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FOCH, AFTER CLASH WITH HAIG, ACCEPTS HIS PLAN FOR BIG DRIVE

DeWar Explains War's "Greatest Myth"—That French Generalissimo Worked Out British Victories.

English Leader's Strategy for Triple Allied Offensive a Tremendous Success.

Canadian Engineers, by Notable Skill, Bridge the Scheldt—With Splendid Courage Americans Face Certain Death.

By George A. B. DeWar.

The seven months of initiative, which the Germans had held on the Western Front, ended in July, 1918, and at once the advance of the Allies to victory began. So this is not an unsuitable occasion for referring to the myth that when, in the summer of 1918, the British troops advanced triumphantly they did so because at length they were directed by consummate genius—and that this genius did not emanate from our own leaders, but from Marshal Foch!

That aspersion on British leadership has been described as the greatest myth in the war so far as the Western Front is concerned.

More and more one is convinced when examining the evidence that the civilian authorities at home in August and September, 1918, did not understand the nature of Sir Douglas Haig's wonderful series of operations; and that they possessed at hand nobody really able or ready to help them in this.

In the latter half of July, 1918, French and American divisions counter-attacked the Germans, threw them back, and took from Ludendorff the initiative.

On August 8th the British, in turn, struck on the Amiens front and threw the Germans back on to their 1916 line south of the Somme, roughly the Roye-Chaulnes line.

As a result of this attack, as the Despatch shows, the Paris-Amiens rail way was disengaged, the connection between the French and British Armies at length quite secured, and the enemy's junction at Chaulnes brought within our gunfire.

Foch now requested Haig to attack the enemy in this Roye-Chaulnes position at once. He was anxious to secure Peronne if possible, with the river crossings to the south of the town and the high ground east of it.

The British Commander-in-Chief ordered further reconnaissances on August 13th. These bore out his earlier conclusion that the position on the Roye-Chaulnes front was most formidable. Clearly the Germans resistance had stiffened here. Therefore, he wrote to Foch, stated the facts, and let it be known that he was not prepared to attack the Roye-Chaulnes position.

At the same time Haig outlined another and quite different plan of attack, one starting farther north, in which the Third and Fourth Armies would be able to co-operate, and the First Army a little later to join in. He preferred science to the sledge-hammer.

Foch did not concur. He was bent on the Fourth British Army continuing and pressing the attack forthwith south of the Somme.

So a conference between the leaders was necessary. It was held at once at Sarcus, and attended by Foch and Haig with their Chiefs of Staff. The two proposals were considered.

No secret shall here be made of the fact that the argument was keen and controversial. How could it be otherwise, seeing that both leaders believed absolutely that their respective proposals—which were of a wholly divergent character—were right?

The British Commander-in-Chief in the end difinitely declined to continue the attack on the Roye-Chaulnes position.

And Foch accepted in its entirety the British Commander-in-Chief's plan. He abandoned his order that the British Army should attack the Roye-Chaulnes position. He eventually promised to attack simultaneously with the French Army over a wide front in order to work in with Haig's plan, which was to start in a new sector.

And there is reason for saying that, not long after, the French Higher Command admitted that it was beholden to us in this vital matter—as truly it was! That is what one expects in good soldiers; it is deep in their training.

Haig's new offensive at once began to achieve what he intended and what he and his staff and Army Commanders had thoroughly studied well beforehand.

The series of battles, started by the small and modest-looking operation on August 21st, led on to the storming of the Drocourt-Queant and the Hindenburg positions and did all their originator had hoped. Ultimately they enabled the Allied Armies as a whole to advance.

So as a result of these victories in August and early September, the British Commander-in-Chief resolved to bring the whole striking power of his army to bear on the retreating enemy. He was "out" for a decision, and believed that it could be reached before the close of the year 1918.

At the end of August and early in September Foch and Haig discussed the strategic aims for their future operations. Before this date Foch's plan of campaign had been of a quite limited character, consisting mainly of possible strokes for freeing several important railways, such as the Paris-Amiens line which the battle of August 8th secured. But now the moment had come to enlarge and co-ordinate the operations in order to reach a decision.

