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Reinstating Haig's Reputation: Did He Serve the British Army Well?



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Abbreviations

Commander-in-Chief (CIC)

Headquarters (HQ)

British Expeditionary Force (BEF)

General Head Quarters (GHQ)

Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO)

Cover Image

John Singer Sargent, *Douglas Haig, 1st Earl Haig, 1861 - 1928. Soldier*, [online]
<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/2646/douglas-haig-1st-earl-haig-1861-1928-soldier-study-portrait-general-officers-world-war-i-1914-1918> , [Accessed 27/03/2020].

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Abstract

Douglas Haig is a controversial figure in British history. He is often personally blamed for sending thousands of men to their death at the Battle of the Somme and refusing to adapt his tactics in line with modern warfare. This further led on to the assumption that he did not care about the men he commanded. The objective of this dissertation is to challenge those perceptions by reviewing Haig's actions as a Corps Commander and later as Field Marshal. Following on from revisiting the war years, Haig's record in relation to what he did to help veterans will be assessed also.

Introduction

Douglas Haig went to France in 1914 commanding roughly half of the British Expeditionary Force. During the summer and autumn, he fought a series of defensive and offensive engagements against the German Army. He successfully withdrew his men from Belgium during the Great Retreat, thus avoiding encirclement and destruction. Despite the odds against him, Haig maintained the effectiveness of his forces through 1914 and 1915, refusing to buckle to the might of German military power, through resilience, optimism and effective strategy.

The weight on his shoulders did not lighten once he was promoted to Field Marshal. The Somme was not his first challenge of the war but was his first as leader of the British Expeditionary Force. As leader of the British Army, the first challenge Haig encountered was not a military matter like planning a battle or responding to a German offensive, rather it was a political and diplomatic dilemma between the Anglo-French alliance. This dilemma led to the Battle of the Somme in 1916, which was instigated to support the French defence of Verdun. During this colossal battle on the Somme, Haig welcomed tactical innovations which helped to give him the edge over his opponent, such as methodological and technical improvements to infantry and artillery deployment. These were important developments for the army, despite its heavy losses at the battle. At the same time, he helped to preserve British and French relations.

His men served him bravely and loyally during The Great War. In the years following the Armistice, Haig wanted to return the favour to his army. He wanted to make sure they had enough money coming in to support themselves and their families. He wanted to find work for the men across the country. Finally, he wanted the men to unite together and work for each other's common interests in the form of the Royal British Legion.

Chapter One: The Corps Commander

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be very easy to read history backwards. General Haig and his participation in the First World War are no exception to this. It was on the 10th December 1915 that Haig was assigned Commander-in-Chief (CIC) of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), around halfway through The Great War. It is as Field Marshal that Haig is best remembered today but what was his record like as a Corps Commander? In this section, the aim will be to present an analysis of Haig's abilities and decisions in the early weeks and months of the war by paying close attention to The Battle of Mons followed by The Great Retreat and then The First Battle of Ypres.

On the 4th August 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany after the British ultimatum for Germany to withdraw troops from Belgium on the 3rd August had been rejected. Ten days later the BEF landed in Northern France and advanced into Belgium to repel the Germans alongside her French allies. At this stage in the war, the opposing armies had not prepared defensive positions across the frontline. The Schlieffen Plan was Germany's strategy to knock France out of the war by invading Belgium and Luxembourg and capturing Paris, as well as the northern French coast, along with encircling the French Army on the German border at Alsace and Lorraine. This would mean that Germany could focus all her forces on Russia on the Eastern Front. The Schlieffen Plan was centred around a war of movement, not stationary trench warfare¹.

The British Army was not in itself large enough to conduct such large-scale operations in 1914, so chose to assist the French with their strategy, known as Plan XVII². Plan XVII was not as ambitious as the Schlieffen Plan, as it initially only aimed at retaking ground lost in the Franco

¹ The Great War, *The Schlieffen Plan - And Why It Failed* I THE GREAT WAR Special feat. *AlternateHistoryHub*. (01/09/2015). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHeMPV5VDR4> . [Accessed. 04/01/2020].

² Hew Strachen, *Pre-War Planning (Great Britain)*, (Last Updated 07/02/2018). https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/pre-war_military_planning_great_britain . [Accessed 04/01/2020].

Prussian War of 1870-1871. It later attempted to enter the German industrial heartlands and capture vital factories and resources invaluable to the German war effort³.

One of the key weaknesses in the French plan was that it did not expect a German attack through Belgium, thus France had not assigned any large numbers of troops to their northern border; this was where the main thrust of the German attack would take place. France and Britain were forced to respond to the German offensive by short-term strategies, in contrast to their adversary who had been working on the Schlieffen Plan since 1905⁴. This put Britain and France at a major disadvantage. Along with Sir Henry Wilson (in charge of the BEF's General Head Quarters (GHQ)), Sir John French (the contemporary CIC of the BEF), agreed that once they reached France the BEF would form up their battle line near Mons, 60 -70 miles east of Amiens⁵. In the strategic response to the German advance, Haig had no influence over Sir John French's decision to send the BEF east of Amiens, and in retrospect this decision probably over-stretched the nascent British supply lines.

I Corps at Mons

In 1914 the BEF was split between I Corps under Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig, and II Corps under Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, with Sir John French in overall command. Upon reaching Mons and the surrounding area, French assigned Dorrien to take up position from the Conde Canal extending to Villers-St Ghislain. Haig's I Corps was stationed on Dorrien's right flank, as well as holding troops in the rear⁶. French recorded in his memoirs that after meeting with General Lanrezac (commanding the 5th French Army) on 23rd August, French reconnaissance determined that the whole allied front line was in jeopardy. The 3rd and 4th French Armies were retiring, and the 5th Army was making rapid preparations to withdraw westwards as soon as possible⁷. Sir John French began making preparations of his own to withdraw the British Army to a more defensible position in line with the French but needed

³ The Loyal Edmonton Regiment Military Museum, *Schlieffen Plan and Plan XVII: Aug 1914*, Last updated N/A. <https://www.lemuseum.org/first-world-war-1914-18/1914/schlieffen-plan-and-plan-xvii-aug-1914> . [Accessed. 04/01/2020].

⁴ John Terraine, *Douglas Haig The Educated Soldier*. (London: Cassell&Co, Republished 2000). p75.

⁵ *ibid.* p 77.

⁶ Field Marshal Viscount French, *1914*. (London: Constable and company, 1919). p 60.

⁷ *ibid.* p 64.

Haig's I Corps to support Dorrien's retreat. In this action, French stated of I Corps 'They were making an excellent stand to cover the retirement of the 2nd Corps'⁸ he also stated 'The situation of the 1st Corps was excellent, and the artillery positions were well chosen. From where we stood we could observe the effect of our fire. It was very accurate,'⁹. In his memoirs, French does not have a bad word to say about Haig or how I Corps was led during the Battle of Mons, especially when it is taken into account that the 3rd, 4th and 5th French Armies were retreating, as well as the British II Corps, from a seemingly unstoppable German Army of eighty seven divisions. Against them there were only six British divisions, two of which (I Corps) provided vital support for II Corps to withdraw to safety and avoid destruction, so it is justifiable to accept Gerard J. De Groot's assessment that both Haig and Smith-Dorrien were competent Corps Commanders¹⁰. In summary Haig was ordered to cover Dorrien's retreat from Mons, which he successfully carried out, only sustaining light casualties to his command¹¹, as well as allowing the majority of II Corps to withdraw mostly intact, suggesting the qualities of a good commander.

The Great Retreat

Following on from the climax of the Battle of Mons, the period known as The Great Retreat began. From 24th August to 5th September, the Allied armies of Britain and France fought a series of defensive battles and engagements on their retreat towards Paris. During part of The Great Retreat, Sir John French, Sir Archibald Murray (Chief of Staff) and Sir Henry Wilson (who was running GHQ) lost all enthusiasm, hope and optimism in the tactics they deployed, as the French plan had failed catastrophically¹². GHQ became increasingly out of touch with the two Corps Commanders, to the extent that the orders they were receiving were impossible to carry out resulting in Haig and Dorrien having to rely on each other and increasingly on themselves to survive, during this period of confusion¹³. As an example, Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien fell back towards Le Cateau, where he set up defensive positions and awaited the

⁸ Field Marshal Viscount French, *1914*. p 66.

⁹ *ibid.* p 66.

¹⁰ Gerard J. De Groot, *Douglas Haig 1861-1928*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p 158.

¹¹ Field Marshal Viscount French, *1914*. p 66.

¹² John Terraine, *Douglas Haig The Educated Soldier*. p84

¹³ *ibid.* p 84.

German army. At 02.00 on 24th August, Haig was ordered by GHQ to fall back to Bavay, take up his own defensive positions and recover the retreat of II Corps¹⁴. Haig points out in his diary that he was much further to the east than GHQ thought. As well as this, that order would require him to pass through Maubeuge, which he states he was unable to do as this would mean he would be marching I Corps into the German Army¹⁵.



Figure 1. Retreating British troops from Mons, August 1914, [online]
<http://www.radcliffeontrentww1.org.uk/a-timeline-1/retreat-from-mons/> , [Accessed 13/04/2020].

Instead of following GHQ orders, Haig spent all night driving to various different positions in I Corps sector, issuing orders to his subordinates, telling them to prepare to withdraw but telling some to garrison particular strategic positions until the retreat was ready to move¹⁶. In his book *Field Marshal Earl Haig*, Brigadier General John Charteris described the state of I

¹⁴ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*, eds Gary Sheffield and John Bourne. (London: BCA, 2005). p 62.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p 62.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p 62-63.

