

THE NADIR OF THE REGULAR ARMY: 28TH DIVISION AND THE BATTLE FOR THE HOHENZOLLERN REDOUBT, SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1915

The year 1915 was a difficult one for the British Army. The Official Historian, Sir James Edmonds, lamented that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 1915 consisted of ‘partly trained’ officers and men who suffered ‘awful slaughter and pitifully small results’ on the Western Front.¹ This was demonstrated at the Battle of Loos, when the novice 21st and 24th Divisions were prematurely committed to action with disastrous consequences. Edmonds acknowledged the courage of these formations but was critical of their lack of field craft and felt that the exertions demanded of them were ‘small as compared with the original five divisions of professional soldiers of the B.E.F.’²

This contrast between the highly-trained, pre-war Regulars of 1914 and the inexperienced volunteers of 1915 is a common theme of Edmonds’ work.³ The official historian’s assessment that the BEF’s defeats in 1915 were due to its reliance on inexperienced volunteers has endured for more than a century. Edmonds furthered this view, writing in the second volume of the 1914 *Official History* that by end of that year ‘the old British Army [i.e. the Regular Army] was gone past recall, leaving but a remnant to carry on the training of the New Armies.’⁴ Whilst it was true that the pre-war Expeditionary Force was damaged beyond repair, Edmonds’s interpretation neglects the fact that there were sufficient

¹ James Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915*, Vol. II, (London: MacMillan and Co., 1928), p. ix. (Hereafter *Official History*.)

² *Ibid.*, p. 344.

³ For example, see Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. II, pp. 26-27.

⁴ Edmonds, *Official History 1914*, Vol. II, p. 465.

Regular battalions stationed around the British Empire to muster four new infantry divisions in 1915. This lack of coverage of Regular forces is compounded by the fact that the historiography of the British Army in 1915 is remarkably sparse despite, as Nick Lloyd has stated, it being ‘a year of real importance’.⁵

Much of the historiography of 1915 remains rooted in the damning assessment provided by David Lloyd George’s controversial memoirs, where he raged against the ‘futile...criminal attacks’ which the British Army had undertaken.⁶ A generation later this theme was seized upon by Alan Clark in his notorious polemic *The Donkeys* which laid the blame for the disasters of the year at the feet of British generals and popularised the term ‘lions led by donkeys’. It is only in recent years that scholars have examined British performance in 1915 in depth, with new assessments considering pivotal battles such as Loos and the problems of warfare in this period.⁷ This new scholarship has acknowledged the terrible cost of the year

⁵ Nick Lloyd, “‘With Faith and Without Fear’: Sir Douglas Haig’s Command of First Army during 1915”, *The Journal of Military History*, 71(4), 2007, p. 1053. Of the recent crop of scholarship, only Alun Thomas, *Unfailing Gallantry: 8th (Regular) Division in the Great War* (Helion & Co., 2017) studies a Regular formation.

⁶ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd-George*, Vol.1, (London, Odhams Press, 1938) p.292.

⁷ Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud, Tempus, 2006); For the most recent work on the British Army of 1915, see Spencer Jones, (ed.), *Courage without Glory: The British Army on the Western Front 1915* (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2015) and Patrick Watt, ‘Managing Deadlock: Organisational Development in British First Army, 1915’, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017. For the Indian Army in 1915, see George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India’s Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 2014). For studies of German and French experience in 1915, see Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on the Western Front 1915* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2012) and Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915* (London: Routledge, 2013).

but, rather than blaming this solely on the poor performance of senior officers, it has highlighted the complex problems of trench warfare which faced the British Army in 1915. However, the year remains understudied especially when compared to the volume of literature that examines the latter half of the war.

This article contributes to the under-developed historiography of the Regular Army in 1915 through an analysis of one of these new formations: the almost entirely forgotten 28th Division. Although it would become the longest serving of Britain's wartime divisions, it lacks a divisional history or any form of memorial.⁸ The division barely features in the France and Flanders volumes of the *Official History*. Edmonds discussed the fate of 21st and 24th Division in detail but neglected the simultaneous actions of 28th Division, dedicating just two uncritical pages to the week-long fight for the Hohenzollern Redoubt.⁹ The commanding officer of 28th Division, Edward Bulfin, was clearly appreciative of this approach. When he was allowed the opportunity to review an early version of the work he told Edmonds "I have no comment to make on your draft chapters – you have let me off 'easy'."¹⁰

Subsequent historians have shown little interest in the performance of 28th Division or the fight for the Redoubt. Authors examining the Battle of Loos have tended to focus on the great drama of its first forty-eight hours, with subsequent fighting largely ignored.¹¹ Only Nick

⁸ The division was demobilised in October 1923. See Martin Middlebrook, *Your Country Needs You: From Six to Sixty-Five Divisions* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2000), p. 33.

⁹ Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. II, pp. 368 –370. The division is mentioned just four times in the main text and twice in the appendices.

¹⁰ TNA CAB 45/102, Records of the Historical Section, E.S. Bulfin to J.E. Edmonds, 11 December 1927.

¹¹ For example: Philip Warner, *The Battle of Loos* (London, Kimber, 1975); Niall Cherry, *Most Unfavourable Ground: The Battle of Loos 1915* (Solihull, Helion, 2005); Gordon Corrigan, *Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle* (Stroud, Spellmount, 2006).

Lloyd's work *Loos 1915* (2006) considers subsequent operations in depth. His work is the only one to offer any real consideration of 28th Division's bitter experience at the battle, and argues that the formation was unfairly singled out for criticism.¹²

This essay will explore three main avenues of enquiry: the nature of the 28th Division and ~~illustrate that a high standard of pre-war training could only go so far in the crucible of trench warfare.~~ ... the contention that its acknowledged high standard of training along pre-war lines was ineffective in dealing with the unfamiliar challenges of trench warfare. In addition to which Many of the problems it encountered, particularly unrealistic orders and inadequate equipment, were as deleterious to the Regulars as they were to Territorial or New Army formations.¹³ Secondly, The fight for the Hohenzollern Redoubt will ~~then~~ be studied in detail with a focus on command, supply and equipment. Finally, the controversy that followed the end of the Battle of the Loos will be considered. The defeat of the 28th Division marked the nadir of the British Regulars. The division had entered the battle as an experienced and combat-hardened formation, but its commanders, equipment and tactics proved inadequate for the task. Following its defeat the BEF was forced to acknowledge that the Regulars could no longer be regarded as a distinct and elite component of the Army, as they were not significantly more successful than the Territorials or the New Armies. As will be demonstrated, even a crack Regular division with a high proportion of pre-war soldiers suffered from the same operational weaknesses in 1915 as the non-Regular and Imperial units of the BEF.

¹² Nick Lloyd, *Loos*, p.195.

¹³ On the problems which beset the British Army in 1915, see Spencer Jones "'To Make War as Must and Not as We should Like": The British Army and the Problem of the Western Front, 1915' in Jones (ed.), *Courage without Glory*, pp. 31-56.

Genesis and Early Experience

In early 1915 the British sector of the Western Front was almost entirely held by Regular and Indian Army forces. Although the core of the elite pre-war BEF had been lost amidst the maelstrom of the First Battle of Ypres (19 October – 22 November 1914), there remained a substantial number of Regular battalions garrisoned around the Empire. There was reason to believe that these battalions could be formed into effective divisions capable of making a significant contribution on the Western Front. The 7th Division, formed in this fashion in September 1914, had distinguished itself at the First Battle of Ypres and earned the nickname ‘The Immortal Seventh’.¹⁴ In the winter of 1914-1915 more Regular battalions returned to the United Kingdom and were assembled into four new divisions; 8th, 27th, 28th and 29th. The first three were sent to the Western Front and the 29th Division was deployed to Gallipoli.