Foch's plan had been that the American Army, after an attack in the St. Mihiel salient, should pass thence to an offensive against the enemy in the Briey coal-fields; the French themselves attacking in Champagne; and the British advancing against the German centre at the Cambrai-St. Quentin front; whilst British, French and Belgian forces combined were to attack in Flanders and advance towards Ghent with the object of clearing the Belgian coast-line.

The design was full of fighting spirit, but it was crude. The American forces in moving eastward towards the Briey coal-fields would be engaging in a drive away from the Allied centre and left! It would mean an eccentric rather than a concentric movement against the enemy, and would render his retirement far easier and safer.

Such was the British criticism of the plan. Haig proposed that the Allied right should, instead, attack and advance towards Menines the Americans right resting on the Meuse. In this manner the offensive of the whole Allied forces would be of a converging nature.

Foch concurred with this British emendation; and on September 3rd he issued his Directive 3537 on these lines. The whole Allied plan of operations thus took a grand and really scientific form.

By Lieut.-Col. J. H. Boraston, C.B.

The chart accompanying shows the disposition of the opposing forces on September 25th, the eve of the triple offensive. The general strategy of the combined operations can be clearly seen.

The shaded area again represents the Ardennes and adjoining country of similar natural characteristics, which lie like a rampart between Germany and France. The main trunk line into Germany and the important lateral south of the Ardennes are also shown again in conventional fashion.

On the right, south of Mezieres, will be observed the Argonne offensive ready mounted, waiting for the moment of assault on the morrow. The reader will note the heavy concentration of French divisions in Gouraud's Fourth French Army, 27 infantry divisions, and the no less powerful grouping of American and French divisions on Gouraud's right, 12 U. S. A. divisions and 4 French. It will be remembered that in rifle strength the 13 U. S. A. divisions were equivalent to at least 30 French divisions.

Opposite this formidable mass, which for purposes of comparison can be reckoned at from 60 to 65 divisions, are 19 German divisions and 1 Austrian division, and of the 19 German divisions only 6 were first-class troops.

In Flanders, the northern offensive is also ready to strike on the 28th, though 3 French cavalry divisions are still on their way to the battle area. The map shows the location of Gen. Byng's command, north of Albert.

The task with which the British Armies were faced on the St. Quentin-Cambrai front was from every point of view far more difficult than that which the French and Americans had been asked to perform in the Argonne battle sector.

The Argonne battle had been launched with an overwhelming superiority of force. The British Armies were called upon to attack an opponent more numerous than themselves. The French and Americans enjoyed the advantage of taking their enemy by surprise, at any rate to a material extent. On the British front the Germans had already been fighting an unbroken battle for a period of seven weeks and expected attacks from day to day.

It was with an Army less strong numerically than that which had survived the German spring offensive that the onslaught was made upon the most powerful, most important, and most strongly held of the enemy's defences in the west.

At 5.20 a.m., on the morning of September 27th the right of Horne's First Army and the left of Byng's Third Army moved forward to the attack. From start to finish the battle proceeded with almost mathematical precision.

On this first day, on the greater part of a front of thirteen miles from Beaucamp to Oisy-le-Verger, our troops advanced to a depth of four miles. On the 28th the area overrun was extended southwards to include Gouzeaucourt, northwards to Palluel and westwards to the Scheldt Canal. Over 10,000 prisoners and 200 guns were taken by us in the first day's fighting.

It were presumptuous to comment here upon the extreme skill and ability with which this most difficult operation was prepared, controlled and directed by the First Army Commander and his staff. The fact speaks for itself in terms of sufficient eloquence.

It may be worth noting, however, as supplementary evidence of the thoroughness and forethought of the preparations and the skill and energy of our technical services at this date, that by 9 a.m. on the morning of the attack Canadian Engineers had completed four two-way bridges over the great Scheldt Canal cutting, and by 6.30 p.m. three trestle and pontoon bridges in addition. Needless to say the successful development of the assault depended directly upon the speed and completeness with which such works as these could be carried out.

The part the 27th American took in the assault on Gillemont Farms should be mentioned here. On the 29th the American infantry attack on this front was launched from assembly position as much as 1,000 yards behind the line from which the barrage started and was mown down by machine gun fire from the strong points that should have been captured two days previously.