Corps on 24th August ‘When the columns were permitted to halt - whether for a few minutes or for longer – the men threw themselves down by the roadside and were asleep almost before their bodies touched the ground¹⁷.’ By this account, the men who Haig commanded were utterly exhausted. Fighting a large battle to cover the retreat of II Corps (as per orders from GHQ) at this stage would have been only to the detriment of the BEF rather than to its advantage. More to Haig’s credit, Charteris writes ‘Throughout the whole Retreat, Haig shared the hardships of the troops. He took no longer hours of rest than he could afford to allow the men¹⁸.’ Haig ignored the orders of GHQ and instead chose to lead on his own initiative, whilst commanding an exhausted force and taking little rest himself, yet still escaping the grasp of the German Army. A commander of any less determination and quality of leadership would have most likely yielded to the tremendous pressure that lay upon him and been defeated by the Germans. As this was not Haig’s fate, it seems only fair to acknowledge at the least that Haig was a competent Corps Commander, but one could take it a step further and feasibly argue that Haig was a brilliant Corps Commander.

By 25th August, I Corps had fought very few major battles. I Corps had faced various rear-guard engagements and played a defining role in Dorrien’s retreat from Mons, but this did not amount to the same level of combat experienced by the French armies or II Corps. As demonstrated above, a good case has been made for Haig’s competence during the Great Retreat and fighting in a support role. In order to convincingly argue whether or not Haig was a good Corps Commander, one must observe his attributes and decisions in the thick of battle. This was soon demonstrated on 19th October when the First Battle of Ypres began, Haig’s first major battle of the war.

First Battle of Ypres

The First Battle of Ypres is often overlooked in modern scholarship as it is overshadowed by the Second and Third Battles. There are various gaps in the historiography around the first battle. Modern scholarship discusses key events such as the Kaiser visiting the front, the charge

¹⁷ Brigadier General John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*. (London: Cassell and Company, 1929). p 92. Charteris was General Haig’s chief intelligence officer from 1915-1918.

¹⁸ Brigadier General John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*, p 93.

of the 2nd Battalion Royal Worcestershire regiment at the defence of Gheluvelt or Haig's ride up the Menin Road. But few scholars have pieced these events together to tell the full story of First Ypres; without that narrative, obtaining an opinion on Haig's leadership abilities is not possible. For this reason, analysis of primary source material is key to understanding the course of the battle and gathering an overview of the leadership during the battle, with a focus on Haig.

On Monday 19th October, Haig made his way to Sir John French's headquarters (HQ) to receive his orders for the Battle of Ypres. French's orders were for I Corps to advance to capture Bruges, followed by a thrust to force the Germans back to Ghent. However, if the Germans moved troops which could threaten IV Corps then it was up to the commander of I Corps (Haig) to decide whether or not to assist IV Corps¹⁹. This leaves a number of factors to take into account. Firstly, I Corps was located fifty miles away from Bruges, their first objective. Fifty miles is a significant amount of distance to cover, especially when it involved moving artillery, ammunition, food, hospitals, men, horses, everything the army needed to survive. On its own that would have been a logistical challenge, but that was providing I Corps beat the Germans who were entrenched just two miles in front of them. The second consideration is how were I Corps supposed to break through the German line? French did not explain how Haig was supposed to achieve a breakthrough, instead French was looking so far ahead in the plan that he paid little attention to planning the encounters on the first day.

Elements of I Corps started their attack on Wednesday 21st October with delays. The attack was meant to start at 07.00, however, due to French Territorial troops blocking the roads, the advance of the 1st and 2nd Division were delayed for two hours²⁰. Haig wrote in his diary that his infantry faced a hard fight but saw initial success, pushing the Germans out of Poelcappelle village as well as securing Passchendaele. However, while Haig's forces were making progress, the French Cavalry guarding I Corps' left flank, was ordered to withdraw, leaving I Corps exposed. What further stalled the advance of I Corps, was Sir Henry Rawlinson's plea for help, stating he could not hold his position without reinforcements²¹. Upon hearing this news, Haig was forced to halt his advance and support Rawlinson. Despite French not explaining or planning

¹⁹ Field Marshal Viscount French, *1914*. p 226.

²⁰ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 73.

²¹ *ibid.* p 74.

how to break through the German frontline, Haig succeeded. Haig's offensive on 21st October was not halted by the Germans ahead of his position, but by the German attacks on his colleagues. At the same time, I Corps under Haig were seeing success at Ypres when no other British commander could advance and some were even struggling to hold their own positions, which prevented Haig from pushing on with his attack. Brian Bond and Nigel Cave referred to Haig's military history as a cavalryman in their book '*Haig A Re-Appraisal 80 Years on*'. When discussing the campaigns of 1914, they imply that his cavalry experiences held him back from achieving success in trench warfare²². However, the events of 21st October show that Haig was capable of beating an entrenched enemy despite his cavalry background.

The First Battle of Ypres is often seen as a defensive battle for the British, French and Belgians. This perception is only true after the end of 21st October. The next major date of the battle, which is often discussed in modern scholarship, is Saturday 31st October. The 31st was one of the most precarious days of the war for the BEF. The German Army had punched a hole in the British line but failed to fully exploit the opening, after the 2nd Battalion Royal Worcestershire Regiment counter attacked the Germans and retook the village of Gheluvelt²³.

Haig's Ride Down the Menin Road

Upon hearing of the break in the line at Gheluvelt, Haig mounted his horse along with his staff officers and proceeded down the Menin Road. 'I got on my horse and rode forward to see if I could do anything to organise stragglers and push them forward to check the Enemy'²⁴. This decision has been both praised and criticised by historians. On the one hand, John Terraine supports Haig's ride, giving the impression in his book *The First World War 1914-1918*, that Haig made a contribution towards the recapturing of Gheluvelt²⁵. On the other hand, Denis Winter argues Haig rode down the Menin Road to enhance his prestige and further his career prospects²⁶. Both of these different arguments provide ground for criticism. Haig did not play

²² Brian Bond, Nigel Cave, *Haig A Re-Appraisal 80 Years on*, (Pen and Sword, Yorkshire, UK, 2009), p 54-55.

²³ Johnathon Boff, *Haig's Enemy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). p 45.

²⁴ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 76.

²⁵ John Terraine, *The First World War 1914-1918*. (London: Papermac, 1984). p 42-43.

²⁶ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command A Reassessment*. (Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military Classics, 2004). p 36.

any role in the retaking of Gheluvelt. The counterattack was orchestrated by Major Edmund Hankey, who was not ordered to retake the village²⁷. This demonstrates that Terraine has over emphasised Haig's role during the crucial moments of 31st October. Winter's argument that Haig was attempting to improve his image, with the hope that it would enhance his chances of promotion, is also flawed. Brigadier General John Charteris recalled the events of the day in his book *Field-Marshal Earl Haig*, 'Five staff officers had been killed outright. The whole chain of command between the General Officer Commanding and the troops seemed irretrievably destroyed'²⁸. Followed by 'The whole of I Corps was utterly worn out: formations were intermixed; divisional staffs were still disorganized by the loss of so many of their senior officers, and there were no reserves'²⁹. By this first-hand account, it appears very clear that the situation of the BEF was close to breaking point. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that Haig's motives at the time of his ride, was to promote self-image. A more realistic explanation for Haig's ride, would be that he wanted to go forward and lead his men in battle in the traditional style.

Regardless of Haig's reasoning to ride down the Menin Road on 31st October, the most important fact must be addressed, what impact did it have? It is difficult to say with confidence whether or not it was the right decision to make. Haig does not record any orders issued to troops whilst riding down the Menin Road, neither did Charteris. This suggests that Haig did not do anything of any significant effect whilst away from his Headquarters. However, Charteris claimed that the ride provided hope to the exhausted men of the BEF³⁰. Considering that the British Army did not collapse within the hour that Haig was absent from his Headquarters, and that troops were encouraged to see him amongst them, it is justifiable to argue that there were positive implications from his ride, suggesting that it was not the wrong thing to do.

²⁷ History West Midlands, *31st October 1914 - Stemming the German tide - Battle of Gheluvelt*, [Last updated 19/10/2017.] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kcntKf8ZQI> . [Accessed 15/03/2020].

²⁸ Brigadier General John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*. p 119.

²⁹ *ibid.* p 120.

³⁰ *ibid.* p 119.

Conclusion to Chapter One

Throughout 1914, Haig consistently prevented the destruction of I Corps. Under his leadership, the men of II Corps escaped from Mons, I Corps survived encirclement at Bavay as well as holding the Germans east of Ypres; all while commanding a force numerically inferior to the German Army. This is not to say however, that all Haig's decisions clearly benefited I Corps. His actions on 31st October boosted the morale of those who saw him ride, but Haig would have had more control and impact from his Headquarters. Outside of his Headquarters, he was only able to control the men he could shout to. Inside his Headquarters, Haig had control over larger numbers of men through communication lines. This could have helped I Corps more than him being out on the road. Nevertheless, Haig remained determined to fight the war, spending all of his time with his army and sharing various hardships his men endured. With these factors taken into account, one would have good reason to argue Haig was a talented commander, whose positive contribution served the British Army well in the early years of the war.

Chapter Two: Field Marshal on The Somme

General Haig inherited a very different battlefield than his predecessor. Sir John French arrived in France in 1914 with the task of repelling the German Army, which was rapidly advancing through Belgium. By the time Haig was appointed Field Marshal in late 1915, the battle lines between the Germans and the Entente (on the Western Front), had already been drawn, and had not moved any great distance for more than a year. To win the war, someone had to break the stalemate of the trenches. For Haig, this was to come in a series of large-scale offensives, lasting from the summer of 1916 until the Armistice in 1918. The Battle of the Somme in 1916, was General Haig's first major offensive operation as Field Marshal. Both Haig and his army were to learn many invaluable lessons throughout this campaign, but at a terrible cost.

Political context

The Battle of the Somme was not intended to be the colossal battle that it turned into. Haig wanted the Somme to act as a feint, to draw German divisions out of Flanders, where General Plumer with heavy support, could attack around the Ypres salient and overwhelm the German defences³¹. The original number of British divisions stationed on the Somme supports this standpoint. Fifteen British divisions were intended to attack German positions³². This was not a large enough force to divert German troops away from Flanders, but it was not meant to do this alone, as the French commander, Field Marshal Joffre, had promised Haig forty-five divisions for the battle³³. The problem came when the French did not honour their promise. By 1st July, the French were supplying just five divisions for the attack, with a further six in reserve³⁴. Perhaps Joffre would have provided more of his divisions had the German attack on the French at Verdun not continued, but it is more likely that he promised those numbers just to

³¹ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 188.

