he was appointed as liaison officer to Faisal bin Hussein, one of the leaders of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Although his exact role is controversial, Lawrence played a role as one of the leaders of the Revolt. This campaign of hit-and-run raids and attacks on railways posed a significant and growing threat to the Turks at the same time that British Empire Forces were invading Ottoman Palestine.

Under the command of General Sir Archibald Murray, the British Empire Forces put the logistic infrastructure in place across the Sinai desert that made an advance on Palestine possible. The first objective was Gaza City, on the route into Palestine, which was defended by a force that included some German elements. Murray attacked on 25 March 1917. In a confused battle the EEF, which included the Anzac Mounted Division, made some progress, but the battle ended in fiasco with a communications breakdown leading to an undignified retreat. Murray unwisely informed London that he had won a significant victory, and was promptly ordered to renew the offensive. “Second Gaza” was launched on 19 April and was a failure. Murray was sacked and replaced by General Sir Edmund Allenby.

Allenby had a point to prove. He had been removed from command of Third Army after a lacklustre performance at Arras in April 1917. The Prime Minister wanted Jerusalem to be captured as a Christmas present for the British people, and provided Allenby with significant reinforcements. Allenby brought with him knowledge of the most recent tactics and techniques in use on the Western Front, and his army was to put this knowledge to good use. Aided by imaginative deception methods, “Third Gaza” (31 October) was a smashing victory. The pursuit carried Allenby to Jerusalem, which surrendered on 9 December.

As a result of the great German offensives, in 1918 Allenby had to send British divisions to France and received Indian troops in return. Although he carried out some indecisive operations in Transjordan in March and April 1918, he waited until 19 September before
It is very difficult to separate fact from fiction when trying to assess the role of T. E. Lawrence in the Arab Revolt. He was a highly skilled writer, and his book Revolt in the Desert was hailed as a masterpiece. In it, he cleverly constructs the myth of “Lawrence of Arabia”, a brilliant guerrilla leader who used his understanding and sympathy for Arabs and their culture to forge a highly effective striking force. This picture contains some truth, perhaps a great deal, but he has been accused of exaggerating his own importance. The historical jury is still out.

mounting a major attack, the Battle of Megiddo. It was a brilliant example of manoeuvre warfare in which infantry, cavalry, artillery, aircraft and even armoured cars combined to rout the Turks, commanded by the German Gallipoli veteran, Liman von Sanders. Seventy-five thousand prisoners were captured, 40,000 being taken in the first five days of fighting. Allenby’s advance coincided with an upsurge of Arab guerrilla activity in Palestine. Damascus was captured by British and Arab forces on 1 October, by which time the Ottoman army was in a state of collapse. The seizure of Aleppo on 26 October marked the effective end of the Palestine campaign. Four days later, Turkey surrendered.

TOP: GENERAL ALLENBY (CENTRE) MAKING HIS SPEECH ON THE STEPS OF THE CITADEL AFTER THE CAPTURE OF JERUSALEM, DECEMBER 1917.

ABOVE: A .44 INCH SMITH & WESSON “RUSSIAN” REVOLVER CAPTURED BY THE BRITISH AT GAZA WITH A NAME, DATE AND PLACE OF CAPTURE SCRATCHED ON THE BUTT, AND A WOODEN SIGN FROM THE BRITISH DEFENSIVE TRENCH SYSTEM AT GAZA.

Lawrence of Arabia
The Italian contribution to the combined Allied strategy for 1917 was yet another Battle of the Isonzo (the Tenth), which commenced on 12 May, hard on the heels of the British and French offensives on the Western Front in April. The Italians had clawed some ground from the Austrians by the time the offensive was closed down in mid-June.

This offensive was followed by the Eleventh Battle in August. Reinforced with French and British heavy artillery and fresh divisions, the attack was timed to coincide with the Allied Passchendaele offensive. Following a preliminary bombardment, the infantry was unleashed. Although the Austrians, commanded by General Boroevic, held against the attacks of Italian Third Army, General Luigi Capello’s Second Army drove through the defensive positions and finally reached open ground beyond. Pursuit rapidly ran into logistical problems, and Second Army paused to regroup, planning to renew the attack shortly. Ironically, this modest success was to contribute to the worst Italian debacle of the war.

Once again, Germany sent troops to bail out its allies. Italian intelligence warned that a major enemy offensive was in the offing. Cadorna gave orders to go on the defensive and pull back artillery to defensible positions, but the headstrong Capello ignored them. At the Battle of Caporetto, launched on 23 October 1917, 35 Central Powers divisions faced 41 Italian. Following a hurricane bombardment, and using advanced infiltration infantry tactics, the Austrian and German forces tore into the defenders. Italian Second Army collapsed, its soldiers’ morale worn down by the ceaseless attrition of the previous years; some 90 per cent of Italian casualties were prisoners of war. Third and Fourth Armies, by contrast, fell back in reasonable order. By 10 November, the Italians had stabilized a line along the River Piave, a mere 40 kilometres (25 miles) from Venice.

This was the high-water mark of the Central Powers’ success in Italy. Fresh offensives were mounted on the Trentino and Piave fronts in June 1918, but neither achieved much. Neither were the Italians keen to renew the struggle. Although French and British reinforcements had arrived from the Western Front, General Armando Diaz, who replaced the discredited Cadorna in November 1917, was in no hurry to take the offensive. But on 24 October 1918, with the tide running strongly in the Allies’ favour, he...
launched the Battle of Vittorio Veneto. It was an Allied effort. In addition to Italian Eighth Army, Twelfth Army was commanded by General Graziani, a Frenchman, and included French 23rd Division. Tenth Army, led by British General Lord Cavan, included the British 7th and 23rd Divisions. The three armies forced a crossing of the Piave, with the Austrians putting up a stiff resistance in places. On 30 October, the town of Vittorio Veneto fell, and the Austrian defenders collapsed. Elsewhere, on the Trentino Front, Italian, British and French attacked near Asiago on 1 November, and drove on until the Armistice came into effect on 4 November: Austria-Hungary had disintegrated, and the war in Italy was over.

ABOVE: Some of the many Italian prisoners of war after the Battle of Caporetto, October 1917.

BELOW LEFT: Italian infantrymen in a trench along the defensive line of the lower Piave River, 1917.

BELOW: Italian general Armando Diaz, who eventually led the Italian forces to victory at the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, featured on the front page of a French publication, 9 December 1917.
The sinking of the French battleship Jean Bart in the Mediterranean on 21 December 1914 was a portent. For this vessel was not destroyed by the gunnery of an enemy capital ship: it fell victim to an Austrian submarine, a mighty and expensive warship sunk by a smaller and much cheaper weapon. And it was to submarines (known as U-Boats) that the Austrians’ German allies were eventually to turn to try to win the war at sea.

At the outbreak of war, the Allied (principally British) navies rapidly bottled up the German battle-fleet in home waters, mopped up stray German ships across the globe, and enforced a blockade of the Central Powers. In response, on 4 February 1915 Berlin announced that any merchant ships that were found in the waters around the British Isles, including neutrals, would be attacked. As a result, American ships were targeted. This unrestricted submarine warfare provoked furious American protests – famously after the British liner Lusitania was sunk by a U-Boat in May and 128 Americans were among the dead – and the strength of these forced the Germans, on 1 September 1915, to call off the strategy. Even so, the submarine campaign was a trump card that Berlin was to play again, once the U-Boat fleet had grown in numbers and experience.

The U-Boat war was far from over. It was vital for the Allies to keep open the Atlantic sea-lanes over which merchant ships carried munitions from North American factories and food-stuffs from farms. Cut this life-line and Britain would starve. Extensive belts of anti-submarine nets were laid in the Channel. Some merchant ships were equipped with guns. Then there were Q-ships, fitted with concealed guns; these were intended to lure U-Boats towards a supposedly helpless victim, at which they would open fire. After the Battle of Jutland in 1916, the Germans increasingly concentrated on the undersea war. In October 1916, British shipping losses amounted to a record 176,000 tons, with the combined loss of neutrals and Allied shipping amounting to a similar total.

Following the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the Germans turned again return to unrestricted submarine warfare. It promised a great reward – starving Britain out of the war – but the risk of making an enemy of the United States was high. Initially, the sink-on-sight approach that began in February 1917 was highly successful. The tonnage of vessels sunk in British waters in January was about 300,000. That increased to more than 500,000 tons in February, 560,000 in March, and a frightening 860,000 tons in April. In the end, salvation for the Allies came in the form of the introduction of a convoy system. British naval authorities had resisted this course, urged by Lloyd George and others. Senior sailors had feared that convoys would simply present golden targets for U-Boats, but in fact it proved much easier for warships to protect merchantmen in a group. Losses declined; the numbers of U-Boats sunk increased; and the crisis was over – but the Germans had come very close to victory. The U-Boat proved to be a far greater menace to the Allies than the Kaiser’s treasured battleships.

Below: The Zeebrugge Raid

On the night of 22–23 April 1918 Rear-Admiral Roger Keyes led a daring attempt to block the German-held port of Zeebrugge. HMS Vindictive sailed up the Zeebrugge mole and put men ashore who tried to destroy it, while blockships were sunk to prevent the harbour being used by U-boats. The Germans fought back fiercely, and the raid achieved only limited success. However, it was a propaganda triumph for the British, with the Royal Navy living up to the tradition of Drake and Nelson, and it boosted home front morale at a time of crisis on the Western Front.
War in the Atlantic

ABOVE: The controversial sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 by a German U-Boat was used by the British government as an emotive and powerful enlistment tool.

LEFT: A British standard-built merchant ship in dazzle camouflage.

ABOVE: A surfaced U-Boat torpedoes a merchant steamer, scoring a direct hit.

BELOW: The ‘Q’ ship HMS Underwing, at anchor with guns exposed and striped dazzle camouflage.

ABOVE: THE CONTROVERSIAL SINKING OF THE LUSITANIA IN 1915 BY A GERMAN U-BOAT WAS USED BY THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AS AN EMOTIVE AND POWERFUL ENLISTMENT TOOL.
Both Britain and France were great imperial powers in 1914, able to draw on the vast human resources of their empires. In August 1914, George V declared war on behalf of the whole British Empire. The Australian statesman Andrew Fisher promptly pledged to support Britain “to the last man and last shilling”, and this reflected a general mood in Australia, New Zealand and Anglophone South Africa and Canada. Imperial ties were still strong, there was much loyalty to the monarch and many still considered Britain as “home”. A large number of the men who enlisted had been born in Britain, or were the sons of British migrants. In South Africa, where many Afrikaners had fought against the British only 12 years before, some of them revolted, and others were reluctant to support Britain. Other Afrikaners did rally to the Empire. Jan Christian Smuts, who had fought against the British in the South African War, became a leading member of the War Cabinet. The French-Canadian community were also notably less enthusiastic about fighting for Britain than English-speaking Canadians.

The Australians and New Zealanders earned reputations as good fighting troops in 1915 at Gallipoli. They arrived in France in early 1916, where over the next two years the Anzacs won the respect of friends and enemies alike. The five-division Australian Corps was created in November 1917, and along with the New Zealand Division under General Sir Andrew Russell, played key roles in the Allied victories. The French Army in 1914

Like the rest of the French army, units from the Empire suffered terrible casualties. In a few days fighting in the battle of the Frontiers in 1914, 3rd Colonial Division lost 11,000 out of 16,000 men, including the divisional commander. By the end of the war, 36,000 Algerians, 10,000 Tunisians and 29,000 Africans were dead, although not all on the Western Front. It has been estimated that the Zouaves and the infantry of La Coloniale sustained some of the heaviest losses of any units in the French army.

ABOVE LEFT: ZULUS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIVE LABOUR CORPS PREPARE TO PERFORM A WAR DANCE IN JUNE 1917. SOUTH AFRICA ALSO PROVIDED WHITE COMBAT TROOPS FOR WESTERN FRONT SERVICE.

ABOVE: FRENCH SPAHIS (NATIVE LIGHT CAVALRY RECRUITED FROM NORTH AFRICA) AT REST, COULDUN CAMP, OISE, 22 JUNE 1916.

LEFT: A DRESSING STATION IN TIKRIT, MESOPOTAMIA IN 1917. A ROYAL ARMY MEDICAL CORPS OFFICER, HELPED BY INDIAN MEDICAL ORDERLIES, TENDS WOUNDED TURKS.
Canadians followed a similar path, first fighting at Second Ypres in April 1915. The four-division Canadian Corps was formed in 1916 and acted as a spearhead formation during 1918. Indian troops (all volunteers) fought in France in 1914–15 as part of the Indian Corps, which included British troops; they were a timely reinforcement to the BEF. Subsequently, the Indian infantry were sent to the Middle East, with the cavalry remaining in France. In all, about 210,000 Canadians, 180,000 Australians, 47,000 New Zealanders and 25,000 Indians were killed or wounded on the Western Front.

Not all the men from the Empire that went to France were fighting soldiers. Chinese from Weihewei and Black and Coloured South African labourers did valuable and sometimes dangerous work behind the lines.

One of the strategic problems France faced before the war was that it had a smaller population than its rival Germany: 35 million to 65 million. In a war of mass armies, this put the French at an obvious disadvantage. In La Force Noire, the then Colonel Charles Mangin advocated drawing upon the population of France’s sub-Saharan colonies to boost its armies. This controversial suggestion earned Mangin notoriety long before the Nivelle offensive. In the event, France did make extensive use of colonial manpower on the Western Front, in Italy, Salonika and at Gallipoli, as well as in colonial campaigns in North Africa. A small such force also fought with the British in Palestine and Syria. A total of 150,000 soldiers from Algeria, 39,000 from Tunisia and 14,000 Moroccans served in the

European theatre, in addition to 135,000 Black Africans, 34,000 from Madagascar and 143,000 from Indochina.

Under French law, conscripts from mainland France could normally not serve outside its borders. Control of the Empire was therefore the responsibility of two forces: the Armée d’Afrique and La Coloniale. Both provided units to reinforce the Western Front. They included troops of European origin, such as the élite Coloniale Blanche and the white Chasseurs d’Afrique (African Light Cavalry) and Zouaves (white troops who wore North African-style uniforms). In a class of its own was the Foreign Legion. One of its members was a British colonel, disgraced in 1914 for attempting prematurely to surrender his battalion on the retreat from Mons. He joined the Legion, fought bravely, and was eventually reinstated in the

British Army. Black and North African units were often used as storm troops.

The French made far more use of its colonial troops in Europe than the British did of the Indian Army. Indeed, without their help, it is difficult to see the French home army could have coped with the stresses of war. I Colonial Division, fighting alongside the British on the Somme in 1916, made a favourable impression on their allies, as did the Moroccans operating on the flank of 2nd US Division during Second Marne. Probably most impressed of all were the Germans who had to face them across No Man’s Land – they paid them a backhanded compliment by being reluctant to take Black and Arab troops prisoner.
In a total war like the First World War, the maximum and effective use of manpower can make the difference between victory and defeat. The insatiable appetite of armies for young men meant that they were increasingly replaced in the jobs on the home front by older men – and by women. At one level, the novelty of women in the work place should not be exaggerated. For millions of working-class women across the developed world before the war, it was a case of work or starve, and so they were already present in the workforce, labouring in factories, as domestic servants or on farms. The option of staying decoratively at home was open only to the higher social classes.

But what was new after 1914 was the vast numbers of women who worked for the war effort in occupations previously the sole preserve of men, as was the redefinition of the boundaries of what was regarded as acceptable feminine behaviour. Social conservatives in many countries feared that the outcome would be destruction of traditional values and morals, with deep suspicion of the sexual liberation supposedly enjoyed by “new” women. A “League of Decency and Honour” founded in Britain to promote morality among women at home provoked an angry response from three women war workers, who wrote to criticize the “wicked insult to us girls”.

In Germany, the Hindenburg Programme, an attempt to mobilize the resources of the state, attempted to tap the reservoir of female workers, but it failed to achieve its ambitious goals. In Britain, by mid-1916, 750,000 women had replaced men in clerical and other jobs, with perhaps another 350,000 working in newly established war-related jobs such as in munitions factories. To take one example, female conductors became a common sight on London buses for the first time.

For many women, the double burden of carrying out traditional roles of wife and mother, while also working for a living, intensified during wartime. Often women, separated from
their husbands, had to take on unfamiliar roles as head of households. An all too familiar female experience was of long hours queuing for food, which was often in short supply, and repairing clothes that could not easily be replaced. In addition, there was the heavy psychological burden of dreading the arrival of bad news about a soldier or sailor husband, lover or son. In Britain, the arrival of a telegram could bring either joy – “I’m coming home on leave” – or despair – official notification of the death or wounding of a loved one. The heavy death toll left a generation of war widows and of young women whose potential husbands had perished in the war. While the demographic impact can be exaggerated, the perception of a cohort of “surplus” women was very real.

There was a close connection between home fronts and the battle fronts. For most major belligerents, there was a regular mail service and military morale could be affected by news from home. In 1918, the willingness of German soldiers to fight was undermined by news of the sufferings of their womenfolk and children, hit by the double blows of the Allied “starvation blockade” and the near collapse of food distribution at home.

The effective mobilization of women was one factor, and not an insignificant one, in the eventual Allied victory.

