The Somme

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Extract

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Preface

The Battle of the Somme will always be controversial. By the early 1960s a stark image was firmly established in the public consciousness of long lines of men marching bravely to their futile deaths, cut down in their thousands by massed German machine guns. The casualties were beyond comprehension with 57,470 British casualties on the first day alone. Of these a staggering 19,240 were killed. The unimaginative generalship of bewhiskered idiots safe in their chateau headquarters far behind the lines was roundly pilloried on all sides. This slaughter of the innocents was deftly portrayed by the theatrical production and film *Oh! What a Lovely War*. Slowly, however, another view began to emerge that took account of the problems faced by General Sir Douglas Haig and his subordinate commanders. This more sympathetic perspective recognised the sheer complexity of modern warfare. It saw that there was a grim necessity to wear down the might of the German Empire on the battlefields of the Western Front before there could be any hope of victory. It discussed the 'learning curve' that had to be surmounted before the new legions of the British Empire could gain the skills required of the new 'all arms' tactics that would finally defeat the German Army in 1918. The controversy rages on to this day: raw emotive sentiments and folk myths vying with the academic assessments of military historians such as the great John Terraine.

There is no doubt that the Somme *was* a tragedy and the massed slaughter and endless suffering it epitomises cannot simply be brushed aside by the justification of cold-blooded military necessity. Although the British Army used the Battle of the Somme *de facto* as a primer to emerge as a stronger fighting machine, the 'learning curve' theory is not a mantra

that can deflect all criticism. Yet, it is equally inane to adopt the morbid sentimentality of portraying the men who took part as helpless victims, mere stooges in a titanic battle that somehow engulfed them all unawares. On the contrary, many were actively looking forward to the moment when they could finally prove themselves as fully-fledged 'warriors'. When engulfed in the fighting many confirmed themselves as brave men in the most dreadful and terrifying of circumstances. Others, unsurprisingly, faltered. But they were not sheep-like victims: such descriptions do a considerable disservice to the memory of a large number of heavily armed soldiers, confident in their abilities, who would have killed their enemies – if only they had had the chance.

Neither was the First World War the result of the machinations of a few politicians and their 'henchmen' generals. We should never allow ordinary people to abrogate their role in the genesis of Armageddon, either then or now. War in 1914 was the near-inevitable result of the frequently expressed wishes and prevailing attitudes of the British population – it was hence a national responsibility. Popular jingoism was certainly stirred then as now, by cynical politicians and morally opaque newspaper proprietors; however, it had its wellspring deep within the dark corners of the popular consciousness. The political imperatives of defending the bloated empire, the endemic racism and all-embracing casual assumption of moral superiority of the age, the overwhelming reliance on blunt threats to achieve what might have been better achieved by subtle diplomacy – these were all part of the British heritage in 1914. All social classes in the Home Country benefited to some extent from the operation of the global British Empire. Amidst the ceaseless jockeying of the old European Continental and Imperial powers, additionally complicated by the remorseless rise of the militaristic new German Empire, conflict was inevitable and in truth no one did much to avoid a war that was easily portrayed as a crusade. War was a risk, casually accepted. When it arrived it was not as they had imagined, but by then it was too late. The remorseless rhythms of global war had already wrapped themselves around the British Empire.

In battle, for the most part their leaders had plans that, although built at times on shaky foundations, were pretty sound in themselves. The generals were not stupid; they were no 'donkeys'. Their military education had been accelerated beyond all pre-war comprehension, but they had

for the most part struggled through, just as one would expect of men who stood near the peak of their chosen profession. Mistakes were frequent and there were undoubtedly some outright blunders. Yet several generals proved themselves to be rapid learners. New and old weapons were eventually slotted into their correct place in the great complex puzzle of war. Above all the primacy of the artillery was recognised. Throughout, although the exigencies of military necessity were their primary concern, the British Army commanders did stand accountable for the consequences of their decisions. The British generals held most responsible for the Battle of the Somme – Douglas Haig, Henry Rawlinson and Hubert Gough – knew full well that the men they sent into battle would pay the price for *their* actions and misjudgements. It was a grave responsibility that they did not shirk.