The 28th Division ~~experienced~~ went through a troubled genesis in the winter of 1914-15. Although built from experienced infantry battalions, the division lacked a clear military identity. Its three infantry brigades, the 83rd, 84th and 85th, were new creations staffed by officers who had not worked together before. The division was commanded by Major-General Edward Bulfin who had served with distinction as a brigadier-general in the opening months of the war, earning the admiration of Sir Douglas Haig, who described him as a

¹⁴ C.T. Atkinson, *The Seventh Division 1914-1918* (London: John Murray, 1927); Richard Hughes, ‘Tommy Capper’s “Immortals”: How effective was the 7th Division at the First Battle of Ypres?’, MA Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013; Richard Olsen, ‘An Inspirational Warrior: Major-General Sir Thompson Capper’ in Spencer Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*, (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2013).

‘tower of strength’.¹⁵ However, Bulfin had suffered a severe head wound in November 1914 and he was still convalescing when given the opportunity to command 28th Division.

Although a tough professional and a proven fighter, Bulfin’s contemporaries felt that he was ‘not the man he was before he was wounded’.¹⁶

The Composition of the 28th Division

83rd Brigade

2nd King’s Own (Royal Lancaster Regiment)

2nd East Yorkshire Regiment

1st King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry

1st York & Lancaster Regiment

84th Brigade

2nd Northumberland Fusiliers

1st Suffolk Regiment

2nd Cheshire Regiment

1st Welsh Regiment

85th Brigade

2nd East Kent Regiment (The Buffs)

3rd Royal Fusiliers

2nd East Surrey Regiment

3rd Middlesex Regiment

¹⁵ For Bulfin’s early career, see Michael LoCicero, “‘A Tower of Strength’: Brigadier-General Edward Bulfin’ in Spencer Jones (ed.) *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914* (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2013).

¹⁶ Imperial War Museum (Hereafter IWM), Loch Papers, 71/12/1, Loch to his wife, 10 March 1915.

The manpower of 28th Division appeared to be promising. A staff officer, Major Philip Howell, felt that the division was composed of ‘real good regular battalions from India.’¹⁷ In fact, this was not quite true, as the 1st Suffolk were garrisoned in the Sudan and 1st Welch were stationed at Malta at the outbreak of war.¹⁸ Overseas battalions had the advantage of being kept at a higher peacetime strength than home battalions and had in peacetime held priority for receiving trained drafts. Indeed, this had been a matter of some consternation for their sister battalions in the United Kingdom, who were frequently forced to release their best men to serve as reinforcements for imperial garrisons. Yet, although individual soldiers were of a high standard, the quality of battalion training on station was uneven. Battalions in India experienced ‘a life of grinding inactivity, dominated by the climate’ and the Indian government was parsimonious when it came to funding military exercises.¹⁹ The 1st Suffolks in the Sudan found themselves preparing for a renewed war with the Mahdists, but as General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien cautioned, ‘one could never become an up-to-date soldier in the prehistoric warfare to be met with against the Dervishes’.²⁰ Despite their Regular status, it was clear that the battalions of 28th Division would need time to prepare themselves for the new challenges of the Western Front. Bulfin felt the division

¹⁷ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (Hereafter LHCMA), Howell Papers, IV/C/3/113, Howell to his wife, 20 February 1915.

¹⁸ C.C.R Murphy, *The History of the Suffolk Regiment, 1914-1927* (London: Hutchinson, 1928), p. 17.

¹⁹ Edward Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815-1914* (London: Longman, 1980) p. 218; George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 48-50.

²⁰ Horace Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of Forty Eight Years' Service*, (London, J. Murray, 1925), p.67

needed to train together for at least two months so that officers and men could come ‘to know the others' values and peculiarities’.²¹

Unfortunately, the urgent need for reinforcements in France meant that the division's training time was curtailed, and it was rushed to France at the end of January 1915. The ~~noisome~~ environment of the Western Front took an immediate toll on the formation. Sickness rates surged as soldiers who had previously been stationed in tropical climates shivered in the winter weather.²² Lord Loch, the division's chief of staff, estimated that 4,000 men had fallen ill in their first month at the front, with the majority suffering from trench foot.²³ Worse still, the Germans opposite the division discerned that the formation was new and resolved to test its mettle. A German trench raid on 5 February 1915 surprised the 2nd East Yorkshires and captured the battalion's two machine guns.²⁴ The loss of the machine guns was especially humiliating as ‘Regimental machine guns, in 1915, were regarded almost as sacred. To lose them ... was considered as shameful as losing the regimental colours.’²⁵ Word of this embarrassment soon spread. Staff officer Captain Billy Congreve noted in his diary ‘I hear rumours that the 28th Division lost a trench last night’ adding that the division was composed

²¹ TNA WO95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Memorandum to V Corps HQ, 23 February 1915.

²² Sir A. Conan Doyle, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders 1915* (Second edition, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), p. 6.

²³ IWM, Lord Loch Papers, 71/12/1, Loch to his wife, 25 February 1915. This rate of attrition was double the average suffered by the divisions of First Army in the winter of 1914-15. Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. I, p. 28, Footnote 1.

²⁴ TNA, WO 95/2267, 28th Division War Diary, 5 February 1915.

²⁵ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008; original 1929) p. 77.

of ‘hurriedly put together Regular battalions, collected from all over the world, given staffs made up in the same way and thrown out here. A most rotten arrangement.’²⁶

It was an inauspicious start for the division. Loch concluded ‘We were not much of a crowd to start with and we have been put into the most difficult place in the line and we have made a mess of it.’²⁷ Within a month of arrival on the Western Front, concerns about the effectiveness of 28th Division prompted Field Marshal Sir John French to take the unusual step of temporarily detaching its original brigades and sending each of them to spend time with an established Regular division to acclimatize them to the realities of the Western Front.²⁸ This decision was a humiliating one and Bulfin felt he deserved to be dismissed from command as a result.²⁹ Edmonds, mindful of the reputation of the Regular Army, concealed the truth behind this embarrassing matter in the *Official History*, writing only that ‘the brigades of 28th Division, depleted by sickness were relieved ... as a temporary measure.’³⁰

However, the policy proved successful and over the following month the brigades showed marked improvement. The previously critical Congreve noted in late March ‘We

²⁶ Terry Norman (ed.) *Armageddon Road: A VC's Diary, 1914-16* (London: William Kimber, 1982) p. 102.

²⁷ IWM, Loch Papers, 71/12/1, Loch to his wife, 18 February 1915.

²⁸ The 83rd and 84th Brigades were sent to 5th Division while the 85th Brigade went to the 3rd Division. In return, 28th Division received 9th Brigade from 3rd Division and 13th and 15th Brigades from 5th Division. Thus, the 28th Division became a “composite” division temporarily consisting of 9th, 13th and 15th Brigades. See TNA WO 95/2267, 28th Division War Diary, March 1915, ‘[Report on the activities of] 28th Division (Composite)’. This arrangement lasted until April 1915, at which point 83rd, 84th and 85th Brigades returned to 28th Division.

²⁹ IWM, Loch Papers, 71/12/1, Loch to his wife, 18 February 1915.