Social advances

The extent to which women made social gains as a result of the Great War is controversial. In France, many women worked during the war in traditionally male jobs, but were still not allowed to vote, only being enfranchised in 1944. Britain gave the vote to women in 1918 and the United States did so 1920, but this was not purely a response to wartime developments. In both cases, there had been a long running campaign for female suffrage that predated the war. Generally, demobilization returned men to the civilian workforce and women lost their jobs. If women had advanced two steps during the war, they retreated one afterwards; but in the end they had still advanced a step.
War stimulates literary creativity, and the 1914–18 conflict produced some of the most famous war literature in history. German veteran Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 novel All Quiet on the Western Front, an expression of the supposed futility of the war, was a sensation. Translated into English, it helped to stimulate what has been termed “the great war books boom”, an explosion of writings about the war that continued well into the 1930s. The cinema experienced a similar phenomenon. The Hollywood film of All Quiet (1930) evoked great sympathy for the former enemy in the English-speaking world. Some books and films, like the French director Jean Renoir’s 1937 film La Grande Illusion, the American e.e. cummings’s The Enormous Room (1922) and the English writer Siegfried Sassoon’s semi-autobiographical “George Sherston” trilogy of novels showed disenchantment with the war. But it would be a mistake to see all the works of the time in this light. R. C. Sherriff, the author of the most famous British war play, Journey’s End (1928), remained proud of his regiment, the East Surreys, to the end of his life, and the play displays ambiguous attitudes to the war. However, the producer of the initial production was a pacifist and thus Journey’s End came across as an anti-war statement. Ex-German stormtrooper Ernst Junger’s memoir Storm of Steel (1929) was a celebration of combat, as was Englishman A. O. Pollard’s now almost completely forgotten memoir Fire-Eater (1932), his account of winning the Victoria Cross.

To some extent, the great war books boom was a reaction against the patriotic propaganda that had appeared during the conflict, produced by journalists and even some established writers, such as Rudyard Kipling and Anatole France. To be sure, there had been other writers who went against the grain while the war was going on: Henri Barbusse’s Under Fire (1916) was an unflinching portrait of a French infantry squad in battle. Wilfred Owen, perhaps the greatest of British war poets, wrote of “the pity of war”, although his work only became widely known once it was over (Owen himself was killed in 1918). Today, popular views of the First World War in Britain are heavily influenced by the poetry of Owen and a handful of others such as Sassoon, although they were not in any way representative of the average soldier, either in terms of their experiences or their attitudes to the war.

The First World War continues to be a rich seam of inspiration for writers and film makers. Recent French treatments of the subject include the film A Very Long Engagement (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2004). Peter Weir’s 1981 film Gallipoli
was an assertion of Australian nationalism, albeit one that was in many ways historically inaccurate. The British novelist Pat Barker achieved huge success in the 1990s with her *Regeneration* trilogy, which included Owen and Sassoon as characters. More recently, the War and its aftermath formed the backdrop for the hugely successful British costume drama *Downton Abbey*. The centenary of the war will undoubtedly stimulate writers and film-makers afresh.

**Oh! What a Lovely War**

The musical *Oh! What a Lovely War* is one of the most powerful pieces of anti-war drama ever produced. First put on by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in 1963, it depicts the events of the First World War as an Edwardian pierrot show. A savage attack on British generalship in the war, it was filmed in 1969 and remains hugely influential. However, like many literary portrayals of the war, it is historically highly inaccurate. It tells us more about the Cold War mentalities of the early 1960s than those of the Great War, but all too often it is treated as sober history.

*BELOW:* The stark poster design for Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli*.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM WAS THAT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR, GERMANY SUCCEEDED IN SEIZING LARGE TRACTS OF ENEMY LAND. THE CAPTURED TERRITORY INCLUDED MOST OF BELGIUM, A SMALL BUT HIGHLY INDUSTRIALIZED STATE; SOME ECONOMICALLY IMPORTANT AREAS OF EASTERN FRANCE; AND, IN 1915, MUCH OF POLAND. ONE POSSIBLE STRATEGY WOULD HAVE BEEN TO USE THESE AS BARGAINING CHIPS AT A PEACE CONFERENCE, BUT HAVING CONQUERED THIS GROUND, THE GERMANS WERE LOATH TO GIVE IT UP. THE SECRET 1914 “SEPTEMBER PROGRAMME” DECLARED THAT THE WAR WAS BEING FUGHT FOR THE

IN FLANDERS
FIELDS

“In Flanders Fields”, a poem written in 1915 by a Canadian medical officer, John McCrae, is still popular in Britain and is regarded by many as a statement of pacifism. In reality, the second verse argues that the dead buried on the battlefields would be betrayed by a compromise peace.

Take up our quarrel with the foe...
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Such sentiments, also heard in France, Germany and other belligerent states, help to explain why a compromise peace was never likely to happen.
“security of the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time”. Not until 1917 did Berlin begin to show some flexibility, and then it was a case of too little, too late.

So various peace efforts, some more serious than others, all failed. In December 1916, the German “Peace Note” was couched in confrontational language, which the Allies rejected. In the same month, the President of the still-neutral United States, Woodrow Wilson, tried to move things along by asking the belligerents to give their war aims. The Allies relied with far-reaching proposals that the Central Powers would never accept. In January 1918, Wilson, by now leader of a belligerent nation, issued his famous Fourteen Points. This was a utopian programme for a peace settlement, but not until military defeat was inevitable did the German government accept it, long after the train had left the station.

Home front morale, with the exception of Russia, proved remarkably resilient. This meant that heavy casualties made a compromise peace less rather than more likely. Having sacrificed so much, to settle for anything other than out-and-out victory became unthinkable, a betrayal of the dead. The French would not stop until they had, at a minimum, recovered the occupied territory lost in 1914. The British sought security by freeing Belgium and destroying “Prussian militarism”. In Germany, the civil population was told that it was fighting a defensive war and, until late in 1918, lived on a diet of victory. Thus, when the truth that Germany was on the verge of military defeat suddenly became clear, the disillusionment and collapse of morale that ensued was catastrophic. Total war left little room for a compromise peace.
The Battle of the Somme was a product of coalition warfare, an offensive fought in the sector where the boundary between the British and French forces lay. Haig’s aims at the beginning of the battle were mixed. While he hoped to break through the German lines and reopen mobile warfare, he recognized that an attritional, “wearing-out battle” might be all his army could achieve.

By the end of 1 July 1916 – the first day of the Battle of the Somme – 57,470 men of the BEF had become casualties, and 19,240 were killed. In the northern part of the battlefront, the British had taken very little ground. However, in their part of the battlefield the French army had taken comparatively light casualties in making significant gains. Alongside them, the British forces in the south had also done rather well, taking all of their objectives, albeit at a very high cost in lives. What had gone wrong in the north?

For the seven days before 1 July, Allied guns had pounded the German positions. In retrospect, the British guns were given too many targets. Massed on a short length of front, artillery could be very effective. Spread out along many miles and given multiple targets, the effect was dissipated. This mistake reflected a further problem in the British plan. Haig sought a breakthrough battle, while Rawlinson, Fourth Army commander and Haig’s principal lieutenant on 1 July, wanted to fight a limited bite-and-hold affair. The eventual compromise was neither one thing nor another. To be added to this was the inexperience of the British soldiers – mainly wartime volunteers – and the fact that British war industries were still developing. In both respects, the French were ahead. While the British had only one heavy gun for every 52 m (57 yds) of trench, the French had one to every 18 m (20 yds).

North of the Albert-Bapaume road, there was a depressingly familiar story of troops suffering high casualties for little gain. 1st Newfoundland Regiment suffered losses of nearly 700 men at Beaumont-Hamel. In Sausage Valley, the 103rd (Tyneside Irish) Brigade was reduced to a mere 50 men. There were some exceptions. Near Thiepval, 36th (Ulster) Division advanced deep into German lines, only to be driven back. South of the road, the British did much better. The German positions were weaker, and the British benefited from the proximity of their Allies. On XIII Corps front, the German defences crumbled and, arguably, Rawlinson might have exploited this success to produce a victory of sorts out of defeat. For all that, on 1 July 1916 the BEF landed a heavy blow on the German army.
which suffered greatly from British artillery fire and was dangerously stretched. Fayolle’s French Sixth Army did very well on 1 July, capturing all of their objectives and taking 4,000 prisoners. I Colonial Corps and XXXV Corps, positioned south of the Somme, deployed 84 heavy batteries; the Germans had only eight. Not surprisingly, Fayolle was frustrated by the inability of the British to push on. The French success on 1 July 1916 poses a fascinating allohistorical: what if, as originally was planned, the French Army had taken the lead in the campaign, with the inexperienced BEF able to learn the ropes under relatively favourable conditions?

After 1 July, Haig switched the British main effort to the south of the main road, while the French continued to fight on the southern flank. Rawlinson launched a well-conducted limited attack on 14 July on Bazentin Ridge which briefly opened the possibility of a major advance. Otherwise, in the British sector, the months of July and August were marked by bloody and laborious struggles to wrest ground from determined defenders in places like Delville Wood, High Wood and Pozieres, the latter being captured by the Australians on 23 July. The Germans, clinging to a doctrine of refusing to countenance the abandonment of territory, counter-attacked vigorously. Under increasing pressure on the Somme, by the end of July the Germans had been forced to go onto the defensive at Verdun.

Co-ordination between the BEF and the French Army was difficult, and often they appeared to be fighting parallel battles rather than making a combined effort. The French continued to push ahead, nearing Péronne on 2 July. A few days later, Joffre contemplated moving cavalry forward. But lacking sufficient reserves, and with the British failing to keep up and the German defenders recovering their balance, the chances of the French army breaking though diminished. The French continued to advance; for instance on 3 September Sixth Army captured 2,000 prisoners. Joffre pressured Haig to conduct another major offensive on a wide front, believing that the numerous small efforts being made by the BEF were inefficient and costly. By mid-September, the British were ready, and Haig made his second attempt at a break-through on the Somme.
For his second “Big Push” on the Somme, on 15 September 1916, Haig was able to deploy 32 tanks, a new and secret weapon, although only 24 took part in the action on that day. Their impact was modest, although they made a big impression on the German troops who were confronted by them. Assisted by tanks, 41st Division captured the village of Flers. Many other British divisions also did well, as did the Canadians and New Zealanders. In all, the line advanced about 2.5 km (1.5 miles). By the standards of trench warfare, this was creditable enough, but the Battle of Flers-Courcelette fell a long way short of a breakthrough.

Ten days later, at Morval, a more limited attack on a narrow front did achieve considerable success. Simultaneously, the French army made important gains in the nearby Rancourt sector. On the following day, 26 September, the fortress of Thiepval, which was supposed to have fallen on 1 July, was captured by 18th Division in a well-planned and executed attack. These two attacks, in which...
British troops had demonstrated that they were absorbing the hard-won tactical lessons of the Somme, pointing the way towards a more successful way of fighting. Unfortunately, Haig misread the message of these limited battles, believing that German resistance was crumbling, and hence he ordered ambitious attacks rather than further bite and hold battles. Subsequent offensives, such as the battle for the high ground around Le Transloy in October, demonstrated that Haig’s optimism was misplaced. Although he can be criticized for this, in truth Haig had no alternative but to continue the battle as he was under pressure from Joffre. As autumn arrived the weather began to deteriorate, with sticky Somme mud adding to the troops’ woes.

During this time, the French continued to attack on the Somme, committing Micheler’s Tenth Army to the fighting in September. However, co-operation with the BEF, already poor during Flers-Courcelette, broke down. In later offensives the French, like the British, tended to neglect large-scale well co-ordinated battles in favour of smaller, disjointed actions. The French suffered heavily in engagements such as those at Saillly-Saillisel, St Pierre-Vaast, and in the Rancourt sector. “On the 16th, 18th, 21st and 22nd of October,” Joffre candidly admitted in his memoirs, “a series of small attacks followed one another without great results.” One problem was that that the “fragmentary … attacks” of the French played into the hands of the Germans. Under the new
102
Front lines
Morning 1st July
Evening 1st July
26 September
18 November
British advances
French advances
1 July–18 November 1916

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME:
The First World War
team of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who replaced Falkenhayn at the end of August, new tactics had been introduced. Gone were rigid trench lines. Now German positions had depth, with machine guns in shell-holes to break up enemy attacks. The British, too, had started to experience problems in dealing with these new defensive methods.

The final phase of the Somme returned the focus of the action to the northern extremity of the battlefield, which had seen relatively little action since the early stages of the offensive. On 13 November, General Sir Hubert Gough, commander of British Fifth Army, launched the Battle of the Ancre. Gough applied many of the lessons of the previous months. His plan was reasonably limited; there was a sufficient number of guns, including 282 heavies; the field guns fired a “creeping barrage”, a relatively flexible curtain of shells that moved ahead of the infantry (the failure to use such methods on 1 July had been a contributory factor to the British setbacks); and staff work showed a distinct improvement over the earlier months of the battle. While not completely successful, the Fifth Army took most of its objectives, including Beaumont-Hamel and Beaucourt villages.

Losses on the Somme were shockingly high. The British suffered 420,000; the French 200,000. German losses were probably in the region of 450,000 to 600,000. The battle is customarily portrayed as a British defeat. It was not. While not a victory in the conventional sense of the word, the attrition was in favour of the Allies, and the BEF’s bloody apprenticeship meant that it ended the year as a more effective army than it had been at the beginning. The German High Command was well aware of the serious consequences of the Somme; it had discounted the British army, but now realized that it was a major force that stacked the odds against a German victory on land. Instead, 1917 was to see an attempt to use the U-boat fleet to starve Britain out of the war. This failed, and served to bring the USA into the war instead.

British generalship and tactics were often poor on the Somme, but the overall result was a success for Allied arms.
Haig's secret 1 August report to Sir William Robertson

Haig's secret 1 August report to Sir William Robertson on the progress of the Somme battle during July, including transcripts of messages from General Fritz von Below, commander of the German Second Army.

ITEM 14

Haig's secret 1 August report to
Sir William Robertson

The First World War – The Exhibits
The enemy still fights strongly, but evidence is not wanting that this is due rather to a realisation of the danger of defeat than to confidence in his power to win; and the conviction is apparent in the British Army, and, I believe, in all the Allied armies, that the enemy is already partially beaten and that all that is now required is unrelenting effort to turn the scale finally. In this connection the attached copy (marked B) of a captured document giving "Orders of the Day" issued by a highly-placed German commander, shows how seriously the KRIegie operations are regarded by the Germans. Moreover, the great moral and material effects on the enemy's troops of our artillery fire and of the vigour and determination of our attacks are fully established by other documents captured, as well as by the statements of prisoners, both officers and men.

2. From the above, the principle on which we should continue to act is clear. Under no circumstances would it be possible to relax our efforts in this battle without prejudicing, probably fatally, the offensive of our Allies and their hopes of victory. We must, and we can, maintain our offensive, and it is essential that we should prove to our Allies, to our enemies, and to neutral Powers, our ability and our determination to do so.

Our losses in the last month's very heavy fighting - totalling to about 150,000 more than they would have been if we had not attacked - cannot be regarded as unduly heavy, or as sufficient to justify any anxiety as to our ability to continue the offensive. Both the enemy and our Allies have borne far heavier losses than this without being turned from their purpose; and, moreover, our ranks have been filled up again and our troops are still in excellent heart.

It is my intention -

(a) To maintain a steady, methodical pressure, giving the enemy no rest and no respite from anxiety;

(b) To push my attack strongly whenever and wherever the state of my preparations and the general situation make success sufficiently probable to justify me in doing so, but not otherwise;

(c) To ensure against counter-attack each advantage gained and prepare thoroughly for each fresh advance.

Proceeding thus I expect to be able to maintain the offensive well into the autumn and to inflict on the enemy material and moral losses which will amply compensate us for our own losses.

It would not be justifiable to calculate on the enemy's resistance being completely broken by these means without another campaign next year. But even if another campaign prove to be necessary, the enemy will certainly enter on the coming winter with little hope left of being able to continue his resistance successfully through next spring and summer, and I am confident that it will prove beyond his power to do so provided the Allies maintain their determination to fight on together, vigorously, to a successful conclusion.

Sir D. Haig, General, Commanding-In-Chief, British Armies in France.
NOTE

ON

THE RESULTS OF THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME
DURING THE MONTH OF JULY.

1. **TROOPS EMPLOYED**.

   The number of troops maintained by the Germans on the Western front has varied between 119 and 123 divisions during the past six months. At present it stands at 120½.

   At the commencement of the battle 8 of these divisions held the sector of the line attacked with 5 divisions in close reserve at CAMBRAI and ST. QUENTIN.

   Up to the 31st July this number had increased to a total of 30 divisions employed by the Germans to resist the attack. The extra divisions have had to be drawn from every part of the Western front.

   This figure of 30 divisions employed during one month must be compared with the total number of divisions (viz. 80¾) used by the Germans in the five months of the attack on VERDUN from February up to July.

   It will be noted that in one month Germany has had to put in nearly as many divisions to resist our offensive as she employed herself during five months in her own effort to take VERDUN.

   A diagram is attached showing the fluctuation in strength of the Germans along the whole of the Western front during July. It will be observed that the numbers of men per yard used by the enemy for the defense of the SOMME front is now greater than that employed at the commencement of the month on the VERDUN front, when the German attack was at its fiercest.

   Six German divisions which had already fought and suffered very severely in the VERDUN area, and had been withdrawn to rest and recover, had to be again employed in the SOMME battle. Allowing for this, 65½ divisions of the total German force of 180½ divisions on the Western front (i.e., approximately 63½%) have been engaged, and have undoubtedly suffered severely in one or other of these great battles.

   Assuming the wastage in divisions to continue at the same rate for another six weeks, then, theoretically, every German division on the Western front will have been employed, and the enemy’s power of resistance on the Western front will have been weakened accordingly.

2. **CASUALTIES**.

   The following data are available:

   (a) Between the 1st and 27th July, not less than 168 hospital trains were observed to move from Belgium to Germany. Allowing for unobserved hours, this represents at least 20,000 daily wounded men.

   (b) The total number of prisoners taken by the Allies now amounts to 26,000.

   (c) All evidence points to an exceptionally large number of German dead.
While any estimate must be largely speculative, it is not unlikely to approximate the total German casualties at certainly not less than 150,000.

