

Telephones, Telegraphs and Automobiles: The Response of British Commanders to New Communications Technologies in 1914.

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In 1909, the British officer Ernest Swinton published a short story depicting the role of the general in “the next great war.” In the tale, Swinton’s headquarters resembles a modern command centre, with numerous staff officers busily answering telephones and processing messages from the field. Conspicuously absent, however, is the general himself, who spends the day trout fishing, appearing only in the evening to peruse the information prepared by his staff and issue clear orders for the next day’s operations.¹ For senior officers in the First World War, Swinton’s idyllic portrayal bore little resemblance to reality. Nonetheless, his story recognized the changing nature of command in the early twentieth century. The opening campaign of the war, from August-November 1914, saw the first use of the telephone, radio and automobile in a European conflict. Along with the slightly older telegraph, these inventions enabled the control of much larger armies than in previous wars. Yet they also encumbered senior officers with vast quantities of information, impelling them to forsake any leadership role on the battlefield and become managers of data increasingly removed from the forces they commanded.

Historians have demonstrated the inadequacies of these new communications devices in providing commanders with enough timely information to direct large armies effectively. There has been little examination, however, of the reaction of commanders

themselves to these innovations and the different role they necessitated. In an effort to shed light on this issue, this paper will assess the response of senior officers in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to new communications technologies in 1914. It will demonstrate that they reacted with ambivalence to these tools as well as the mode of “generalship” advocated by Swinton. While commanders embraced inventions that enhanced personal interaction with subordinate units, they often eschewed devices which facilitated the rapid transfer of information without face-to-face contact.

In a military context, the automobile is usually associated with the transportation of personnel and supplies rather than the movement of information. In 1914, however, senior British officers embraced the automobile as a communications tool. To expedite the transfer of orders, the BEF employed a pool of trained chauffeurs, many of them former race drivers, to carry liaison officers and instructions between formations. In addition, chauffeurs were assigned to senior commanders and staff officers to allow them to maintain contact with their subordinates.² Automobiles were of limited utility in performing these tasks. During the mobile operations that prevailed through much of the 1914 campaign, chauffeurs had to navigate through largely unknown territory while attempting to locate the continually shifting headquarters of different British formations. Furthermore, they were usually forced to share roads with heavy civilian and military traffic. Travelling in close proximity to the enemy, they also risked attracting fire from friends and foes alike. After the war, the liaison officer Edward Spears recalled that during the British retreat of August 1914:

...I had many times to do with Germans, but they were not nearly so dangerous as the posts of Territorials or lunatic armed civilians that one met

on the roads at frequent intervals.... These posts had no idea of what they were expected to do, but very often, at night especially, they used to just fire and as they were often armed with shot guns, the chance of their doing damage was very great indeed.³

In addition to these obstacles and hazards, chauffeurs and liaison officers also faced the more mundane challenge of car troubles. In his memoirs, Spears complained of the automobiles provided to the BEF in 1914. “[M]any of them,” he related, “had never been tuned up or run in, and broke down constantly. Several cars I had were equipped with lighting sets that worked for about ten minutes and then had to be refilled with carbide.”⁴

Clearly, the automobile did not assure the rapid transfer of information between formations. Nevertheless, British commanders adopted it with enthusiasm. Not only were infantry commanders and liaison officers assigned chauffeurs and motor vehicles, by September 1914, British cavalry commanders at the brigade level and above were beginning to trade in their horses for cars. Moreover, in early September, the British Army purchased three vehicles to facilitate communications between the different brigades of the BEF’s Cavalry Division.⁵ Thus, even in an arm with an institutional interest in retaining its traditional form of transportation - the horse - the automobile found ready acceptance.