³² Denis Winter, *Haig's Command*. p 55.

³³ *ibid.* p 55.

³⁴ Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War Germany and Austria – Hungary 1914-1918*. (London: Arnold, 1998). p 199.

encourage British involvement³⁵. The Battle of Verdun lasted from 21st February until 18th December 1916, and Joffre made his promise of forty-five divisions to Haig in May 1916, so already knew he was not going to be able to supply so many divisions³⁶. For Haig's grand strategy to work, he needed to be successful on the Somme in drawing German divisions away from Flanders. Without the support promised by the French, Haig was forced to use British troops to fill their place, which was not part of the plan agreed between the French and British high command. Haig's reputation was later tarnished due to the sheer numbers of British troops who died on the Somme in 1916. A later nickname of his, The Butcher of the Somme, is still used in the National Curriculum, tainting his reputation amongst school pupils who are only given limited background knowledge of the war and often grow up with this inaccurate perception of him³⁷. The nickname is in fact undeserved, as he was let down by the French.

Furthermore, Haig was led into a sense of uncertainty over the French ability to resolve the Battle of Verdun. On deciding when to begin the Battle of the Somme, Haig noted in his diary 'The moment I mentioned 15th August, Joffre at once got very excited and shouted that 'The French Army would cease to exist, if we did nothing till then!'³⁸. What is undisputed is that the fighting at Verdun was horrendous. Part of what made it such a dreadful battle, was that the German Army was not aiming to seize any territory of strategic importance but instead focusing on wearing down the French Army³⁹. Erich von Falkenhayn, the German general leading the attack on Verdun, stated to General Schmidt von Konbelsdorf that 'The object is not to defeat but to annihilate France'⁴⁰. However, Haig was drawn into a sense of uncertainty because although the French were holding their ground, they refused to ask for direct British help with the battle, and instead wanted the British to attack elsewhere along the Western Front. If the French position at the Battle of Verdun was as dire as Joffre conveyed to Haig, why did Joffre not request British divisions to fight at the battle to help relieve the French Army? This was not

³⁵ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command*. p 55.

³⁶ *ibid.* p 55.

³⁷ Greg Auger, Haig, *Butcher of the Somme*, published N/A, <http://www.markedbyteachers.com/gcse/history/haig-butcher-of-the-somme.html> , [Accessed 10/04/2020].

³⁸ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 188.

³⁹ Bryn Hammond, *Cambrai 1917 The myth of the first great tank battle*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009). p 8.

⁴⁰ Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918 Kriegsrüstung and Kriegswirtschaft*. (2 Vols, E, S, Mittler and Sohn, Berlin, Germany, 1930). p 277.

unprecedented however, because it happened at the First Battle of Ypres, when French troops helped fill the gaps in the British line. From 18th to 24th October 1914, British troops were manning the whole salient, but were forced to retire almost a third of their positions to French divisions on the 25th October due to exhaustion⁴¹. At the First Battle of Ypres, Sir John French noted that Britain's dwindling supply of ammunition was becoming increasingly concerning to him, as it hindered the British Army's ability to fight⁴². Ammunition was not the only concern during the battle. Haig recorded in his diary 'He [Sir John French] was most pleasant, but he had no reinforcements to send me'⁴³. When Denis Winter discusses the situation of the French Army in his book *Haig's Command A Reassessment*, he quotes Henry Wilson who stated 'The French were never so rich in guns and men'⁴⁴. His reasoning to support this statement was that the Germans put all their fittest men (aged twenty) in to the line at Verdun, when the French on the other hand, were able to introduce their fittest men over the space of the year. He further states that France maintained fourteen fresh divisions at the start of the battle, which later increased to eighteen divisions⁴⁵. When all these factors are taken into account, a picture starts to emerge. The French position at Verdun was not as desperate as Joffre implied to Haig. The French maintained the advantage in field guns and men, they did not need British support to fill gaps in the line, and they were holding back the Germans. In comparison, the British cry for help at First Ypres was genuine, as ammunition was low, and casualties were high, whereas the French call was not as desperate.

The price the British Army paid on the Somme was disturbingly high. Even before the battle began, in April 1916 the British Army estimates were that forty-one thousand men were being lost each month, despite no major battle raging on⁴⁶. Losing forty-one thousand men a month is a human tragedy, but when compared to the casualties sustained on the Somme, it is understandable to see why the battle was so devastating to the nation. Around four hundred-

⁴¹ Arthur Banks, *A Military Atlas of the First World War*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975). pp 78-79.

⁴² Field Marshal Viscount French, *1914*. p 241.

⁴³ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 76.

⁴⁴ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command*. p 51.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p 51.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p 51.

thousand men were killed, wounded or missing at the close of the battle⁴⁷. No one could have foreseen how costly the battle turned out to be, however, if casualties could have been limited, then efforts would have been made to improve the chances of survival for troops. This is why Haig wanted to postpone the Battle of the Somme for as long as possible. There were many officers and men who were inadequately trained but only by 15th August would they be ready to see action and be effective⁴⁸. Unfortunately for the men (and their families) who saw action on the Somme, Haig had conceded to General Joffre's demands, to fight the battle from the start of July. This indicates that Haig does not deserve the level of criticism he receives for the Battle of the Somme, as he was unconvinced that the battle would result in a break-out but had agreed to lead the offensive in order to maintain positive relations between the two major Entente allies⁴⁹. What further exacerbated the situation, was that Haig did not have the amount of men he had planned for, and the men he had to use to make up for the lack of French troops, were still under-trained and not battle-ready. With these factors in mind, it is unjust to argue that Haig was a bad Field Marshal at the Battle of the Somme, as the politics for instigating the battle were out of his control, and the much-needed French support was mostly withdrawn, yet Haig had to continue with the battle.

Cavalry success

Despite the fact that Haig did not want to fight the Battle of the Somme, he was pressured into it by the French and did not have the men he needed, nevertheless his leadership during the battle should still be examined to help determine his qualities as a Field Marshal. Although Haig did not expect a breakthrough on the Somme, he did make preparations to exploit one if it emerged. General Rawlinson was to lead the first phase of the attack and try to break the German line. Once a sizeable enough gap had been created, General Gough, commanding the reserve army (which was made up of infantry and a large body of cavalry), would charge through the gap

⁴⁷ Nick Lloyd, *Passchendaele A New History*, (Milton Keynes: Penguin Books, 2017). p 20-21.

⁴⁸ J. H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*, (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1919). p 19.
Lieut. Colonel J. H. Boraston was private secretary to General Haig.

⁴⁹ John Keegan, *The First World War*, (London: Hutchinson, 1999). p 299.

and capitalize on German disorganisation and chaos⁵⁰. Haig was planning for a success. If the British Army had broken through the German line without a reserve army to take full advantage of the breakthrough, then the Germans would have easily retreated a few miles and constructed a new line of defence. This would have made fighting the Battle of the Somme a pointless engagement. Haig's emphasis on cavalry was well founded. Cavalry could advance faster than infantry could retreat. Although cavalry had not performed well in the previous years of the war, this did not mean that they were completely obsolete. In the future battles of Cambrai 1917 and the Second Battle of the Somme 1918, cavalry was to play a significant support role to tanks⁵¹. Haig recognised the potential of the tank before they had proved their worth in battle. On 14th April 1916, Haig wanted one-hundred and fifty tanks ready for 1st June but was told that was not possible⁵². This meant that he had to make do with what he had available at the time, in the case of the Somme, that meant men on horseback.

⁵⁰ The Western Front Association, *The Battle of the Somme reassessed*, (26/03/2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxS9GhiQ6kI&t=2345s>, [Accessed 26/03/2020].

⁵¹ National Army Museum, *The First World War Cavalry on the Western Front*, published N/A, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/cavalry-western-front>, [Accessed 26/03/2020].

⁵² Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 184.



Figure 2. Earnest Brooks, *Secunderabad Brigade, The Battle of The Somme, Battle of Bazentin Ridge 14-17 July*. [online] <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/search?query=q821&pageSize=>, [Accessed 12/04/2020].

Unfortunately for the British, the big breakthrough they had planned and hoped for, did not happen. However, there were smaller areas of the line where German resistance broke down, which provided the opportunity for cavalry to seize the initiative. On 14th July, a squadron of the 7th Dragoon Guards and the Indian Secunderabad Brigade (cavalry units) charged into High Wood, where they defeated the majority of the German defenders (with the exception of the northern tip of the forest) and held their ground until they were relieved by infantry⁵³. The engagement fought by the cavalry on 14th July, demonstrated to Haig and the rest of the British High Command, that a well-planned cavalry attack was capable of defeating a modern army. As early as 1896, Haig had noted that ‘the recent tendency to reduce cavalry in favour of artillery and infantry was a fatal error because only the mounted arm could win a decisive victory’⁵⁴. There were very few instances at the Battle of the Somme where cavalry saw action. This

⁵³ J. H. Boraston, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*, p 30.

⁵⁴ Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground. The British Army, The Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918*, (Essex: Pen and Sword, 2019), p 89.

suggests that the skirmish fought by the 7th Dragoon Guards and Secunderabad Brigade (see figure 2), could have reflected the overall trend of Gough's advance had the breakthrough been achieved. It is important to mention however, that High Wood had no significant defences, with the exception of the northern tip, which the cavalry could not secure (see Appendix 1). If Gough's cavalry advance was to be successful, his mounted units would have to attack German troops who were not in entrenched positions. As the cavalry saw more success than failure at the Battle of the Somme, it is fair to say that Haig's preference for cavalry was the right decision to make on this occasion.