3. **German Resources in Men.**

Accurate figures are not possible. It is, however, established that the whole of the 1916 Class, and a large proportion of the 1917 Class are already at the front. To meet the drain of men up to the end of the year, Germany can only rely on:

- The remainder of the 1917 Class, probably = 200,000 men
- Returned wounded, probably = 100,000 men
- **Total:** 300,000 men

The 1917 Class have undergone training for about four months. It is estimated that the 1918 Class will not be ready to take the field before January, 1918.

The figure of 300,000 has to be distributed between the Eastern and Western fronts. The number of men in a division is 10,000, and there are 30 divisions. Thus, 300,000 will be available for the Western front.

Under ordinary conditions on the Western front, i.e., when no battle is in progress, the casualties per month in a division of the German army probably amounts to about 300 per month, or a total of 97,000 for six weeks for the 30 divisions on the Western front not employed in the Somme battle.

Assuming that the battle on the Somme is continued for another 6 weeks with the same intensity as during the past month, the German casualties in

```
this battle alone for these extra six weeks will presumably not be less than 60,000. Adding this to the 67,000 for the remainder of the divisions during the six weeks, it will be seen that by the middle of September the total available resources in trained men of Germany for the Western front for the remainder of the year will have been exceeded by 27,000.
```

4. **Co-operation with Operations on Other Fronts.**

Both in 1914 and 1915, Germany, owing to her central position, was enabled to move troops from one front to the other, either to meet pressure exerted by the Allies, or herself to exert pressure on one or other front.

During the last month, the successes of the Russians against the Austrians would have given the Germans every reason to reinforce the Eastern front by large bodies of troops drawn from the Western front, if it had not been for the pressure exerted by the battle of the Somme.

The 19 divisions which have been thrown into the Somme battle to bring the 11 already there up to the 30 who are now opposing us, would obviously have been available to reinforce the Eastern front. With reinforcements up to this amount, it is more than probable that the Russian offensive would have been checked at its inception.

5. **Strength of the Allies at Present.**

At the present moment, Germany has on the Somme front an equivalent of 30
item 14 (cont'd)

The allies on the same front have massed considerably superior forces in men and guns, and they can maintain their superiority.

**Summary.**

The effect of the offensive on Germany may, therefore, be summed up as follows:-

(a) Germany has had to draw troops from the whole extent of her Western front to meet the threat.

(b) She has been forced to employ defensively a strength in men per yard exceeding that which she was able to employ for the offensive operations on the Verdun front.

(c) In spite of such reinforcements it is proved possible for the Allies to maintain a superiority of numbers and of guns in the battle.

(d) Owing to the battle, Germany has been unable to move troops to meet the Russian offensive in the East. Had she been able to move these troops, which calculations show would amount to 19 divisions, it is more than probable that the Russian offensive would have been able to make progress.

(e) The German offensive on the Verdun front appears to have been definitely postponed, if not entirely abandoned.

(f) Germany has suffered losses far in excess of the proportion of drafts which she can make available for this front.

(g) If the battle is maintained for another 5 weeks it appears probable that the German losses will be more than she will be able to make good by the end of the year.
4th Battalion, the Tank Corps war diary

A handwritten official war diary of 4th Battalion, the Tank Corps, describing the unit’s build-up to the 15 September attack, then, tank-by-tank, D Company’s actions and casualties.
German artillery spotter’s panorama

A panoramic photograph of the Ypres battlefield, from the German perspective, used by German artillery.
Excerpts from the diary of Major Rudolf Lange, the commander of 2nd Battalion, 237 Reserve Infantry Regiment, during the Third Battle of Ypres.
Pétain’s letter about Nivelle

On 26 June 1917 General Pétain sent this letter to the minister of War that he could not employ Nivelle.

**TRANSLATION**

*Confidential*

I have the honour to inform you that General Nivelle, on returning from leave, has arrived at his general quarters in Senlis.

On the one hand, I do not have any special mission to give General Nivelle at present, and on the other hand I do not foresee any holiday for the commandant of the Group of armies or army in the near future.

In these conditions, I am obliged to provisionally remit General Nivelle to your disposal.

[signature] Pétain
A German poster celebrating the success of the 1918 spring offensive. Boasting of prisoners and equipment captured and ground gained.
The appointment of Nivelle

By the end of November 1916, activity died down on the Western Front, and the generals prepared to renew the offensive in the New Year. Haig and Joffre consulted on plans but in mid-December Joffre, the man who had sacked so many generals, was himself dismissed. He was still popular, so his sacking was dressed up as a promotion to strategic adviser to the government and he was elevated to Marshal of France. But in reality Joffre’s power was at an end, and he was reduced to a ceremonial role for the rest of the war. The enormous moral capital Joffre had amassed through his steady, calm generalship in 1914 had been eroded by the huge casualties and the continuing deadlock. Despite the sanguinary efforts of 1915, despite Verdun, despite the Somme, the invading Germans were still firmly camped on French soil, at their closest only 65 km (40 miles) from Paris. The politicians had had enough. It was time for a change.

Change took the form of General Robert Nivelle who was appointed as de facto French Commander-in-Chief on the Western Front. From the beginning he wielded a new broom. Articulate and persuasive in French and English (his mother was British), Nivelle had a very different personal style from Joffre.

Initially, Haig, who had had a sometimes turbulent relationship with Joffre, thought Nivelle “a most straightforward and soldierly man”. In the context of French military politics, where Catholic piety was a handicap, Nivelle had good credentials as a Protestant. Above all, he promised success. Nivelle had come to prominence as a result of his successes at Verdun, which had been based on the techniques of the set-piece attack. Massed artillery fire covered the advance of the infantry, who were set limited objectives. This had worked well in small-scale actions, but now he persuaded his superiors that the same methods could be used to achieve the elusive breakthrough on the Western Front which would reopen mobile warfare and lead to a decisive victory. At his first meeting with Haig, Nivelle made it clear that he intended to disregard existing plans. Haig noted in his diary that the new French commander was “confident of breaking through the Enemy’s front now that the Enemy’s morale is weakened”. The key was for the attack to achieve surprise “and go through in 24 hours”.

Nivelle found a key supporter in London as well as in Paris. David Lloyd George, who had become Prime Minister in December 1916, was a gunner by background. His career included service in North Africa, China and Indochina and was sound rather than distinguished. By 1914 Nivelle was a colonel. His skilfully handling of artillery in the initial campaigns brought him promotion to general in October 1914, and his performance at Verdun led to his becoming Commander-in-Chief of the French armies at the end of 1916. The failure of the April 1917 offensive to which he gave his name (see pages 84–85) led to his dismissal and slide into obscurity.
distrusted Haig and Robertson and was opposed to a fresh British offensive on the Western Front. As the leader of a coalition government, however, he was too weak politically to move against the senior generals. He fell for Nivelle’s eloquence, and so decided to push for the BEF to be placed directly under the French command: this would marginalize Haig and effectively reduce him to an administrative role. The prospect of getting a firmer grip on their ally appealed to some senior French commanders, and Lloyd George conspired with Nivelle and others to present Haig with a fait accompli. This was duly delivered at a meeting at Calais on 26 February, ostensibly called to discuss transportation. Haig and Robertson were predictably furious that their own prime minister wanted to hand the BEF over to foreign generals. As one of the participants at the conference, the British liaison officer Brigadier General Edward Spiers (known after the war as Spears), later wrote, “Seldom in history can Englishmen have been asked to subscribe to such abject conditions … such as might be imposed on a vassal state.”

Haig and Robertson fought back, and the end result was an uneasy compromise. Haig remained in operational control of the BEF but was placed under Nivelle’s command for the forthcoming operation. Crucially, the British Commander-in-Chief was given the right of appeal to London if he objected to Nivelle’s orders. This was a long way short of what Lloyd George and Nivelle had wanted, and came at a high price. The Calais plot destroyed what remained of the trust between Lloyd George and the two most important generals in the British army. Unity of command was certainly desirable, but a shotgun marriage was not the sensible way to achieve it. Haig did not know how deeply Nivelle had been involved in the conspiracy, and he remained correct in his dealings with him. The French change of command had avoided a major breach between the Allies, but had precipitated the worst clash between the British military and government of the entire war.

In February and March 1917, the German army abandoned the positions they had defended so tenaciously on the Somme in 1916. The German troops fell back to a new, immensely strong fortified defensive system. Work on this position, called by the British “the Hindenburg Line”, had begun in the middle of the Somme offensive. The retiring Germans carried out a scorched-earth policy, damaging towns such as Bapaume and Péronne. The retreat was a sensible move by the Germans, and badly disrupted Nivelle’s offensive plans.
THE BATTLE OF ARRAS
Allied Offensive

The 9 April 1917 was the most successful day that the BEF had enjoyed since the beginning of trench warfare. The BEF committed to battle as the first stage of an Anglo-French operation, with the French Nivelle Offensive beginning on 16 April (see pages 120-121). After a heavy artillery bombardment, 14 British and Canadian divisions of General Sir Edmund Allenby’s Third Army attacked on a 23,000-m (25,000-yd) front near Arras. For an army that on the Somme had become used to gains that were meagre at best, the results of the day’s fighting were hugely encouraging. The Canadian Corps—which was commanded by a British officer, General Sir Julian Byng and included a number of British troops—captured the daunting high ground of Vimy Ridge, while further south British forces made some important gains. The 4th and 9th (Scottish) Divisions of XVII Corps pushed 5.5 km (3.5 miles) into the German positions and dug in on the German Third Line. This was the longest single advance achieved by a British formation under conditions of trench warfare. VI Corps pushed forward about 3.25 km (2 miles); Battery Valley, complete with German artillery, fell to 12th and 15th (Scottish) Divisions. The village of Neuville-Vitasse fell as VII Corps advanced 1,800 m (2,000 yds). Not surprisingly, on the afternoon of 9 April, Haig wrote to King George V on a note of triumph.

The first day of Arras was a successful example of a limited battle founded on careful planning and preparation. Twelve tunnels were dug under Vimy Ridge which allowed troops to move up to the front line safe from artillery fire. Light railways brought supplies and ammunition to the front line, and troops trained in the new tactics that had emerged from the Somme, were thoroughly rehearsed in the roles they were to play on 9 April. The artillery preparation lasted for five days—Allenby had wanted a shorter bombardment, but Haig overruled him—and was thorough and effective. The effectiveness of much of the German artillery was sharply reduced by British fire, with many German gunners killed or forced to take shelter. At Vimy Ridge, the artillery fire plan was masterminded by a British gunner, Lieutenant Colonel Alan Brooke, who was to rise to become Churchill’s principal military adviser during the Second World War.

The seizure of Vimy Ridge was a particularly impressive operation, where the infantry-artillery combination was highly successful, and four Victoria Crosses were awarded. Vimy Ridge has since become a symbol of the birth of Canadian nationhood, and a beautiful memorial was inaugurated in 1936. It is sometimes said that the Canadians succeeded in capturing Vimy Ridge where the British had failed. This is inaccurate; since the British had taken over
The Battle of Arras

the sector, they had mounted no major operation against the Ridge. Despite the fact that the German defence-in-depth tactics did not work well here – the German commanders made mistakes and the terrain did not lend itself to these methods – in many places the Germans fought very effectively. The Canadian Corps emerged from Vimy with its reputation as an elite formation greatly enhanced.

The first day of the battle demonstrated that the BEF had matured greatly since July 1916, but it was unable to capitalize on its success. The weather was poor, and Allenby did not receive reconnaissance reports from Royal Flying Corps (RFC) aircraft. He wrongly believed that Third Army was facing a retreating enemy and ordered that “risks must be taken freely”. In reality, German reserves were arriving on the battlefield as the Allied advance slowed down. The infantry were moving out of range of the field artillery, which was struggling to get forward over ground which had been cratered in the initial attack. This starkly revealed the problem of artillery-driven limited offensives – it was very difficult to maintain operational tempo. The battle congealed, and although bloody actions continued for a month – the Australians had particularly gruelling fights in two actions at Bullecourt in April and May, and a general attack on 23 April gained over 2km (more than a mile) – Edmund Allenby’s optimism was proved to be chimerical.

Arras was the product of coalition politics, a battle that Haig never wanted to fight. Nevertheless, it demonstrated that the BEF was now capable of conducting an effective limited battle and that the German line could be broken, knowledge which was to influence Haig and GHQ in their planning for Third Ypres later in 1917 (see pages 126-127). Arras was the shortest but most intense of the BEF’s major offensives under Haig. The daily loss rate of 4,076 was higher than that at the Somme or Passchendaele. In all, 150,000 of the BEF’s soldiers became casualties, along with over 100,000 Germans.

Edmund Henry Hynman Allenby (1861–1936)

General Allenby was Haig’s exact contemporary. Both were cavalrymen, and while there was never an open breach, the two never worked together entirely easily. After Arras, to his disgust, Allenby was sent to command the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. Ironically, the move away from trench stalemate to conditions of open warfare was the making of him. In 1917 and 1918, Allenby fought a series of successful battles against the Turks in Palestine, and today his popular reputation stands in stark contrast to that of Haig.
THE NIVELLE OFFENSIVE

Build up to a mutiny

The battle launched on the Aisne on 16 April 1917 is known to history as “the Nivelle Offensive”. It is a monument to one man’s folly. When he was briefed on Nivelle’s plans, General Lyautey, a veteran of French colonial conflicts who was serving as Minister of War, thought them ridiculous. Likewise, Nivelle’s principal subordinates expressed reservations. Nivelle planned to smash through the enemy front by heavy artillery fire followed by infantry attacks, which he believed would lead to a decisive defeat of the Germans. Moreover, he asserted that, unlike battles of the past, this one would be time limited. Nivelle promised that if, by some mischance, the troops did not break through, he would call off the battle rather than allow it to become a lengthy attritional struggle.

The initial objective of the offensive was the ridge of the Chemin des Dames in Champagne, an area that was no stranger to warfare. It was a tough prospect for the attackers: the Germans had taken maximum advantage of the high ground and strengthened it to create an immensely strong belt of trenches and strong-points designed according to the principles of elastic defence. To add to the problems of the French army, the element of surprise was soon lost. Nivelle himself was unbelievably indiscreet, and before long rumours of the offensive were being reported in the French press, which was assiduously read by the Germans. In any case, a set of preliminary “Instructions” for the attack fell into German hands as early as 15 February. All this merely confirmed the build up they could see with their own eyes. The Germans reinforced the threatened sector, the number of divisions there rising from 18 divisions in January to 42 in March.

Micheler’s Reserve Army Group, (Fifth, Sixth and Tenth Armies under Mazel, Mangin and Duchêne respectively) was entrusted with the main attack, with Pétain’s Central Army Group playing a secondary role. Originally, Franchet d’Espérey’s Northern Army Group was to have attacked as well, but the planned German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in February-March 1917 had made this plan redundant. The British, of course, were to attack at Arras a week earlier. Morale among the troops was generally

ABOVE: CRAONNE, THE SCENE OF ONE OF NAPOLEON’S VICTORIES IN 1814, ALSO WITNESSED HEAVY FIGHTING IN THE NIVELLE OFFENSIVE 103 YEARS LATER.

“We demand peace, peace”

FRENCH SOLDIER, JUNE 1917

Pushing the Mutineers

Of the tens of thousands of poilus affected by the mutinies following the Nivelle Offensive, only 554 were condemned to death. Of these, most were not executed. Historians’ estimates of men actually shot range from around 40 to 62 (in all about 600 men were executed during the entire war for all offences). Pétain’s strategy was to mix reforms of the soldiers’ conditions with making examples of individuals to reassert the authority of the army. The latter policy, he later wrote, “a deterrent effect”.

120
The Nivelle Offensive

high, but curiously, as the date of the attack neared, Nivelle’s confidence began to sag, and thanks to a change of government, his political support waned.

On 16 April, the attack began. For days beforehand the French guns pounded the German defences. The French artillery observers were hampered by poor weather and enemy strength in the air; this was the period known to the British pilots as “Bloody April”. The resulting bombardment was heavy – Michelet’s artillery fired 11 million shells – but inaccurate and ineffective. Since Nivelle’s method depended heavily on artillery blasting a way for the infantry through the German positions, this was a disastrous start to the attack. The French infantry struggled through the in-depth defences, finding wire uncut, machine-gun posts untouched, and the German reserves virtually unscathed. Even so, some of the French infantry did well. By 20 April, part of Sixth Army had pushed forward about 6.5 km (4 miles) and taken 5,300 prisoners. By the end of the battle, Nivelle’s troops had taken 29,000 enemy prisoners and had carved out a salient 6.5 km (4 miles deep) and 26 km (16 miles) wide. Judged by the standards of 1917, this was a limited success. But the huge French losses – 134,000 casualties of which 30,000 were fatalities – incurred in a few days and the failure of Nivelle’s ambitious plans to come even remotely close to achievement meant the attack was written off as a ghastly failure, and the Chemin des Dames gained the sinister reputation it holds in France to this day.

The morale and cohesion of the French army was badly shaken. Swathes of divisions were affected by “collective indiscipline”, that is, by mutiny, which broke out almost as soon as the Nivelle Offensive began. Some acts of defiance were relatively minor, such as the shouting of slogans or smashing of windows. Others threatened the very disciplinary fabric of the French army. Troops refused to obey orders to return to the trenches and gathered in crowds to air their grievances and even express revolutionary sentiments. The failure of the Nivelle offensive was the trigger for the mutinies, but the causes were deeper, reaching back to the huge losses since 1914, to the soldiers’ discontent with their conditions, and their lack of faith in their officers. The mutinies were at their worst in June, but over the next few months General Philippe Pétain, who replaced Nivelle, rebuilt the army’s fragile cohesion. Fortunately for the Allies, the Germans did not take advantage of the French army’s most traumatic period of the war.