Even blessed with hindsight, there are still real difficulties in making a final judgement on the overall conduct of the Somme campaign. All this book can do is to try to show what the generals were attempting and chart the effects of their decisions on the men who served them. In the end it is inevitable that the interpretation of such a complicated mélange of issues is a deeply personal matter; in essence the reader must make up their own mind as to what degree the Battle of the Somme was militarily justified.

The general approach adopted in this book is to provide an outline of events within which I have layered personal accounts to help bring dry facts and complex concepts to life. The contemporary quality and vivid writing of the veterans, the raw emotions of participants in a calamity, these cannot be matched by the musings of inevitably distanced modern commentators. There is a vitality, a pathos, even a beauty in the unsullied words of those who were actually present while history was being made around them, qualities that cannot be faked. I have been led by the power of these sources to concentrate where they most eloquently reveal a general truth. Anything else would lead to an uncomfortable amount of repetition without making the salient points any clearer.

My main interest is in the insights into the human condition granted by studying the conduct of men of all ranks under conditions of incredible stress, fear and suffering. All of life is here amidst the reeking dead. The gallant young officer leading his men to death or glory: his reward in the main dull oblivion, but just occasionally, a Victoria Cross and a life

marked out as a wondrous oddity. The stolid sergeant, solicitous of his men, critical of their manifold faults during the long months of training, yet willing, when needs must, to die to save them from the consequences of their foolish mistakes in action. The feckless private, drunk and brawling out of the line, good for nothing, the 'scum of the earth', yet transformed by the 'grace' of battle into a hero, battling forward when all but hope had gone, risking his life for reasons he surely could not comprehend. These clichés will be made flesh in this book. For such near-caricatures certainly did exist.

However, the unpublished memoirs, personal letters, diaries and recorded interviews that I have used also reveal their complex motivations and it is the purpose of this book to interpret these. How could men voluntarily walk into the fire of the machine guns and the crunching maelstrom of massed shell fire? Was it duty or sheer grit and determination? Was it to prove something to themselves, that they too were men, as good as any around them? Was it a hatred of 'Hunnish' Germans, a desire for revenge for relatives and friends already lost in battle? Or was it a conviction that God was on their side, perhaps even that the day of Armageddon had truly dawned and that they must stand up to be counted in the final battle? And, after all, most of their best friends were going over the top with them. Was it the comradeship engendered by the ordinary experiences of their former lives – the classroom, the Sunday school, the factory floor, the office, the pit, the merry banter of the pub, the casual crudities of barrack-room life – that carried them forward almost despite themselves? Were others simply trapped when the whistles blew, too scared to escape from the mess in which they were embroiled, left with no alternative in those final grim moments before they went over the top?

Peter Hart
2005

CHAPTER ONE

The Rocky Road

> We do not live alone in Europe but with three other powers that hate and envy us.[1]
>
> Prince Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of Imperial Germany

The Battle of the Somme was the direct result of the British government abandoning their traditional maritime geo-political strategy. In previous European conflicts Britain had sought to stand back and minimise her involvement in Continental land campaigns. Wherever possible Britain would use her economic strength to inveigle her Allies into bearing the bulk of the fighting while addressing herself to the far more profitable agenda of preying on the overseas colonies of her enemies. Britain's strength was based on the Royal Navy and the pre-eminence of her maritime empire. Unlike the Continental powers who were forced to raise huge armies able to compete with the equally powerful countries that surrounded them, the British Isles were just that – islands – unattainable unless her enemies could first comprehensively defeat the Royal Navy.

British global strategy in the nineteenth century could be encapsulated within three simple rules of thumb. Firstly, the Royal Navy would be maintained in accordance with a 'two power standard' – it must be equal, or better still, superior to the strength of the next two naval powers. Secondly, no one country should be allowed to secure domination of Europe – in particular the coastline of Belgium and the Netherlands should not be occupied or controlled by any of the Great Powers. In essence this was perceived as buffer territory, intended to prevent any army gaining a base from which an effective invasion of the British Isles could be mounted

with minimal warning. Thirdly, the British Empire was to be defended, and where possible expanded, across the globe to provide the resources and markets that fuelled the economy. These 'eternal and perpetual' policies may have seemed defensive to the British, but they were highly aggressive to other Great Powers who found themselves constantly baulked by the British in attempting to chart their own course to a global empire.