It was stated to the writer at the time that the mistake was pointed out to the American units concerned before the battle and that they were urged to alter their artillery arrangements. The reply said to have been made was that it was all right because American infantry were accustomed to march four miles an hour and would soon catch up their barrage. A distinguished American staff officer who visited the battle-ground immediately after the fight brought back word that on this front the American dead lay in long orderly lines, a tribute to the high spirit and splendid courage with which they had advanced to certain death.

Yet even so, the strength, energy and fighting spirit of the American soldiers was not to be denied, and in the first rush bodies of troops made great progress. Contact aeroplanes sent back word that American detachments had been seen at an early hour so far east as Gouy, and high hopes were entertained of a great success all along the line.

Then the experience of the Somme 1916 and of other early battles was repeated. Eager for the attack and confident in their powers, the main object of many of the American rank and file would seem to have been to keep in front of the Australian troops, whose duty was to pass through them to carry on the attack. They went straight ahead, as the troops of the 8th British Corps had done in 1916 and forgot to make sure of the positions they had overrun.

After the first flood had passed by, the German garrisons came out of their deep dugouts and from the shafts connecting their trench line with the tunnelled canal. They cut off the retreat of the American troops who had passed beyond them and engaged in a desperate struggle with the Australian divisions who, with no artillery barrage to keep the German machine guns under cover, were forced to use all their battle craft to fight their way forward and make good the beach in the southern half of the tunnel sector.

This they succeeded in doing, so that at the end of the day's fighting, despite all misfortunes, the central sector of the Hindenburg line had been broken through on a front of five miles.

The events of these three days on the St. Quentin-Cambrai front put a new complexion upon the military situation in the west.

At the end of October the great conception of the triple convergent offensive was on the point of realization. In spite of the vast withdrawals he had already carried out, the British advance had beaten the enemy in speed.

When on November 9th the German wireless announced the abdication of the Kaiser and the Crown Prince's renunciation of his claims to the German throne, the German Army jammed in the Liege bottle-neck, was like a whale aground in shallow water, trapped by its very bulk and able neither to escape nor to defend itself.

On the British front the war ended on November 11th with a message from the enemy which may be classed as characteristic, namely, that a British heavy gun was in action after 11 a.m. southwest of Binche. "Please stop firing."

By Geo. A. B. DeWar.