³⁰ Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. I, p. 31.

have found the 85th Brigade to be first class in every way.³¹ When 28th Division reformed in early April it had overcome its early problems. The improvement in morale and organisation came not a moment too soon, as a few weeks later the division was caught up in the chaos of the Second Battle of Ypres (21 April – 25 May). The 28th Division put up determined resistance to stem the German attack, suffering the heaviest casualties of any British division engaged.³² The battle was its first major engagement and it emerged with its reputation enhanced, with Sir John French singling it out for praise.³³

The heavy losses suffered at Second Ypres have led to the suggestion that the division was ‘inexperienced’ by the time it was deployed to the Hohenzollern Redoubt.³⁴ However, a close study of the composition of the formation reveals that this assessment is inaccurate. Despite its casualties the division retained a significant core of pre-war Regulars amongst both officers and men.³⁵ The presence of these older soldiers provided an experienced backbone

³¹ Norman (ed.), p. 117

³² Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. I, p. 356. 28th Division suffered 15,533 casualties.

³³ Ibid., p. 264, Footnote 1.

³⁴ Lloyd, *Loos*, p. 195.

³⁵ A survey of *Soldiers Died in the Great War* (London: HMSO, 1922) reveals that, of the men of the 2nd Cheshires who were killed at Loos, 22% were pre-war Regulars and 25% were 1914 volunteers with at least nine months’ service. Several factors explain the survival of these old soldiers despite the apparently devastating losses at Second Ypres. The 28th Division listed over 6,000 men “missing” at Second Ypres. This figure is more than double that of any other division engaged and suggests a collapse of administration amidst the chaos of battle. It seems probable that a significant proportion of these men were separated from units in combat and subsequently returned. Further, many of those listed as “wounded” were chlorine gas casualties who generally made a full recovery. I am grateful to Dr Alison Hine for sharing these statistics.

for the division as it rebuilt its strength by absorbing wartime recruits.³⁶ Major C.J. Deverell of 85th Brigade commented that ‘officers and men are good keen lads, ready to fight.’³⁷ The ‘experienced’ status of the formation was confirmed in August, when it was given temporary command of several battalions from the recently-arrived 37th Division for the purpose of ‘instructing them in trench warfare.’³⁸

Nevertheless, the 28th Division was not without weaknesses. Bulfin was troubled by his old head wound and showed a tendency towards micro-management, much to the annoyance of his subordinates.³⁹ The military standard of the division’s component brigades varied. In the estimation of its commander, Brigadier-General Cecil Pereira, his 85th Brigade was ‘far ahead of the others’.⁴⁰ The 83rd and 84th Brigades suffered from repeated changes of commanding officers. Some of these changes were caused by battlefield casualties, whilst others were a result of the expansion of the BEF and the need for experienced officers to take command of New Army formations. On the eve of the Battle of Loos, 84th Brigade lost its commanding officer Brigadier-General L.J. Bols, who was promoted to the staff of XII Corps.⁴¹ Although this appeared to be a promotion, Pereira felt that Bols had been ‘degummed’ for inefficiency.⁴²

³⁶ Arthur Crookenden, *The History of the Cheshire Regiment in the Great War* (Chester: W.H. Evans, Sons & Co Ltd, 1938), pp. 53-54.

³⁷ Private Collection, Cecil Pereira Papers, C.J. Deverell to Pereira, 8 August 1915. I am grateful to Mr. Edward Pereira for allowing me access to these papers.

³⁸ TNA WO 95/2276, 84th Brigade War Diary, August 1915, Training of the 37th Division in Trench Warfare.

³⁹ Pereira Papers, Pereira to his wife, 9 September 1915.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bols had an eventful career. After service with XIII Corps he became a staff officer with Third Army, but was removed in May 1917 and given command of 24th Division on the

However, by mid-September 28th Division had recovered from its earlier trials and was recognised as a first-class Regular division. It was part of II Corps and when inspected by the corps commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Fergusson, in September he was ‘delighted and most complimentary’, stating ‘that the bad news from Russia ceased to depress him when he saw such troops.’⁴³ After its period of rest in the summer, the division was itching for action. Pereira felt that the ‘younger officers are for an assault on the Germans and the general spirit of the Brigade is for having a dash at something.’⁴⁴ They were to get their wish at the Battle of Loos.

The Battle of Loos

The 28th Division began the battle in GHQ reserve. For reasons, which remain open to debate, Sir John French chose to keep his reserves far from the action and the division was held approximately 17 miles behind the front at the opening of the offensive.⁴⁵ On 26 September it advanced along congested roads and was ‘tired’ by the time it arrived at the front that evening.⁴⁶ Fortunately the men ‘were by now comparatively old campaigners, and knew from past experience how to look after themselves while waiting to go into the line’,

Western Front. In September 1917, he became Edmund Allenby’s chief of staff in Palestine and served here for the remainder of the war.

⁴² Pereira Papers, Pereira to his wife, 9 September 1915.

⁴³ Ibid., Pereira to his wife, 21 September 1915. The ‘bad news’ to which Fergusson referred was the loss of Poland and the retreat of Russian forces.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, September 1915, Operation Order No. 51 and No. 53.

⁴⁶ J.M. Bourne & G.D. Sheffield (eds.) *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), p. 157.

thereby avoiding many of the problems experienced by the novice 21st and 24th Divisions during the same period.⁴⁷

The 28th Division was placed at the disposal of Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert Gough's I Corps which stood opposite the Hohenzollern Redoubt and had been tasked with its capture.⁴⁸ The Redoubt was the British name for a formidable defensive work that was thrust out approximately 500 yards in front of the main German position.⁴⁹ It stood on elevated ground and possessed several defensive lines, each linked by a network of communications trenches. The entrenchments had been constructed to protect a sprawling 30-foot high slag heap referred to as 'The Dump' and a fortified mining complex close behind it known as Fosse 8. The slag heap towered over the German lines and was studded with machine gun nests and artillery observation posts. Trench lines connected the Redoubt, the Dump and Fosse 8. The British identified each point individually, but the Germans considered it a single defensive position.

[INSERT FIG 1: Map of the Hohenzollern Redoubt at the outset of the Battle of Loos.]

⁴⁷ Everard Wyrall, *The Die Hards in the Great War: A History of the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment) 1914 -1919*, Vol.1, (London: Harrison, 1926), p. 158. In comparison, Haig recorded in his diary that 21st and 24th Division had not been fed and went into battle hungry; see Bourne & Sheffield (eds.) *War Diaries*, p. 157. On a similar theme, Edmonds included a curious appendix in *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p. 348, which consisted of a lengthy quotation from Captain Sir John Kincaid, *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade* (London, 1830) outlining the differences between 'young and old soldiers' and their comparative abilities to find comfort on the eve of battle, which appears to relate to the different approach of the novices of 21st and 24th Divisions and the veterans of 28th Division.

⁴⁸ Bourne and Sheffield (eds.), p. 157.

⁴⁹ Murphy, p. 126.

Caption: On the first day the 9th Division was able to storm the entire position and advance as far as Pekin Alley to the north. By the time 28th Division joined the fray the Germans had retaken Fosse 8 and the fighting that followed took place in the trenches of the Redoubt and on the slopes of the Dump.

The Dump and Fosse 8 gave the Germans a crucial observation advantage. They overlooked the British lines opposite the Redoubt and dominated the ground to the south. Haig noted ‘Owing to Fosse No.8 commanding the ground to the south and southeast it is difficult to place guns for wire cutting of Enemy’s second line south of Hulluch without having them knocked out.’⁵⁰ Yet, if the British could capture the position, then they would dominate the German lines in turn and gain a vital observation point for further attacks. The Redoubt, the Dump and Fosse 8 were of great tactical value to both sides.