In comparison to the motor vehicle, the telegraph, telephone and radio were much more efficient methods of conveying information. While orders sent by car could take hours to reach their destination, communication by wire or “wireless” was almost simultaneous. British commanders certainly utilized these devices in 1914. They did not take full advantage of them, however, and in some situations they deliberately chose to use slower means of communication. This reticence can be explained in part by the

limitations of the technologies themselves. Radio sets of the early twentieth century were exceedingly bulky, requiring wagons to transport them. In addition, radio transmissions were vulnerable to interception by the enemy, as the British learned by eavesdropping on German messages throughout the autumn of 1914. The staff of the British IV Corps underscored this lesson in October when they undermined the Anglo-French offensive by asking for maps of northern France and Belgium in an uncoded radio transmission. Thus, the BEF made little use of the radio as a means of conveying information in the opening months of the war.⁶

The telephone and telegraph also had significant drawbacks, particularly during mobile operations. Unless formations remained stationary for more than a few hours, it was impractical to lay telephone cable between them. In the absence of such direct links between headquarters, officers were forced to rely on the existing Belgian and French telephone and telegraph systems which were usually located at railway stations. Until the emergence of stalemate on the Western Front in late October 1914, however, British formations rarely remained in the vicinity of a particular railway station long enough for their staffs establish consistent communications with either superiors or subordinates. Even when a telephone was accessible, it did not always offer a reliable connection to the desired party. Spears complained in his memoirs of:

...exasperating delays at the telephone, when every moment was of value; the connection obtained at last through a dozen exchanges, sometimes after several hours' delay, only to find it impossible to hear, or to be suddenly cut off. It was amusing, but a poor consolation, to get through to the Germans by mistake, as I did on a number of occasions during the retreat, and it showed the danger of the telephone.⁷

These limitations notwithstanding, the telephone and telegraph were more convenient and secure methods of communication than the radio. As a result, British commanders made greater use of them, even during mobile operations. Throughout the retreat of late August and early September, British General Headquarters (GHQ) communicated with the headquarters of the French Army by telegraph. Within the BEF, British commanders used the telephone and telegraph even to transmit crucial information. On the morning of 26 August, for example, the commander of II Corps, Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, utilized the French railway telephone system to inform GHQ of his decision to disobey orders and face the Germans at Le Cateau.⁸ It is significant, however, that even when telephone and telegraph links were available, British commanders often elected not to use them. At the beginning of the retreat, GHQ and corps headquarters relied primarily on liaison officers to distribute orders. This policy often necessitated hazardous and time-consuming journeys by automobile. In a letter to his wife, the liaison officer L.A.E. Price-Davies complained of one such expedition to secure orders from a higher headquarters. According to Price-Davies:

I went in a Daimler & took a taxi to follow in case we had to do reconnaissance. We took a wrong turn & had to pull up, where upon the taxi rammed us & punctured one petrol tank & I had to work the pressure pump all the way. When we got there we were told we were to march at once! which might easily have been sent by wire!..."⁹

In early October, as the British attempted to advance in northern France and Belgium, GHQ continued to rely on this method of communication despite the availability of other means. On the 9th, the British commander-in-chief, Sir John French, despatched the chauffeur Toby Rawlinson with orders for his elder brother Henry Rawlinson, the commander of IV Corps, which was positioned on the left of the BEF.

The younger Rawlinson's journey apparently took over 12 hours and entailed considerable risk of capture by the enemy. As he related in his memoirs, Sir John French "considered that my chance of escaping was very small indeed. In these circumstances he was not prepared to entrust me with any written communication at all, for such a document might afford valuable information to the enemy in the extremely probable event of it falling into their hands."¹⁰

Toby Rawlinson's valour is not in doubt. The necessity of his journey is more questionable, however, in light of the fact that GHQ possessed an indirect telegraphic link with IV Corps headquarters via the War Office in London.¹¹ While this circuitous route precluded the simultaneous transmission of messages, it was nonetheless a more efficient and secure means of communication than the conveying of verbal orders through enemy territory by an individual officer. Concerns about the reliability of the telegraph may have deterred officers from using it. Clearly, however, motorized travel in 1914 was not without its own considerable drawbacks. Thus, it is evident that during the 1914 campaign, senior British officers showed a preference for the automobile as a means of communication even when faster and safer methods were available.