The overall dynamic of power in Europe was complicated following the rapid rise of the German Empire. Since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 successive British governments had devoted much of their time to suspiciously monitoring and countering the real and imagined activities of France and Russia. France was an obvious cause of concern – she already had ports just across the Channel and had thus been the traditional enemy since time immemorial, and she was still considered a potent threat to British colonial ambitions in Africa and the Middle East. Russia meanwhile was seen as a looming menace to the jewel of the British Empire – India. Now, however, there was a new Continental power. Germany had not only the military might to threaten domination of the European mainland, but also the burgeoning industrial and manufacturing base to threaten British economic interests.

Germany was determined to carve out a new colonial empire in China and Africa and equally determined to build a navy fit to challenge any fleet afloat. The successive German Naval Laws commencing in 1898 specifically set out the size of the fleet they wished to achieve and their promulgation struck directly at the heart of British concerns in a manner that they could not ignore. The massive German Army had already proved itself the dominant military force in Europe by defeating the Austrians in 1866 and the French in 1870. Ever since 1882, Germany had been at the heart of the powerful Triple Alliance alongside Austria–Hungary and Italy. Now the Germans appeared to want to supplement this with a significant element of naval power. If Germany was to achieve her aims then others must surrender power and as such her rise was a direct economic, colonial and naval challenge to the hegemony exerted by the British Empire. Inevitably Germany came to be perceived as the main threat and gradually her enemies came to be viewed as putative friends.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the French and the Russians had been driven to resolve their own multifarious differences by the threat posed by their common enemy in Imperial Germany. At first

they merely pledged to assist each other in the event of a German attack, but slowly their affiliation deepened as the threat from the Triple Alliance was perceived to grow. Britain was soon determined to resolve her differences with France and Russia – differences that seemed to melt away with every battleship launched by the German shipyards. The relationship was formalised in the *Entente Cordiale* signed with France in 1904. Year by year increasing diplomatic tension and the precautionary countermeasures taken by both sides only served to create an overall mood of a Europe simmering in crisis.

But what could Britain offer the *Entente Cordiale*? The first part was obvious – the power and global reach of the Royal Navy would deliver maritime superiority at a stroke. An arrangement with the French fleet left the bulk of the Royal Navy free to concentrate its power against the German fleet across the North Sea. What they could *not* offer was a powerful standing army. The British Army was established as a force to garrison the far-flung empire and as a mobile strike force to be swiftly deployed by sea to any developing point of conflict. It was certainly not an army capable of playing a significant part in a full-scale Continental war – it was simply too small. From the German standpoint the *Entente Cordiale* offered an encircling threat – with the Russians to the east, the French to the west and the British balefully eyeing them across the North Sea, they seemed to be surrounded by enemies. German diplomacy seemed unable to resolve the conundrum and various ham-fisted attempts to break up the *Entente Cordiale* merely had the effect of pushing their putative enemies still closer together. The expensive continuation and escalation of the naval race following the genesis of HMS *Dreadnought* in 1906 provoked a significant groundswell of anti-German feeling right across Britain.

Slowly the British Army began to be drawn into the Continental equation. The hearts and minds of the Royal Navy were concentrated only on a great naval set-piece battle with the German High Seas Fleet and they inevitably spared little thought for the type of operations that had typified the British approach in previous wars. In the resulting vacuum it became accepted in joint army staff talks with the French that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) – small though it may be – might mark the difference in the coming battle between the mighty French and German armies and ought therefore to be deployed on the mainland. Thus it was

over the next few years mobilisation plans were laid for the six divisions of the BEF under the Commander-in-Chief General Sir John French to cross the Channel and enter the main Continental war alongside the mighty sixty-two divisions of the French Army.

War, when it came, was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in far away Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. In a sense war was inevitable: *all* the Great Powers harboured essentially selfish ambitions that could not all be achieved without thwarting the aims of other powers. No single power particularly sought war, but equally none did enough to avoid it as the crisis flared through the embassies of Europe during the next few weeks. Serbia was blamed for the assassination and threatened by Austria–Hungary: Germany supported Austria–Hungary, Russia supported Serbia; Germany threatened Russia: France supported Russia, and so the ultimatums and mobilisations began, until there was no longer any room for talking. When Austria–Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28 July 1914, Britain simply could not stand by. The German invasion of Belgium on 3 August triggered all the traditional British foreign policy concerns and if Britain abandoned her commitments to her European Allies it would inevitably lead to her utter diplomatic isolation – she would be alone in a dangerous world. Britain really had no choice and finally declared war on 4 August. To a large extent the British still saw their role as naval and although the BEF would be sent to fight alongside the French, as far as the British government was concerned this was an afterthought.