At the opening of the battle, the 9th (Scottish) Division had stormed the Hohenzollern Redoubt and captured Fosse 8, but the success came at a high cost in lives and the division’s grip on its objectives was tenuous.⁵¹ By the time 28th Division arrived on the evening of 26 September, the ‘situation around Fosse 8 was undoubtedly precarious’.⁵² The battle was entering its most critical phase and tensions were running high. Gough recalled that at a meeting on 27 September ‘Haig was visibly worried and, as is often the case under such

⁵⁰ Bourne and Sheffield (eds.), p. 160.

⁵¹ A full account of this assault can be found in John Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division* (London: John Murray, 1921), pp. 40-60. The 9th Division suffered 6,058 casualties at the Battle of Loos.

⁵² Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1931), p. 115

circumstances, he was sharp – perhaps I might say without injustice, cross: I also must have been very worried, and perhaps those below me thought the same of me’.⁵³

For the battle to succeed it was important that Gough and Bulfin forged a working relationship. Several factors prevented this from occurring. The two men had no prior experience of working together and the 28th Division, never having previously served under I Corps, was not accustomed to its methods. The decision to deploy the reserve division in this sector was the result of battlefield necessity rather than considered forward planning. Worse still, there was mutual antipathy between the commanders.⁵⁴ Gough recalled his first meeting with Bulfin:

*He was a bluff, red-faced man, and at once on entering the room commenced to explain that infantry were not cavalry - and it seemed to me that he was more intent on instructing me how to command a corps than he was to deal with the serious problem before his division and to help the troops already in great difficulties round Fosse 8.*⁵⁵

Bulfin was presumably protesting about the fatiguing march his division had undertaken, but this mitigating context was omitted in Gough’s account. For his part, Bulfin ‘could not get on with General Gough who accused the Division of being slow and who was always pressing for attacks without ... sufficient artillery preparation.’⁵⁶ Although 28th Division was

⁵³ Ibid., p. 116.

⁵⁴ The precise cause of this antipathy is not known. It is tempting to speculate that their differing backgrounds played a role. Both men came from Anglo-Irish families, but Gough was a Unionist Protestant whereas Bulfin was a devout Catholic.

⁵⁵ Gough, p. 117.

⁵⁶ TNA, WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Private Diary of Brigadier-General C.E. Pereira, 20 October 1915.

unfamiliar with the sector, Gough ordered an immediate attack. In this respect he appears to have forgotten his own experience commanding the 7th Division at the Battle of Festubert (15 – 25 May 1915) where he had been pressed into a hasty attack without time to reconnoitre the ground, noting then ‘It always seemed to me a very careless and casual way of conducting operations ...[it] threw a very unfair responsibility on subordinates.’⁵⁷ After 28th Division’s initial assault was repulsed Gough continued to hector the formation, even to the point of ignoring the chain of command and issuing orders directly to brigades.⁵⁸ Captain Hugh Cumberbatch, Bulfin’s *aide-de-camp*, noted mid-way through the engagement: ‘I Corps very troublesome in their attentions and have either got wind up or don’t trust this Division.’⁵⁹

Gough’s interference and the fraught situation at the Redoubt placed Bulfin under enormous pressure. Bulfin had been struck down by a fever three days before the Battle of Loos and it is unlikely that he had fully recovered by the time his division went into action.⁶⁰ Cumberbatch recorded that Bulfin ‘took a very decided attitude’ in his dealings with Gough but the strain extracted a toll. Bulfin was invalided home a week after the end of the battle and confided to Pereira that ‘his eyesight gave out’.⁶¹ The engagement left psychological scars, for he later admitted to Edmonds that he ‘had a very confused memory of Loos – a sort

⁵⁷ TNA WO 95/1628, 7th Division War Diary, May 1915 and Gough to Edmonds, 31 March 1927.

⁵⁸ TNA WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, 27 September 1915.

⁵⁹ Private Collection, Captain Hugh Cumberbatch Papers, Diary, 30 September 1915. I am grateful to Brigadier John Powell for sharing this source.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 September 1915.

⁶¹ TNA WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Pereira Diary, 20 October 1915.

of horrid nightmare.’⁶² These pressures adversely affected his performance as divisional commander. Gough was predictably scathing in his estimation of Bulfin, complaining of ‘slackness and a complete want of co-ordination and cohesion in the Division.’⁶³ Yet some of Bulfin’s subordinates were also critical. Colonel Arthur Roberts, who assumed temporary command of the 85th Brigade early in the action, related that ‘I begged B. [Bulfin] to let me carry out the attack in my own way ... I had already written the orders for it. But no, that word counterattack was sent down the telephone every ¼ hour – it is simply an excuse not to write orders I say.’⁶⁴ Bulfin’s constant demand for hasty counterattacks probably reflected the pressure he was under from Hubert Gough. It is not clear why Bulfin objected to Roberts’s attack scheme, but he clearly failed to provide any useful alternatives. Command and control broke down further as the battle raged. A post-war regimental history complained that ‘superior head-quarters entirely failed to realize the conditions in and around the Redoubt, and ordered attack after attack in a way that can only be described as ruthless and senseless.’⁶⁵

There is no doubt that the sour relationship between Gough and Bulfin diminished the performance of 28th Division. Gough, under pressure from Haig to regain Fosse 8 as a precursor to operations further south, refused to countenance the idea of pausing and consolidating the position. Instead he pressed for repeated attacks. Although some of these assaults achieved local gains, none was strong enough to capture the entire Redoubt and many could only seize small portions of trench, which proved impossible to defend against

⁶² TNA CAB 45/102, Records of the Historical Section, Bulfin to Edmonds, 11 December 1927.

⁶³ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, October 1915, Notes: Staff Work, Command – 28th Division. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Pereira Papers, Roberts to Pereira, 11 October 1915.

⁶⁵ Crookenden, p. 57.

the inevitable German counterattacks. For example, a 'gallant' charge by the 1st Welch on 1 October captured a sizeable portion of the enemy line but could not carry the entire trench, with the result that attackers were exposed to counterattacks from both flanks and forced to withdraw.⁶⁶ Worse still, in his eagerness to retake Fosse 8, Gough failed to grasp that the growing weight of German counter-attacks threatened to evict the 28th Division from the Redoubt entirely. Unaware of this danger, Gough's insistence on repeated, piecemeal attacks was disastrous. The policy exhausted the division and weakened its ability to withstand German ripostes.⁶⁷ Bulfin seems to have had limited influence on the direction of operations and was forced to follow the detrimental orders of his corps commander.⁶⁸

The initial deployment is worth recounting in detail so as to give an impression of the difficulties faced by the division as it deployed.⁶⁹ Pereira's 85th Brigade slogged forward in pouring rain along communication trenches 'filled with stragglers and wounded making movement very slow'.⁷⁰ Its role was to relieve the bloodied 9th Division, which was still clinging to the Redoubt though it was unclear how much of the position it retained.⁷¹ To add to the confusion, the commanding officer of the 9th Division, Major-General George Thesiger, had been killed by a German shell on 26 September and Bulfin had been given temporary command of the formation thereby adding to his difficulties. Communication

⁶⁶ TNA, WO 95/2277, 1st Welch War Diary, 1 October 1915.

⁶⁷ A recurring weakness in Gough's military career was his inability to consider how German actions might affect his own plans. See Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914-18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006) p. 19.