Innovation: Night operations

It has been argued by some that Haig was an inflexible strategist⁵⁵. However, when it became apparent that the infantry had failed to break through the German lines in depth, Haig was open to the idea of experimenting with unconventional tactics to turn the Battle of the Somme back in Britain's favour. Operations conducted under the cover of darkness presented more challenges than those operations that were carried out during daylight hours. Night operations further strained tactical communications, as well as creating difficulties for artillery observers watching for the effect of their shelling. For these reasons at least, it is not hard to understand why General Haig was cautious about ordering large scale operations to take place at night⁵⁶. However, in the early hours of the morning of 14th July 1916, four British divisions quietly left their trenches and advanced within a few hundred yards of the German positions. As soon as there was enough light to distinguish friend from foe, the attack began, taking the Germans by surprise and resulting in the British securing the whole German second line of defences which included almost four miles of the great ridge which overlooked the Somme battlefield⁵⁷. The events of 14th July mark a significant point on the Western Front. In a letter to his wife, Haig wrote 'This is indeed a very great success. The best day we have had this war...'⁵⁸. Haig was referring to the successful night operation more so than any success of the

⁵⁵ History.com editors, *Douglas Haig*, (21/08/2018), <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/douglas-haig>, [Accessed 27/03/2020].

⁵⁶ Keegan, *The First World War*, p 319.

⁵⁷ Brigadier General John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*. p 220-221.

⁵⁸ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 205.

cavalry, as in fact the infantry took roughly four miles of territory from the Germans, whereas the cavalry only occupied High Wood. The effects of attempting such original tactics had proved to be beneficial for the Entente, but although the events of 14th July were successful, it is important to remember that they, on their own, did not fundamentally change the course of the battle.

Innovation: Tanks and the creeping barrage

As mentioned above, Haig had displayed an interest in the use of tanks for military operations and asked for some before starting the Battle of the Somme, but it was not until the Battle of Flers, that they made an impression on him. On 17th September 1916, the day after tanks were used in combat, Haig personally congratulated Colonel Swinton on their use. Haig further discussed the future of the tank within the army and requested that the Home authorities send more tanks to France, but with better armour⁵⁹. Tanks had never before been used in combat operations in the history of warfare⁶⁰. The successful use of tanks at the Battle of Flers coupled with the night attack on 14th July, presented a compelling argument that investing in tactical innovations, would improve the army's ability to produce clearer successes in future battles. If tanks had been available to him when Haig wanted to launch his attack, his adaptability of new techniques for overcoming trench warfare might have had ensured more success from the start of the Battle of the Somme.

Haig does not mention in his diary that he learnt a great deal from the Somme offensive. However, his actions suggest that he did. On 18th September 1916 he proposed to Admiral Bacon the idea of a naval landing on the Belgian coast, to be spearheaded by one hundred tanks⁶¹. Amphibious landings on the Belgian coast had been discussed previously in the run up to the Battle of the Somme as a further stage of the offensive, but the fact that Haig wanted tanks to lead the attack, showed a radical change in strategy. In his book *The Killing Ground: The British Army, The Western Front and the Emergence of Modern War 1900-1918*, Tim Travers puts forward the argument that in 1916, British GHQ showed no willingness to look for radical

⁵⁹ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 231.

⁶⁰ Bryn Hammond, *Cambrai 1917*, p 9.

⁶¹ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 232.

changes in strategy⁶². The use of tanks at the Battle of Flers and Haig's intention to use them again in major operations in the future, when they were still in their infancy stage, presents a challenge to Travers standpoint. Moreover, Denis Winter describes the British approach to the creeping barrage - at the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, British artillery would not fire within three-hundred yards of their infantry for safety reasons⁶³. Disappointingly, Winter does not expand on the development of artillery doctrine throughout the battle. Fortunately, however, Haig's Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sir Launcelot Kiggell did record the improvements made to the creeping barrage. On the 16th July 1916 he states, 'It is therefore of first importance that in all cases infantry should be instructed to advance right under the field artillery barrage which should not uncover the first objective until the infantry are close up to it (even within 50/60 yards)'⁶⁴. Before 1916, much of the British army's artillery doctrine was tailored towards an eighteenth-century style battle, where the artillery would fire on a line of sight, rather than indirect fire⁶⁵. The creeping barrage was not an artillery tactic used in the eighteenth-century, which further supports the argument that the British army was modernising during the Battle of the Somme.

Conclusion to Chapter Two

Haig's primary objective as Field-Marshal was to win the war on the Western Front. The tactics and strategies employed by British High Command had not produced decisive results in 1914 and 1915; to win the war, something had to change. Haig clearly welcomed change and innovation if it produced favourable results, such as the introduction of the tank, the practice of large-scale nocturnal operations and the development of the creeping barrage. However, embracing the new was not an outright rejection of the old. The cavalry distinguished themselves on 14th July at High Wood, which reassured Haig that if a breakthrough could be achieved with modern innovations, then a traditional massive cavalry effort could exploit that success and lead to an all-out victory in Western Europe. General Haig was a good Field Marshal for the British

⁶² Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground*, p 190.

⁶³ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command*. p 60.

⁶⁴ Don Farr, *Silent General: Horne of the First Army a Biography of Haig's Trusted Great War Comrade-In-Arms*, (Solihull: Helion and Company LTD, 2007), p 142.

⁶⁵ Denis Winter, *Haig's Command*. p 61.

Army because he endorsed innovation and flexibility, whilst combining those qualities with traditional methods which proved practical under the right circumstances. Despite seeing few advantages to a direct attack on the Somme, he came to terms with the fact that appeasing Britain's predominant ally, the French, was of the greatest strategic importance in 1916.

Chapter Three: A Country Fit for Heroes

Douglas Haig is best known for his service during the war years, but his story, legacy and influence does not end in 1918. Upon his return to England from France later that year, Haig may have wanted to spend a quiet break with his wife back home in Kingston Hill, but this was by no means a reflection of the next ten years of his life. From the Armistice until his death, Haig devoted much of his efforts to improving the well-being of ex-servicemen. His highest achievements in this respect, was his success in getting the government to raise military pensions, and the development of the Royal British Legion.

Haig's war record has been hotly contested by historians, the media and veterans since the second half of the 20th century and up until the present. However, little discussion has surfaced surrounding the final ten years of his life. An obituary in *The Telegraph* described John Terraine as Haig's staunchest defender⁶⁶. Yet in his four hundred and eighty-two-page biography of the man, Terraine makes no effort to describe Haig's actions and endeavours after the Armistice. Neither Denis Winter in his book *Haig's Command A Reassessment*, nor John Keegan in his book *The First World War*, make any great effort to describe Haig's post war commitments.

In his book *The Good Soldier*, Gary Mead and in his book *Douglas Haig 1861-1928*, Gerard J. De Groot have both written accounts relevant to Haig's life after the war, but this information still feels limited compared to what has been written on events between 1914-1918. Even Haig himself made no great effort to record his life after the war ended, his diaries concluded in 1918. However, despite the lack of modern scholarship examining the life of Douglas Haig between 1918-1928, there are primary sources that offer a valuable insight to this decade. Brigadier-General John Charteris, Reverend George S Duncan and Haig's wife, Dorothy Haig (Countess Haig), all addressed his post war endeavours in some detail

⁶⁶ The Telegraph, *John Terraine*, (31/12/2003), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1450566/John-Terraine.html> , [Accessed 01/04/2020].

Demobilisation

Despite the fact that there is no evidence of the phrase being used during the war years, Douglas Haig's infamous nickname 'The Butcher of the Somme', would suggest that he did not care about the men under his command⁶⁷. But as argued above, Haig did not want to fight the battle, knowing that many of his officers and men were not sufficiently trained which would inevitably lead to high casualties. However, some could interpret this concern, as being not for the welfare of the men but with not having enough manpower for use in later battles. This interpretation is demonstrably untrue, however, given Haig's post-war campaign to help all ex-servicemen, including the wounded, to find employment for them wherever possible. Haig viewed the millions of volunteers and conscripts for his army not as 'cannon fodder' but as human beings and cared about their future wellbeing.

As early as 1917 Haig wrote a letter to the British Government explaining that when the war ended, the army would need to be demobilized and that this would have to be carefully orchestrated. He further pointed out that cherry-picking certain military personnel for return home early, depending on their occupation before the war, would create division and dissent within the army⁶⁸. In 1919 when it had become clear to Winston Churchill, The Secretary of State for War at the time, that the government's strategy for demobilization was failing, he sent a memo to the Cabinet suggesting that it would be useful to read the letter Haig had written to them over a year ago; Haig's predictions and warnings were becoming a reality⁶⁹. Gary Mead states that on 7th January 1919 'soldiers drove lorries up and down Whitehall in London, holding aloft banners proclaiming: 'We won the war. Give us our tickets' and 'No more red tape-we want civvies suits'⁷⁰. It is no secret that Douglas Haig and the Prime Minister at the time, David Lloyd George, did not get along, and it is for this reason that the letter had been shelved. Haig wrote a lengthy passage in his diary, the day he returned from France for his homecoming organised by the king, and had this to say about Lloyd George 'This more than compensates me for the

⁶⁷ The Western Front Association, *The Battle of the Somme reassessed*, (26/03/2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxS9GhiQ6kI&t=2345s>, [Accessed 04/03/2020].

⁶⁸ Gary Mead, *The Good Soldier*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2007). p 357.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p 357.

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p 357.

difficulties put in my way and the coldness towards me by the Prime Minister (Lloyd George)’⁷¹. Haig’s motives were not to assist the government in their handling of demobilization, but more to assist those who had served in the army. This is supported by Haig’s letter to Sir Edward Cooper in 1921, where he stated ‘I cannot forget that, without the loyal and devoted help of all ranks of that army, I neither could have rendered my king and country the services to which you, Sir Edward, are good enough to refer in your letter,’⁷².

