

## THE ARMY OF THE INNOCENTS

### Prologue

In spring, Picardy is a green expanse of meadows and woods. The Somme river flows slowly and calmly, drawing loops, forming ponds and marshes that are a paradise for a lot of waterfowls. On the apparently uniform surface of Picardy's meadows, sometimes, here and there, strange sinking and small fractures appear. In May the poppies dress them in red.

High in the sky the larks sing.

### “Big Push” and “Grignotage”.

After the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, on the western front an almost continuous line of trenches runs from the Northern Sea to the Swiss borders. Inside those trenches -- damp and cold in winter, very hot in summer, stinking, overrun by mice and by lice, by frogs and by cockroaches- - Wilhelm II's dream to win the war in few months has ended. But neither the Germans nor the Allies want to renounce to fight. The Germans have built a formidable defensive line. The Allies attack it during the year 1915 but in vain. Their only hope to break the stalemate is the following: turning again the war in movement. If the war were turned in movement, the Allies could have put in place their superiority in men and materiel and they could have won.

During the Chantilly meeting (6-8 December 1915), the Allies define their war strategy for the year 1916. The Central Powers would have been attacked on three fronts: on the eastern front by the Russians, on the southern front by the Italians and on the western front by the French and the British troops. Breaking the stalemate of the trench warfare and going back to the war of movement are their main goals.



Sir Douglas Haig, Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force(BEF).  
Source: Wikipedia

On the western front, so. Yes, but in which part of the front? Sir Douglas Haig, the new Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force( BEF) has a plan. If we bring our attack in Flanders –he says- we could conquer the seaports from which the German submarines sail. In addition, Flanders are close to the Channel, our ships could carry all that we need during the operation: men an materiel.

Self-controlled, determined, calm, ambitious even though “not very brilliant”(Walter Reid, *The Architect of Victory: Douglas Haig*, Birlin, 2007), sometimes impassive and reserved, so reserved that he sometimes looks like an opinion-less, General Haig comes from the Cavalry, that is by him venerated. After the war, neither the tanks, nor the military Air Force – by him, moreover, organized and developed as independent Corps during the battle of the Somme- will be able to change his mind: in the tanks and in the aircraft he will see only useful support for the Infantry and for the Cavalry. One time, after the war, he had said” The machine gun will never replace the horse as an instrument of war.”

Taking the command replacing the demoralized Sir John French, Haig sees in the western front and only in the western front the key of everything: on the western front and only on the western front the war will be won or lost.

His solution is simple: engaging the enemy on a wide front( wider it is, better it is) in order to force him to use his whole reserves, testing his strength during a bit of time, then bringing the final blow in his weaker point or in his weaker points.

In other words, his “philosophy” is the following: making the enemy weaker during a more or less long period, then hitting him. “Making the enemy weaker” is a dangerous theory: the Germans are entrenched behind a formidable defensive system and they can obtain the same result simply staying on the defensive, and wearing out the allied forces.



General Joseph Joffre. Source: Wikipedia

General Joseph Joffre, Commander in Chief of the French forces, sees the issue in a different way. Celebrated as the saviour of the Motherland after the Battle of the Marne( September 1914), great organizer, endowed with an extraordinary cool head, optimist, supporter of the offensive at all cost, he does not emerge, however, from the tactical and strategic point of view. His belief system is recapped in a only word: *grignotage*( literally: gnawing). The Larousse dictionary defines *grignotage* in this way: “*action de gagner à peu de terrain, de s'approprier progressivement quelque chose*”( action to gain a bit of terrain, to take possession gradually of some thing). In other terms, Joffre’s strategy is based on continued offensive actions to gain some metres of terrain. “Gnawing” gradually- this is his thought - finally the German defensive system will collapse and the movement war will begin again. But Joffre’s “gnawing” actions are without significant results and, above all, they demand a fearful bloody tribute. The campaigns in the Artois and in the Champagne(1915)-- in Joffre’s opinion “brilliant successes-- demonstrate it. In short, as it has been written, Joffre wants “to gnaw a steel door with a shaky dental plate.”

And however, although there be not much *grignotage* into Haig’s proposal to attack in Flanders, Joffre, at first, approves it. But, then, he changes his mind and, in mid-February,

during a second meeting , he proposes and obtains that the attack be brought in the North of France, in Picardy, near the River Somme.