⁶⁸ Cumberbatch Papers, Diary, 30 September 1915.

⁶⁹ At the outset of the battle 85th Brigade was tasked with relieving 9th Division which was occupying the Redoubt. 83rd Brigade occupied the old British front line. 84th Brigade was held in reserve.

⁷⁰ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

beyond the British line was dependent on runners and establishing the boundaries of units and their approximate locations was largely guesswork. Worse still, Pereira initially possessed only a single map and two guides to steer his brigade into position. Roberts complained that ‘the map [was] very inaccurate with a great many trenches not shown’ and later recalled ‘the whole situation of the Redoubt was hopeless confusion, men and officers shouting and doing nothing.’⁷² The state of affairs was so chaotic that Pereira was forced to prepare three separate sets of orders with each one dealing with a different scenario: ‘Original trenches captured and held for the most part, but very shakily’; ‘only British trenches held. Everything else lost.’; and ‘Hohenzollern Redoubt still in our hands.’⁷³ In the midst of this confusion it became clear that the Germans had retaken Fosse 8, prompting Gough to telephone Pereira at 4.15pm ‘ordering an immediate counter attack across the open’.⁷⁴ Pereira judged this ‘impossible’ and believed ‘it was hopeless to do more than secure the Redoubt’.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, before more could be done, both Pereira and his Brigade Major, Captain J. Flower, were wounded.⁷⁶ Arthur Roberts took charge of 85th Brigade but it was not until 4.30am that his leading formation had taken position in the Redoubt.⁷⁷ After consultation with his battalion commanders, Roberts asked for more time to consolidate the position: ‘This report was forwarded to 28th Division. They replied the attack must take place at once with

⁷² Ibid.; Pereira Papers, Roberts to Pereira, 16 October 1915.

⁷³ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th War Diary, October 1915, General Pereira Statement as to 85th Brigade Operations.

⁷⁴ TNA, WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Pereira Diary, 27 September 1915.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Pereira was wounded in the foot by shrapnel. Flower suffered a head wound and died some weeks later.

⁷⁷ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915.

the utmost resolution, there must be no pause or delay until the FOSSE is taken.’⁷⁸ Faced with a direct order, Roberts launched his assault at 9.30am on 28 September. After a brief artillery bombardment the 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) stormed the Dump but found the Germans were strongly entrenched around Fosse 8.⁷⁹ Pressing the attack forward ‘was a hopeless task and those who attempted it were shot or grenaded.’⁸⁰ As the attackers recoiled across the summit of the Dump they were ‘plastered with shells of all descriptions both from our guns and those of the enemy’.⁸¹ The attack was broken and the survivors fell back into the Redoubt. The charge was the high-water mark of 28th Division’s efforts.

The days that followed were characterised by a see-saw struggle for the Redoubt and ‘extremely violent’ trench fighting.⁸² Each of 28th Division’s brigades rotated through the Redoubt but, despite repeated attempts to expel the Germans, nothing could change the course of the battle. German counterattacks steadily fought their way into the British position, culminating on 4 October when the last defenders were evicted and the Redoubt was finally lost.⁸³

Several problems were encountered that explain the defeat of the division.

Communications to the Redoubt were precarious; the only route being a single

⁷⁸ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, September 28 1915.

⁷⁹ TNA WO 95/2279, 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) War Diary, 28 September 1915; Pereira Papers, Major M. Beevor to Pereira, 6 October 1915.

⁸⁰ TNA WO 95/2279, 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) War Diary, 28 September 1915.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² TNA WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Pereira Diary, 20 October 1915.

⁸³ 85th Brigade occupied the Redoubt between 27th and 29th September. They were relieved by 84th Brigade who fought until 3rd October when they were replaced by 83rd Brigade. See TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915.

communication trench, known as ‘Central Boyeau’.⁸⁴ All traffic to and from the position used this trench. Bulfin described it as ‘very narrow and deep and most complicated to newcomers’ adding that it was ‘a funnel into which poured large numbers of wounded and leaderless men’.⁸⁵ The communication trench was a prime target for German artillery fire and units moving through it ‘suffered many casualties’.⁸⁶ A post-war regimental history bemoaned ‘the continuous blocking of these trenches by everlasting working-parties moving backwards and forwards’ which ‘caused such congestion and confusion that units sometimes abandoned the comparative security of the trench and took to the open, an uncertain and hazardous alternative in the prevailing conditions and in the darkness.’⁸⁷ Attempts were made to reduce the dependence on the Central Boyeau by constructing parallel communication trenches, but the work was slow and poorly executed. Two working parties were stopped by enemy fire and a third only completed its new trench on the evening of 3 October, by which time it was too late to influence the fighting.⁸⁸ Bulfin blamed his chief engineer, Lieutenant-

⁸⁴ This was the official designation. There are frequent variations in spelling in contemporary paperwork and it was also known as “Central Avenue” or “Central Alley”.

⁸⁵ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915.

⁸⁶ Crookenden, p. 55; TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915; TNA WO 95/2279, 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) War Diary, 27 and 28 September 1915.

⁸⁷ Murphy, p. 127.

⁸⁸ TNA WO 95/592, I Corps War Diary, October 1915, Reports Regarding Operations of 28th Division around Hohenzollern Redoubt, No: ‘G’ 511, 4 October 1915; TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, October 1915, Notes: Staff Work, Command – 28th Division.

Colonel Alfred Winsloe, and took the unprecedented step of sacking him while the battle was in progress.⁸⁹

The dependence on the overcrowded Central Boyeau meant that traffic trickled forward at an agonisingly slow pace. Priority was given to reinforcements and supply parties moving towards the Redoubt and thus wounded soldiers often had to wait until nightfall before they could be evacuated.⁹⁰ Despite this rudimentary traffic system it proved impossible to keep the soldiers in the Redoubt fully supplied. The intense fighting consumed ammunition, especially grenades, at a prodigious rate. The Buffs recorded that ‘the greatest difficulty was evinced in obtaining a sufficient supply of bombs.’⁹¹ At the height of the engagement the 1st Welch Regiment found that they ‘were cut off from supplies, food, water and worst of all bombs.’⁹² Herculean efforts were made to bring grenades to the front. Private Samuel Harvey of 1st York and Lancaster Regiment won the Victoria Cross for bringing thirty crates of grenades forward under fire before he was finally wounded. Yet individual heroism could not make up for the inadequacies of the Central Boyeau.

The tremendous appetite for grenades was due to the nature of the fighting in the Redoubt. Combat took place amidst a labyrinth of artillery-ravaged trenches, which were partially flooded and ‘full of dead’.⁹³ Any movement above ground level drew immediate fire

⁸⁹ TNA WO 95/592, I Corps War Diary, October 1915, Bulfin to Corps HQ, 3 October. Bulfin misspelled Winsloe as “Winslow” in this letter.

⁹⁰ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915.

⁹¹ TNA WO 95/2279, 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) War Diary, 28 September 1915.

⁹² TNA, WO 95/2277, 1st Welch War Diary, 1 October 1915.