Pensions

The process of demobilisation was full of challenges, which in many cases ended to the detriment of the returning soldier. In January 1920, twenty thousand former officers were redundant, followed by a further thirty-three thousand disabled ex-officers who were trying to live on an average pension of £70 a year⁷³. Many of these former officers had been promoted from the ranks to meet rising demand, which the middle and upper classes were unable to fill due to lack of numbers and the fact that so many had been killed and wounded. The government fund supplied £104,000,000 for Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) but only £2,000,000 for officers⁷⁴. As these men were no longer members of the British Army, Haig had no responsibility or obligation to help them because he was CIC of the Home Forces at that time. This did not however, deter him from giving evidence before a parliamentary committee in July 1919, pressing for the increase of military pensions. Haig also refused to accept a peerage until the government agreed to raise them, which the government succeeded in doing in October 1919⁷⁵. Haig’s actions here demonstrate that his priority was to help the men who served under him in The Great War.

⁷¹ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 492.

⁷² Douglas Haig, *Letter to Sir Edward Cooper 1921*, Private Collection, Appendix 3.

⁷³ Gary Mead, *The Good Soldier*. p 364.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* p 364.

⁷⁵ Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*. p 492.

Finding employment for ex-servicemen

An increase in pensions was a step in the right direction for Haig, but he still felt that there was more that could be done to help the ex-servicemen. Pensions and charitable giving were welcomed, but the men who fought in the trenches needed more from life than money and occasional donations, they needed work and a sense of purpose and this was not lost on Haig⁷⁶. In January 1920 during his final weeks as CIC of the Home Forces, Haig visited Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Hull. The purpose of these visits was to encourage employers to hire more ex-servicemen. It was hoped that ex-servicemen would account for at least five percent of each organisation's workforce. Some organisations had surpassed the original target and were functioning on twenty percent, whereas in other areas such as West Riding, seventy five percent of employers were below the five percent target⁷⁷. Traveling in person across the country encouraging employers to hire ex-servicemen, was not in the job description of the CIC of the Home Forces in 1920 and is still not a requirement one hundred years later. Just seven months had passed since Haig had appeared in front of a parliamentary committee related to veterans' pensions and yet here he was again, battling on behalf of ex-soldiers, trying to secure permanent employment for them.

The Royal British Legion

Even after his contributions in 1919 and 1920, Haig still believed that more could be done to help the retired soldiers of the BEF. Between 1916 and 1919, four ex-servicemen groups were formed: The National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers (Association) formed in 1916 and was closely connected to the Trade Unions and the Labour Party, The National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers (Federation) emerged in early 1917 and aligned itself to the Liberal Party, followed by The Comrades of The Great War in late 1917 which welcomed Officers and NCOs; and in 1919 The National Union of Ex-Servicemen was created, which leaned politically towards the far right⁷⁸. With so many conflicting objectives

⁷⁶ Countess Haig, *The Man I Knew. The Intimate Life-Story of Douglas Haig*, (London: The Moray Press, 1936), p 286-287.

⁷⁷ Gary Mead, *The Good Soldier*. p 364.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p 362-363.

between these groups, it should not come as a surprise that they struggled to cooperate to each other's mutual benefit. Haig wanted the groups to put aside their political differences and work together as one united force, which held the interests of all ex-service personnel in mind⁷⁹. It has been argued by Charteris that Haig founded the Royal British Legion⁸⁰. However, Gary Mead argues that Colonel George Crosfield, a leading activist in The Comrades of The Great War, played a bigger role than Haig in amalgamating the ex-servicemen's groups into one⁸¹. Moreover, The Royal British Legion website gives credit to both Haig and Tom Lister of The Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers, for formation of the Royal British Legion⁸². There is little consistency over who actually formed the Royal British Legion, so it is not justifiable to give Haig the sole credit. On the other hand, none of the sources above dispute the fact that Haig was a significant founding member of the Legion.

Haig had a number of aspirations for the Legion. First and foremost, he wanted to amalgamate the four ex-servicemen organisations mentioned above, which would revive the camaraderie amongst ex-soldiers throughout the country, from the lowest ranks, to the highest. According to Countess Haig, writing about her husband, he believed that once this had been achieved, the Legion could more effectively improve the lives of ex-servicemen more rapidly and efficiently⁸³. On top of camaraderie and improvements to the lives of ex-soldiers, Haig wanted the Legion to promote the principles for which the British Empire had fought for in The Great War. He wanted the Legion to practice loyalty to the community, unite the classes and protect peace and goodwill across the world⁸⁴. Haig certainly had a vision for the Legion, one which impressed on the ex-soldiers and their families the importance and value of their fighting in The Great War. The Legion would serve as a constant reminder that Britain had won the war,

⁷⁹ George S Duncan, *Douglas Haig As I Knew Him*, (Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2015), p 97.

George S Duncan was an army Chaplain from 1915-1918, Haig regularly attended his Sunday Services and the two men became friends until Haig's death in 1928.

⁸⁰ Brigadier General John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*. p 371.

⁸¹ Gary Mead, *The Good Soldier*. p 363.

⁸² The Royal British Legion, *Our History*, last updated N/A, <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-history>, [Accessed 07/04/2020].

⁸³ Countess Haig, *The Man I Knew*, p 283-285.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* p 286.

as well as promote unity amongst the classes, loyalty to the community and world peace through the strength of a united British Empire.

The Royal British Legion was not just a group for idealists believing in world peace, it had its own practical side. Lady Haig recorded that Douglas Haig felt particularly anxious about disabled veterans and how their wounds hindered their chances of finding work⁸⁵. In response, the Legion set up its own factories to produce poppies to commemorate the Armistice (see figure 3). These factories primarily employed disabled ex-servicemen, around three hundred by 1925⁸⁶. However, there is once again an inconsistency. Charteris gives credit to Haig for coming up with the idea⁸⁷. The Poppy Factory website on the contrary states that Major George Howson founded the Poppy Factory in January 1920, but that it made poppies for the Royal British Legion. The Poppy Factory was not entirely independent from the Legion as Howson's factory received a cheque of two thousand pounds from the Legion in 1922⁸⁸. Whether or not Haig came up with the idea of constructing the Poppy Factory, the fact remains that he played an important role in bringing it to life. The Royal British Legion website remarks that Douglas Haig was the organisation's first President and served in this role between 1921-1928⁸⁹. This would mean that even if Haig did not personally found the Poppy Factory, as President of the Royal British Legion, he would have had the final say on funding Major Howson's project.

⁸⁵ Countess Haig, *The Man I Knew*. p 283-284.

⁸⁶ Brigadier General John Charteris, *Field Marshal Earl Haig*. p 373.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p 373.

⁸⁸ The Poppy Factory, *History*, Uploaded N/A, <https://www.poppyfactory.org/about-us/history-timeline/> . [Accessed 07/04/2020].

⁸⁹ The Royal British Legion, *Our History*. last updated N/A, <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-history> , [Accessed 09/04/2020].



Figure 3. Douglas Haig visiting The Poppy Factory. Douglas Haig: a postwar revolutionary? Online, available at: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/first-world-war/douglas-haig-a-postwar-revolutionary/>. [Accessed 12/04/2020].

Conclusion to Chapter Three

Throughout the post-war years, Douglas Haig consistently worked to improve the wellbeing of ex-servicemen. He campaigned for an increase in veterans' pensions. He toured the country encouraging employers to recruit ex-servicemen in their work force. He was instrumental in amalgamating the ex-servicemen's groups into the Royal British Legion, which championed camaraderie and employment. Haig's record following the conclusion of The Great War, present him as a man who genuinely cared about the men who had served under him. Douglas Haig died in January 1928 of a heart attack and had an elaborate funeral in London. His reputation amongst his contemporaries was that of a good man, as can be seen by many of the obituaries written about him. The following from a newspaper in Perth, Australia, is one such example, 'Great though the loss to the Empire may be through Haig's death, that is a general loss. To the ex-service men and women of the Empire it is a particular loss, and I am afraid an irreparable loss. In life Haig was even a greater inspiration in the realm of ex-service men and

women than a driving force. Great though his fame is and will be as a soldier, I venture the opinion that posterity will grant that he was a greater humanitarian.’⁹⁰ (Appendix 3).

⁹⁰ ‘J.C.’, Field Marshal Earl Haig Remembrances and reminiscences The Origin of the High Command, *The Listening Post*, 24/02/1928, p 13.

Conclusion

Douglas Haig went to war in 1914 with two Divisions under his command, approximately forty thousand men. His enemy vastly outnumbered him, at times his allies abandoned him, he successfully escaped encirclement by the German Army during the Great Retreat and in late 1914, held the German Army at Ypres with no reserves. Despite getting off to a bad start, Haig believed that it was still possible for Britain to emerge victorious when the war finally came to an end. His optimism coupled with his experiences of 1914 and 1915, were to be put to the test when he was promoted to Field Marshal and CIC in late 1915. These qualities alone, were not enough to drive Britain to victory in 1918, but Haig's preparedness to innovate as the war progressed helped in achieving that result. As Field Marshal, Haig was coming to terms with the fact that battle tactics had evolved from the nineteenth century into a new type of warfare. In order to win, he recognized the importance of equipping the British Army with the appropriate tools to fight a modern war. These would come in the form of tanks and developments to infantry and artillery doctrines. Haig's war record depicts a man who operated within the constraints of a strategic alliance but acted upon initiative in dire circumstances. It further indicates that he was prepared to compromise his plans for the sake of Anglo-French diplomacy, even if it would lead to the deaths of thousands of lives. He was always looking at the bigger picture, how one battle would lead to the next and so on, until an allied victory could be achieved.

Once the war was over, Haig was firmly committed to helping the men whom he led in France and Belgium. He campaigned for an increase in their pensions, and he tried to convince employers across Great Britain to hire ex-servicemen. Haig wanted to bring back unity to the men of the former BEF, after factionalism had begun to creep in. Ensuring that The Great War veterans had a stable income and decent work, was of the upmost importance to him.