Why there and not elsewhere? Because in the area of the Somme is there the join point of the French and British Armies? Because in that area can one deploy massive forces? Because , after the failure of the attempts in the Artois and in the Champagne, was it necessary “gnawing “elsewhere? Because in Picardy is there the centre of the German deployment? Certainly one thing is sure: the military High Commands, obsessed by the idea to make the war in movement again, pushed by the public opinion and by the politicians, want results. And they want to obtain them at all cost. Given this situation, the casualties, for them, are not important.

### **The plan**

The plan is based on an attack south and north of the Somme river, along the Albert-Baupome road and it is organized in three stages: an opening heavy bombardment, the attack of the Infantry, the intervention of the Cavalry. The cannons should raze to the ground the trenches, destroy the barbed wires, kill as many soldiers as possible. The Infantry, covered by a creeping barrage, should open a breach into the German positions; finally, the Cavalry, --the Cavalry so beloved by Haig-- should exploit immediately every breach to roll - up the enemy troops.

Many uncertainties carry weight on that plan. Its three stages are not independent, but strictly linked. In other terms if the opening bombardment is ineffective( stage 1), the Infantry can not conquer the enemy positions( stage 2); if the Infantry does not conquer the enemy positions, the Cavalry can not attack( stage 3). An the whole plan fails.

Moreover, as we have seen, Joffre and Haig have different minds about the manner to bring the blow: Haig would want a breakthrough action, Joffre the umpteenth *grignotage*. For his part, the commander of the Fourth Army, Sir Henry Rawlinson, would prefer a “bite and hold” approach, i.e. step by step: we conquer the enemy positions, we line up in them, we make them secure and only after this, we advance again. General Edmund Allenby, commanded to lead a diversion close to Gommecourt ( northern side of the front) points out: between my soldiers and those ones of Rawlinson there is a hole a couple of kilometres long. Told in another words, my right flank is undefended. If the enemy becomes aware of this situation and exploits this corridor, my troops and I are in troubles. Nobody listens to him. In short, there is a lot of approximation. And, perhaps, an overdone optimism.

And a damned hurry, in particular. From February 21, the French are under attack at Verdun and they want to accelerate the opening of the second front . Haig would want to make start the operation in August; Joffre is under pressure and he can not wait till August. Finally, Haig gives up and the attack is set for July 1.

With two easily foreseeable results: the French participation will be inevitably less than that one previewed ( 11 Divisions and not 40) and the Somme offensive, having to make lighter the German pressure on Verdun, will loose in part its original objectives.

At the end of the War, the Chief of the Imperial Staff, Sir William Robertson, will see not in the "Big Push", but in the necessity to relieve the German pressure on Verdun and to

cause as many casualties as possible to the enemy the main goals of the Somme offensive. Actually, on the eve of the battle, the expectations are different.

### **The battle.**

The attack is preceded by a very heavy bombardment. From June 24 to June 30, day and night, more than a million and half shells fall upon the German positions. "After this bombardment, not even a rat will stay alive" are Haig's words.

Into their underground shelters, the *Landser* are shocked; they are trembling when the bombs explode; they are scared by the fear of being buried alive. At 7,00 a.m. in the morning of July 1, D-day, the allied artilleries shoot again. Between 7,15 and 7,28 a.m., some powerful mines are made explode under the German trenches . Huge craters are opened. At 7,30 a.m. in a serene and bright summer day, the infantries go over the parapets and head to the enemy trenches, while a creeping barrage moves gradually forward.

However, things go wrong immediately. The barbed wires have been damaged by the preliminary fire in some areas of the front only. For this reason, the troops are forced to slow their advance , losing the barrage and arriving close to the enemy positions when the Germans are already come out from their own shelters and have reached their action stations over the chalk heights of the Somme: from there, they are able to overlook the whole battlefield.

In the evening of July 1 – a sad and tragic day in the history of the British Army- the British soldiers have before conquered and then lost the so-called Schwaben Redoubt; they have conquered two villages, Mametz and Mountauban, surrounded a third village, Fricourt, but they have lost sixty thousand men. Sixty thousand men only in one day.

Around Le Boiselle, the 34<sup>th</sup> Division has left on the terrain almost four thousand soldiers. "It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no further" is the paradoxical and involuntarily tragic comment of a British officer, Major General Sir Beauvoir de Lisle, commander of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division.

In the southern part of the front, the French are luckier – or more capable to use the preliminary fire and the creeping barrage- and they obtain some significant progresses, occupying some villages and taking many prisoners.