Healing the Army

On being appointed Commander-in-Chief on 17 May, Pétain energetically addressed the bread-and-butter issues that underlay the soldiers’ grievances. He introduced more frequent leave, better food and improved welfare facilities. He also mounted several small-scale operations, carefully planned and backed by massed artillery, to demonstrate that battlefield success was possible. Pétain, however, made it clear that his strategy had changed, announcing that he intended to “wait for the Americans and the tanks”. The French Army would no longer bear the principal burden of the war on the Western Front.

On being appointed Commander-in-Chief on 17 May, Pétain energetically addressed the bread-and-butter issues that underlay the soldiers’ grievances. He introduced more frequent leave, better food and improved welfare facilities. He also mounted several small-scale operations, carefully planned and backed by massed artillery, to demonstrate that battlefield success was possible. Pétain, however, made it clear that his strategy had changed, announcing that he intended to “wait for the Americans and the tanks”. The French Army would no longer bear the principal burden of the war on the Western Front.

ABOVE LEFT: Although the French army’s morale was in a delicate state after the Nivelle Offensive, nevertheless, here the 313 Infantry move up to the trenches on 7 June 1917.

LEFT: Scenes of carnage at Craonne, after the French attack of 16 April 1917.

ABOVE: King George V decorates General Philippe Pétain with the Order of the Bath on 12 July 1917.

RIGHT: A French F1 hand grenade.
Ever since he became Commander-in-Chief, Douglas Haig had wanted to fight a major battle in the Ypres area. Unlike on the Somme, here there were important strategic objectives. A relatively short advance would threaten the major German communications centre at Roulers. This would open the enticing prospect of reducing the threat to the Channel ports, on which the BEF depended for supplies. It also would allow the BEF to threaten the German-held Belgian coast. The Admiralty were extremely worried about the risk posed by German U-Boats and surface warships. While capturing the ports such as Ostend would not eliminate the German naval threat, it would certainly help to reduce it.

The first stage of the offensive was an attack against Messines Ridge. This key position had been lost to the Germans in 1914, and General Sir Herbert Plumer’s Second Army was given the task of winning it back. He formed an effective team with General Sir “Tim” Harington, his Chief of Staff, who described Plumer’s methods as being underpinned by three Ts: “Trust, Training and Thoroughness”. Plumer was popular with his men, who gave him the nickname “Daddy”. His methodical approach and his insistence on extensive training for operations were very evident in his preparations for Messines. For months, a series of mines had been dug under Messines Ridge. Each consisted of a tunnel, laboriously bored under No Man’s Land by specialized mining companies, packed with explosive. It was, even by the standards of the Western Front, dangerous work. Aside from the normal perils of working deep beneath the ground, miners faced the continuous fear that the enemy might explode a small charge in the mine shaft and bury them alive. Alternatively, German miners, engaged in their own tunnelling, might break into a British working party, in which case a hand-to-hand struggle would take place beneath the ground. In the event, 24 mines were excavated. On average, each mine contained about 21 tons of high explosive, but the largest charge was roughly double that size. It’s no wonder that on the eve of the battle Harington said “I do not know whether we will change history tomorrow, but we shall certainly alter the geography.”

Nine divisions were to be used for the initial assault. These included the Catholic, Nationalist 16th (Irish) Division and the Protestant, Unionist 36th (Ulster) Division, fighting alongside each other for the first time. As at Arras, the preliminary artillery bombardment was highly successful. The British had twice as many heavy guns as the Germans, and had a five-to-one advantage in other guns. British artillery fired 3.5 million shells between 26 May and 6 June. The German artillery suffered badly even before the mines were detonated, meaning that when the British and Anzac infantry attacked, they did so under highly favourable conditions. The commander of German XIX Corps contributed to the defenders’ problems when he rejected a solution to pull out of the Messines sector.

Nineteen of the mines were detonated at 03:10 on 7 June 1917. The force of the explosion was...
The Battle of Messines

tremendous, leaving many of those defenders that survived the blast shocked and easy targets for the Allied infantry that advanced under an accurate barrage. The attackers rapidly captured their objectives: Messines village fell to the New Zealanders; and the Wytschaete area was occupied by 16th and 36th Divisions. In the fighting, the BEF demonstrated how proficient they had become at combined arms tactics, with 72 tanks accompanying the infantry. The battle was effectively won on that first day, although the fighting continued spasmodically for a week. The Germans mounted a number of counterattacks from 8 June to 14 June, but none succeeded in dislodging the British. Ironically, the worst loss of life for the BEF came not in the initial assault but on subsequent days, when the Germans shelled British troops crowded onto the newly captured ridge, causing heavy casualties.

Messines was Plumer’s masterpiece, and it is not surprising that when he was ennobled after the war, he took as his title Plumer of Messines. The battle showed that, by June 1917, the BEF had become highly proficient at limited, set-piece battles. However, Haig controversially judged that Plumer was not the right man to command the next stage of the Flanders offensive. Haig believed a breakthrough was possible and placed Hubert Gough, renowned as a “thruster”, in charge of the push. Logistic problems and the time needed for Anthoine’s French First Army to arrive meant that six weeks elapsed between Messines and the beginning of the Third Battle of Ypres.
The reign of Nicholas II, Tsar of all the Russias, came to an abrupt end on 15 March 1917. Three days earlier, the Imperial regime was struck a death blow when soldiers joined protesters in Petrograd (formerly St Petersburg) and a “Soviet”, or council, of disaffected workers, soldiers and socialists gathered. Members of the Duma, the toothless Russian parliament established after the troubles of 1905, joined with the Soviet in setting up a Provisional government. The Tsar’s abdication and arrest followed. A revolution which had seemed initially to be a bourgeois affair had been captured by far more extreme revolutionary forces.

Russia had been on the verge of revolution 12 years earlier. In 1905, frustration and resentment at the autocratic rule of the Tsars boiled over, triggered by defeat at the hands of Japan in the Far East. Some of the middle classes resented being excluded from the political process. The peasantry (among whom serfdom had only been abolished in 1861) wanted land to farm. In the cities, rapid industrialization produced a growing working class, often living and working in terrible conditions. Violent clashes between protesters and troops, and mutinies in the navy, led some to fear – or hope – that full-scale revolution was about to break out. In the end, a mixture of repression and concessions brought Russia back from the brink. Crucially, the army remained loyal.

The fragile national unity of August 1914 soon came under strain. The problems that underpinned the 1905 uprisings had worsened. Food shortages, defeats and heavy losses among the conscript army (even successful campaigns like the 1916 Brusilov Offensive came with a large “butcher’s bill”) caused discontent to grow. Nicholas II committed a bad error in assuming nominal personal command of the army in September 1915. Now he was seen as personally responsible for the disasters.

In March 1917, the Provisional Government vowed to continue the war. However, the July offensive named after the War Minister,
Alexander Kerensky, was a failure, and damaged the credibility of the new regime. In September, a German offensive took the key Baltic city of Riga, almost 500 kilometres (300 miles) distant from Petrograd. Worse, a new threat had appeared in the shape of the veteran Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. He had been in exile in Switzerland, but was conveyed back to Russia by the Germans in a cynical attempt to undermine the stability of the country. Already reeling from an abortive coup by a disaffected general, the government – now led by Kerensky – was overthrown by Lenin’s Bolsheviks on 7 November (25 October in the old Russian calendar).

Lenin’s coup ushered in a Communist regime bent on exporting revolution, but it also found itself in a bitter civil war in which the “Reds” fought the “Whites” – who were supported by foreign armies – that only ended in 1921. The Germans forced the Bolsheviks to accept the harsh Peace of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918) and carved out a huge empire in the East. Germany was the victor in the first part of the Great War, but threw away the fruits by gambling on an all-or-nothing offensive in the West.

Lenin, who died in 1924, was ruthless enough, but he was outshone by his successor Josef Stalin. Under Stalin’s rule, the country underwent political purges, enforced industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture, at the cost of millions of deaths. Similarly, his labour camps were filled with opponents, real or imagined.
Haig hoped that the Third Battle of Ypres would prove decisive. The BEF would break out of the Salient, and trigger a landing on the Belgian coast by British 1st Division, which had been secretly training for the operation. Given the grand scale of his plans, it is not all that surprising that Haig chose Gough over the more cautious Plumer for the command. On 17 July, the Allied guns began a preliminary bombardment of the German positions. Haig had 3,091 guns at his disposal, and nine infantry divisions of Gough’s Fifth Army were to be committed to the first phase of the campaign, officially known as the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. Just as in the First and Second Battles of Ypres, British and French troops were to fight alongside each other. General François Anthoine’s French First Army of six divisions (and more than 900 guns) was slotted into the line on the British left flank. Plumer’s Second Army guarded Gough’s other flank.

On the other side of No Man’s Land, the troops of German Fourth Army were deployed in a very strong defensive system based around a series of miniature fortresses, known to the British as “pillboxes”. The essence of German defensive tactics was flexibility. The front line was defended lightly, with pillboxes used to slow the enemy advance, while counter-attack troops would hit the attackers as they became over-extended and vulnerable. In spite of some sensible suggestions from GHQ for a more limited approach, Gough believed that his Fifth Army could rapidly overcome the German defences and so planned for an ambitious advance of up to 5,500m (6,000yds). This was to reach the German Third Position, after which further fighting would carry Fifth Army out of the Salient altogether.

The infantry attack began at 03:50 on 31 July, as the artillery fire reached a crescendo. The assault was supported by tanks, and thanks to a major aerial offensive commenced on 11 July,
The Third Battle of Ypres

The Ypres sector came under the Army Group of Crown Prince Rupprecht, son of the King of Bavaria. Under the German system, royal personages often received high military positions. Unlike some of his peers, Rupprecht was a highly effective commander and thoroughly merited his promotion to lead an army group. If history had turned out differently 200 years earlier, Rupprecht might have been commanding British forces. When his mother Queen Marie Theresa died shortly after the war in February 1919, he became the Jacobite Pretender to the British throne.

ABOVE: In the conditions in the Ypres salient, pack mules came into their own, though many were killed by shell fire. This photograph was taken on 31 July 1917.

British and French aircraft had superiority in the air. Initially, the attack made progress. Anthoine’s infantry had been carefully trained for the operation, and were supported by a mass of heavy artillery; French First Army gained about 3,200m (3,500yds); the left-hand British formation, XIV Corps, advanced about the same distance. The Guards Division, which in a brilliant preliminary operation on 27 July at Boesinghe had crossed the Yser Canal and seized positions on the German bank, took 600 prisoners. The advance was reasonable in the circumstances, but still only about half what Gough had hoped to achieve. In the centre and on the right, the picture was much gloomier. Here, the German defensive tactics worked well. The advancing British infantry were caught off balance by the German counter-attack units and forced back as much as 1,800m (2,000yds). Allied losses amounted to about 17,000. In spite of some modest success achieved, Gough’s ambitious plan had failed.

In the early evening of 31 July, it began to rain. The ground, badly churned up by shelling, which had severely damaged the drainage system, turned to thick mud. The weather is an ever-present and unpredictable factor in military operations. Frequent statements by subsequent writers to the contrary, rain in these quantities could not have been predicted; Flanders was not regularly subject to a “monsoon” in August. Major operations had to be halted on 2 August, and were not recommenced until 16 August when the Battle of Langemarck began.

This phase of fighting lasted two days and was a bigger failure than 31 July. Langemarck village itself was captured, but the Gheluvelt Plateau, the possession of which was critical if the BEF was to make a substantial advance, remained in German hands. Haig had made it clear that the ridge, which dominated the battlefield, had to be taken as a priority, but Gough had not made it his priority. The battle spluttered into a number of small-scale actions rather than being joined up into a coherent offensive. Fifth Army’s progress was stymied by a combination of heavy German fire and tenacious defence, poor weather and difficult ground, and failure to concentrate artillery. It all seemed a far cry from the heady days of Messines, only two months earlier. The main operation was halted on 18 August, but smaller actions continued.

In London, the War Cabinet came close to ordering the halt of the entire offensive, but Haig won the day. Clearly, however, something had to change. Haig did not readily admit to making errors, but when in mid-August he relegated Gough to a supporting role and made Second Army the principal attacking force, he implicitly acknowledged his mistake.

ABOVE: One of the iconic images of the Third Battle of Ypres: stretcher-bearers struggle in the mud near Boesinghe, 1 August 1917.
With Plumer in charge, British fortunes began to improve. Haig proved amenable to Plumer’s request for a three-week delay to ensure everything was ready. At 05:40 on 20 September the Battle of the Menin Road began. Four divisions attacked, each on a narrow frontage, with further divisions guarding the flanks of the main assault. The infantry’s objectives were limited, some 1,450m (1,600yds) away, and the attackers advanced behind a deep and complex artillery barrage. Pillboxes proved death traps to any German infantry caught in them, as by now the BEF had evolved sophisticated tactics for tackling defensive positions. German counter-attacks were negated by British firepower – the infantry did not advance out of artillery range – and special units held in reserve. Menin Road was a clear, if costly, victory for Plumer’s British and Australian troops.

On 26 September, Plumer began the process all over again. The battle of Polygon Wood repeated the formula of the Menin Road. The pattern of massing combat power on a relatively narrow front, formidable artillery support, and limited advances was the epitome of the bite and hold operation. Ludendorff highlighted the acute problems that it posed the defenders: “We might be able to stand the loss of ground, but the reduction of our fighting strength was [on 26 September] again all the heavier... The depth of penetration was limited so as to secure immunity from our counterattacks, and the latter were then broken by the massed fire of artillery.” The Germans tried different tactics, reinforcing the front lines, but with little success. Plumer’s hammer swung for a third time on 4 October and delivered another smashing blow. In preparation for the Battle of Broodseinde, the guns were moved forward (Second Army
fielded 796 heavy and medium guns, and over 1,500 field guns and howitzers). To avoid predictability, on this occasion there was no full-scale preliminary artillery bombardment. This time it was to be primarily an Anzac battle: 3rd Australian Division, the New Zealand Division and 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions were deployed side by side, with British formations protecting the flank. The Germans also planned a major attack on 4 October, and as the Anzac infantry assembled for the assault, they were caught in a German bombardment. However, the Germans suffered much more heavily from the British barrage that at 06:00 rained down on the defenders’ positions. Packed into the front line and deployed for attack rather than defence, many Germans were killed or wounded either by the shelling or by Allied infantry advancing with fixed bayonets. Following the setback, Plumer's assault rapidly flung back on track, and by the evening the Germans were counting the cost of what their official history referred to as a “black day”. Their luck was about to turn, however.

The weather had mostly been fine during the period of Plumer’s attacks. On the night before Broodseinde it began to rain, and once again the ground was turned into a morass. Believing that the Germans were on the verge of defeat now that much of the Gheluvelt Ridge had been captured, Haig elected to fight on.

The next battle, Poelcappelle, was launched on 9 October. The moonscape created by shelling in previous battles, the rain and the mud hindered the preparations, which were incomplete when the infantry went over the top. The terrible conditions meant that many were exhausted by the time they reached British front line. The artillery bombardment was simply inadequate. Not surprisingly, the result was few gains for heavy losses. The same was true of the First Battle of Passchendaele (12 October). Haig’s decision to push on was – and is – highly controversial, but he did not want to leave the Germans on the ridge at Passchendaele to dominate the battlefield over the winter.

Writing to Pétain in October, General Anthoine stated that Haig had failed to admit the lack of success, and feared his own French First Army would suffer casualties in a fruitless battle. For the sake of the alliance, Pétain insisted that First Army fight on. The key objective of Passchendaele Ridge eventually fell to the Canadian Corps in the Second Battle of Passchendaele, which ended on 10 November. The bad conditions made Passchendaele (the name popularly given to the entire campaign) infamous. The losses were heavy – 245,000 British, 8,500 French, perhaps 230,000 German. Haig argued that the attritional effect on the Germans made the battle worthwhile. Under extreme pressure, the German High Command considered withdrawing from the Ypres salient, which would have been a significant strategic victory for Haig. A senior German general argued that the Allied Offensive at Ypres, had prevented the Germans from taking advantage of the poor state of the French army after Nivelle’s unsuccessful offensive earlier in the year.
TRENCH LIFE

A soldier’s life for me

It is a popular myth that the soldiers spent all their time in the trenches. One British regimental infantry officer calculated that in 1916 he was under fire for 101 days, spending 65 days in the front line. The rest of his time was split between periods in reserve, in rear areas, on leave, and on instructional courses. He spent 12 separate periods in the trenches, and was involved in fighting four times, only one of which was a “direct attack”. This pattern held true, with variations, for all armies, although some sectors of the Western Front were more dangerous than others. A French infantry unit at Verdun in May 1916 was likely to see more action than one holding positions near the Swiss frontier. The Ypres Salient was an active sector throughout the war, while for much of 1915 the Somme was generally quiet – although anywhere near the front line random death or wounding was an ever-present threat, whether from sniping, or from “marmites” (as a heavy German shell was known to the French; the British called it a “Jack Johnson”, after a Black American boxer).

The trenches themselves evolved during the war. At the end of 1914, they were little more than a series of holes in the ground protected by a little barbed wire. The following years were to see the trench systems become much more

Food and Drink

Food was either cooked on primitive stoves in the trenches, or brought up from the rear from mobile field kitchens. Staples of the British soldier’s diet included Maconochie’s stew (meat and vegetables) and bully beef. The French nicknamed their tinned meat “singe” (“monkey”). Favourites with German soldiers included sausages and other tinned meats, but as the British naval blockade took effect they often got “ersatz” (“substitute”) materials such as acorn coffee and coarse black bread. Alcohol was an important morale booster. The British issued rum, the French wine and gniole spirit – rum or brandy from the French West Indies.
elaborate. Duckboards were laid on trench floors, sandbags on the parapet, and barbed wire grew from a few strands festooned with tin cans (a crude early warning system) into dense belts. The men sheltered in “dugouts”. In general, German trenches were more elaborate with deeper dugouts than their British or French equivalents. The Germans, sitting on occupied territory, were usually content to hold what they had, while the British and French saw the trenches as jumping-off points for offensives. By the time of the Somme in 1916, defensive systems usually consisted of three parts: fire, support and reserve trenches. Later this set-up was replaced by a much looser defensive system, with front-line posts held lightly, and the main defences further back.

