



## THE MOBILE WAR: AUGUST - DECEMBER 1914



The detailed British war plan for putting an army ashore in Continental Europe ensured there would be none of the muddle associated with landings during the Napoleonic wars, and the injection of the BEF of some 80,000 men into northern France was perfectly executed by the General Staff including **Col. George MacDonough**. However, even as the first elements were landing in France, the C-in-C Field Marshal Sir John French was not sure whether the agreed centre for operations would be at Mauberge close to the Belgian border, or at Amiens, about

100 miles to the Southwest. In the end, the BEF attached itself to the left hand end of the French armies that stretched from the border at Basle across the country to the Belgian frontier.

The British had little time to prepare their positions, and were compelled into an unexpected encounter battle with von Kluck's First German Army outnumbering the BEF three to one. **Macdonough** now in France as Intelligence chief warned French that their position was probably untenable.



In the resulting battle on 23 August in the industrial area around Mons, the professional soldiers of the BEF with the salutary experience of the Boer War behind them, proved themselves to be more than the equal of the German Army, man to man they were seriously outnumbered but training counted and whilst the German army closed up to and secured crossing points on the Mons canal by nightfall, they were halted in their tracks. Among the first troops in action were 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers (**Capt.Harter, Lt Stapleton-Bretherton**), 2<sup>nd</sup> KOSB (**Lt Hamilton-Dalrymple**) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment (**Lt Anderson**).



Captain Arthur Ward DSO

On 24 August the German advance resumed but with the threat of the Germans enveloping them, the BEF had to withdraw. Orders to move back, were however, delayed and consequently they fought a withdrawal in contact through the streets; they retreated to Landrecies (1 Corps) and Le Cateau (11 Corps).

At Le Cateau, Gen Smith–Dorrien decided to make a stand thus allowing 1 Corps to make a break. In the course of the battle **Capt Arthur Ward DSO** 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers became the first OB to be killed in the conflict.

Below is an extract from the Regimental war Diary:-

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of shrapnel and machine gun fire  
opened on the King's Own. Colonel Dyke  
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the reverse side of the hill: when they had gone this fire was turned  
onto our trenches. The Companies stuck gallantly to their posts but the  
the casualties were very heavy, the shallow rifle pits being of little  
protection from the artillery. For about three hours the unequal  
contest was carried on, our infantry receiving no support from  
artillery which had not yet arrived. One by one the trenches were  
enveloped and enfiladed and the survivors forced to retire. Captain  
Ward and Lieutenant Boyle were killed. Captains Roffey and Major  
Lients Corbett-Winder, Rowley and Helps were wounded. Captain  
Davenport, Lients Humfrey, Bass and Wilkinson were not seen  
and grave doubts as to their safety are entertained Lients Fulton  
Stewart and Smyth rejoined some days later.

The survivors fell back to the next ridge ....

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“L” Battery in action at Nery awarded three VCs.

The Army withdrew to the River Marne covering some 140 miles in 5 days. Two engagements took place on 1 September – The first was Nery where German Guns were captured by 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade (**The McGrath** and **the Fanshawe** brothers of The Queens Bays). The Cavalry Brigade was attacked whilst breakfasting in their overnight bivouac by a force twice their size despite fog and panic in the horse lines caused by the initial enemy bombardment, with covering fire from the Battery the Cavalry regained the initiative as rep[orted by the C-in-C.-

On the 1st September, when retiring from the thickly wooded country to the south of Compiègne, the 1st Cavalry Brigade was overtaken by some German cavalry. They momentarily lost a Horse Artillery battery, and several officers and men were killed and wounded. With the help, however, of some detachments from the 3rd Corps operating on their left, they not only recovered their own guns but succeeded in capturing twelve of the enemy's."

Despatch of Sir [John French](#), 17th September

At Villers-Cotteret 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade fought a running rear guard action through the forest that included 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadiers (**Capt Gosselyn, Lt Miller, Lt Gunnis**) and 1<sup>st</sup> Irish Guards (**Lt Hope**).



German troops advancing towards Villers-Cotteret 1<sup>st</sup> Sept.

On 3 September the Germans now to the east of Paris found their flank exposed and sensing that their troops were also exhausted, Marshal Joffre ordered an end to the retreat and the offensive to commence which developed into the Battle of The Marne 5-11 September. It was at Sablonieres that **Capt Dalglish** Black Watch was killed in an assault against the German held village. The fortune of war had changed and the Germans pulling back to formidable defensive positions on the River Aisne some 45 miles north of the Marne. The allies had enjoyed their first strategic victory but soon found themselves at stalemate with neither side able to dominate the other; the impasse hardened that would lock the antagonists into a relatively narrow strip for the next four years.

The First Battle of the Aisne 13-28 September initially saw some open warfare with very little use of trenches; a period of attack and counter attack typified by 1<sup>st</sup> Northamptonshires assault at Troyon 14 September with rifle and bayonet fighting toe to toe. (**Capt White KIA**). That same day, General French ordered the Army to entrench. Firstly shell-scrapes, but these soon developed into deep defenses.