War brought massed crowds out in celebration on the streets of cities all across Europe. War was exciting, a break from the dull routine of the factory, the office, the mines and farms. It evoked strong notions of chivalry and national pride in the populations of all the belligerent nations. Underpinning this enthusiasm was the widespread conviction that the war would be relatively quick and painless; all nicely wrapped up with a crushing victory before Christmas. It is important to emphasise, however, that not everyone reacted with such jubilation and confidence: realists feared the catastrophic effect of war on society across Europe, and many socialist and workers' groups had real concerns and doubts. There were even pacifists opposed to the very idea of war on religious or moral grounds. Yet, nevertheless, the clear majority of people across Europe undoubtedly welcomed war. As such they did not act as a brake to the machinations

and posturing of their governments but cheered them on even as they collectively careered towards the horror of the Great War.

The German war plan envisaged a violent thrust through Belgium to push on into northern France, swinging round behind the main French armies to seize Paris and thereby secure victory at a stroke. Meanwhile, a defensive front would be established in the East to thwart any attempted advance of the Russian 'steamroller'. The French Army had nurtured a blind faith in the powers of the offensive rather than its previous rather more pragmatic reliance on an immensely strong series of concrete forts, typified by those at Verdun, built to defend the Franco-German frontier. It would instead charge blindly forward into the 'lost' provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, forfeited in the aftermath of France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The results were predictable as the French, dressed in the brightly coloured red and blue uniforms more attuned to another age of warfare, were duly slaughtered by the weapons of the twentieth century. By the end of 1914 the French had suffered an incredible 955,000 casualties.

As the French charged to their doom, the German columns were marching through Belgium and the almost undefended Franco-Belgian frontier. Here they encountered an unconsidered trifle – the BEF under the command of General Sir John French, which in accordance with mobilisation plans had moved up to Maubeuge to take its allotted place on the left of the French line. The British found themselves right in the path of the onrushing German juggernaut at the Battle of Mons on 23 August. In the succession of desperate defensive actions that followed as the British fell back into France, the quality of the British regulars seemed apparent, but their trusty Lee Enfield rifles could not stop the masses of well-trained German soldiers who were equally committed to the cause of their country. As the situation teetered in the balance the tiring Germans began to falter in their final approach to Paris, just as the French dredged up sufficient troops to launch a flanking thrust of their own and together with the BEF created the 'miracle' of the Marne. The Germans were forced back through France until they made a determined stand in swiftly dug trenches ranging along the easily defensible ridges behind the Aisne River.

The swirling, sidelong race to the sea followed as attempts were made by both sides to turn their opponents flank, bouncing and cannoning from

each other in desperate encounter battles. There was much slaughter on both sides, but the battle for the key Belgian town of Ypres was fought with a particular intensity in mid-October. Ypres guarded the approach to the Channel ports, the linchpin of the BEF communications back to Britain. The German Army suffered grievous casualties at the Battle of Ypres, but at the same time the battle consumed the bulk of the original BEF. The British fought to the end and at the last gasp managed to hold back the Germans from a breakthrough that at one point seemed all but inevitable. Stalemate ensued and the trenches stretched in unbroken lines from Switzerland to the North Sea.

Trenches were not a new development. They had been used many times in warfare especially during the sieges of fortresses and cities. What made the problem so intense for the generals of both sides was the power of modern weapons acting in concert. Belts of barbed wire slowed the approach of attacking infantry to the trench and gave the defending troops ample opportunity to pour in rapid rifle and machine-gun fire from the relative safety of their own trenches. But the real difference lay in the destructive potential of massed modern artillery. Superficially it appeared to offer the opportunity to easily sweep away the barbed wire and trenches in a welter of shrapnel and high explosive. Yet both sides had artillery. If the defending batteries were not knocked out of action, then they would let loose a devastating fire of their own when the attacking infantry advanced into the open across No Man's Land. Even if the front line was captured the support and reserve lines of trenches still stood in front of the attacking troops and the defending reserves would rush to counter-attack. Any kind of breakthrough was extremely difficult to achieve.