When the troops were not involved in major operations, trench life was a matter of constant work parties, carrying out such tasks as repairing wire, observation, and – since much activity took place at night – trying to snatch naps. Soldiers fought a constant and losing battle against the lice that infested their clothes and the rats that inhabited the trenches. All armies carried out patrols and raids: to gather information; intimidate the enemy; and, supposedly, to inculcate fighting spirit in the troops. These could be highly dangerous however. The British were probably the keenest on raiding, while the French had a more pragmatic approach.

Out of the line, soldiers trained, provided work parties that often involved heavy manual work, and had a limited amount of leisure time. Sport was popular, and in the BEF this ranged from simple football kickarounds to elaborate Divisional Horse Shows with gambling (another popular, but illegal, pastime) on the side. Estaminets, a type of café-bar, were ever present. Over a simple meal and rough wine,
men could relax, gossip, tell stories, or perhaps sing. For the soldier who simply wished to read or write a letter, organizations such as the YMCA provided some quiet rooms. Toc H, at Poperinge, provided a Christian haven in which rank was ignored. At the other end of the scale, soldiers could go to brothels, some officially sanctioned, and visit prostitutes. Many French soldiers had a marraine de guerre – a sort of female pen-friend who provided a home for the soldier when on furlough.

The factors that maintained a soldier’s morale under such terrible conditions were many and varied: tobacco and alcohol; belief in the cause; pride in the unit; religious faith; superstition; paternal officers; mail from home; leave; baths; and periods away from the front line – all these things were important. The British army was particularly good at sustaining morale by enforcing a “bureaucracy of paternalism” – ensuring that officers inspected soldiers’s feet for signs of trench-foot, and providing baths behind the lines, for example – while French morale suffered because of the lack of such a system, with near-disastrous results in 1917. German soldiers in 1918 were badly affected by news from home of the poor conditions being endured by their families. Trench life was hard for everyone, although officers generally had superior facilities. That the morale of soldiers survived so well under the circumstances is testimony to the astonishing ability of the human being to endure the most extreme conditions.

Informal, tacit arrangements often sprung up between Allied troops and their German enemies with the aim of making trench life a little easier. Graham Greenwell, a British officer, noted “We go out at night in front of the trenches... The German working parties are also out, so it is not considered etiquette to fire.” On other occasions troops would refrain from firing when food was being brought up, or ritualize aggression by firing at the same time every day. Such examples of “live and let live” were discouraged by High Command.
The fighting on the Western Front encompassed local as well as major actions, some of which had major consequences. Others were futile. This was true of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF)’s first taste of action in France after arriving from the Middle East in March 1916. The newly created and inexperienced 5th Australian Division under Major-General J. W. McCay was initially sent to the quiet Armentières sector, known as “the nursery”, to learn the ropes. But on 19 July 1916, 5th Australian Division and British 61st Division were committed to an ill-thought-out operation at the village of Fromelles, on ground fought over in 1915. This was a diversion intended to support the Somme offensive by pinning the Germans to their trenches, diverting German reserves, and making clear that the British would not be confining operations to the Somme area. While this was sensible in theory, in practice Fromelles was too obviously an isolated diversion, and had little impact on the German High Command.

Virtually every aspect of the execution of the attack was bungled. The ground which the Australians and British were sent to contest was terribly bare and dominated by the Sugar Loaf, a formidable German strongpoint. The preparations were rushed, the troops and many of the commanders involved were inexperienced and command blunders were made at various levels. In spite of some initial success, such as the capture of part of the German front line by the 2/7th Royal Warwicks, and much heroism, by the troops, Fromelles was a disaster, the only results the slaughter of troops and embitterment of Anglo-Australian relations.

Hill 70 was very different from Fromelles. During Third Ypres in 1917, the Canadian Corps were tasked with attacking this rise near Lens, partly as a diversion from the main operation, but also to seize a key position for future use. The original British plan for an assault on Lens itself was altered by General Arthur Currie, the Canadian Corps commander, to become an attack on the vital high ground to the north of the city. The battle lasted 10 days (15–25 August 1917), and cost the Canadians over 9,000 casualties. Currie prepared for the battle in his

ABOVE: During the Battle for Hill 70 in August 1917, a wounded soldier is brought in on a stretcher by German prisoners of war.

ABOVE RIGHT: Action shot of the Battle for Hill 70, near Lens, taken by a Canadian official photographer. Note the bursting shells.

Brigadier-General Elliot commanded 15th Australian Brigade at Fromelles. Nicknamed “Pompey”. Elliott was a brilliant leader of men and an inspired commander. A breakdown in communications led to one of his battalions attacking unsupported at Fromelles, with disastrous consequences. This only reinforced his fiercely anti-British feelings. In 1918, Pompey Elliott was passed over by his Australian superiors for promotion to command a division, a slight he resented for the rest of his life and which almost certainly contributed to his suicide in 1931.

Harold Edward “Pompey” Elliot (1878–1931)

THE AUSTRALIANS

The Rising Sun badge was worn by Australian soldiers in both world wars. Introduced in 1904, along with the slouch hat on which it was worn, it came to typify the “digger”.

The First World War

WED 19 JUL 1916 – MON 23 OCT 1917

LOCAL ACTIONS

Fromelles, Hill 70 and La Malmaison
Maistre, commander of Sixth Army at Malmaison, earned a reputation as a general with a safe pair of hands. He rose from a staff job to command XXI Corps in September 1914. Thereafter, he appeared stuck in this position, but was assigned to lead Sixth Army and rebuild its morale after the trauma of the April 1917 offensive. Thereafter, he commanded French Tenth Army in Italy, and in 1918, Central Army Group in which he fought alongside Pershing’s Americans.

Maistre, commander of Sixth Army at Malmaison, earned a reputation as a general with a safe pair of hands. He rose from a staff job to command XXI Corps in September 1914. Thereafter, he appeared stuck in this position, but was assigned to lead Sixth Army and rebuild its morale after the trauma of the April 1917 offensive. Thereafter, he commanded French Tenth Army in Italy, and in 1918, Central Army Group in which he fought alongside Pershing’s Americans.

Maistre, commander of Sixth Army at Malmaison, earned a reputation as a general with a safe pair of hands. He rose from a staff job to command XXI Corps in September 1914. Thereafter, he appeared stuck in this position, but was assigned to lead Sixth Army and rebuild its morale after the trauma of the April 1917 offensive. Thereafter, he commanded French Tenth Army in Italy, and in 1918, Central Army Group in which he fought alongside Pershing’s Americans.

Maistre, commander of Sixth Army at Malmaison, earned a reputation as a general with a safe pair of hands. He rose from a staff job to command XXI Corps in September 1914. Thereafter, he appeared stuck in this position, but was assigned to lead Sixth Army and rebuild its morale after the trauma of the April 1917 offensive. Thereafter, he commanded French Tenth Army in Italy, and in 1918, Central Army Group in which he fought alongside Pershing’s Americans.

Maistre, commander of Sixth Army at Malmaison, earned a reputation as a general with a safe pair of hands. He rose from a staff job to command XXI Corps in September 1914. Thereafter, he appeared stuck in this position, but was assigned to lead Sixth Army and rebuild its morale after the trauma of the April 1917 offensive. Thereafter, he commanded French Tenth Army in Italy, and in 1918, Central Army Group in which he fought alongside Pershing’s Americans.

Maistre, commander of Sixth Army at Malmaison, earned a reputation as a general with a safe pair of hands. He rose from a staff job to command XXI Corps in September 1914. Thereafter, he appeared stuck in this position, but was assigned to lead Sixth Army and rebuild its morale after the trauma of the April 1917 offensive. Thereafter, he commanded French Tenth Army in Italy, and in 1918, Central Army Group in which he fought alongside Pershing’s Americans.
THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI
The first massed tank assault

Ironically, the bitter slogging match at Passchendaele, the epitome of attrition, was followed by the return of mobile warfare to the Western Front. The Battle of Cambrai, which began on 20 November 1917, was initially planned as a large-scale tank raid. With some notable exceptions, the performance of the tanks in the Third Battle of Ypres had been disappointing, which was unsurprising given the poor terrain and the weather. The commander of the Tank Corps, Brigadier General Hugh Elles, and his Chief-of-Staff, Colonel J. F. C. Fuller, believed that the country around Cambrai offered more scope to show what the tank could really do. As Third Ypres dragged, on the idea of a fresh offensive away from Passchendaele grew more attractive to Haig and GHQ. The crushing defeat inflicted on the Italians at Caporetto in October 1917 provided further reasons for a new attack, as a major effort on the Western Front might divert German attention from the Italian front. The original idea of a raid, in which the capture of territory was unimportant, grew into a major offensive by General Sir Julian Byng’s Third Army designed to break through the Hindenburg Line (the extensive system of defensive fortifications built by the Germans in northeastern France in 1916–17) and take Cambrai itself. With this stage successfully completed, GHQ would judge the best way to exploit the victory – perhaps a possible advance on Douai.

There were two novel features about the attack. The attack would take place without a preliminary bombardment or even the guns firing preliminary shots to establish the range. The latter was a revolutionary suggestion, based on the fact that gunnery techniques were now sufficiently sophisticated to allow “shooting off the map”. This meant that the tell-tale signs that an offensive was imminent would not be needed and surprise could return to the battlefield. The second novelty was the use of tanks, not thinly spread out in support of infantry formations, but concentrated to gain the maximum advantage from the shock of the assault. A total of 378 fighting tanks were deployed, accompanied by a further 98 for transporting supplies. Haig concentrated 19 infantry divisions on the Cambrai front, plus cavalry formations. Pétain sent three French infantry and two cavalry divisions to the area. If a major success did materialize there, the Allies would be hard pressed to exploit it, given the insufficient numbers of reserves available. The ravages of Passchendaele and the need to send reinforcements to Italy left precious few troops available for Cambrai.

The initial attack was highly successful. At 06:20 the tanks rumbled forward, accompanied by infantry, under the cover of a bombardment. The Germans were caught by surprise, and at first it seemed that the attack was unstoppable. The tanks crushed barbed wire and dropped fascines (bundles of wood) into trenches to allow them across. Third Army broke through the Hindenburg Line and the possibilities seemed limitless. The cavalry passed through the gap.

John Frederick Charles Fuller (1878–1966)

Colonel Fuller, as Chief of the Staff of the Tank Corps, was a major architect of the Cambrai plan. After the war he was an influential writer, lambasting British high command in the Great War (not always fairly) and making important contributions to the development of armoured warfare. A visionary military thinker, “Boney” Fuller was a man of extremes: at various times he embraced the occult and fascism. His views on tanks on the Western Front were partisan in the extreme.

ABOVE LEFT: A British tank at Cambrai. The rhomboid shape of the early tank is still featured on the badge of the Royal Tank Regiment.

TANK CORPS
A cap badge of the Tank Corps. This replaced the badge of the Machine Gun Corps, of which the first tank formations were technically a part.
and did relatively well, but given the shortness of daylight hours in late November, its effect was limited. Only on the left flank, on the front of 51st (Highland) Division, where the tanks got too far ahead of the infantry at the village of Flesquières, was there a major setback.

Tanks in the First World War were effectively a one-shot weapon. Mechanical failure and casualties from enemy action meant that the tank force was savagely reduced, and only 92 remained as “runners” three days after the beginning of the battle. With the Allies unable to reinforce the initial success, and with the Germans rushing reserves to the battlefield, the fighting became bogged down on the left flank in a seesaw struggle for Bourlon Wood. This was back to attritional slogging, the antithesis of mobile warfare. Worse was to come, because on 30 November General von der Marwitz’s German Second Army launched a counter-attack, giving a taste of the tactics – stormtroopers, hurricane bombardments and low-flying aircraft – that were to be employed to great effect in the German’s March 1918 offensive. The British reeled under the impact, and Haig sanctioned a withdrawal – he could not afford another lengthy attritional battle. Some of the gains of 20 November were retained but most were lost. German casualties equalled British losses of about 45,000.

The ringing of the bells in England to celebrate a victory had been premature. Haig’s credibility as a commander suffered more as a result of disappointed expectations at Cambrai than it did because of Passchendaele. For those who had eyes to see, Cambrai was a very significant battle. It indicated that the tactical advantage, which for so long had lain with the defender, now rested with the attacker. Trench warfare was on the verge of ending for good.
GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE
Holding out against Operation Michael

If 1917 had been a year of frustration and stalemate for the Western Allies, for the Russians it had been a year of disaster. Military setbacks on the Eastern Front had helped to trigger the liberal revolution in March 1917. By the end of the year, further defeats and the Bolshevik seizure of power all but removed Russia from the war. The British and French, suffering from manpower shortages, would be able to field only 156 divisions in early 1918 to the Germans’ 192. From the perspective of the German High Command, this offered the chance to mass its forces in the West and seek a knockout blow before American troops could arrive in overwhelming numbers. In a meeting at Mons on 11 November 1917 (in retrospect, the venue and date are richly ironic), the decision was taken to gamble on a strike in the West. Later, Ludendorff confirmed the target would be the British Fifth and Third Armies. The codename for the attack was Operation Michael.

The Allies, aware that they had lost the strategic initiative, went on to the defensive. Haig was forced to reduce the size of British divisions from 12 battalions to nine. He was misled by German deception and, realizing he could not be strong everywhere, chose to keep the bulk of his forces in the north, defending the critical areas that led to the Channel ports. In the event, this was to prove to be the correct decision. In the short term, however, Gough’s Fifth Army stationed at the southern extremity of the British line and which bore the brunt of the attack, was dangerously weak, with only 12 infantry divisions covering a 68km (42 mile) front from south of Flesquières to La Fère.

At 04:40 on 21 March 1918, Michael began with a furious hurricane bombardment of British...
positions in the St-Quentin sector orchestrated by Colonel Bruchmüller. Overwhelmed by the fire of nearly 10,000 guns and trench mortars, five hours later waves of German stormtroopers from Second and Eighteenth Armies assaulted the British defences. The British, having spent most of the previous three years on the offensive, were unused to defending. They misunderstood the principles of defence in depth, massing too many soldiers in the front positions which were supposed to be lightly held. Morale was poor in some units, and by the end of the day, Fifth Army was in serious trouble. Materially aided by thick fog, the Germans captured the British Forward Zone, taking some 500 guns and 21,000 prisoners. Worse, the stormtroopers got through III Corps’s Battle Zone, where attackers were supposed to be stopped. However, in places Fifth Army fought well and the Germans did not reach all their objectives. To the north, British Third Army stubbornly held out south of Arras against German Seventeenth Army’s attack.

The attack made further progress on 22 and 23 March as Gough’s Fifth Army fell back. Ludendorff, frustrated that his plan was lagging behind schedule, gave Hutier’s Eighteenth Army, which had made the most ground, the lead role, although it had been intended to act as a flank guard. Ludendorff’s new plan dissipated the strength of his attack, although it threatened to separate the British from the French. It would have been better to continue to aim for the critical communications centres which, if captured, might have crippled the BEF’s ability to fight on. Paradoxically, the severe threat forced the Allies to agree to unity of command, a factor that was greatly to improve their command performance. Fearful that the French would give priority to defending Paris over maintaining contact with the BEF, on 26 March the British supported Foch’s appointment as overall Allied commander.

Byng’s British Third Army decisively defeated another major attack near Arras on 28 March. Operation Michael was slowing down; as the Allies recovered, French reserves arrived, and German infantry outran their artillery support. The German attempt to take the critical rail-hub of Amiens was halted on 4–5 April at Villers-Bretonneux, 16km (10 miles) from the key city of Amiens, by Australian and British troops. Ludendorff, recognizing that Michael had run out of steam, halted the offensive. It had gained a great deal of ground, but the possession of a bulge into the Allied lines some 65km (40 miles) deep proved difficult to defend and in the long run more trouble than it was worth. Haig’s forces had suffered tactical defeat – Gough paid for it with his job – but the BEF was still very much in the fight. Moreover, Ludendorff had failed to break the link between the French and British armies. The trench deadlock had been broken, and open warfare restored. Who could best take the advantage – the Germans or the Allies?

“Holding out – Boche all around within fifty yards – can only see fifty yards, so it is difficult to kill the blighters”
MESSAGE FROM COMMANDER OF 7TH BATTALION ROYAL WEST KENTS, 21 MARCH 1918

General von Hutier, commander of German Eighteenth Army in 1918, came to prominence on the Eastern Front. At Riga, in September 1917, his Eighth Army had given an early demonstration of the methods that would be used in March 1918: a short bombardment without previously registering the guns, arranged by Bruchmüller, followed by the infantry using infiltration tactics (although the Russians put up little resistance). This approach became known as “Butler tactics”, although Hutier himself had little influence on their development.

Oskar von Hutier (1857–1934)

General von Hutier, commander of German Eighteenth Army in 1918, came to prominence on the Eastern Front. At Riga, in September 1917, his Eighth Army had given an early demonstration of the methods that would be used in March 1918: a short bombardment without previously registering the guns, arranged by Bruchmüller, followed by the infantry using infiltration tactics (although the Russians put up little resistance). This approach became known as “Butler tactics”, although Hutier himself had little influence on their development.
GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE
Operation Georgette to the Second Marne

THERE was little respite before Ludendorff’s next attack was launched. Operation Georgette (or the Battle of the Lys) opened on 9 April with the now-familiar hurricane bombardment, and infantry of German Sixth Army drove into Allied positions south of Ypres. The objective was Hazebrouck, a major communications centre whose capture would imperil the entire British situation. This threat was, potentially, much more dangerous than that posed by Operation Michael, as it would put the Channel ports directly at risk.