During the war, Haig was steadfast in withstanding the power of the German Army. All the while he was learning, adapting and testing new ways of fighting, which eventually led to the allied victory in 1918. In return, he went to extraordinary lengths to look after the men who fought under him once the war was over. It is for these reasons that it is being argued here that Sir Douglas Haig did serve the British Army well and is not worthy of the criticism that he has received over the years, by the likes of Denis Winter, Tim Travers and David Lloyd George. On the contrary, Haig was a competent strategist, open to innovation who cared for the men under

his command. He should be remembered as the father of the British Army during The Great War and post-war period, not The Butcher of the Somme.

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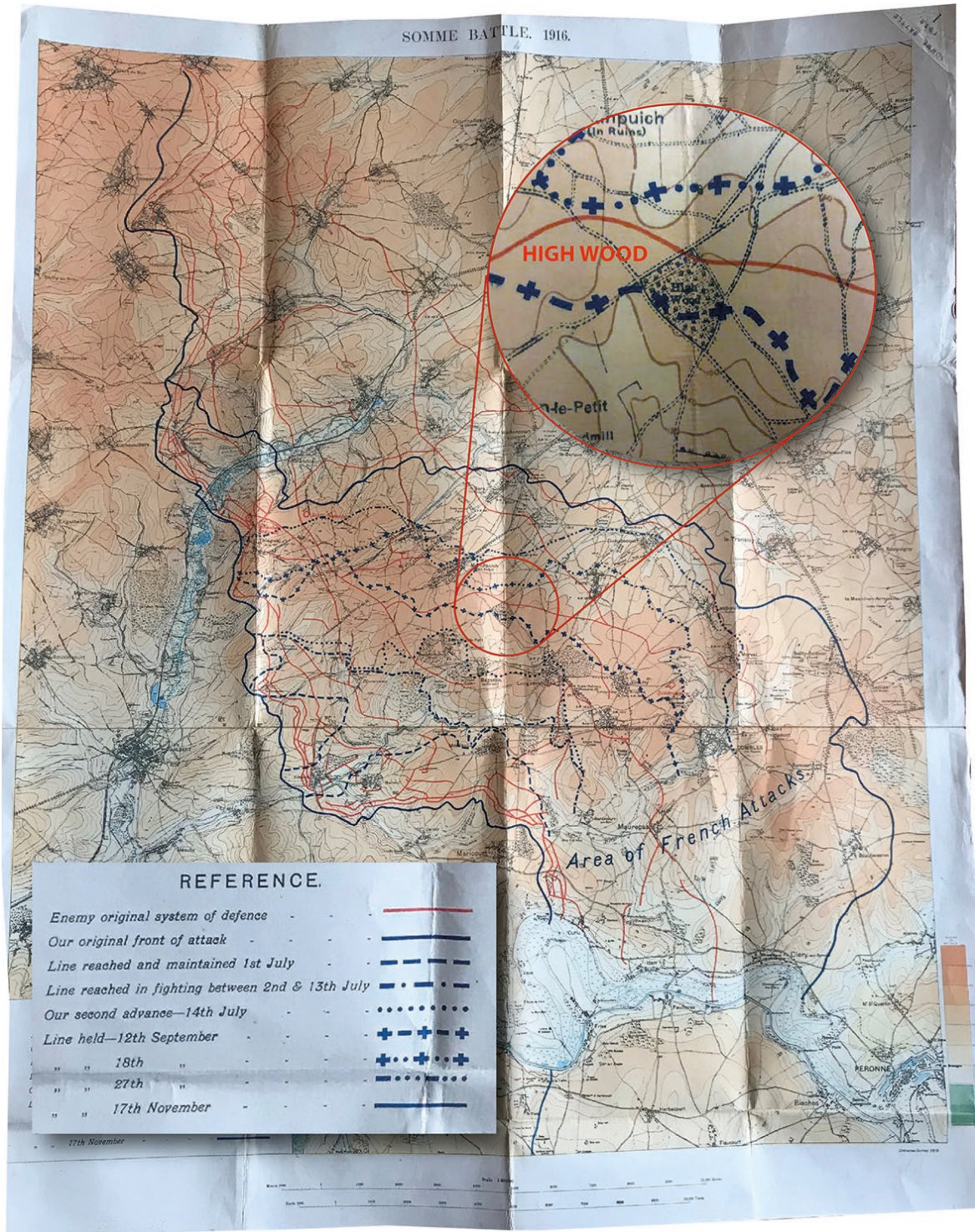
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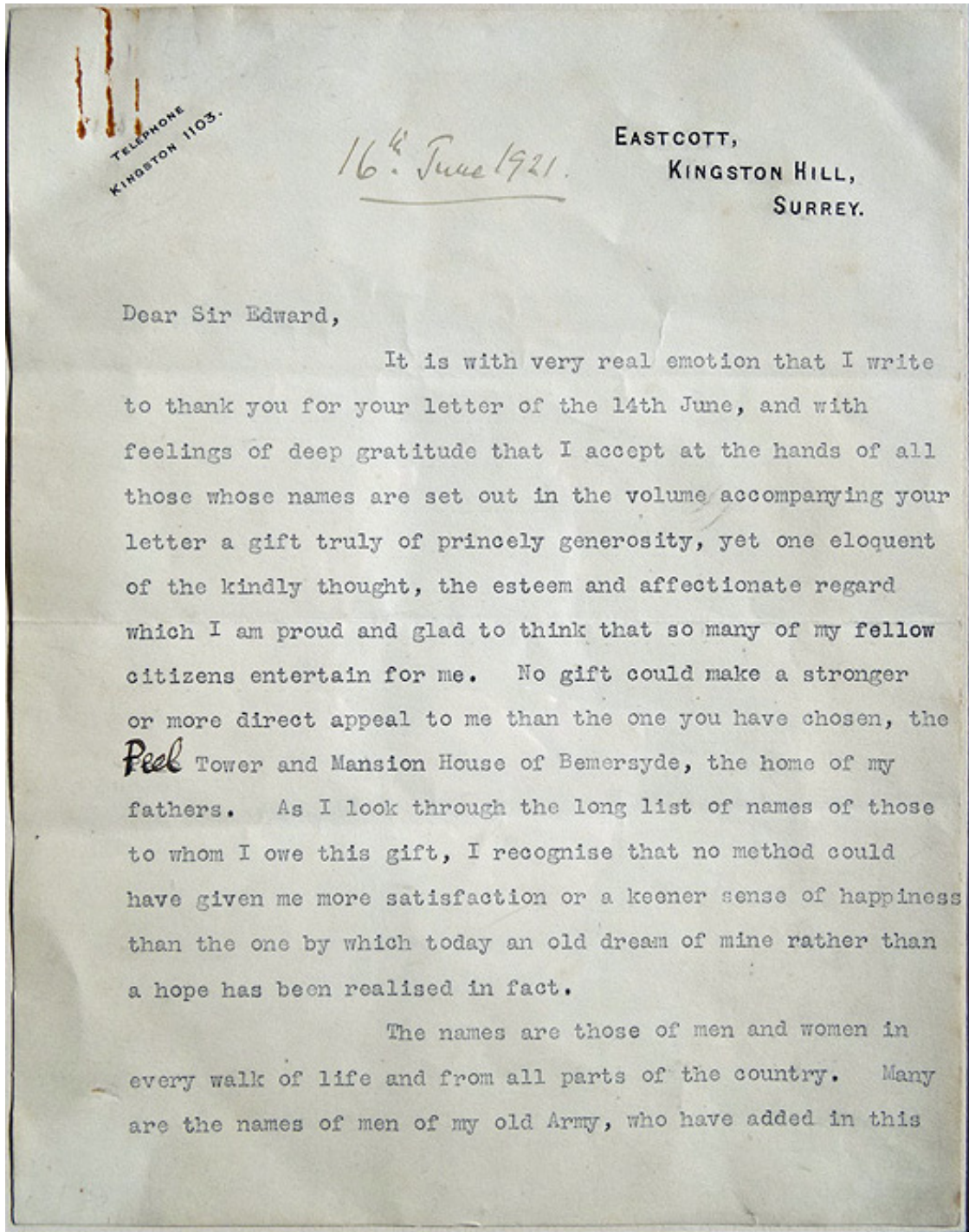
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APPENDIX 1 Somme Battle 1916 Map



Somme Battle 1916 Map, published in Haig's Despatches, enhanced to show High Wood and the German defensive line in the north of the wood.

APPENDIX 2 Douglas Haig, Letter to Sir Edward Cooper



Douglas Haig, Letter to Sir Edward Cooper 1921, thanking him for his title. Page 1. Letter in Private collection.

TELEPHONE
KINGSTON 1103.

EASTCOTT,
KINGSTON HILL,
SURREY.

- 2 -

personal way to the great debt I already owe to all who fought so gallantly under my command. That fact does appeal to me very much. I cannot forget that, without the loyal and devoted help of all ranks of that Army, I neither could have rendered my King and country the services to which you, Sir Edward, are good enough to refer in your letter, nor should I today be entitled to sign myself, Haig of Bemersyde.

You will, I know, convey to all who have taken part in this most noble presentation my sincere and heartfelt thanks. Nothing could touch me more. I cannot, however, end this letter without a word of warm acknowledgment to my kinsman Colonel Haig, lately owner of Bemersyde, who has lent himself so readily to the kindly schemes of those good friends of mine who conceived and worked out the idea of making me a gift which from every point of view I must needs appreciate so highly; nor without expressing my especial gratitude to those good friends themselves.

Yet for Lady Haig and for me, and for all who may come after us so long as my family endures, the

Douglas Haig, Letter to Sir Edward Cooper 1921, thanking him for his title. Page 1. Letter in Private collection.

TELEPHONE
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EASTCOTT,
KINGSTON HILL,
SURREY.

- 3 -

pleasure of making our home in the old house that for 800 years has been the seat of Haigs will be redoubled by the thought that it was the spontaneous act of all classes of our fellow countrymen and women that enabled us to do so.

I am, my dear Sir Edward,

Yours Sincerely,

Haig
of Brimleyde -
F.H.