⁹³ Crookenden, p. 56.

and ‘it was impossible to show a head above the parapet.’⁹⁴ Roberts remembered: ‘Once we got out on both sides and ran up and shot the Huns in the trench but M.Gs were on us within a minute and most [of us] were killed.’⁹⁵ Edmonds felt that this was the first large scale, sustained ‘trench fight’ that the British Army had experienced on the Western Front.⁹⁶ It was soon found that there was little opportunity for the Regulars to demonstrate the marksmanship or fire and movement tactics for which they were renowned.⁹⁷ The grenade, not the rifle, was the dominant weapon and the engagement was characterised by ‘heavy bombing taking place at all points of contact with enemy’.⁹⁸

The growing importance of the grenade had been noted throughout 1915 and by the time of the Battle of Loos approximately 20% of 28th Division’s infantry was classified as trained ‘bombers’.⁹⁹ Yet the British bombers were greatly disadvantaged by their grenades, which were distinctly inferior to the German Model 24 *Stielhandgranate*. The division was equipped with a mixture of the War Office-approved No.15 Ball grenade and the locally-

⁹⁴ TNA WO 95/2279, 3rd Middlesex War Diary, 28 September 1915.

⁹⁵ Pereira Papers, Roberts to Pereira, 6 October 1915.

⁹⁶ Edmonds felt that the only comparable experience prior to this engagement was the fight for Hill 60 in April 1915. See Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.II, p.369. Comparisons may also be made to the fight for International Trench in July 1915, but this was a small-scale engagement compared to the battle for the Redoubt. See Michael LoCicero, ‘“A Coda to the Second Battle of Ypres”: International Trench, 6-10 July 1915’ in Jones (ed.) *Courage without Glory*, pp. 312-360.

⁹⁷ On the development of marksmanship in the Regular army, see Spencer Jones *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army 1902 – 1914* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), pp. 88 – 101 and Nicholas Harlow, ‘The Creators of the “Mad Minute”: The Careers of Brigadier-General N.R. McMahon and Major J.A. Willingford’, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. 94 (377), 2016, pp. 37-54.

⁹⁸ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, 29 September 1915.

⁹⁹ TNA WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Infantry Battalion Returns, 25 August 1915.

manufactured Battye bomb.¹⁰⁰ Both these grenades relied upon exposed fuses that the soldier had to ignite before throwing. Lighting a fuse amidst the chaos of battle was difficult and was complicated by the wet weather. Gough recalled of the Ball grenade: ‘the fuse of this could only be lit by striking it on a piece of emery paper and this was sewn on the man’s left sleeve’ but the rain meant ‘the emery paper was soaked and the bomb useless.’¹⁰¹ The 2nd East Kents found ‘owing to the rain the fuses were damp, matches gave out, and the only way to light the fuses was by means of keeping cigarettes alight.’¹⁰² It was estimated that 80% of Ball grenades failed to detonate in the damp conditions.¹⁰³ The Battye bomb was no better. A contemporary remembered that to prime the grenade:

*... the bomber had to unwind a sticky tape, pull out a safety nail, and then (with the fingers of his left hand, fingers always clumsy and often cold and wet, and frequently nervous in addition) take the cardboard lighter, wobbling on the top of two inches of pliable fuse and secured to the bomb with a bit of wire, to twist the upper thimble on the lower one.*¹⁰⁴

The British bombers fought hard despite these disadvantages. Second Lieutenant A.J.T. Fleming-Sandes of the 2nd East Surrey Regiment won the Victoria Cross for hurling grenades ‘from the [top of the] parapet in full view, during a critical situation’.¹⁰⁵ The 1st

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of British grenades in 1915, see John Mason Sneddon ‘The Supply of Munitions to the Army 1915’ in Jones (ed.) *Courage without Glory*, pp. 56-79.

¹⁰¹ Gough, *Fifth Army*, p. 122.

¹⁰² TNA WO 95/2279, 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) War Diary, 28 September 1915.

¹⁰³ Anthony Saunders, *Weapons of the Trench War 1914-1918* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p. 24

¹⁰⁴ Alan H. Maude, *The History of the 47th (London) Division, 1914-1919* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1922), p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. 2, p. 369.

Welch recalled protracted grenade fighting in the pre-dawn light where they ‘had the best of these battles, wounding and taking prisoners’ but the tide soon turned for ‘by 10am, the bombs were finished. The enemy’s supply were [sic] unlimited.’¹⁰⁶ The greater weight and effectiveness of German grenades told. An officer of the 2nd East Kents commented ‘The organisation of the enemy bomb throwers was astounding. They threw at least 5 bombs to our one and of much more powerful description.’¹⁰⁷ The 1st Northumberland Fusiliers experienced a ‘violent’ attack from German bombers, noting ‘the grenades, which were very large, were well thrown, came in a constant hail, breaking down all resistance and killing all before it.’¹⁰⁸ By contrast, a German account recalled the ‘repeated but futile hand grenade attacks’ launched by the British.¹⁰⁹

Although the battle was dominated by grenade fighting, both sides attempted to bring forward additional firepower to support their soldiers. The British were hampered by the need to use the congested Central Boyeau trench, which prevented the deployment of heavy Vickers machine guns. Several light Lewis machine guns were employed but they were still relative novelties at this stage of the war and the crews had only received ‘some elementary instruction’ in their use.¹¹⁰ The weapons jammed repeatedly in the muddy trenches and in several cases the gun teams were wiped out.¹¹¹ In an attempt to provide further support, No. 9 Trench Mortar Battery deployed four Vickers 1.57-inch mortars in and around the Redoubt. Unfortunately, within 24 hours of deployment two had been lost during a German counter-attack, a third had been knocked out by counterbattery fire, and the fourth was forced to

¹⁰⁶ TNA WO 95/2277, 1st Welch War Diary, 2 October 1915.

¹⁰⁷ TNA WO 95/2279, 2nd East Kents (The Buffs) War Diary, 28 September 1915.

¹⁰⁸ TNA WO 95/2277, 1st Northumberland Fusiliers War Diary, 3 October 1915.

¹⁰⁹ Hans Etzel, *Das K.B. 9. Infanterie Regiment Wrede* (Wurzburg: Schick 1927), p. 70.

¹¹⁰ Crookenden, p. 55.

¹¹¹ TNA WO 95/2279, 3rd Royal Fusiliers War Diary, 29 September 1915

withdraw due to ‘the difficulty of getting ammunition up into the Redoubt’.¹¹² The loss of the trench mortars was keenly felt as the Royal Artillery could provide little fire support for the embattled 28th Division. At the beginning of the battle Gough made the unwise decision to withdraw 9th Division’s artillery, which had been registered around the Redoubt, and replace it with 28th Division’s guns ‘who knew nothing of the targets.’¹¹³ This transfer took several days to complete and greatly disrupted artillery fire support. The Royal Artillery lacked positions suitable for observation amidst the dreary plains, and the foul weather prevented the Royal Flying Corps carrying out reconnaissance flights. Furthermore, the point-blank nature of much of the fighting made it difficult for Forward Observation Officers to know exactly where the British line ended and the German line began.¹¹⁴ As a result the Royal Artillery was limited to shelling comparatively distant communication trenches.¹¹⁵ Attempts to deliver bombardments on German positions within the Redoubt were marred by poor co-ordination and friendly fire incidents.¹¹⁶

German forces did not suffer from these drawbacks. German machine guns could occupy elevated nests dug into the side of the Dump, and at Mad Point to the north and the Quarries to the south. These positions gave good fields of fire and allowed the weapons to

¹¹² TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, 9th Trench Mortar Battery, Action of Trench Mortar Battery, 25 Sep – 2 Oct 1915.

¹¹³ TNA CAB 45/102, Records of the Historical Section, Bulfin to Edmonds, 11 December 1927.

¹¹⁴ Lloyd, *Loos*, pp. 176-178.

¹¹⁵ TNA WO 95/2269, Commander Royal Field Artillery, 28th Division, Report on Operations 27 September to 4 October.