In 1915 both sides made attempts to break free from the constraints imposed on them by the lines of trenches, but the strategic imperative was clear: the Germans had possession of a large and economically invaluable tranche of France and Belgium. As this situation could not be allowed to continue, the French and their British Allies had to drive them out. The French launched numerous offensives and fought with a savage desperation to reclaim their homeland, but were held back by the brutal realities of trench warfare. The casualty lists grew, casting a black shadow over countless families across France. The British were also flexing their muscles as the BEF slowly began to grow in size. The first real attempt at a breakthrough was made by the First Army under the command of General

Sir Douglas Haig at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle on 10 March 1915.

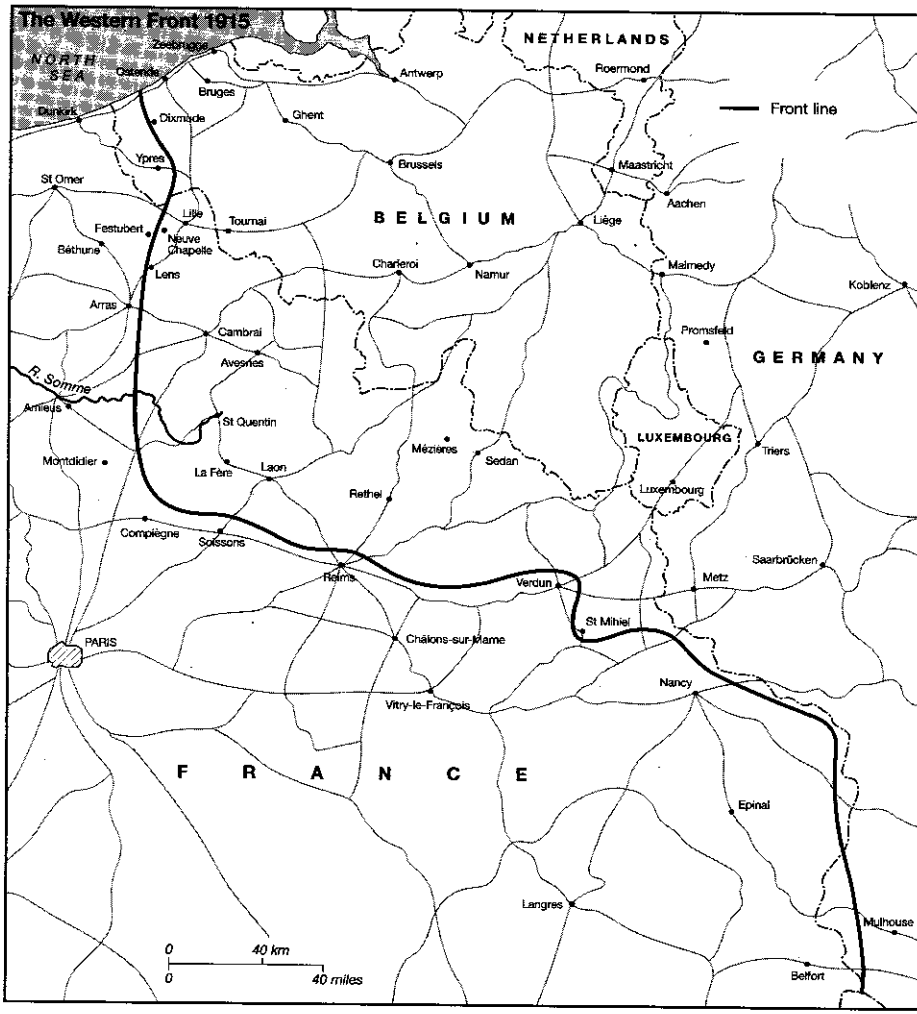
Douglas Haig was born on 19 June 1861. Educated at Clifton College and Brasenose College, Oxford, he entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst as a cadet in 1884. Here he had found his vocation and applied his considerable intelligence and disciplined personality to mastering his chosen career. After service as a regimental officer with the 7th Hussars he went to the Staff College at Camberley in 1896 where he gained a theoretical understanding of war that coloured much of his subsequent career. His first real active service experience occurred in a typical colonial conflict as a staff officer in the Sudan in 1898. During the Boer War, Haig was given command of one of the many small columns trying to snuff out the Boer commandos. By this time Haig had been marked out as a very promising officer and he was soon rewarded with command of the 17th Lancers and appointment as the *aide de camp* to King Edward VII. His career then flourished. He was appointed first as Inspector General of Cavalry and then promoted major general and became Director of Military Training at the War Office. At this point Richard Haldane, the Liberal Secretary of State for War, was engaged in a thorough overhaul of the structure of the British Army. Haig was tasked with creating a new Territorial Army out of the mish-mash of part-time volunteer units that served as Britain's second line.