A Portuguese division gave way, but on its flanks British divisions held on, ensuring that the advance of about 5.5km (3.5 miles) was funnelled on a relatively narrow front. To the north, on the following day, German Fourth Army smashed into British Second Army. The defenders gave some ground and the British were forced to abandon Armentières to the enemy. The villages of Messines and Wytschaete – the scene of so much heavy fighting in previous years – also fell into German hands. The seriousness of the situation can be judged from the fact that on 11 April Haig, not a man given to grand gestures, issued his famous “Backs to the Wall” order.

The Allies survived – just. Foch, whose authority as Allied commander was enhanced on 14 April as a response to the crisis, sent French divisions, including Michelé’s French Fifth Army, up to support and relieve the British. Some British divisions were moved to quiet parts of the front. Although Haig wanted more help, he sourly noted in his diary that Foch was “very disinclined to engage French troops in the battle”. Foch instead took a hard, calculating look at the situation and decided to keep plenty of French divisions in reserve. He believed that the British could hold on in Flanders, and rightly suspected that the Germans would attack further south. Plumer, after much heart searching, abandoned the positions on the Passchendaele Ridge, won at such a high cost the previous autumn.

On the other side of No Man’s Land, Ludendorff was becoming frustrated with the failure to push on. A German account of the fighting of 17 April recorded that the “foremost waves were compelled to return to their jumping-off trenches, suffering severe losses. There they lay the whole day under the heaviest fire.” Georgette, like Michael before...
On 24 April 1918, at Cachy, three German A7V tanks fought an action against three British Mark IV tanks. After two British machine-gun armed “female” tanks had been forced to pull back, Lieutenant Frank Mitchell’s Mark IV “male”, armed with a 6-pounder gun drove back an A7V, which overturned, and caused the crew of another to abandon their tank. This action, fought during the clash at Villers-Bretonneux, which prevented the Germans from moving on Amiens, was the first confrontation of armoured fighting vehicles in history.

GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE: 1918

German gains from operations:
- Michael, 21 March–6 April
- Georgette, 9–11 April
- Blücher-Yorke, 27 May
- Grosgenau, 9 June
- Marne-Rhins, 15–17 July

it, was becoming stalemated. On 25 April, a further crisis arose when the Germans captured Mount Kemmel, the highest feature on the Ypres Salient, which had been held by three French divisions. This setback caused some inter-Allied tension, but the Germans were unable to take advantage. Five days later, the battle came to an end. Both sides had paid a heavy price (from 21 March to 30 April, 332,000 Allied casualties, 348,000 German), but Ludendorff failed to break through.

On 24 April, even before the Lys had ended, the Germans began another attack aiming at Amiens. Once again, a clash at Villers-Bretonneux was critical, where two Australian brigades took the lead in mounting a counter-attack and pushing the Germans back. However, for his next offensive Ludendorff turned his attention to the French, aiming to exhaust their reserves. In the early hours of 27 May, a hurricane bombardment, heavy even by Bruchmüller’s standards, opened on the Chemin des Dames, held by General Duchêne’s French Sixth Army (which included British IX Corps, sent south for a “rest”). The Allies were badly deployed; being forward of the defensible line of the Aisne with their forward positions crammed with troops. Attacking in overwhelming force, the Germans quickly smashed through the Allied defences and crossed the Aisne, advancing 18km (10 miles) in a day. The situation was stabilized only when the Germans reached the Marne on 3–4 June. Although alarming to the Allies, the Germans had merely acquired another tract of unrewarding territory, as Foch was shrewd enough to realize. Some Allied reserves (including US divisions) had been rushed to the sector, but not enough to make life easier for the Germans elsewhere. Another German offensive had started well but then run into the sand.

ABOVE: THE HUGE AND UNGAINLY GERMAN A7V TANK WAS 7 M (7.6 YDS) LONG AND HAD A CREW OF UP TO 18.

RIGHT: A GERMAN STAHLHELM (STEEL HELMET). THE FIRST MODEL WAS INTRODUCED IN 1915, AND WAS GRADUALLY IMPROVED DURING THE WAR.
The start of modern warfare

Powered flight was very new in 1914—the Wright brothers’ first flight had taken place only 11 years before. German, French and British aircraft all went to war in 1914, but they were primitive and their potential was barely recognized. By 1918, the aircraft had emerged as a powerful weapon indispensable to modern warfare. Virtually all of the military roles of the aircraft had been developed. Air power was one of the major reasons why the First World War was different to the wars of the past, instead pointing the way to the wars of the future.

Before the war, military men had viewed aircraft with a mixture of interest, scepticism and doubt. Foch made some dismissive comments in 1910, but at an exercise in the following year the French army used airplanes for reconnaissance and—in a portent of the future—to direct artillery fire. Any initial reservations Haig might have had about aircraft vanished after he was comprehensively beaten in pre-war manoeuvres by a force that used aerial reconnaissance. In August 1914, the value of aircraft was demonstrated graphically when Allied aircraft detected the swing of von Kluck’s army inside Paris. The counter-stroke that led to the Battle of the Marne was the result (see pages 14–15). Once trench stalemate set in, aircraft completely took over reconnaissance, traditionally the cavalry’s role. In order to keep the prying eyes of the enemy’s aircraft away from the trench systems, other aircraft were sent up to shoot them down or drive them away. Yet more aircraft were then deployed to protect the reconnaissance aircraft and fight enemy fighters, and so the modern battle for control of the air was born.

The aircraft of 1914 were crude in comparison to what was available only four years later, and...
The War in the Air

Above and right: French ace René Fonck (left) and the British Captain Albert Ball VC (right) sitting in the cockpit of his SE5 aircraft in April 1917. Ball achieved 17 of his 44 kills in an SE5. Fonck survived the war but Ball was killed on 7 May 1917.

Left: A flying helmet that belonged to the French ace Joseph Guiguet, a pilot in the “Stork” squadron.

Above: Royal Flying Corps pilot’s “wings”: a badge issued to qualified pilots.

were maids of all work. Eventually, specialist machines were introduced. Artillery spotting was left to large platforms like the British R.E. 8, while fighter planes evolved in a very different direction. Most early planes were unarmed, and the air combat only took place if a pilot or observer brought a rifle with them. Even when machine guns were fitted, they were difficult to use. The invention of the interrupter gear in 1915, which permitted a machine gun to fire through the propeller arc, created the modern fighter. By the late period of the war, fighters such as the fast and maneuverable French Spad XIII, the British Sopwith Snipe, and the German Fokker D-VII dominated the skies. Arguably the D-VII was the finest fighter aircraft of the war. All three were a far cry from the first dedicated fighters such as the Fokker E-I “Eindekker” (monoplane) of 1915. Individual ace fighter pilots had rather different styles. For the British, Captain Albert Ball VC was a lone hunter, stalking his prey through the skies. The German ace Manfred von Richthofen fought as part of his “flying circus”. On the French side, René Fonck was a skilled tactician who studied the techniques of enemy pilots.

Specialized bomber aircraft were also developed. The British DH-4, French Caudron G-4 and German A.E.G. G-IV came into this category. And yet this was not the end of the

Allied Aces

An ace was a pilot with five or more kills. The highest scoring Allied ace was René Fonck, with at least 75 victories. Other French aces included Georges Guynemer, of the French “Stork” squadron with 53 kills and Charles Nungesser (45). Billy Bishop VC, a Canadian, was the leading British Empire ace credited with 72 victories. Edward “Mick” Mannock may have exceeded Bishop’s total with 73 kills, but only 47 are officially recognized. The leading American ace was Eddie Rickenbacker with 26 kills.

Right: Capitaine Georges Guynemer in front of his Spad SVII aeroplane. He went missing on a patrol in September 1917.
The War in the Air

roles performed by aircraft during the war. Ground attack, contact patrols (i.e. attempting to locate and communicate with ground troops during battles), photographic reconnaissance; interdiction bombing; and even dropping supplies by parachute were all roles fulfilled by aircraft during the war. Away from the Western Front, they were used at sea and for strategic bombing of enemy cities.

Even the humble balloon had a role. Tethered behind the lines, with an observer in a basket armed with binoculars and a telephone, the Kite Balloon was an important means of spotting for the artillery. Balloons and aircraft made indirect fire possible – gunners could now accurately shoot at things that they could not see. This apparently simple development transformed warfare by making artillery far more effective. The year 1916 was crucial; for the first time, in the Battles of Verdun (see pages 70-73) and the Somme (see pages 98-101), the struggle for the air became an absolutely essential part of the overall battle. Dominance in the air see-sawed between the belligerents. The 1917 Battles of Arras (see pages 118-119) and the Nivelle Offensive (see pages 120-121) coincided with a period of German air superiority that became known to the British as “Bloody April”. In the last phase of the war, the Allies had the upper hand, not least because of weight of numbers.

Air combat made huge advances during the First World War. In recognition, in April 1918 the British created the world’s first independent air force, the Royal Air Force, from the army’s Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service.

Manfred Albrecht von Richthofen (1892-1918)

Von Richthofen was the highest scoring pilot of the war, with 80 kills. Nicknamed the Red Baron from his aristocratic lineage and red-painted aircraft, he achieved a legendary status in his lifetime that has continued to the present day. He came to prominence in the second half of 1916, and was appointed leader of his “Flying Circus” Jagdstaffel (fighter squadron) 11 in January 1917. He was shot down near Amiens on 21 April 1918. There is some mystery over his death, but most likely Richthofen was hit by ground fire.
A poster published on 22 April explaining procedures for dealing with airmen landing in Allied territory and showing the identifying roundel design used by the French, British, Belgian and German airforces.

ITEM 20

Airforce insignia recognition poster

A poster published on 22 April explaining procedures for dealing with airmen landing in Allied territory and showing the identifying roundel design used by the French, British, Belgian and German airforces.
Compiègne
17 September 1917
Dear Commandant,
Thank you for your very kind and heartfelt letter to my son. It was of great comfort to us. We shall never lose hope for as long as it is physically possible for us to preserve it, and we shall continue to rely on the devotion and affection of his chiefs.
Yours.....

In this Citation Georges Guynemer is described as “Pilote de combat incomparable”. The Citation lists his service and decorations.

**ITEM 21**
Georges Guynemer’s citation and a letter written to his parents after his death

Dear Commandant, Thank you for your very kind and heartfelt letter to my son. It was of great comfort to us. We shall never lose hope for as long as it is physically possible for us to preserve it, and we shall continue to rely on the devotion and affection of his chiefs.

Yours.....
An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.

Lieutenant Taplin's combat report

ITEM 22

An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.

ITEM 22

An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.

ITEM 22

An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.

ITEM 22

An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.

ITEM 22

An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.

ITEM 22

An Australian pilot's report on a successful combat with a German aircraft on 3 August 1918.
General Monash’s Hamel map

General Monash’s map of the Hamel battle, showing the positions reached.
2nd Australian Infantry Division’s Amiens report

The War Diary of the 2nd Australian Infantry Division covering 8 August 1918.

ITEM 24

The First World War – The Exhibits
A poster announcing the abdication of the Kaiser

This poster displays the announcement of the abdication of the Kaiser by Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden. Prince Max resigned on the same day.
St Canadian Division’s battle objectives map

A map marked with objectives to be archived which was included in the Canadian Report.
1st CANADIAN DIVISION.
MAP No. 1.
SHEWING ADVANCE OF AUG. 8, 1918.
This enduring image embodying the spirit of Verdun, and featuring Pétain’s famous rallying cry “On les aura”, or “We’ll have them!”, was used by the French government for its war loans poster of 1916.
One of Field Marshal Lord Kitchener's recruiting posters.

**ITEM 28**

We Need You poster

One of Field Marshal Lord Kitchener’s recruiting posters.
At the end of the Germans’ Chemin de Dames offensive, American troops saw a considerable amount of fighting, notably in the Belleau Wood battle (6 June). This was a warning that there was little time left for the Germans to defeat the Allies before US troops arrived in France in vast numbers. On 9 June, Ludendorff struck again, this time against Humbert’s French Third Army in the River Matz sector between Noyon and Montdidier. Again, the German aim was to wear out French reserves before striking in Flanders. The attackers made spectacular gains, 10km (6 miles) on the first day, but two days into the battle the French launched a counter-offensive under General Charles Mangin, who had been out of favour since the Nivelle Offensive (see pages 120-121). After an hour-long bombardment, Mangin’s forces, which included several US Divisions, supported by ground-attack aircraft and 144 tanks, went into action. The Germans were halted, and the main battle was over by 14 June.

German High Command continued to put their faith in a planned attack by Rupprecht in Flanders, Operation Hagen, but felt that a preliminary offensive aimed at exhausting French reserves was necessary. Allied intelligence picked up signs of German activity on the Marne and in Flanders, leading to some inter-Allied disputes about where reserves should be sent. In the meantime, Mangin’s Tenth Army made gains around Soissons (28–29 June), an attack that sowed the seeds for a much bigger offensive several weeks later. On the eve of the Second Battle of the Marne, the Allies had concentrated Maistre’s and Fayolle’s army groups, mostly comprising French divisions but also nine US, two Italian and two British. Against this, the Germans could bring First and Third Armies to attack to the east of Reims, aiming for the River Marne, 25km (15 miles) away. To the west of the city, Seventh and Ninth Armies had to cross the Marne and link up with the eastern arm of the attack.

From the beginning, some things went wrong for the Germans. The element of surprise was lost because some prisoners betrayed the time and date of the planned attack (03:50 on 15 July). This allowed the Allies to open a disruptive counter-bombardment 90 minutes before German zero hour. Moreover, unlike during the defence of the Aisne on 27 May, the French defenders understood the purpose of defence in depth. French Fourth Army under General Gouraud, a Gallipoli veteran, fought a model defensive battle; the attackers were harried by fire in the outpost zone and then defeated in the main killing ground. In the western sector, initially the Germans had greater success. The Italians took a battering
and were replaced by British 51st (Highland) and 62nd Divisions, which had just arrived in the area. Making good tactical use of a smokescreen, the German Seventh Army fought their way across the Marne at Dormans, and once on the far bank advanced 6km (4 miles). This caused consternation in some parts of the French High Command. Clemenceau was furious with Foch, and Pétain, the commander of the French Army, was worried by this development. Foch, by contrast, was calm, overruling Pétain’s desire to postpone a planned counter-offensive.

Mangin attacked the western flank of the bridgehead on 16 July and gained some ground. Hemmed into a shallow salient, unable to break out, the six German divisions that had crossed the Marne were in a dangerous position and lost heavily from shelling and bombing. But this was just the preliminary to a much larger French attack on 18 July. For this, Mangin massed 18 divisions, backed by another seven. However, it was Degoutte’s French Sixth Army on Tenth Army’s flank that struck the first blow, 45 minutes earlier at 04:35. Disoriented from this surprise attack, the defenders were wholly unprepared when Mangin’s troops joined the battle. The Germans were pushed back 6km (4 miles) in the face of French artillery, infantry and tanks. Tenth Army took 15,000 prisoners and 400 guns. Pressure grew on the German salient as French Fifth and Ninth Armies came into action later, and increased steadily over the next few days as more troops (including two more British divisions, 15th (Scottish) and 34th) were committed to battle.

On 18 July, Ludendorff was in Mons, planning Operation Hagen. Mangin’s counter-offensive wrecked his plans. Accepting the inevitable, the Marne bridgehead was evacuated, and the Germans fell back on other parts of the front. By 6 August, the battle was over. Foch deserved his promotion to Marshal of France, announced that day. Operation Hagen never took place. The strategic initiative had passed decisively from the Germans to the Allies.

The wartime career of General Mangin was distinctly chequered. He was a brigade commander in 1914 and thanks to successes at Verdun in 1916 was appointed to command Sixth Army. Scapegoated because of the failure Nivelle Offensive in 1917, he was restored to favour by Foch in 1918 and played a vital role in the Second Battle of the Marne. Ruthless and personally brave, he was nicknamed “the Butcher”. Mangin had the satisfaction of knowing that he had played a significant role in restoring his home province, Lorraine, to France.
The spring offensives left the German army exhausted, stuck at the end of tenuous supply lines, unable to make any further headway and vulnerable to attack. Just how vulnerable was revealed by a limited action that took place in early July at Le Hamel near Villers-Bretonneux. Monash’s Australian Corps, reinforced by American troops, captured all of its objectives in just 90 minutes. An updated version of the bite-and-hold operations used in 1917, this small-scale action was of enormous significance because it provided a model of a carefully prepared, tightly controlled, set-piece battle. Tellingly, Monash later described his methods as being akin to a conductor working from a musical score. A pamphlet on the lessons of 4 July was quickly produced and disseminated to the rest of the BEF.

Le Hamel proved to be a dress rehearsal for a battle fought on a far larger scale which has a good claim to be the turning point of the war on the Western Front. It was carried out by British Fourth Army, commanded by Rawlinson, in combination with General Debeney’s French First Army. For this operation “Rawly” controlled British III Corps and both the Australian and Canadian Corps, two of the most powerful and effective formations in the Allied order of battle. Preparations for the battle were meticulous. Perhaps the most impressive piece of staff work was to bring the Canadians down, in great secrecy, from the northern part of the Western Front. The Canadians Corps was fresh, having taken little part in the spring battles, and in comparison to the British and Australians was very strong in numbers. A map captured during the battle showed that the Germans were totally unaware of the presence of the Canadian Corps in the Amiens area. In sharp contrast to the Battle of the Somme launched just a few miles to the north on 1 July 1916, at the Battle of Amiens the Allies achieved complete surprise.