¹¹⁶ I Corps was especially critical of 28th Division’s artillery support. See Gough’s handwritten notes on Bulfin’s report contained within TNA WO 95/592, I Corps War Diary, October 1915, Reports Regarding 28th Division Operations about Hohenzollern Redoubt, Bulfin to Corps HQ, 4 October 1915.

sweep the open ground between trenches of the Redoubt. Possession of the Dump gave German artillery observers a clear view of the British position and allowed their gunners to maintain accurate fire. This ‘stiff bombardment’ inflicted a steady stream of casualties and further degraded the ruined trenches.¹¹⁷ By 30 September it was reported that ‘Big Willie’ trench, which marked the outermost British-held line of the Redoubt, ‘has no existence except for a scratch of chalk.’¹¹⁸ The artillery fire was supplemented by German *minenwerfers* (trench mortars), which proved especially effective.¹¹⁹ An officer of the 1st Welch recalled that on 1 October ‘the enemy opened up with minenwerfer shell. The men were so congested it was not possible to get out of the way. When one lands in the trench men in the vicinity disappear.’¹²⁰

These factors shaped the fighting in the Redoubt.¹²¹ In the maze of trenches it proved ‘impossible to follow the progress of the battle or to ascertain the local situation.’¹²² Improvised trench barricades made of sandbags, wood, barbed wire and battlefield debris became the focal point for bitter hand-to-hand combat. The Germans proved adept at breaching these obstacles. The history of the German 57th Regiment recalled:

... barricades in both saps were cleared by blasting and the assault began: at the head of the advancing assault columns in each sap was a strong force of grenadiers/bombers, these followed by men carrying filled sandbags and who could

¹¹⁷ Crookenden, p. 56.

¹¹⁸ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Message Log for 30 September 1915.

¹¹⁹ Etzel, p. 69.

¹²⁰ TNA WO 95/2277, 1st Welch War Diary, 2 October 1915.

¹²¹ Narratives of the action may be found in Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. II, pp.369-370 and Lloyd, *Loos*, pp. 192-197.

¹²² Crookenden, p. 56.

*hurriedly build new barricades as required. Behind these, troops with rifles and grenades followed, mopping up dugouts and defending the parapets. At the rear, reserve troops to replace casualties among the grenadiers.*¹²³

An attack of this nature caught the 2nd Cheshires by surprise on 3 October, as their own history recorded: ‘The enemy broke through part of the trench occupied by the Welch on our left flank and advanced with great rapidity, throwing hundreds of bombs, their bombers being supported by machine guns and rifle men. The attack came as a complete surprise.’¹²⁴ Conversely, the British struggled to break through German barricades. The infantry lacked explosives with which to destroy them and it was difficult to target them with artillery. The inability to break through German trench blocks even prompted Brigadier-General T.H.F. Pearse to request that a mountain gun, a weapon considered obsolete on the Western Front, be brought forward to try and breach a particularly troublesome German barrier.¹²⁵

On 4 October, after six days of ferocious fighting, the 28th Division was finally driven back to the old British front line. The Hohenzollern Redoubt had been lost. The battle had cost the formation 146 officers and 3,230 men, representing almost 30% of the division’s official infantry strength.¹²⁶ The rate of officer attrition was particularly severe and reflected the close-range fighting. Of the first ten battalions to engage at the Redoubt, six lost their commanding officer. Four were killed in action and Lieutenant-Colonel White of the 1st Suffolk, and Lieutenant-Colonel Hoggan of the 1st Welch, were invalided home after the

¹²³ Herman Castendyk, *Infanterie Regiment Nr.57* (Oldenburg: Berlin, 1926), p. 54.

¹²⁴ Crookenden, p. 58.

¹²⁵ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, 84th Brigade Report on Operations, 4 October 1915.

¹²⁶ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Narrative of Operations 27 September to 4 October 1915.

battle. Neither returned to service. Roberts told Pereira that the two officers ‘went off their rocker’ and it is probable that they were psychiatric casualties who had reached the limit of their mental endurance.¹²⁷ The Other Ranks suffered similar stresses. The Suffolk regimental history felt the battle was of a ‘most difficult, even disheartening, character’.¹²⁸ The Cheshire regimental history took a stronger line, arguing that by the end of the fighting the ‘survivors had all but reached the limit of human endurance. This phrase is often used, but it is, unfortunately, justified.’¹²⁹ German forces were also exhausted, but could take comfort in their victory. The 9th Bavarian Regiment recalled that the men suffered ‘from the cold, the rain and the lack of warm food’ adding ‘their uniforms were tattered, many of them were marching barefoot having lost their boots in the clinging mud. But good morale and certainty of victory helped the brave “Niners” get through all this.’¹³⁰

Aftermath

The defeat of the 28th Division was a bitter blow. The I Corps had nothing to show for its efforts and the failure to capture Fosse 8 hampered efforts further to the south. Captain Cumberbatch noted that Gough was ‘very angry’ at the result of the battle.¹³¹ His rage was evident in a searing memorandum issued to 28th Division on 6 October, which listed twelve points of criticism. Amongst other complaints, Gough stated that the veterans of the 3rd Middlesex lacked ‘discipline and soldierly bearing’, felt that the retreat of the 2nd Cheshires

¹²⁷ Pereira Papers, Roberts to Pereira, 11 October. I am grateful to Dr Peter Hodgkinson for providing information about the careers of Hoggan and White.

¹²⁸ Murphy, p. 127.

¹²⁹ Crookenden, p. 59.

¹³⁰ Etzel, p. 69.

¹³¹ Cumberbatch Papers, Diary, 4 Oct 1915.

‘was disgraceful’ and condemned ‘lack of discipline among Brigadiers.’¹³² Ignoring his own role in the defeat, he concluded that there was ‘not sufficient energy in command ... But it is not the business of the Corps to command Division – that is the business of the Division.’¹³³ In these comments he revealed many of the contradictions that were inherent to his command style. Gough desired initiative from his officers but wished to retain close control of the battle.¹³⁴ He was critical of Bulfin’s orders that were ‘bad because they enter into details which should not find a place in Divisional Orders, and go into matters of tactical training’, yet expressed his anger at Brigadier-General Pearse for ‘shirking his responsibilities’ as he had allowed his battalion commanders too much tactical freedom.¹³⁵

On the same day that he issued his condemnatory memorandum, Gough complained that the bloodied division was not working hard enough to improve its reserve trenches and felt that there was ‘no reason’ for such ‘weariness’.¹³⁶ His report concluded ‘there is not a properly active and offensive spirit existing among Officers. The Commanding Officer is to be informed of this opinion of the GOC Corps.’¹³⁷ It is perhaps little wonder that Pereira found the ‘injustice and crassness of [the] Corps Comdr’ was ‘beyond belief’.¹³⁸ This period of criticism culminated on 11 October when, according to Captain Cumberbatch, ‘Corps commander came in before lunch to see General [Bulfin], the outcome of which is that the

¹³² TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, October 1915, Notes: Staff Work, Command – 28th Division.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front* (Stroud, Spellmount, 2006), p. 19.

¹³⁵ TNA WO 95/592, I Corps War Diary, October 1915, Reports Regarding 28th Division Operations, Correspondence regarding 84th Brigade Operations.

¹³⁶ Ibid., No.520 (G), 6 October.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ TNA WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Pereira Diary, 20 October 1915.