Sir Edward Cooper, Bt.
Mansion House,
London, E.C.4.

Lord Mayor of London 1919-20

Douglas Haig, Letter to Sir Edward Cooper 1921, thanking him for his title. Page 1. Letter in Private collection.

APPENDIX 3 Obituary in the Listening Post 1928

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FIELD-MARSHAL EARL HAIG

Remembrances and Reminiscences The Origin of the High Command

(by "J.C.")

It was my good fortune to have been daily thrown into a close personal contact on two occasions with the late Earl Haig and Lady Haig, for a period of eight weeks in South Africa in 1921 and for five weeks in Canada in 1925.

Along with other Dominion delegates to the inaugural conference of the British Empire Service League, I first met Haig F.M. on the Kenilworth Race Course, Cape Colony, South Africa. His hearty handshake, simplicity of manner, and lack of formality, together with his few kindly words of welcome, at once indelibly stamped upon one's mind the impression that, however great Haig may have been as a soldier, he was just a simple homely man for "a' that."

A day or so later General Smuts opened the Conference. Haig's opening address to the Conference will endure in respect to modesty, tolerance, vision, and outlook. His reference to our Empire is worth repeating, *vis.*:-

Dominion delegates, brother warriors, I thank you for your welcome. It is a welcome worth coming all the way from England to receive. This is a very great and notable occasion, unique in our Empire. I am most grateful for the opportunity to meet you and to thank you, and through you, all the gallant fellows you represent, for the splendid and patriotic service you rendered to our Empire in the hour of our Empire's greatest need. I say *our* Empire, but the British Empire does not belong to England or to Great Britain or to any one class or party in Great Britain or elsewhere. It belongs equally to all who are partners in the world symbol of its unity, whatever may be the individual race or creed and whatever his position in society. We may call ourselves Englishmen, or Scots, or Britishers, or South Africans, Canadians, Australians, or New Zealanders. We may possess, and we should possess, each of us, a deep pride and loyalty for the land of our birth or choice; we may love and honour a flag that contains other emblems than the crosses of St. George, St.

Andrew, and St. Patrick. Yet, because we are equal partners in a common heritage, the Empire is ours.

Also his reference to the spirit of comradeship amongst all ranks during the Great War and the need for unity amongst ex-service men, *vis.*:-

We have come to the conclusion in the Old Country that, in our own interests, unity is essential. There is an even greater and more lasting work to be done for the sake of our Empire as a whole in spreading throughout all parts of our Empire and all classes of its many peoples the same spirit of comradeship and mutual helpfulness, the same sane and healthy ideals that carried us ex-service men steadily and successfully through the most terrible of all wars. I ask you, and through you, all old comrades of mine in the great lands from which you come, to help me in this work. I ask, knowing that in the old days in France and Flanders, even when the outlook was at its darkest, I never asked ought of you in vain.

The Conference lasted for five whole days, the late General "Tim" Lukin presided. Throughout the whole proceedings Haig rarely spoke. When he did so, it was only for the purpose of directing delegates back to the broad path from which they had wandered. Never once did he endeavour to sway delegates to his way of thinking. He was content to allow Conference to practically work out its own destiny. There is no doubt whatever that had Haig felt inclined to do so, he could have made the Conference a one man show, but he was too big a personality for any such action, and preferred to take his part in the Conference just as a humble unit of it.

Two instances of Haig's intervention during the Conference are well worth quoting. I was privileged to have acted as Chairman of the Committee that drafted the present

constitution of the B.E.S.L. After the days of much labour, on behalf of the committee I presented the draft constitution. Some discussion ensued upon it, but Haig offered no opinion.

After Conference had adjourned for the day Haig came to me with some written suggestions, which I still possess and prize, and which he said might be helpful towards improving one clause of the draft rules. He was content, however, to state that he desired the committee to judge his suggestions solely upon their practical value and not because of the source from which they had emanated.

When feeling ran high during a discussion as to whether or not the ex-officers' association of Great Britain should be included as a foundation organisation of the B.E.S.L., Haig intervened and strongly opposed its inclusion. He said that he alone was responsible for the formation of that organisation and that at the time he had formed it, the position of thousands of ex-officers was 'desperate, some being in such desperate straits as having to beg for a meal. He then said: "It has now fulfilled its purpose and must go and be replaced by one organisation embracing all ranks of ex-service men."

When the Conference concluded a tour of South Africa and Rhodesia began. At Kimberley Haig, Lady Haig, the British, Australian, and N.Z. delegation were the guests of the De Beers Diamond Coy. at the Hotel Belgravia. Meal arrangements were such as to seat the party at separate tables. Just prior to dinner on the day of arrival, Haig sent a message through Donald Simson, Hon. Sec. B.E.S.L., to the Aussie and N.Z. delegates to the effect that it was his wish that both tables be brought together and a joint dinner partaken. This message momentarily "put the wind up" the Aussie and N.Z. delegation. One delegate, however, rose to the occasion and put forward a legitimate South African excuse, lack of dinner dress. Simson conveyed the excuse to the F.M. and returned with a further message that it was the company of the delegates he sought, how they were dressed gave him no concern. The union sought became accomplished and memories of it will endure in the minds of all concerned so long as they live.

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RETURNED SOLDIERS' MONUMENTAL WORKS.

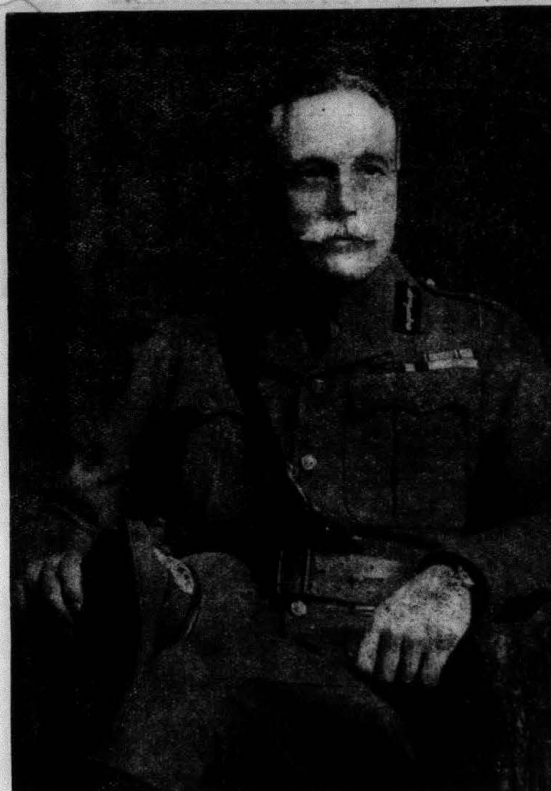
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During the stay in Kimberley several of the old battlefields there were visited. Haig accompanied the delegation to Klip Drift on the Modder River where General French crossed with his cavalry in order to make a dash on Kimberley. He informed the delegation that when French and he left the Headquarters of Lord Roberts, both Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener had told French and him that if they succeeded in relieving Kimberley their future career as soldiers would be assured. He took the delegation on to the kopje where French and he, as Chief of Staff, came to the decision to depart from General Kelly-Kenny's plan to advance on Kimberley as mounted infantry, and to deploy their cavalry into line and advance at a gallop on Kimberley between two kopjes about six miles apart, upon each of which the Boers had long range guns mounted. To show the greatness of Haig, this is what he said to the delegation regarding the decision arrived at by French: "I thought then, and with my later experiences both in the Boer War and the Great War, still think that French's decision to act as he did was one of the most masterful decisions of war strategy and tactics in the annals of British warfare, and a decision that only a brilliant cavalry leader could have arrived at."

For the purpose of enquiring into a certain question whilst in South Africa, I left Kimberley for Johannesburg a day ahead of the main delegation. Haig and Lady Haig did so too. Whilst waiting on the Kimberley Railway Station for the train to go out Major Van der Byle, loaned by General Smuts to Haig as his A.D.C. in



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South Africa, accosted me and informed me that it was the F.M.'s wish that I join him and Lady Haig at dinner in his car that evening. Having recollections of the dinner dress episode I at once accepted the proffered hospitality. The dinner party numbered only four: Haig, Lady Haig, Van der Byle, and myself. My stay in the car was about three hours. Much was said and many subjects touched upon. One portion only of the conversation will I repeat. It runs thus:—Haig said, "C—, war is a frightful thing and the most awful catastrophe that can befall any nation, but to me it had some redeeming features. Do you know what appeared to me to be the most redeeming feature of the war?" Of course, I could not hazard an opinion. He said: "It was this: To see the East Londoners come over to France, many of whom were born and reared in poverty with not even a chance to bask in God's sunlight. I watched them from day to day after arrival and saw the effect God's sunlight, warm clothes, good food, training and exercise

had upon them, and when called upon to do the real job they came over for, they rendered a good account of themselves." Haig concluded by saying the lesson learned from this experience was that England, given a chance, is not yet decadent.

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MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, BRISBANE, ADELAIDE, LAUNCESTON, WELLINGTON, CHRISTCHURCH.