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Haigh and Rawlinson meet again to take stock of the situation. Haig would want to attack immediately there where the most significant progresses have been registered; Rawlinson is more cautious. Before advancing – he claims- we must neutralize the positions around the Mametz Wood and around The "High Wood". In short, he is proposing again his old tactic "bite and hold". However, both seem to ignore the fearful dimension of the casualties suffered by the British Army the day before; both are convinced they could still carry out the "Big Push".

On July 14<sup>th</sup> , the attack against the "Woods", preceded by a short preliminary artillery fire concentrated on a narrow front, partly succeeds. This time the preliminary bombardment

is short, the troops attack under the cover of darkness, they succeed around Mametz ( Bazentin Ridge), but they are not able to occupy “ High Wood”.

During the following days and weeks, the fights become harsher in the *ghastly by day, ghostly by night* sector which is situated between High Wood and Pozières. This last village is attacked in vain four times, before it be conquered by the Australians, who leave on the terrain, between July 19<sup>th</sup> and September 5<sup>th</sup> , 28.000 men.

Despite these episodic and very bloody successes, the situation seems a stalemate. Pressured by the politicians, who are pressured by the public opinion, Haig tries to break the stalemate, attacking in the Flers-Courcelette area, which is situated southward of the Albert-Baupome road. During this battle ( September 15<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>) a new weapon -the armoured tank- appears first. Forty–nine of them are available, but only thirty-two are effective. In truth, during the battle, they are not decisive. Non only because they are terribly slow ( around three miles per hour) and because they go wrong very easily, but also because Rawlinson uses them on the whole font of the attack , instead to concentrate them on a narrow sector of it.

At the beginning, however, the attack is successful. Important positions ( High Wood, Courcelette, Martinpuich) fall into the British hands. The casualties are quite few, the Germans seem to suffer the blow. From 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> September, Rawlinson obtains other successes. Morval, Lesboeuf, Guedencourt are conquered, also thanks some tactic progresses. Opening fire is concentrated on a narrow part of the front; the creeping barrage and the infantry’s advance are better synchronized; coordinated attacks are brought. As in the area of Thiepval, for instance, where Canadian and British troops are able to surround this important position( an objective of the offensive on July 1<sup>st</sup> ), infiltrating through the lines and taking advantage from the frontal attacks of the Australian troops.

In November the weather gets worse , making impossible bringing other attacks on a large scale. Between October and November, however, The British Fifth Army takes some important successes on the western side of the front, in the area of the river Ancre, conquering Beucourt.

When, on November 18<sup>th</sup> , the hostilities finish, the Allies have penetrated around six miles in the enemy lines. Five months of harsh struggles have brought small results and, considering all the parts involved, they have caused almost a million and two hundred thousand casualties.

(source: Richard Holmes, BBC)

### **Anatomy of a slaughter.**

That tragic July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916, on the Somme front, an “ army of innocents” ( John Keegan) attacked in orderly rows, one after the other, almost at a parade pace and with the rifle on their shoulders. But who were those soldiers? Where were they coming from? Who or what had brought them to the appointment with death?

The British Army was a professional Army: its soldiers were experienced, well equipped, but relatively few. Soon it was clear that the war which had exploded in Europe would have been long and difficult. The six Division of the British Army and the Territorial Militias would have not be able to bear an extended effort. In other words, soldiers were needed. Many soldiers. Since in Britain the conscription was not obligatory( it will be introduced on March 1916), they had recourse to the volunteers.

It was an idea of the Minister of War, Lord Horatio Kitchener. London was the first city that was engaged, then Liverpool and, a day after the other, the whole Britain was invaded by thousands of posters, from which the face of the Minister with his big whiskers and his pointed index, was inviting the British to enlist in the "New Army".

Kitchener's plea was accepted. Thousands and thousands of enthusiastic young people went to the gathering centres, in long rows. General Sir Henry Rawlinson promised: who comes from the same city or town, from the same district, even from the same professional category, will be enlisted in the same unit till the end of the conflict. So the Pals Battalions were born. They regrouped the young people of the slums of London, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Glasgow, Cardiff. But also the fans of soccer teams( West Ham, Hearths of Midlothian), the students of the public schools, the sportsmen ( included a boxing national champion), the traders , the employees of the transports, the public employees, even the artists. They volunteered to escape from the hardship and from the miseries of the daily life; they volunteered to help " the brave little Belgium"; they volunteered in a spirit of emulation or in a desire of self-affirmation; they volunteered in a spirit of patriotism. The war –they thought- will be ended at Christmas.