Frontal assaults having failed both sides tried to outflank the other “the race to the sea” began. The BEF was relieved by the French Army to allow them to counter the threat with a move to Flanders. The next month saw attack and counter attack till the British formed a defensive salient around Ypres. In the course of these manoeuvres 11 Corps had attempted to break through the German positions at La Bassee. The only success in this attack resulted in tragedy; 2 RIR were the only battalion to reach its objective but they were surrounded. A valiant stand by 600 men resulted in 300

captured and only 30 returned; **Lt Anderson** was not among them. His brother was killed 4 months later.

On 19 October the First Battle of Ypres began which included a German attack on Messines to the south. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division fighting on foot for the first time were defeated by vastly superior numbers (**Lt N McGrath** Queen's Bays killed); it would not be retaken until 1917.

This First Battle represented the final, desperate attempt by the Germans to outflank, roll up and trap the Allied armies before the war of manoeuvre became completely positional. The Germans realized that if they were to achieve the breakthrough they would need additional forces. Their solution was to mass all available cavalry and launched them between Lille and Ypres. Swirling, indecisive, clashes persisted for several weeks but to no avail. The German leadership then gambled on bringing in a new army of six corps consisting of reservists and volunteers; they were poorly led, grossly ill-equipped and had received the minimal training. This huge mass of men were to advance on the River Yser and outflank the British. The Allies benefitting from good lines of communication including the railways easily counted this new threat. The Battle as it developed was intense with Germans advancing to contact in mass formations. They blundered into the Allied defences and dashed themselves to pieces through a combination of inexperience, incompetence and reckless courage in repeated ill-coordinated attacks. Losses in some units exceeded 90%. The BEF having first held an over extended frontage gradually shortened their front until they were largely concentrated astride the Menin Road the main route to Ypres. Exemplary cooperation between the Allies meant that each time the mounting losses to the BEF they had to draw in closer, they were replaced by the French. On the 11<sup>th</sup> November the final assault by the Prussian Guards was stopped in their tracks by the final remnants of the BEF. The cost to both sides had been enormous but the German dreams of victory in the west died in the mud and rain of Flanders.

Stalemate resulted and with the onset of winter 22 November formal attacks petered out.





Cuirassiers waiting in reserve

By the end of the year 17 OBs had been killed – more than from any other of their Catholic contemporaries. The fallen included both the **Count de Boisgelin** and the **Count d'Yanville** both in Cuirassier Regiments (Cavalry) still resplendent in their dress uniforms.

Overall only half the BEF that landed in August remained unscathed. The Regular Army was decimated and it would now depend upon Kitchener's volunteers to bear the burden of fighting the war.

The majority of OBs that I have mentioned were either killed in this phase of the War or later in the conflict.

The following extract from letters to the Beaumont Review give an impression of what life was like at the front in these first few months.

**From Sir Hew Hamilton- Dalrymple Bt.**

.....I am only too glad to tell you of **Jock's** adventures as best I can. His Regiment the KOSB left Dublin on 14 Aug. and with the rest of the army they were in action at Mons on that fateful Sunday. That afternoon they were in very heavy fighting. They retired to Mauberge, and then to Le Cateau. Jock says "le Cateau was awful. I had to take my platoon up to the trenches under fire .....after holding for four hours we got the order to retire. The fire was tremendous. When it got too bad we threw

ourselves on our faces and rested and when it slackened again rose up and retired. It was wonderful to watch the German outflanking movement. The officers seemed to be standing all the time and as cool as possible.

Commenting he says” the retreat from Belgium was wonderful. We marched 114 miles in eight days. As three days were taken up with battles we really covered the distance in five”. At one stage we had no rations for 24hrs”.

The KOSB suffered great losses. At Le Cateau and Mons they lost 16 officers. Of Jock’s company, his Major, a Captain and a subaltern are missing, two subalterns killed and a Captain wounded. This left Jock the only officer in the company. He was cut off at Le Cateau and rejoined after two days. He has never told us the circumstances and did not know that he was reported as missing. On rejoining he took command of the Company and commanded all through the Battle of the Marne and the first week of the Aisne. Eight officers then arrived. Speaking generally, he says that aeroplanes have played a great part in the action and he had seen them fighting in the air above him.

Like everyone he bears out the magnificent spirit of the NCOs and men. He says he was twice reported dead, and when he turned up from Le Cateau was loudly cheered by his men. He continues “Facing death quietly night and day is a fair reminder that there is another life beyond the grave. To see a brave friend dead beside you is good for the soul. I have had miraculous escapes as indeed we all have, and your prayers have pulled me out of some very tight places.

As I write the enemy are sending lyditte into us. This is a daily show. Our artillery are amusing themselves by sending shrapnel in return”.

**The Comte de Marotte de Montigny** has been having thrilling adventures. The following is an extract of a letter from one of his cousins.

“At the beginning of hostilities Robert, being debarred by his youth from serving in the Belgian army went to France, where he offered himself on 4 August with my automobile to the English forces. On account of his knowledge of language he was attached to The Scots Greys in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Brigade.....