Much has been said and will be said and written about who brought about the High Command in France. I give Haig's version of it as he gave it one Sunday morning in February, 1921, to the Aussie and N.Z., Canadian, and Rhodesian delegates only in a little hall where the Johannesburg League of Comrades usually met. Now that Haig is no more the compact entered into by those who heard him that morning, viz.: "that nothing Haig had said would be repeated during his lifetime" is no longer binding, I will now repeat what he said: "I am not going to Rhodesia with you, but Lady Haig is. I am going to Sir Abe Bailey's farm at Colesburg for a fortnight's relaxation and shooting. I will join those of you that remain in Bloemfontein. In understand that some members of the delegation intend returning to their homes and therefore I may never again meet them. I feel that we cannot part without my telling something respecting the appointment of Foch to the High Command. Throughout this tour I have been hailed as Britain's greatest soldier, in respect to my position as G.O.C. British armies in France and sympathised with for having effaced and sacrificed myself to Foch. The former I have always countered by saying that no special thanks is due to me, any thanks due is general and due to all ranks of the army I commanded, from the private soldier right up to the G.O.C. But I have had to remain silent regarding the High Command, because, believe or disbelieve me, it was I who first suggested it and it came about thus: Some of you will no doubt recollect the position of the British line before the German army began its great attack on

21st March, 1918. You will also, no doubt, recollect its position when I issued my "back to the wall" order about a fortnight later. The British line was never really broken, but it was terribly bent and distended. Petain's army junctioned with mine near Montdidier. Paris lay behind General Petain's army. Up till then the whole force of the German attack had been upon the British armies, its objective being Amiens and the Channel ports. My conception of the situation was that, if the British line was to hold until it could be reconstructed and further munitioned, the French army under Petain would have to attack. Petain held another view and appeared to be obsessed with the defence of Paris, and every time the Germans' attack further extended the thinly held British line, correspondingly did Petain obliquely retire on Paris and thus give my army more line to hold. The situation was desperate and something had to be done to get Petain's army either to stand fast, but preferably to go forward. I knew it was useless to suggest that Petain be put over me or me over Petain. In order to get the French army to go forward it was necessary that one of two things should happen. Some other French General must supplant Petain or a French General must be placed in command over Petain and me. I submitted my conception of the situation to the War Office and Milner and Robertson came to France at once. I met them at my Headquarters at Doullens and plainly told them that there was only one thing to do to save the situation, and that was to unify the commands in France and to put a French General over Petain and me. I

suggested Foch, because I had fought with him on the Marne and at Ypres. I knew his worth, and also knew that if he were given the High Command the French army would move as I thought it should. Milner and Robertson agreed with my contentions, and subsequently Foch was given the High Command, and the situation on the right of my army relieved." This, he said, was the short and simple history of the origin of the High Command, and concluded by saying: "Though the High Command became an accomplished fact, I, as Commander of the British armies, was as free a man after its consummation as I was before it."

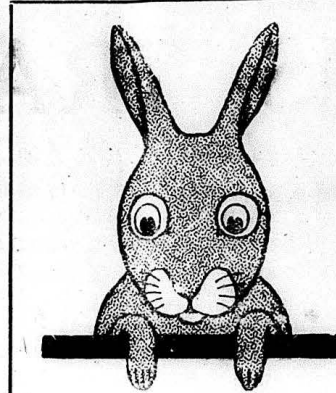
The following may serve to show the general feeling of the Boers in South Africa towards Britain's part in the Boer war. The special train in which the delegation was travelling pulled up at Samia's Post, 10 miles from Bloemfontein. Haig and party walked across to the spot where De Wet had surprised a British detachment as it marched into Bloemfontein, and captured eight guns. The only place and habitation to be seen was a Boer farmhouse and the only person met there was an elderly Boer farmer, who served with De Wet when he made his attack. He spoke African only, Van der Byle acted as interpreter and introduced him to Haig. He then asked Van der Byle to inform the General that the reason why he was there to meet him was because he had heard that a certain Boer was to be there that morning to explain to the General the battle of Samia's Post. He wanted to tell the General that that Boer was not at or near the battle of Samia's Post. He was and would explain it to the

'J.C.', Field Marshal Earl Haig Remembrances and reminiscences The Origin of the High Command, The Listening Post, 24/02/1928. Private collection.

General; which he did, and appeared as having received the most satisfaction, not from the fact of De Wet having routed the British column and also capturing guns from it, but from the fact of having captured some Boers who were serving with the British and giving to them the option of either being shot or rejoining their commands. When parting from this most interesting old chap he asked Van der Byle to tell the General that he bore him no ill-will and to tell the Countess that had he met the General during the Boer War he probably would have got him with a Mauser bullet; to also tell the General that he bore no animosity towards the British. They had fought for one thing, and the Boers for another, but he had no time for the damned Khaki Boer who fought for himself.

Recent references have been made to Haig as an ardent Churchman. He may have been one, but left those who accompanied him on the South African and Canadian tours to follow their own individual bent in this regard. I do know, however, that he held very broad views in regard to the churches in peace and war. Speaking at a Caledonian Breakfast in Maritzburg, he waxed most eloquent in regard to united church services in the war zone, and said how much he admired them, especially when circumstances were such that the denomination of the Padre did not for a moment concern the congregation. These happenings, he said, convinced him of what a wonderful factor the Churches could be in peace if they would arrive at some general understanding whereby similar united services might be held. He said that accordingly he had approached the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, who both thought it would be a good thing too. Nothing, however, he said, had come out of his representations, and either rightly or wrongly he had concluded that the Churches preached one thing and practiced another.

When I bade goodbye to Haig and Lady Haig aboard the Kenilworth Castle, Capetown, in April, 1921, little did I think we should ever meet again. However, fortune was again on my side and I was privileged to meet them again in Ottawa, Canada, end of June, 1925. It is with reluctance that I recount the circumstances, because they are purely personal and to some may savour of egotism and bombast. I feel, however, that I cannot pass them over. If I do not recount this happening an episode that revealed the real Haig will remain



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untold. The Australian delegation reached Ottawa from the west the day prior to the arrival there of Haig, Lady Haig, and other delegates from the east. Prior to the arrival of Haig and party's special train from Montreal about 200 Canadian veterans formed themselves into two lines on the Canadian Pacific Railway platform. My colleague, who was attending his first conference, and myself fell into the rear line. The Prime Minister of Canada, together with most of his ministers, was present to welcome Haig and Lady Haig to Canada. The train had hardly stopped moving when Haig alighted from it, without the slightest formality and unattended. He hurriedly shook hands with the Prime Minister and at once left him to inspect the front line of veterans. The rear line then stepped back one pace, and he hurriedly inspected it too. Though he passed me by during the inspection without showing the slightest signs of having ever seen me, as soon as he had completed the inspection he returned along the front line and halted opposite to where I stood in the rear line, then came through the front line, held out his hand and said, "C—, you have, no doubt, after a lapse of four years, thought I had forgotten you, but I have not." The warmth of his handshake brought back a flood of memory. He then took my arm, led me up to the Prime Minister, and introduced me to him and to the other ministers present. The

only outward alteration the lapse of four years appeared to have brought about was a few grey hairs.

Numerous episodes characteristic of those above written could be related about Haig in his five weeks' tour through Canada. The organisation he had started in South Africa had grown from a strength of six dominions or constituent parts to thirteen, and the delegation to the Ottawa Conference numbered thirty as against eighteen at Capetown. It may not be amiss to state that Haig had his 64th birthday whilst in Canada, and also to state, strange as it may appear, that he there first began to dance.

His mission to Canada was for the sole purpose of uniting the seven ex-service organisations then existing in Canada into one organisation. His efforts in this direction, as in Great Britain and South Africa, were crowned with success, and the Canadian Legion B.E.S.L. now alone functions in the interest of Canadian veterans. Right throughout the Canadian tour I have not one single recollection of Haig ever straining the man from the ranks or a junior officer for the chaos then existing amongst Canadian veteran organisations, but he never spared the senior officers, whom he plainly told that an amalgamation and consolidation of the several veteran organisations was a necessity so far as junior officers and other ranks were concerned, and the obligation to

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bring it about was rightly the prerogative and function of the senior officers.

Be it to their credit, the driving force and advice of Haig did not fall on deaf ears or barren ground. The Canadian senior officers not only rose to the occasion in respect to amalgamation, but, if reports are correct, are pulling more than their full weight in the conduct and administration of the united veterans' organisation.

Great though the loss to the Empire may be through Haig's death, that is a general loss. To the ex-service men and women of the Empire it is a particular loss, and I am afraid an irreparable loss. In life Haig was even a greater inspiration in the realm of ex-service men and women than a driving force. Great though his fame is and will be as a soldier, I venture the opinion that posterity will grant that he was a greater humanitarian. In all walks of life it can be said of him that he lived up to the motto:

*"Tide what may betyde
Haig shall be Haig of Bemersyde."*

CIVILIAN SECRETARY TO SOLDIERS' ORGANISATION.

That a non-returned soldier could be appointed as a paid official of a soldiers' organisation seems a ludicrous suggestion, but such a glaring violation of the preference principle has actually occurred in N.S.W., where a civilian was appointed as secretary of the State Branch of the T.B. Soldiers' Association.

Feeling that this violation would have a detrimental effect on kindred associations in their efforts in having the law of preference given its full force, the R.S.L. and the Limbless Soldiers' Association joined forces and appointed delegates to interview the President of the T.B. Soldiers' Association. The interview failed to move this gentleman to even call a meeting of his executive together to discuss the appointment. Future developments will be watched with interest and concern by us.

Later: Since writing the above it has been reported that the successful applicant was Mr. A. C. Hughes, a son of the former Prime Minister. When applications for the position were called a hundred men responded, including a man possessing the V.C., M.C., and D.C.M. The executive of the T.B. Soldiers' Association has also approved of the selection of Mr. Hughes. Truth is certainly stranger than fiction.

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(By "Toate")

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ruary, all good Diggers resident in the metropolitan area who once wore the Blue and White Diamond will be found lurching together at the R.S.L. between 1 and 2 p.m. on the 28th day of each month. The tucker is high class and the company is—Well, ask each other.

That the nurse who attended the late Digger Shipway as he lay shattered in all but spirit, should term him "The Bravest of Men," comes as no surprise to those who served with the youngest enlisted Digger of the original 28th. Sympathy on

the occasion of his tragic death has been forwarded to his parents by the 28th Battalion Association in a manner which, we hope, will tinge their sorrow with pride.

That every non-financial member of the 28th Battalion Association is to be the special "pigeon" of one particular committeeman or another was amongst the things resolved upon at the last meeting of the committee. Dividing the "ground" into sectors with a definite objective for each participant as laid down in F.S.R.

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'J.C.', Field Marshal Earl Haig Remembrances and reminiscences The Origin of the High Command, The Listening Post, 24/02/1928. Private collection.