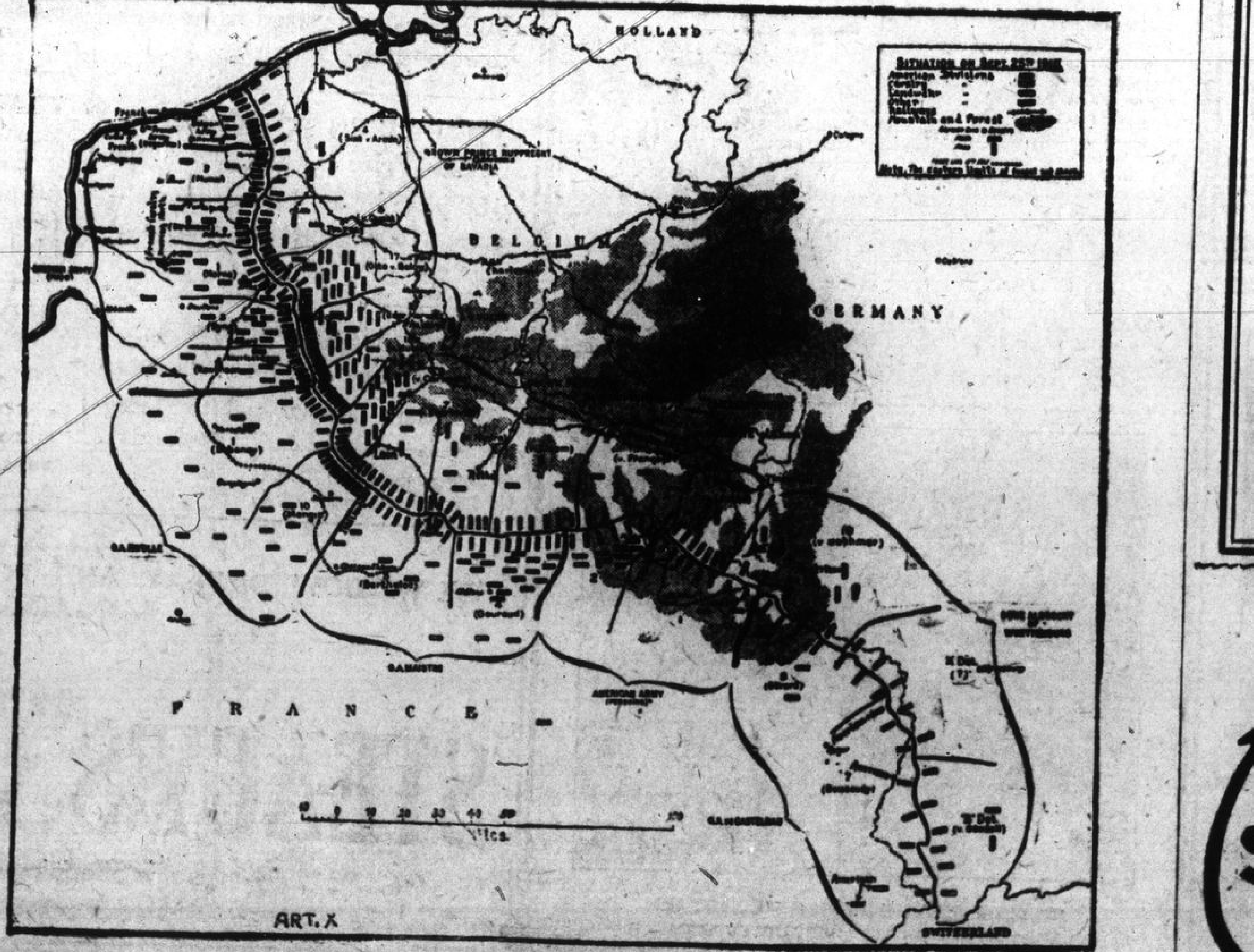
No subject in the latter part of the war aroused much keener interest and discussion than "unity of command".

Lord Kitchener's charter first to Sir John French, then to Haig, insisted on two cardinal points: (1) That closest co-operation between the Allied Armies Commander-in-Chief was an indpendent one not to come under the orders of any Allied general further than the necessity of such co-operation might compel.

In his final report Pershing says, "As our troops were being trained for open warfare, there was every reason why we should not allow them to be scattered among our Allies even by divisions, much less as replacements, except by pressure of sheer necessity. Any sort of permanent amalgamation would irrevocably commit America's fortunes to the hands of the Allies." That is not meant as an argument against a generalissimo—Pershing approved the March 1918 arrangement. But it is an argument against anything like dictation: i.e., the powers of a generalissimo must be restricted.

At the Beauvais conference on April 3rd the three Allied Governments, at the suggestion of Haig, defined the powers of the Generalissimo more exactly than had been done at Doullens. He was entrusted with "The stregical direction of military operations. The Commanders-in-Chief of the British, French and American Armies will have full contgol of the tactical action of their respective armies. Each Commander-in-Chief will have the right of applying to his Government if in his opinion the army is endangered by any order received from General Foch."

Such was the final form of "unity of command." The arrangement worked out on the whole well, thanks to the soldiers. It is not impertinent to ask whether some corresponding formula might not have then applied to the statesmen who arranged the peace terms.



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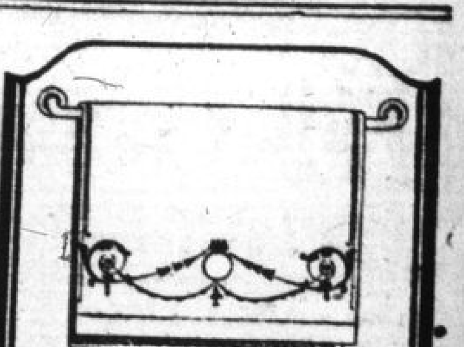
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