While this tendency may appear puzzling from a contemporary perspective, it may be explained by examining the leadership style of senior officers in 1914. Rather than adopting a managerial approach to command like that envisioned by Ernest Swinton, British commanders placed considerable emphasis on personal contact with their subordinates during active operations. Despite the emergence of stalemate in the autumn of 1914, Walter Congreve, commander of the 18th Brigade, made a point of visiting his largely static front line on a daily basis. According to his biographers:

Each day, with the exception only of Sundays, Congreve inspected his front line morning and evening. Sometimes, when he had a visitor, he would go round his line a third time for his visitor's benefit. On such occasions his companion would have no cause to pronounce his walk lacking in interest, for his host much disliked getting wet and far preferred walking dry shod - completely indifferent to the target which he was presenting to the enemy - along the top.¹²

Even Sir John French, who was responsible for directing the operations of the entire BEF in 1914, yearned to escape the confines of GHQ and conduct similar expeditions. In November, the commander-in-chief enlisted L.A.E. Price-Davies to take him to view the front. As the liaison officer related:

This morning I went to report before going out & Sir John said he wanted to see me. He was like a child & said he wanted me to take him out somewhere and show him something. He wanted to get away from everyone including his ADCs. 'We'll go out and poke about, just you & I' !! 'We'll take out a thick stick and go look through some peep hole' !! So now I have to think out what to do with him. He said I was not to let anyone know as the 'Corps commanders might be annoyed.'¹³

The purpose of such personal visits was not only to observe the condition of the front line, but also to lead by example. Julian Byng, commander of 3 Cavalry Division in 1914, took considerable risks at the front in order to bolster the morale of his subordinates. Toby Rawlinson's memoir contains an admiring description of Byng enjoying a leisurely coffee break in full view of the enemy and his own troops during the First Battle of Ypres in October. As Rawlinson recounted:

There was not the least suggestion of bravado, although it was obvious to everyone that he was offering himself as a most exceptionally favourable target to the enemy. This is the spirit which distinguishes the true leader of men, and it is appreciated as an example by all ranks. It is, above all things, the unaffected simplicity with which such things are done which drives home their lesson. It also sets a standard for smaller men to live up to, and goes far toward creating that high 'morale' without which no troops are capable of great achievements.¹⁴

British commanders even advocated personal leadership in battle at the expense of officers' organizational responsibilities at headquarters. Thompson Capper, commander of 7 Division, maintained that it was the duty of every staff officer to die in battle as an example to the other ranks. Capper himself was killed in action in 1915 after riding his horse openly in front of enemy lines in an effort to inspire the soldiers of his division.¹⁵ While Sir Douglas Haig, commander of I Corps in 1914, was less extreme in his behaviour, he shared Capper's regard for personal leadership on the battlefield. On the afternoon of 31 October, at the height of the First Battle of Ypres, Haig left his headquarters and rode forward to the front in an effort to stabilize the British line and encourage his troops.¹⁶ Given that the units of I Corps were involved in fighting across a front of several miles, Haig had little chance of making contact with the vast majority of them. Moreover, by abandoning his headquarters, he compromised his ability to exercise centralized control over his corps. Nevertheless, during the critical situation that prevailed on the afternoon of 31 October, Haig deemed his most appropriate course of action to be a personal intervention in the battle.

The response of British commanders to modern communications technologies thus forms part of a broader pattern. In 1914, senior officers favoured devices which enhanced their ability to maintain personal contact with their subordinates. The automobile afforded commanders the mobility to visit the soldiers under their command and confer with other officers face-to-face. Alternatively, it enabled the personal delivery of orders by liaison officers trusted by the commanders themselves. Thus, despite the manifest difficulties associated with operating a motor vehicle on campaign

in France and Belgium in this period, the automobile found favour among British officers. Devices such as the radio, telegraph and telephone had the potential to convey information more quickly and in many cases more safely than motor vehicles. Nonetheless, they also diminished the need for face-to-face contact. Consequently, while officers hardly ignored these devices, they often shunned them in favour of more “personalized” methods of communication, regardless of the difficulties and dangers involved.