Haig's capacity for hard work and analytical abilities were much prized and the next mark of high approbation was his appointment as chief of staff in India. He struggled with the inherent problems in the Indian Army until he was rescued by another promotion to lieutenant general and made commander-in-chief at Aldershot in 1912 – the home of the British Army. Here he was responsible for training and preparing the two divisions under his command ready to take up their wartime role as the I Corps within the BEF. Haig had already developed a firm belief in some of the classic principles of war, which decreed that any conflict would go through several stages: the initial manoeuvring for position, the first clash of battle, then the wearing out process of indeterminate length before one side began to fold and the decisive stroke could then be struck home. This conviction would endure throughout the war but his somewhat naive early belief that the power of 'the spirit' could overcome an inferiority of numbers, arms or training would soon wither from exposure to harsh reality. Haig also believed that any decision, even if misguided, was better than indecision

and that a bad plan resolutely pursued was better than a good plan that was not pushed through vigorously.

Haig took his I Corps across to France and into Belgium where it played a full part in the open warfare of the 1914 campaign. He drew a key lesson from his personal experiences in the First Battle of Ypres in October 1914, where he was convinced that the day would have been lost had the Germans only persevered in their attacks a little while longer. This was to colour much of his subsequent thinking about the merits of hammering on in battle, in the hope and expectation of finally triggering the sudden collapse of a staggering enemy and thereby capitalising on all the hard fighting and sacrifices already invested. As the BEF expanded he was promoted to full general in command of the First Army made up of the IV and Indian Corps in December 1914. Now he was charged with the overall responsibility of attempting to pinch out the German salient that jutted into the British line at the village of Neuve Chapelle. His subordinate, General Sir Henry Rawlinson as the commander of the IV Corps, was charged with the task of drawing up the actual battle plans.

Henry Rawlinson was a highly respected professional officer who had a distinguished military career. Born on 20 February 1864, he was the privileged son of a diplomat. Educated at Eton he was soon destined for the army and passed through the Royal Military College, Sandhurst before serving in India for much of his early career. As a young officer he amassed useful experience in colonial campaigns in the Myanmar expedition, chasing dacoits in Burma during 1886–7. Following these adventures he returned to Britain and passed through Staff College. As a staff officer he served under Lord Kitchener in the successful Sudan campaign of 1898. When the Boer War broke out in 1899 he was caught up in the disastrous start to the campaign and besieged in Ladysmith until it was finally relieved in the spring of 1900. Afterwards he served both on the staff and in command of independent columns of troops trying to hunt down the Boer commandos. His reputation was enhanced by these episodes and on his return once more to England he was given various prestigious appointments, including commandant of the Staff College, before being given command of an infantry brigade and then a division at Aldershot. On the outbreak of war, Rawlinson was given command first of the 4th Division operating on the Aisne in September 1914, and then of the makeshift IV Corps, which was sent to assist the Belgian Army in the doomed campaign


The Western Front 1915
NETHERLANDS
NORTH SEA
Zeebrugge
Ostende
Bruges
Dunkerk
Dixmude
Ghent
Antwerp
Roermond
Front line
Ypres
Brussels
Maastricht
St Omer
Aachen
Lille
Tournai
BELGIUM
Liège
Festubert
Neuve Chapelle
Béthune
Lens
Charleroi
Namur
Malmedy
Koblenz
Arras
Promsfeld
Cambrai
GERMANY
Avesnes
R. Somme
Amieus
St Quentin
LUXEMBOURG
Mézieres
Sedan
Triers
Montdidier
La Fère
Laon
Rethel
Luxembourg
Compiègne
Soissons
Saarbrücken
Reims
Verdun
Metz
St Mihiel
PARIS
Châlons-sur-Marne
Nancy
Vitry-le-François
FRANCE
Epinal
Langres
Mulhouse
Belfort
0 40 km
0 40 miles

to save Antwerp in October 1914. The Corps subsequently joined the main body of the army just in time for the First Battle of Ypres.