The attack began at 04:20 on 8 August 1918. Thanks to the advanced gunnery techniques that had been developed by this stage of the war, 2,000 Allied guns were able to fire without any preliminary bombardment – another crucial element in the maintenance of surprise. The number of guns and shells that were needed had been carefully calculated, and unlike in previous years, the BEF had a superfluity of both: 700 field guns fired 350,000 shells. The counter-battery work of the heavy guns was highly effective, with most of the German guns neutralized, their crews either killed or driven off. A total of 580 tanks were used, including 72 “Whippet” light tanks and supply tanks. Infantry moved in close support of the armour, and 800 aircraft flew overhead to bomb and strafe the Germans. The plan called for reserve forces to follow on the heels of the initial waves. This was to allow them to pass through the assault troops once the first objective had been captured, and so maintain the momentum of the attack.

British III Corps, attacking over the difficult terrain of the Chipilly spur in the north of the battlefield, had the toughest job. Its problems were exacerbated by the fact that, thanks to a preliminary German attack, it had to recapture part of its old front line before it could make the attack proper. Even so, it...
Hamel and Amiens

made a substantial advance. In the centre, the Canadians and Australians, advancing over more favourable ground, pushed forward as much as 13km (8 miles). On the southern flank, French First Army also made progress. In total, Allied casualties came to 9,000. German losses amounted to some 27,000 plus 400 guns. It was the most dramatic victory of the war up to that date. Ludendorff called it the “black day of the German Army”. Amiens was also significant for its aftermath. On 11 August, with the Allies finding it increasingly difficult to get forward, the battle was halted and guns and troops moved northwards to begin a new offensive. In contrast to 1916 and 1917, the BEF now possessed the guns and logistics to allow the point of attack to be switched quickly from sector to sector. This was to be a huge key factor in the defeat of the German army over the coming months.
At the beginning of the First World War, armies were fairly simple bodies consisting of infantry, cavalry, artillery, supply troops, engineers and a limited number of specialists such as signallers and staff officers. By November 1918, in response to the challenges posed by warfare on the Western Front, armies had become vastly more complex and sophisticated organizations. Units appeared on orders of battle that had been unknown before the war, concerned with new weapons such as tanks, flame-throwers and gas, while some branches of armies expanded enormously. Typical was the British Corps of Military Police, which grew from 500 men in August 1914 to 13,300 in 1918, having acquired important operational roles in addition to the enforcement of discipline. Much the same happened to the French military police. The German equivalent, the Feldgendarmerie, also expanded, with five cavalry units being assigned to policing duties to handle the increasing indiscipline in the German army in 1918.

The arrival of new weapons in the front line meant that increasing numbers of troops became specialists. In 1914, most French infantry were armed with a rifle and bayonet. By early 1917, the platoon had evolved to consist of four rifle sections, each of 12 men with two grenade launchers; two bombing sections of eight men; and a light machine-gun section armed with one gun. The platoon of 1918 was different again, with four light machine-gun sections and only two of riflemen. The British and German armies saw broadly similar changes. There was a tendency to form new weapons into separate organizations. In the German army, Minenwerfer (short range mortar) units were formed at the end of 1914. Later, independent units were attached to armies. As the light Lewis machine gun became increasingly available, the British withdrew heavier weapons from its battalions and formed them into Machine Gun Companies attached to brigades. In October 1915, the Machine Gun Corps was formed.

Advances in battlefield communications technology symbolized the birth of modern war on the Western Front. The visual signalling using flags in use at the beginning of the war was generally ineffective and dangerous, while many decorations were won by signallers crawling out into No Man’s Land to repair broken telephone wires. By the end of the war, portable radio sets had been developed, and each British tank brigade at Cambrai in 1917 (see pages 136-137) had three tanks equipped with wireless and one for laying telephone cable.
**Trench Weapons**

A variety of specialized weapons were developed for trench fighting. At the beginning of the war, there was a high degree of improvisation that produced fearsome clubs, sharpened entrenching tools, grenades manufactured from jam tins and spring-operated grenade throwers. Later on, weapons became much more sophisticated. The British Mills Bomb (grenade) and Stokes mortar, both invented during the war, were among the most effective weapons developed for trench fighting. Some 75 million Mills Bombs were produced during the war.

The demands of trench warfare brought about the formation of specialist units of miners and tunnellers. An informal group of German units had evolved to handle mining from the beginning of trench warfare, and in April 1916, Pioneer Mining Companies were formed. In February 1915, the British created similar units under the auspices of the Royal Engineers. Mining companies were also formed in French divisions. Some infantry came to specialize in patrolling and trench raiding. The Germans formed units of elite storm troops, although the British shied away from this development.

The shortcomings of the French medical service were exposed by the battles of 1914. It was equipped with insufficient and poorly designed ambulances. There were five properly equipped hospital trains, with 30 standard trains pressed into service. Brancardiers (stretcher-bearers) often had little medical training. The subsequent years saw huge improvements in the quality of French military medical care. The German medical service was 7,500 strong on the outbreak of war, and grew steadily in size. The German division of 1914 had a medical company of stretcher-bearers and a dressing station, but at the end of 1916 another was added to the establishment in addition to independent companies. Similarly, under the leadership of Sir Alfred Keogh, the strength of the British Royal Army Medical Corps grew from about 10,000 to some 170,000 during the war.

The increasing sophistication of artillery tactics depended to a large degree on specialists. Ernest Gold, a brilliant British meteorologist, was a pioneer in the field of providing information on atmospheric conditions, his staff of three eventually expanding to 120. All armies used highly skilled sound rangers and flash spotters, who used acoustic methods and visual observation to determine the whereabouts of enemy guns. Reconnaissance aircraft “spotted” the fall of shot for the artillery, radioing back data that allowed gunners to adjust the range.

Battlefield communications were primitive at the beginning of the war, but the semaphore flags, homing pigeons and field telephones were increasingly supplemented by wireless (radio) as the war went on. This was reflected in the growth of communication specialists—-the German signal service increased from 6,300 to 190,000 men during the course of the war. The 50 wireless sets used by the French army in 1914 had grown in number to 30,000 by 1918.

Many other specialist troops, such as logisticians, staff officers and veterinarians, could also be mentioned as essential parts of the armies of the Western Front. The backbone continued to be the infantryman, but increasingly the Tommy, Poilu and Landser (the ordinary German soldier) was supported by a bewildering array of arms and services.
ALLIES ON THE ADVANCE

The drive to the Hindenburg Line

Comming so quickly after the failure of the German offensive on the Marne and the Allied counter-offensive, Amiens came as a tremendous blow to German morale at the top and bottom of the army. Victory was now clearly impossible, but the German High Command believed that if a stubborn retreat could inflict heavy losses on the Allies, the Germans might end the war on moderate terms. They were wrong; the strategic initiative had passed to the Allies, and under Foch’s strategic direction, they made the most of it.

The key to their success lay in fighting a series of limited operations, breaking off the battle when the attack began to lose momentum. A fresh attack (or attacks) would then be mounted on a different part of the front. The defenders were thus placed at full stretch, unable to initiate, constantly struggling to fend off defeat. The Allied infantry did not advance too far away from the safety of their artillery support, or outrun their lines of supply. This was very different from the German approach in the spring offensives (see pages 138-139), and also a distinct improvement on some of their own fumbling efforts earlier in the war.

The next phase of the Allied offensive began in the third week of August. In the previous week or so, reinforcements were moved north from the forces at Amiens to Byng’s British Third Army around the Somme area. It is noteworthy how quickly this could now be done, in comparison to the problems of moving troops and guns from Messines to Ypres in June–July of 1917. The Canadian Corps moved up to join First Army to the north of Arras. Beginning on 20 August, Fayolle’s French Army Group struck heavy blows against the southern face of the German-held Montdidier-Amiens salient. French Tenth Army, under the ever aggressive Mangin, pushed the Germans back some 13km (8 miles) between the rivers Oise and Aisne.

British Third Army attacked on 21 August over the all-too-familiar battlefield of the 1916 Somme offensive. On the following day, Rawlinson’s Fourth Army came into action on Byng’s right flank, and on 26 August part of Horne’s First Army attacked on Third Army’s left, extending the battlefront to some 65km (40 miles). This too was a battle in an area well known to British veterans, around Arras. On the Somme, 18th (Eastern) Division had the bizarre experience of capturing Trônes Wood for the second time, having first attacked and taken this objective in July 1916. Now, there were very different conditions on the battlefield. With superiority in the air, in artillery support and logistics, using sophisticated all-arms tactics, with experienced and confident staff officers and commanders, and up against a visibly weakening enemy, the BEF was achieving the success that had eluded it.
The strain proved too great for the Germans to bear and on the night of 26–27 August they retreated to the Hindenburg Line. In doing so they gave up the ground they had captured in the German Spring Offensive. For the Germans, the news grew ever worse. French First and Third Armies on the right of the BEF attacked on 27–29 August and captured the key town of Noyon. By 1 September, the Australians held both Mont St-Quentin and the city of Péronne, putting paid to any hope the Germans had of holding the line of the River Somme. On First Army’s front on 2 September, the Canadians smashed through the formidable Drocourt-Quéant Switch Line near Arras and triggered another German withdrawal. Fayolle’s French Army Group capitalized on the BEF’s successes by carrying out various operations against the retreating Germans.

South of Ypres, the Germans were forced out of another piece of territory captured at a huge cost in lives in the spring. The withdrawals to the Hindenburg Line left the German troops defending the salient captured during the Battle of the Lys uncomfortably exposed. British Fifth Army, now commanded by Birdwood, had commenced operations on 23 August, keeping up the pressure on the Germans. By 6 September, accepting the inevitable, the defenders on the Lys, too, fell back.

The BEF followed the retreating Germans, fighting the battles of Havrincourt and Epéhy between 12 and 26 September as divisions sought to reach good positions from which to attack the main German positions on the Hindenburg Line itself. The achievements since Amiens were real, but were costly. The BEF had pushed forward some 40km (25 miles) along a front of 65km (40 miles) at a cost of 180,000 casualties. Perhaps the worst was still to come. Their next objective was the Hindenburg Line.
At the beginning of the First World War, the United States of America was a sleeping giant. Although it had overtaken Britain as an economic powerhouse, and acquired an informal empire in places such as Philippines, the United States was not yet truly a great power. While the US Navy was impressive, the country’s army was tiny. Above all, the United States had no allies: isolationism was king. On 19 August 1914, President Woodrow Wilson declared a policy of strict neutrality. While many of the East Coast elite, including Wilson himself, were sympathetic towards the Allies, there were some 10 million first- and second-generation German-Americans to be considered.

The British Royal Navy effectively excluded Germany from trading with the United States, but American companies made much money by manufacturing war material and other goods for Britain and France – $3.2 billion in 1916. Banks in the United States were also critical in financing the Allied war effort; without American loans and credit the British would have had trouble continuing the war into 1917.

The depredations of German U-Boats heightened US-German tensions in 1915 as American ships were sunk and American citizens died. From 1915, the “Preparedness Movement”, which sought to build up American military power, conducted a propaganda campaign that helped to make the idea of entering the war less unthinkable. Although the American government carried out some cautious preliminary steps such as creating a Council of National Defense, Wilson, a genuine idealist, sought to broker a peace between the belligerents. He was re-elected in 1916 on a neutrality platform and as late as 22 January 1917 called for “peace without victory”. However, the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in February that year made war inevitable.

When it declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, the United States tried to distance itself from the Allies by calling itself an “Associated Power”. American entrance into the war made little immediate difference in terms of boots on the ground, as the army (raised by “Selective Service”, i.e. non-universal conscription) had to be prepared for combat. Only in September 1918 did it begin to play a major role on the Western Front, but the US Navy was a useful addition to the Allied fleets. Most importantly, the boost to flagging British and French morale was huge. Extensive industrial mobilization made also a significant impact. Seventeen thousand tons of shipping was produced each
The USA Enters the War

month in 1914, for instance, but this grew to 250,000 tons by 1918.

At home, some groups, such as German-Americans and socialists, had a hard time. In all, some 1,600 opponents of the war, from various backgrounds, were jailed. The enthusiasm for war in 1917–18 turned in many cases to bitter disillusionment, with many after 1918 believing that America had somehow been cheated of the fruits of victory. The United States was one of the major beneficiaries of the war. Economically, it had received a huge boost, while rivals such as Britain had declined. And although it was temporarily to retreat back into isolationism in the 1920s, the First World War marked the arrival of the United States as a global power.
The arrival of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France brought a powerful accretion of strength to the Allies. American divisions were roughly double the size of comparable British and French formations, and the numbers of “Doughboys” (as the ordinary US soldier was nicknamed) seemed limitless. Having gained control of American divisions in order to train them and to give them combat experience, the British and French were reluctant to give them up. Throughout 1918, Pershing, the AEF commander, strove to create an American operational command fully independent of his Allies. US First Army became operational on 29 August 1918. The battlefield debut of the new force was to be an offensive to reduce the Saint-Mihiel salient.

The rapid tempo of events elsewhere on the Western Front placed this plan in jeopardy. The success of the BEF convinced Foch that Haig’s concept of large-scale concentric offensives should be adopted. Rather than attacking Saint-Mihiel, Pershing should attack northwards through the Argonne forest towards Sedan and Mézières. This would threaten major railways that were critical to German lines of supply. Foch believed that this attack could be decisive. The clash of two different plans resulted in an uneasy compromise. The Americans would attack Saint-Mihiel, but would then redeploy to attack in the Meuse-Argonne area.

Many high-ranking officers of the Second World War served their military apprenticeship on the Western Front: Charles de Gaulle was wounded and captured at Verdun in 1916; Bernard Montgomery was wounded in 1914 but went on to be a staff officer; while in the German army Erwin Rommel fought on the Western Front and in Italy. The most senior American soldier of the Second World War had a key role in planning the 1918 Meuse-Argonne battle: George C. Marshall, then a colonel, went on to become President Roosevelt’s principal military advisor.

Above: In a town captured by the Americans near St Mihiel, US troops give a new name to a street named after Hindenburg — “Wilson USA!”

Below: A US 14-inch railway mounted gun fires during the Argonne offensive, 1918.

Above: Bernard Law Montgomery (left) as a staff officer in the First World War. Charles de Gaulle (right) was captured in March 1916 and remained a German prisoner until the end of the war.
German Views of the US Army

Many Germans were dismissive of the ability of American forces in the Meuse-Argonne battle. One report said: “The American Infantry is very unskilful in the attack. It attacks in thick columns, in numerous waves echeloned in depth, preceded by tanks. This sort of attack offers excellent objectives for the fire of our artillery infantry and machine guns.” However, the number of US troops was impressive. In the summer of 1918, a German officer, Rudolf Binding, had noted “The American Army is there – a million strong. That is too much.”

The Saint-Mihiel offensive began on 12 September 1918. The French II Colonial Corps, under the command of General Blondlat, was deployed alongside three American Corps. Although the defensive position was strong, the Allies achieved surprise, and the Germans were in the process of evacuating this bulge in the Allied line as the attack went in. The result was less a formal assault than the following up of a withdrawing force. Poor American staff work led to disorder among the advancing troops. Nonetheless, the operation was a success, with Saint-Mihiel being captured by French troops on 13 September. With 16,000 prisoners and 450 guns falling into American hands, Saint-Mihiel gave a timely boost to US morale. Curiously, at one stage two future American generals of the Second World War met during the battle, when Lieutenant Colonel George S. Patton of the Tank Corps encountered Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur of 42nd (Rainbow) Division.

Some Americans believed that an opportunity had been missed by not capitalizing on St-Mihiel, but the “Doughboys” headed for a new battlefield in the Argonne. To move an army 95km (60 miles) on three minor roads, get it into position and launch an attack in less than two weeks was a huge logistic challenge. Late on 25 September, the artillery bombardment commenced. The first phase of Foch’s Grand Offensive was on an appropriately grand scale. Two French Armies, the Second (Hirschner) and Fourth (Gouraud) plus I, III and V US Corps commanded by Hunter Liggett, Robert L Bullard and George H Cameron respectively, were supported by 700 tanks and 400 guns. At 05:30 on 26 September, the tanks and infantry attacked. On the first day the French and Americans advanced about 5km (3 miles). It was a hard, grinding slog. The Germans had the advantage of deep belts of defences – trenches, barbed wire, strong-points, machine-gun posts – based on no less than four separate positions. Up against the inexperienced Americans, the defenders caused heavy casualties even as the advance continued. Three regiments of black American troops served alongside the French. They treated the African-Americans much like their own colonial divisions, and the black troops did well, although like their white American counterparts, they had lost heavily in the process.

Pershing had insisted on training for open warfare and treating the rifle-armed infantryman as the most important part of the tactical jigsaw. He disdained the hard-won lessons of the French and British armies, and the AEF paid the price in heavy casualties and slow progress. This was an army reminiscent of the British on the Somme in 1916, still learning how to fight a modern battle. Co-operation between the artillery and infantry was often poor and the Americans faced considerable logistical difficulties compounded by bad weather. Three days after the initial attack, with the battered infantry in poor shape, the offensive had clearly run out of steam. “Those Americans will lose us our chance of a big victory before winter,” complained Georges Clemenceau, the French Premier. His criticism was unjust, though: although the Franco-American battle was not as successful as the other phases of Foch’s offensive, it contributed to the overall effort by tying down German troops and grinding away their strength. Foch’s comment was fairer: the Americans “are learning now, rapidly”.

ABOVE LEFT: US TROOPS WITH A 37MM GUN FITTED WITH TELESCOPIC SIGHT IN FIRING POSITION DURING A TRAINING SESSION.


RIGHT: A SHOULDER BADGE FROM A UNIFORM WORN BY A SOLDIER OF US 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION.