All those men were to be trained, armed, equipped. And for doing this, time was necessary. A lot of time. England was not ready to manage so many soldiers. On average, training lasted eight months, in some cases almost twelve months were requested. But, during the training, to the volunteers was never told what to do in the eventuality of the failure of an attack. Sergeant Jimmy Myers has written: " When this happened...[i.e. when the attack at the Somme failed].. none knew what to do." The Pals Battalions had not , generally, officers who were part of their social class. The volunteers were placed under command of professional or territorial officers, who were part of the middle or high classes. Some of them had little confidence in those "improvised" soldiers; others, on the contrary, fraternized with them and, after the war, they did their best in order to improve the living conditions of the working class.

The Pals Battalions received , in practice, their baptism of fire during the battle of the Somme. On that July 1<sup>st</sup> , inexperienced soldiers crowded around the parapets of the trenches, waiting for the signal of the attack. They remembered their wives, their sons, their mothers. At zero-hour ( 7:30 a.m.), they went out from the parapets and headed the enemy lines. They were burdened by around thirty kilos, by two anti-gas masks, by their weapons, the ammunitions, their rations, two rolls of barbed wire, some bags to fill with sand or earth. They did not expect to meet a hard resistance and they should have used their rolls of barbed wire to strengthen immediately the occupied trenches in view of a possible German reaction. They advanced with the rifle on their shoulders, in orderly rows, at steady pace.

It was an incredible and terrible slaughter. The German machine gunners went out from the **Stollen** and cut the attackers down in thousands in the first metres of the "no man

land" or on the untouched barbed wires, while the German barrage did not cease to hammer the British trenches, making that slaughter more fearful. In the Gommecourt area, the fears of General Allenby became dramatic reality. The Germans exploited the "hole" which had been guilty left undefended between Allenby's Divisions and those ones of the General Rawlinson, and mowed without pity the assailants. The Accrington Pals Battalion, aggregated to East Lancashire Regiment, lost more than four hundred men (on around 700) in twenty minutes. The Newfoundland Regiment went to assault with eight hundred men: finally only sixty-eight were unhurt. Who was able to reach the objectives- the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division, the 10<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshire Battalion, the First Essex Regiment- was quickly surrounded and swept away.

Why that horrific slaughter? What had happened? Why were those "innocent soldiers" sent to die at a parade pace? The reasons of that slaughter were numerous. The preliminary artillery fire – the fire that lasted seven days- obtained results which were not up to expectations. Few heavy guns were used and many bombs loaded with shrapnel were shot. They were totally ineffective to raze to the ground the trenches and the barbed wires. Moreover, many projectiles – a third of the total, at least-- were faulty and they did not explode. Put on their guard by this powerful bombardment, the Germans came down into their underground shelters(*Stollen*) and they suffered light damage. Inside the *Stollen*, the danger was to remain buried alive, more than to blow up.

The powerful mines which were made explode under the German defences, were a double-edged sword: they opened huge craters which were immediately occupied by the Germans and turned by them in deadly points of fire. In short: the German trenches were damaged only superficially, the barbed wires remained almost intact, the defenders did not suffer heavy casualties, the surprise effect lacked. But the Allies, on the contrary, were convinced that the enemy positions had been destroyed and that into the trenches none had remained alive. Even when the aerial observation and the reports of the scout patrols signalled that in some areas the enemy trenches and, in particular, the barbed wires had not been damaged, no one gave weight to these information.

Thus the soldiers were sent to attack in rows and at steady pace, on the one hand because they were convinced that no resistance would have been found and, on the other hand, because the senior officers wanted to avoid that the men of the Pals Battalions( by them considered inexperienced and--why not?--not very courageous) would scatter or shirk the combat. Among the historians there is who justifies this decision ( Gordon Corrigan, for instance); others – the most part of them- instead do not justify it. For its part, the German High Command expressed an opinion destined, wrongly or rightly, to become famous: "lions led by donkeys". Surely the German machine gunners were astounded. At a certain point-- as some witnesses reported-- they ceased the fire and screamed: "Britons, stop!"