This tendency may have reflected the history and culture of the British Army in 1914. The small-scale colonial conflicts of the preceding decades, in which British forces operated in individual columns, likely encouraged the notion that a single commander leading from the front could have a significant influence on the outcome of an operation.¹⁷ In addition, the strong traditions of British regiments, which emphasized personal leadership by junior officers, had an influence even on senior commanders. It is worthy of note that commanders in the German and Russian armies also exhibited a preference for personal leadership on the battlefield in 1914, and apparently had a similar suspicion of “impersonal” communications devices such as the telephone.¹⁸ Whatever the reason for this commonality, the behaviour of senior British commanders in the opening months of the First World War suggests that rather than judging technology based solely on its ability to contribute to some universally-understood standard of “military effectiveness,” officers assessed its benefits according to the specific values and norms of the military organizations to which they belonged. This tendency undoubtedly remains as armed forces adapt to the new communications technologies associated with the most recent “Revolution in Military Affairs.”

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1. This summary of Swinton's story is based on Dennis Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires*, (Hamden CT: 1991), 191.
 2. On chauffeurs in the BEF in 1914, see C.D. Baker-Carr, *From Chauffeur to Brigadier*, (London: Ernest Benn, 1930); Frederic Coleman, *From Mons to Ypres With French: A Personal Narrative*, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1916); A. Rawlinson, *Adventures on the Western Front: August 1914-June 1915*.
 3. Spears to Sir John French, 16 May 1919, Spears Papers 2/3, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London, LHCMA.
 4. Edward Spears, *Liaison, 1914*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1968), 122.
 5. See Coleman, *From Mons to Ypres With French*, on the use of automobiles by the cavalry.
 6. John Ferris, "The British Army and Signals Intelligence in the Field During the First World War." *Intelligence and National Security*. 3:4 (October 1988), 23-48. For reference to the interception of German signals, see Peter Scott, ed., "The View From GHQ: the Third Part of the War Diary of Charles Deedes, KCB, CMG, DSO," *Stand To!* (1984), 28-33.
 7. Spears, *Liaison, 1914*, 121.
 8. Smith-Dorrien Diary, 26 August 1914, CAB 45/206, Public Record Office, Kew (PRO). See also Peter Scott, "The View From GHQ: The Second Part of the Diary of General Sir Charles Deedes, KCB, CMG, DSO." *Stand To!* 11 (Summer 1984). 8-17.
 9. L.A.E. Price-Davies to Mrs. Price-Davies, 22 August 1914, L.A.E. Price-Davies Papers, Imperial War Museum, London.
 10. Rawlinson, *Adventures on the Western Front*, 160-161.
 11. Lord Kitchener to Sir John French, 12 October 1914, WO 33/713, PRO; Charles Callwell, *Experiences of a Dug-Out, 1914-1918*, (London: Constable, 1920), 58.
 12. Pamela Fraser and J.H. Thornton, *The Congreves: Father and Son, General Sir Walter Norris Congreve, V.C., Bt-Major William LaTouche Congreve, V.C.*, (London: John Murray, 1930), 128-129. Other senior commanders displayed similar habits in 1914. On Stanley Maude, see Charles Callwell, *The Life of Sir Stanley Maude*, (London: Constable, 1920), 137. On Charles Anderson of the Indian Corps, see James Willcocks, *With the Indians in France*, (London: Constable, 1920).
 13. L.A.E. Price-Davies to Mrs. Price-Davies, 10 November 1914, Price-Davies Papers, IWM.
 14. Rawlinson, *Adventures on the Western Front*, 201.
 15. Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854-1914*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), 208, 318.
 16. Haig's comments on *Official History*, CAB 45/183, PRO; 3 Cavalry Division War Diary, 31 October 1914, WO 95/589, PRO; Haig Diary, 31 October 1914, WO 256/2, PRO, Haig Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; John Hussey, "A Hard Day at First Ypres, the Allied Generals and their Problems, 31st October 1914," *British Army Review*, 107 (August 1994), 75-89.
 17. Archibald Home, *The Diary of a World War I Cavalry Officer*, Diana Briscoe, ed., (Tunbridge Wells: Costello, 1985), 42.
 18. Showalter, *Tannenberg*, 268-269; Showalter, "Even Generals Wet Their Pants: the First Three Weeks in East Prussia, August 1914," *War & Society*, 2:2 (September 1984), 61-86; Richard Harrison, "Samsonov and the Battle of Tannenberg, 1914," in Brian Bond, ed., *Fallen Stars: Eleven Studies of Twentieth Century Military Disasters*, (London: Brassey's, 1991.)