FAR RIGHT: BLACK AMERICAN STEVEDORES ATTACHED TO 23RD ENGINEERS ENJOY A SINGSONG, 1918.
One critical difference between the “Hundred Days” (August–November 1918) and earlier Allied offensives was the role of co-ordinator played by Ferdinand Foch as Allied Generalissimo. By ensuring that the efforts of the Allied armies meshed into an overall plan, he avoided the situation that had occurred during the Somme in 1916, when the British and French had often appeared to be fighting separate battles side by side rather than a truly combined offensive. Foch’s relationship with Douglas Haig, who commanded the principal Allied strike force, was crucial. They did not always see eye to eye, but the partnership proved highly effective. This was demonstrated by the plan for the Grand Offensive launched at the end of September 1918. While Pétain was pessimistic, judging that the fighting would continue into 1919, Haig believed that a decisive victory was possible by the end of the year. He successfully urged Foch to extend the original scope of the attack. Foch’s motto was “Tout le monde à la bataille!” (“Everybody into battle!”). He unleashed a series of blows up and down the German positions over a four-day period. First
The Grand Offensive

to act were to be the Franco-American forces that attacked on 26 September, in the Meuse-Argonne area (see pages 166-167). Next in the sequence came two British Armies, Horne’s First and Byng’s Third, kicking off their offensive towards Cambrai on 27 September. This was to be followed on the 28 September by a major attack at Ypres by French, Belgian and British divisions under King Albert of the Belgians, who had the French General Jean-Marie Degoutte as his chief-of-staff. The climactic push would be made on 29 September by Rawlinson’s British Fourth and Debeney’s French First Armies. For the first time, Foch was able to wield the full force of Allied combat power on the Western Front.

As we have seen, Foch expected much of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, but the results were a little disappointing. The attack on the following day was much more significant. British First Army, with Currie’s Canadian Corps in the lead, tackled the formidable defences of the Canal du Nord (the canal connecting the Oise River and the canal Dunkirk-Scheldt). Under the cover of a barrage described by the infantry as “very good”, the Canadians assaulted on a narrow front and then spread out like the fingers of a hand. Third Army also penetrated the German defences, although not as deeply as the Canadians, and by the end of the day Byng and Horne had between them advanced 10km (6 miles) on a frontage of 19km (12 miles). The 27 September attack was, as one historian has commented, “Currie’s operational masterpiece”.

Such were the changed conditions of battle that around Ypres on 28 September, King Albert’s Army Group attacked right across the old Passchendaele battlefield and broke out of the Salient altogether. Plumer’s British Second Army advanced up to 10km (6 miles), a distance that would have been unthinkable 12 months earlier, and on the next day it recaptured Messines Ridge. After an advance of about 14km (9 miles), logistic chaos brought the French and Belgian forces to a halt; food was dropped to forward troops by air, probably the first time in history this had been done. At last the deadlock in Flanders was at an end.

The most difficult task in the Grand Offensive, carrying the Hindenburg Line in the St Quentin sector, had been assigned to Rawlinson’s Fourth Army. It was faced with the problem of crossing a wide strip of defences, including the St Quentin Canal, which was up to 11m (35 ft) wide and 15–20m (50–60ft) deep. The best going was at Bellicourt, where the canal ran through a tunnel, but it was very heavily defended. Preceded by a two-day bombardment, the Australian Corps (reinforced by two American divisions) attacked here but, faced with stiff opposition, it made slow progress. The US 27th and 30th Divisions fought bravely but revealed their inexperience and tactical naivety. The major break-through came a little further south at Bellenglise on the front of Lieutenant General Sir Walter Braithwaite’s British IX Corps. Here, a surprise bombardment was followed by 46th (North Midland) Division attacking straight across the canal. No fewer than 216 heavy guns were concentrated on an attack frontage of only 2,750m (3,000yds). The infantry crossed the channel using lifebelts from Channel steamers, or hopped across the rubble blown into the watercourse, or simply used a bridge captured in the early stages of the battle. By nightfall, these Staffordshire Territorials could boast, in the proud words of their divisional history of “Breaking the Hindenburg Line”.

OPPOSITE: MARK V TANKS OF 8TH TANK BATTALION AND MEN OF 5TH AUSTRALIAN DIVISION WITH GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR, SEPTEMBER 1918. THE TANKS ARE CARRYING “CRIBS”, DESIGNED TO HELP THEM CROSS THE HINDEBURG LINE DEFENCES.

LEFT: PART OF A GERMAN TRENCH NEAR COLOGNE FARM, WHICH WAS PART OF THE FORMIDABLE HINDEBURG LINE DEFENCES NEAR HARGICOURT, 12KM (8 MILES) FROM ST QUENTIN.

ABOVE: A GERMAN PRISONER TAKEN IN THE BATTLE OF THE ST QUENTIN CANAL.

The First World War

THE FINAL BATTLES

Victory in sight

FRI 04 OCT 1918 – MON 11 NOV 1918

With the breaking of the Hindenburg Line, the German Army’s last realistic hope of halting the Allies vanished. At a meeting of the High Command on 1 October 1918, Ludendorff stated that Germany faced “an unavoidable and conclusive defeat”. Events moved rapidly; in Berlin, the Chancellor resigned and was replaced on 3 October by Prince Max of Baden. He was a man of liberal views who presented a very different public face of the German government. Ludendorff had cynically suggested that opposition politicians should be given responsibility in government, blaming them – utterly unfairly – for the defeat: “They should make the peace that must now be made. They made their bed, now they must lie in it!”

Meanwhile, the relentless Allied pressure continued on the Western Front. French First Army took St Quentin on 2 October, and progress was made early in the month by Fifth and Tenth Armies in the Soissons area, and Gouraud’s Fourth Army on the flank of the Americans. Foch, however, was displeased with the slow rate of advance compared to the British. The Allied Generalissimo was ungenerous to his own countrymen. Having born the main burden of the fighting on the Western Front through so much of the war, the French Army was almost played out.

The BEF was in better shape. By this stage its divisions consisted of a mixture of wary veterans and young conscripts, and as the ordinary officers and soldiers began to realize that the end of the war was at last in sight, there was a perceptible rise in morale. Fourth Army cleared the Beaurevoir Line to the rear of the main Hindenburg positions on 4 October. The Germans were forced to abandon Cambrai on 8–9 October, regrouping on the River Selle.

With the breaking of the Hindenburg Line, the German Army’s last realistic hope of halting the Allies vanished. At a meeting of the High Command on 1 October 1918, Ludendorff stated that Germany faced “an unavoidable and conclusive defeat”. Events moved rapidly; in Berlin, the Chancellor resigned and was replaced on 3 October by Prince Max of Baden. He was a man of liberal views who presented a very different public face of the German government. Ludendorff had cynically suggested that opposition politicians should be given responsibility in government, blaming them – utterly unfairly – for the defeat: “They should make the peace that must now be made. They made their bed, now they must lie in it!”

Meanwhile, the relentless Allied pressure continued on the Western Front. French First Army took St Quentin on 2 October, and progress was made early in the month by Fifth and Tenth Armies in the Soissons area, and Gouraud’s Fourth Army on the flank of the Americans. Foch, however, was displeased with the slow rate of advance compared to the British. The Allied Generalissimo was ungenerous to his own countrymen. Having born the main burden of the fighting on the Western Front through so much of the war, the French Army was almost played out.

The BEF was in better shape. By this stage its divisions consisted of a mixture of wary veterans and young conscripts, and as the ordinary officers and soldiers began to realize that the end of the war was at last in sight, there was a perceptible rise in morale. Fourth Army cleared the Beaurevoir Line to the rear of the main Hindenburg positions on 4 October. The Germans were forced to abandon Cambrai on 8–9 October, regrouping on the River Selle.

First, Third and Fourth Armies followed up, while in the Lens area, Fifth Army (Birdwood) was able to push forward about 16km (10 miles) as the defenders retreated. Having untangled their logistic knot, King Albert’s Army Group began to advance in Flanders on 14 October, with the ever-reliable Plumer’s British Second Army in the lead. Six days later, Albert’s troops reached the River Lys, where there was another

ABOVE: Cambrai was liberated by the Canadians in October 1918. In this picture the buildings of the city are still burning.

BELOW: Prince Max of Baden, photographed before the First World War. He was German Chancellor for little over a month in October-November 1918.

BELOW: Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States, speaking from a podium in 1917.

President Wilson and the “Fourteen Points”

Woodrow Wilson was elected US president in 1912 and re-elected for a second four-year term in 1916. He proposed his “Fourteen Points” in January 1918. These included an end to secret diplomacy, self-determination for nations and a post-war League of Nations to keep the peace. These idealistic principles for ending the war and organizing international relations were unrealistic (and opposed by Britain and France) but gave Wilson huge moral authority at the Paris Peace Conference. However, the 1919 Treaty of Versailles only partially reflected the Fourteen Points. Isolationist opposition prevented the USA from joining his cherished League of Nations.
The Final Battles

TOP RIGHT: Canadian troops in the streets of Mons in 1918.

ABOVE RIGHT: The German fleet, interned at a British naval base, scuttled itself in June 1919. Here SMS Bayern is sinking.

FAR RIGHT: The Allied representatives (Foch is second from the right) stand in front of the railway carriage on 11 November 1918 in which the Armistice had been signed moments before.

RIGHT: A New Zealand "lemon squeezer" hat.

The Return to Mons

On the morning of 11 November 1918, 3rd Canadian Division entered Mons, after encountering stiff resistance from German machine gunners and snipers. It was a sober coincidence that the forces of the British Empire fought one of their last Western Front actions in the town where the original BEF had its baptism of fire in August 1914. In later years, the Canadian Corps Commander Sir Arthur Currie was unjustly criticized for causing unnecessary Canadian deaths by ordering the attack on Mons so close to the end of the war.

The Germans desperately sought a way out of the war before they were overtaken by military catastrophe. Prince Max appealed to the US President, Woodrow Wilson, on 4 October to end the war on the basis of the Fourteen Points, and this was followed by the transformation – at least in theory – of Germany into a constitutional monarchy. General Wilhelm Groener replaced Ludendorff in late October. While some elements of the German Army continued to fight effectively, if unavailingly, others in effect went on strike, and ominous signs of revolution appeared on the home front. Part of the German Navy mutinied on 29 October when ordered to sea. Gradually Germany’s allies – Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria – collapsed in defeat as the Allies advanced in Italy, the Middle East and the Balkans.

Foch launched another major offensive on 4 November. Haig’s First, Third and Fourth Armies won a major victory on the line of the Sambre and French First Army captured Guise, while in the Argonne, the Germans finally conceded defeat and withdrew. French Fourth Army and the Americans pursued, US forces reaching outskirts of the key city of Sedan on the Meuse by 7 November. Across the entire front the Allies moved forward. In a throwback to an older form of war, the New Zealanders captured Le Quesnoy, a walled town, using scaling ladders. With his armies beaten, and Germany sliding into revolution, the Kaiser abdicated on 9 November, the same day as Prince Max resigned in favour of a moderate Social Democrat. Two days later, at 11am, an armistice between Germany and the Allies came into effect. The war was over and the Allies were victorious.

THE FINAL BATTLES: 1918

THE FINAL BATTLES

1918

Farthest German advance, 17 July

German defence line

Frontline, 15 October

Armistice line, 11 November

173

The Final Battles

THE FINAL BATTLES

1918

Farthest German advance, 17 July

German defence line

Frontline, 15 October

Armistice line, 11 November

173
Conflict and turmoil continued across Europe for months after the Armistice. A rumbling guerrilla war in Ireland led in 1921 to independence from Britain for all but Ulster. Revolutionary violence took place in various parts of Germany, while the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires fell apart. In Russia, there was an increasingly brutal civil war underway as various White (anti-Communist) groups, supported by British, French and American forces, sought to reverse the result of the Bolshevik coup of November 1917. The Russian Civil War was to end in 1922 with the victory of Lenin’s Bolsheviks. An attempt to export the revolution by armed force to eastern and central Europe was thwarted, however, by the victory of the Poles against the Russians in the Battle of Warsaw in 1920.

Formally, the war with Germany was ended on 28 June 1919, with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. This stripped Germany of various territories, forced it to pay reparations of £6,600 million, restricted the size of its armed forces and obliged it to admit responsibility for the outbreak of the war. The Treaty was denounced as a harsh peace that left Germany thirsting for revenge and led inevitably to the Second World War. In reality, the terms were not as savage as those imposed by Germany on defeated Russia at Brest-Litovsk in 1918. Given the scale of the war, Germany’s culpability for its outbreak, and the bitterness in France and Britain in 1919, the terms were not unduly harsh. The main problem was a failure by the victorious Allies to enforce the Treaty. Versailles soon lost moral authority in the eyes of many in Britain, and steps were taken to revise the settlement in Germany’s favour even before Hitler came to power in 1933.
1933. The feeling that Germany had been badly treated influenced public opinion in Britain and fed into the policy of appeasement in the 1930s. The Great Depression, which began in 1929 and helped to destroy the German Weimar Republic and contributed to the rise of the Nazi regime, was at least as important a factor as Versailles in the origins of the Second World War. The new states created in Eastern and Central Europe such as Poland and Romania tended to move towards authoritarian rule, although in Czechoslovakia democracy survived until destroyed by Hitler in 1939.

Although Britain’s Empire reached its greatest size after the war, British power had been damaged. No longer would the dominions (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) automatically support Britain, and economic weakness was to undermine the British military. Similarly, France’s position in Europe was weaker in 1919 than it had been in 1914. It no longer had an alliance with Russia, and understandings with the newly emerged states on Germany’s eastern flank such as Poland were a poor substitute. Britain and the USA, meanwhile, proved fickle friends. The wartime alliance rapidly unravelled, and when in 1923 the French did try to enforce the terms of Versailles by occupying the Ruhr, London and Washington did not support them. The USA retreated into isolation, its people disillusioned by the experience of breaching its long-held tradition of distancings itself from European power politics.

After 1918, the French abandoned the costly cult of the offensive, and instead adopted a defensive mentality epitomized by the construction of the Maginot Line, an updated version of the Verdun defences of 1916, along the French-German border. The German Blitzkrieg of 1940 apparently showed the folly of this idea, but for the most part the military methods so painfully developed during 1914–18 proved to be the foundations of modern warfare, improved upon but not substantially changed in the Second World War and subsequent conflicts.

After the Armistice, people across Europe struggled to come to terms with the vast loss of life. There were 1 million from the British Empire dead; 1,400,000 French; 1,800,000 Germans and 115,000 Americans. In addition there were those badly wounded in body, mind or both; over three-quarters of a million in France alone. People in the victor states began to question the belief that war was a sensible or moral way of settling international disputes. Instead, pacifism grew in influence, alongside – in Britain and the USA at least – the erroneous idea that the war had been “futile”. Everywhere the attitude was “never again”. Germany was the exception to this. Western Front veteran Hitler channelled the thirst for revenge, the belief that the German army had not been defeated in 1918, but rather had been betrayed, and in 1939 once again took the German nation – and hence Europe, and eventually the world – to war.

The years 1911–1991 can be seen as one period bounded by the beginning of the First World War and the end of the Cold War. The year 1918 saw the collapse of the old monarchical regimes and the rise of the dictators that led to the Second World War. With Germany defeated, the USSR fell out with Britain and America, its erstwhile allies against Hitler, and a 50-year Cold War began. The collapse of the USSR and the return to a multipolar world brought this “Short Twentieth Century” to an end.
Enjoyed this book?

Exclusive offer for new

Try 3 issues for just £5*

*This offer entitles new UK direct debit subscribers to receive their first three issues for £5. After these issues, subscribers will then pay £17.95 every six issues. Subscribers can cancel this subscription at any time. New subscriptions will start from the next available issue. Offer code ZGGZIN must be quoted to receive this special subscriptions price. Direct debit guarantee available on request.

** This is a US subscription offer. The USA issue rate is based on an annual subscription price of £50 for 13 issues, which is equivalent to approx $78 at the time of writing compared with the newsstand price of $129.87 for 13 issues ($9.99 per issue). Your subscription will start from the next available issue.
Making history accessible and fun

Great leaders
From the War of the Roses to the great politicians of the modern age

Fantastical legends
Look at the truth behind the people that have made our folklore legendary

Historic events
Each issue is packed with insightful information about the world’s biggest events

subscribers to...

ALL ABOUT HISTORY

Try 3 issues for £5 in the UK*
or just $6 per issue in the USA**
(saving 40% off the newsstand price)

For amazing offers please visit
www.imaginesubs.co.uk/hist
Quote code ZGGZIN

Or telephone UK 0844 848 8408 Overseas +44 (0) 1795 592 867
The First World War

CREDITS

There are a number of general histories that cover the Western Front, including:

  
- Family snapshots, A Short History of World War I (1951).

For short biographies:


Two excellent books cover the French Army:


There is much relevant material in:


For the British Army:


For the British:


There are a number of general histories that cover the Western Front, including:


For short biographies:

- James Edmonds, A Short History of World War I (1951).


There are a number of general histories that cover the Western Front, including:


For short biographies:

- James Edmonds, A Short History of World War I (1951).

There are a number of general histories that cover the Western Front, including:


For short biographies:

- James Edmonds, A Short History of World War I (1951).

There are a number of general histories that cover the Western Front, including:


For short biographies:

- James Edmonds, A Short History of World War I (1951).
THE EVENTS, PEOPLE AND BATTLES THAT SHAPED THE GREAT WAR

ON THE FRONTLINE
Learn about the battles and offensives fought during the First World War on all fronts, at land and at sea

BEHIND THE SCENES
Discover life behind the scenes including the role of women, literary influences, life in the trenches and more

HISTORICAL ARTEFACTS
Experience first-hand accounts of the war with personal letters and diary entries, official reports and tactical maps

www.imaginebookshop.co.uk