For the battle of Neuve Chapelle, Rawlinson and his headquarters staff had under their command the 7th and 8th Divisions that together made up the IV Corps. In planning to pinch out the Neuve Chapelle salient they conceived of a revolutionary new plan to use the power of massed artillery to smash a way through for his men into the German lines. In this he was certainly ahead of many of his fellow generals of the time. He summed up his views pithily: 'It is primarily an artillery operation and if the artillery cannot crush and demoralise the enemy's infantry by their fire effect the enterprise will not succeed.' [2] It is ironic that in this, the first major British offensive against the German lines, so much was done in accordance with what would become accepted as 'best practice' in the last two years of the war. A concentration of some 340 guns along the 2,000 yards frontage of the assaulting IV and Indian Corps meant that there was a ration of one gun for every 6 yards of the front attacked. Even more impressively in view of the difficulty in moving heavy guns this was all achieved without significantly alerting the Germans. Then a crushing hurricane-style short bombardment flayed the barbed wire and smashed down the relatively weak German defences. Photographs and artillery observation carried out by the Royal Flying Corps were used to direct the power of the massed guns to maximum effect.

Yet for all the innovations the battle was still a painful experience for the British Army. Although the ruined village of Neuve Chapelle was duly captured and the line straightened, the attempts made to try and push on to the next raft of objectives proved painfully expensive against the massed German reinforcements who rushed to the scene. Rawlinson had always been of the opinion that the attack should be suspended after the capture of the immediate localised objective of Neuve Chapelle, but when ordered by Haig to try and achieve more for the massive investment of men and materials he swallowed his objections and pressed home the attacks with every appearance of enthusiasm. However, a breakthrough on such an easily plugged narrow front was impossible and in the end the First Army suffered 11,652 casualties. A pattern of behaviour had been established between Haig and Rawlinson that both would repeat time and time again on the Somme.

Rawlinson was a man of considerable intelligence who had already

divined the holy grail of successful generalship on the Western Front in 1916 – don't aim too high.

> What we want to do now is what I call, 'bite and hold'. Bite off a piece of the enemy's line, like Neuve Chapelle, and hold it against counter-attack. The bite can be made without much loss, and, if we choose the right place and make every preparation to put it quickly in a state of defence, there ought to be no difficulty in holding it against the enemy's counter-attacks and inflicting on him at least twice the loss that we have suffered in making the bite.[3]
>
> Lieutenant General Sir Henry Rawlinson, Headquarters, Forth Army

Of course, this was simply not possible in 1915. There was a lack of guns and ammunition to carry out the pulverising bombardments on a sufficient scale. The other problem for Rawlinson was that this slow step-by-step process did not appeal to the prevailing mood of the British and French senior command. General Sir John French and General Joseph Joffre were determined to finish the war in 1915 and thus constitutionally disinclined to take a longer more painstaking route to success.

It is also sadly true that although Rawlinson seemed to have intuitively grasped the essence of 'bite and hold' he did not himself adhere to its principles in action if pressed forward by his seniors. At the attack on Aubers Ridge on 8 May 1915 there was not only slightly less artillery per yard of front than at Neuve Chapelle (one for every 8 yards) but the bombardment also included all three trench lines. This left the German front line receiving far fewer shells and introduced the very real possibility that the British would never get across No Man's Land. This is precisely what happened. The almost intact German garrison simply manned their machine guns and shot the advancing battalions to pieces resulting in over 11,000 casualties to no practical gain whatsoever.