On 25 August making a reconnaissance they were attacked by a squadron of Uhlans. His companion was killed by his side and a soldier attending them wounded while the car was riddled with bullets. Robert succeeded in saving the wounded man though on foot and in open country, pursued by a hail of fire. The English General seeing that the recce party did not return sent out a party of 45 men to search for them of which only six returned. Robert was posted as dead but turned up later at Brigade Headquarters having got the man to an ambulance. This is the second escape he has had. He spent back home and secured another motor and went off at once to join the English. He is as happy as a prince!



**Lt Malcolm Hay Gordon Highlanders** was missing for six weeks. About the middle of October news arrived that he was lying wounded in a French military Hospital. The following details have been supplied by two wounded men now in hospital in Aberdeen. Lt Hay was in the trenches at the battle of the Marne where he was shot through the head as he stood to reconnoitre. For two days he lay more or less unconscious tended by his men. On retreating he was carried for some distance until the pursuit became so hot that his men were forced to leave him at the roadside. A rescue party returning to the spot some days later failed to discover him. Hence he was reported missing. At the time of writing the exact location of the hospital is unknown nor the extent of his wounds. He has been mentioned in Dispatches.

**Lt Raymond Purcell Kings Royal Rifle Corps** was wounded on 7 Oct. Mrs Purcell sent the following account: "He left Southampton with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. He has been fighting continuously since they have been often in trenches for more than five days at a time. From a letter written on 6 Oct he mentions that his machine gun had killed some two hundred Germans and that he had accounted for 15 with his own hand. On the 4 Oct his horse was shot under him when acting as assistant adjutant. He rescued a wounded man who was lying between the respective firing lines and carried him out of danger. A wire has just been received from the War Office saying that he was wounded on the 7 Oct. Unfortunately I cannot give you further news.

**From Major Lord Bernard Gordon-Lennox. Grenadier Guards**

Dear Sir William Miller,

It is with most profound grief that I write to offer you my most sincere condolences on the death of **Donald**. He has been my subaltern since the beginning of the war and he had invariably done magnificently. I had learned to love him as a really good

officer, an excellent companion and a friend whose friendship was worth cultivating. I cannot tell you how deeply I personally feel his death. I would have written before, only since his death, we have had a really hard time, continually on the move, day and night, and fighting all the time. Perhaps it may be some small satisfaction to you to know that Donald suffered not an instant's pain, being instantaneously killed by a shell which landed straight on him

It would be out of place to insert any further news in this letter, so I will; conclude by saying we are having a very hard time of it, being shelled by day and attacked by night, so we don't get much peace.

Please excuse writing, but five of us are squatting in a dug-out meant for three and writing at all is almost an art.

### **Lt W (Budge) Meldon**

We came into the firing line six miles to the west of Lille on 25 Oct. That night was very wet and we were put in the support trenches, we lay hidden there under incessant shell-fire for twenty-four hours. The second night, three of us decided to risk sleeping in a house beside our trench and be back by five o'clock just before daybreak. However, we didn't wake till 5.30 I was awakened by a shell striking our house with a tremendous explosion. We all got safely away and later I returned to get my things and found a shell had gone right through the center of the mattress I had been sleeping on. It must have come actually before I got out of the house....In the evening I was sent to take over a trench in the very front. Both the officers had been killed that day. The officer who took me up to the position was shot and had his thigh broken on the way up. I had to bind him up and bring him back – this was a good start. Then I had to go back to the trench. Both the General and the Colonel had told me that this was the weak point in the line. Our trenches were not continuous here, there being a gap on either side of mine. I had forty men. At daybreak we were under a terrific bombardment for ten minutes and then the Germans attacked us – about a thousand of them in a solid mass. We shot them down as hard as we could but they got around my trench and into it from both sides. About half my men were killed. I was about the last to leave when four big Germans jumped on top of me. I don't know how I got away with my life. I met our reserves coming up about two hundred yards behind, and in ten minutes I had my trench back again. My little lot killed about two hundred of the enemy. We actually picked up a hundred and sixty of them behind and there were more than as many again in front. In the same all along the line, we must be killing five or six Germans to every one they kill of ours....The Germans are trying to break through here, but I don't think they will”.



A French OB has died in action:-**Daniel d'Yanville**, a young man of singular earnestness and uprightness of life, his devotion to his Country is well exemplified in his final; interview with his father before leaving for the front. The Count had very naturally remarked, "Pray God that you may come back safe". To which the young soldier replied, "No! Pray rather that I may do my duty, and more than my duty". His Colonel; breaking the news of his son's death to his father alluded to him as "a young officer full of gaiety, vigour and courage who rightly looked forward to a brilliant future". He was struck by a shell and killed instantly on the 4 Nov. On hearing the sad news his Colonel hastened to the spot and found the soldiers carrying away the body under heavy fire. This devotion on the part of his men struck him as the best proof of the sincere affection which the young officer inspired in all.