General is to go home sick & have a rest.’¹³⁹ Haig had doubts about this decision and ‘pressed General Bulfin to remain with the Division but he declined.’¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Haig still clearly rated Bulfin’s ability, for he was sent home to command a Territorial division rather than removed from command entirely.¹⁴¹

The 28th Division’s reputation lay in tatters. Haig felt that the formation ‘had not proved equal to the task.’¹⁴² Lieutenant-General Sir William Pulteney reflected Army gossip when he wrote that ‘28th Division lost the Hohenzollern redoubt from being completely bombed out by six [battalions of] Germans, simply because Bulfin did not believe in bombing and the men were ignorant.’¹⁴³ The surviving officers of 28th Division were painfully aware of the criticism. Pereira felt that ‘the whole of 28th Division [was] under a cloud’.¹⁴⁴ Roberts agreed and told Pereira that ‘28th Division simply stinks in the nostrils of First Army.’¹⁴⁵ Despite the bleak mood, the formation resumed training on 8 October with a focus on lessons learned from the Hohenzollern Redoubt. As part of a staff exercise, the division drew up plans for a renewed effort to retake Fosse 8.¹⁴⁶ Despite this useful study, no

¹³⁹ Cumberbatch Papers, Diary, 11 October 1915.

¹⁴⁰ TNA WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Pereira Diary, 20 October 1915. See also Cumberbatch Papers, Diary, 11 October 1915.

¹⁴¹ Bulfin took command of the Territorial 60th Division in late 1915. His career was revived in June 1917 when he was transferred to Palestine to command XXI Corps. He served with distinction in this theatre and retired as a full general in 1925.

¹⁴² TNA WO 95/159, First Army War Diary, October 1915, Douglas Haig to GHQ, 4 October.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Anthony Leask, *Putty: From Tel-el-Kebir to Cambrai. The Life and Letters of Lieutenant-General Sir William Pulteney, 1861-1941* (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2015), p. 102.

¹⁴⁴ TNA, WO 95/2278, 85th Brigade War Diary, Pereira Diary, 20 October 1915

¹⁴⁵ Pereira Papers, Roberts to Pereira, 11 October 1915.

¹⁴⁶ TNA WO 95/2268, 28th Division War Diary, Program of Training, 8 October 1915.

one from the division was consulted prior to 46th (North Midland) Division's disastrous assault against the Hohenzollern Redoubt on 13 October.¹⁴⁷

There would be no further opportunity for the 28th Division to share its experiences. On 25 October the formation was ordered to embark for Salonika. Officially, the justification for sending the Regulars to this peripheral theatre was the need to provide 'seasoned' troops to strengthen the British contribution to the campaign.¹⁴⁸ Yet given Sir John French's opposition to sending *any* British soldiers to Salonika it seems curious that he would choose to send a battle-hardened Regular division.¹⁴⁹ French's own private papers do not clarify his reasoning. However, given that French had been unimpressed with the formation in early 1915 and considering its recent defeat at Loos, it may be hypothesised that he was willing to let the division depart the Western Front in return for the fresh New Army formations which he had been promised by Lord Kitchener. The exact reasoning that underpinned the decision must remain a matter of conjecture.

The departure of the 28th Division, soon to be followed by its sister formation 27th Division, marked a low point for the Regulars of the BEF. One of the traditional strengths of the Regular Army was its ability to rely on its crack battalions to compensate for deficiencies in planning, for in Sir Michael Howard's phrase, 'Like well-trained horses, they can carry

¹⁴⁷ For details of this latter operation, see Michael Woods, 'Gas, Grenades and Grievances: The Attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt by 46th North Midland Division' in Jones (ed.) *Courage without Glory*, pp. 408-437 and Simon Peaple, *Mud, Blood and Determination: The History of the 46th (North Midland) Division in the Great War* (Solihull: Helion & Co., 2015), pp. 52-77.

¹⁴⁸ Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol.2, p.406.

¹⁴⁹ For French's reluctance, see Roy A. Prete, 'Imbroglia par excellence: Mounting the Salonika Campaign, September-October 1915', *War and Society*, 19(1), 2001, pp. 62-63.

even indifferent or incompetent riders.’¹⁵⁰ Major-General Ivor Maxse put it another way in July 1916 when he remembered fondly that even when ‘hustled on and told to attack at an impossible hour ... The Old Army could do these things and accomplish “the impossible.”’¹⁵¹ But this reliance on the fighting ability of the Regulars could result in unrealistic demands being placed upon them, and Gough’s fury at the defeat of the division perhaps reflected his disappointment that they had failed to live up to the mythical standards of the pre-war Army.

In fact, 28th Division fought exceptionally hard and its endurance in the ‘nightmare’ of the Redoubt was testament to its tenacity.¹⁵² But without effective planning, preparation and suitable equipment, no formation of the BEF could fight its way through the German defences in 1915. The fact that the 21st and 24th Divisions of the New Army and the Territorial 46th Division were defeated when trying to tackle the same objective, was largely explained by reference to their inferior training compared to pre-war Regulars.¹⁵³ Yet this explanation did not apply to the 28th Division and its defeat revealed many of the problems inherent to BEF operations in 1915. Regular divisions had been at the forefront of battle throughout 1915, but superior training and professionalism could not secure victory. As has been shown, the division’s core of pre-war soldiers meant it retained its Regular characteristics longer than the divisions that had been at the front since August 1914, but even with this advantage it could not overcome the many problems it faced.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Howard, ‘Leadership in the British Army in the Second World War: Some Personal Observations’ in G.D. Sheffield (ed.) *Leadership and Command: The Anglo-American Experience since 1861* (London: Brassey’s, 1997), p. 120

¹⁵¹ IWM, Ivor Maxse Papers, 17/2, Maxse to Montgomery, 31 July 1916.

¹⁵² Pereira Papers, Roberts to Pereira, 11 October 1915.

¹⁵³ Edmonds, *Official History 1915*, Vol. II, pp. 395-400.

The 28th Division's final engagement on the Western Front would be the last time that senior officers expected the Regulars to perform to the standards of the pre-war Army. Following the battle there was an acknowledgement that relentless casualties had eroded the force beyond repair. A pointed report issued after Loos stated: 'it can no longer be assumed that measures which would as a matter of course have been taken in our Regular divisions in the earlier stages of the war, will now always be carried out efficiently.'¹⁵⁴ This was formally acknowledged between late October and December 1915 when seven of the nine Regular divisions then serving on the Western Front were reorganised by exchanging a brigade with a New Army division.¹⁵⁵ Officially, the purpose of this reorganisation was to 'stiffen' the inexperienced volunteers, but there is little evidence that it improved New Army combat performance.¹⁵⁶ What is certain is that it permanently altered the composition of Regular divisions. This decision to break up almost all the long-standing Regular divisions was, in part, an acknowledgement that they had lost their original military identities.

In this respect, Edmonds's assertion that the Battle of Ypres in 1914 witnessed the disappearance of the Regular Army may be qualified. The fighting at Ypres destroyed the homogenous pre-war British Expeditionary Force, which had been based in the United Kingdom, but it was the 28th Division's defeat at Loos, and the loss of faith in the formation resulting in its subsequent transfer to Salonika, that marked the last act of the Regular divisions as a distinct component of the BEF on the Western Front.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Edmonds, *Official History* 1915, Vol. II, p. vii.

¹⁵⁵ Only 1st Division and Guards Division avoided this change. Both these divisions were unique: 1st Division was the premier division of the British Army and Guards Division was composed entirely of Guards battalions.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front, 1916-1918* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2014), p. 67.

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