By the time of the Battle of Loos in September 1915, Haig had three corps in his First Army. The opening assault would be made by Rawlinson's IV Corps fighting alongside the I Corps commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Hubert Gough, whom Haig considered an extremely promising officer. Hubert Gough was born in Ireland on 12 August 1870. He attended Eton before passing through Sandhurst and undergoing a lengthy stint as a regimental officer with the 16th Lancers in India from 1890, which culminated in an attachment to the Tirah expedition on the

North West Frontier in 1897–8. He then attended Staff College in 1899. During the Boer War he saw considerable active service and marked himself out as a thrusting young officer in command of a composite cavalry regiment acting as a mobile column. Disaster, however, claimed him when he boldly attacked a party of some 200 Boers, who turned out to be only a detachment from a much larger grouping of about 1,000 Boers in the valley of the aptly named Blood River on 17 September 1901. As a result Gough and most of his men were first surrounded and then captured. It took all his considerable initiative to conceal his identity from the naturally inquisitive Boers and then to escape. He continued to lead his mobile column until he was finally wounded in the hand and arm in a skirmish and sent home to recuperate.

Gough served from 1903 to 1906 on the directing staff of the Staff College, which was then under the command of Rawlinson. A period in command of his old regiment followed from 1907 to 1910 and he soon established close links with Haig, who was at that time also the Inspector General of Cavalry in his other capacity as Director of Military Training. In 1911 Gough was promoted to command the 3rd Cavalry Brigade based at Curragh Camp in Ireland. This nearly destabilised his entire career for the Irishman in him surfaced when he became involved in the Curragh incident in March 1914, threatening to resign rather than suppress Unionist opposition to the Liberal government's proposed Home Rule Bill. The affair burnt out quickly though his career may well have suffered but for the shortage of experienced officers on the outbreak of war a few months later. Gough was quickly promoted to command first the 2nd Cavalry Division, with whom he fought at the First Battle of Ypres, and then the 7th Division in April 1915. His next promotion to lieutenant general was startlingly quick. He was given command of the I Army Corps within Haig's First Army. The Battle of Loos would be his first great test as a corps commander.

It was a daunting prospect that faced these commanders. The British Army was still cripplingly short of guns and ammunition. Yet Sir John French had no choice but to order Haig to attack, for Joffre was adamant that the British must attack in strength on the widest possible front as part of the overall plan for a huge French autumn offensive in the Champagne and Artois regions. In their turn Rawlinson and Gough were chivvied on by Haig. A decision was made to use clouds of poisonous gas to make up for the shortfall of guns. The Germans had used a surprise gas attack

earlier in the year on 22 April to launch the Second Battle of Ypres – they had nearly broken through when the arrival of British reserves managed at the last gasp to seal the line just short of Ypres itself. Rawlinson remained generally pessimistic as to the chances of any real success. There simply were not enough guns, shells or men for the scale of attack that was being undertaken. The I and IV Corps between them had just 533 guns facing an 11,200-yard front, which included two strong German trench lines covered by thick belts of barbed wire.

The preliminary bombardment was designed to last for four days prior to the release of the gas and the infantry attack. This then was no hurricane bombardment and there was no element of surprise. Despite some prevaricating over the wind direction, the attack went ahead with a final artillery bombardment and the release of the gas clouds at 0530 to presage the infantry attack at 0610 on 25 September 1915. The results were patchy in the extreme, but even so in some sectors the speed of advance by the infantry across No Man's Land occasionally allowed them to surprise the Germans before they could emerge from their deep dugouts. Yet the German second line was not taken and the British reserve formations from the IX Corps were delayed in coming forward through a frustrating confusion in command and control that was later blamed on Sir John French. As a result the German reinforcements arrived first and the offensive petered out in a welter of attacks that achieved nothing.

Even as new offensive tactics were being developed in the painful laboratory of the Western Front so defensive tactics were mutating to counter them. Barbed wire belts thickened exponentially, trenches became deeper and better sited to secure raking fields of fire, dugouts were deeper and substantially reinforced by the use of concrete, while villages and farms became fortresses, support lines were properly integrated to cover the front lines and the once sketchy reserve lines gradually became fully-fledged defensive systems in their own right.

The failure at Loos was unacceptable to the British government and people. This time a scapegoat was required. A confusion over the method and speed of deployment of the reserve troops was seized upon and, after considerable intrigue amongst the soldiers and politicians, on 19 December 1915 Field Marshal Sir John French was summarily dismissed. He was replaced as commander of the BEF by his erstwhile subordinate, General Sir Douglas Haig.