According to the plan, the attack of the infantries should have been supported by a creeping barrage: the troops would have advanced while the shells of their artillery, falling before them, would have " accompanied" them on the enemy positions. The creeping barrage was not to destroy the enemy, but to neutralize it for a time, in order to compel it into no-action.

In theory, a creeping barrage works, more or less, in this way. When the first shells fall in front of the enemy positions, the assailants come out from the trenches, advancing in the no man's land. While they are advancing, the artillery shot goes forward at regular

intervals ( about 50 metres every minute) in order to keep the defenders blocked into their shelters.

Once reached the trenches on the first line, the creeping barrage, always at regular intervals, goes forward towards the second line. At this point, the attackers come on the scene : arrived in the shelter of the first line under the cover of the fire of their cannons, they burst to the trenches, conquer them and, always “ accompanied” by the creeping barrage, they go towards the second line.

What can happen *in practice* is easily imaginable: if the infantries move too quickly compared to the creeping barrage or if the creeping barrage is too slow compared to the fixed intervals, the shells will fall upon the attackers, not upon the enemy or upon its positions; if, instead, the troops advance too slowly, if they are being stopped temporarily by unforeseen obstacles or by the resistance of the enemy; or if the creeping barrage advances too quickly compared to the troops’ advance, they will have no advantage. If the troops do not reach the enemy positions soon after the “ passage” of the creeping barrage and at the fixed times, the defenders have time to come out from their shelters, to take position in their trenches and to react. And if there is a reaction, the assailants run the risk to be blocked, “ to loose” the creeping barrage and, if they are lucky and they break through the first enemy line, they will advance towards the second line without any cover.

As it is easily deducible, during a such operation keeping to schedule is very important. And keeping to schedule, when the cables of the telephone could be sheared by a bomb, when the optical signals could be made useless by the smoke, by the dust or by the mist is how to win the lottery.

The creeping barrage is not only offensive: it can act as defensive barrage. In this case, it is not “creeping”, i.e. it does not advance beyond the advancing troops, but it falls upon a specific area-- almost always the so-called "no man’s land", i.e. the area which is interposed between the opposite trenches-- in order to avoid that the enemy can move safely its soldiers and that the supplies reach the first line of combat.

During the battle of the Somme, the British creeping barrage worked badly. Very badly. In some sectors, it fell upon the advancing troops, in other sectors, it went too soon forward: in other words, it never adapted itself to the infantries’ pace. And the infantries were not able to walk, in the same wavelength with the creeping barrage, the distances which had been assigned to them because of the almost intact barbed wires and of the enemy fire. Also the communications did not work. All the cables of the telephones were sheared by the German artillery and it was necessary to communicate by dispatch riders or by carrier pigeons. The French, as we have seen, were luckier or more clever. They made a shorter and more effective preliminary bombardment and they obtained better results. The German defensive barrage, instead, was deadly: it hammered implacably the “ no man’s land”, kept under fire the passage opened in the British barbed wires, through which the troops passed, hit the trenches, opening fearful empty spaces among the attackers.

During the battle, the mistakes were numerous. Wanting at all cost and despite the facts to continue the "Big Push" was, perhaps, the worst strategic blunder. And on the tactical point of view , what about the ineffective use of the armoured tanks? Or about the artillery fire, scattered along the whole front and not concentrated on the weaker sectors of the German defences? Or about the frontal attacks instead action of infiltration or outflanking?



Or about the little consideration in which were taken the reports of the aerial reconnaissance or those ones of the scout patrols? Or about the surprise-effect, wasted because of a too long preliminary bombardment ? Or about inexperienced soldiers sent to attack in broad daylight?

It is true: in some ways, the battle of the Somme gave useful teachings to the Allies about the management of the war, both with regard to offensive phase(tactic of infiltrating , creeping barrage), and with regard to defensive phase( flexible defence and echeloned in depth ). But such results – and even others more important-- can justify the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of men?

According to some historians , the battle of the Somme was not futile. They write: after the Somme, Great Britain became important inside the Allies ; attempting to starve it, the Germans were compelled to make harsher the submarine war, causing the entry at war of the USA; the German army lost experienced soldiers (and replacing them was very difficult), becoming weaker.

And the protagonists? What was their assessment? French General Foch, on the spur of the moment, considered the battle of the Somme a victory in effect, both because of the gained terrain, and because of the casualties caused to the enemy. Haig claimed that the goals of the plan had been reached: the pressure on Verdun had been relieved; huge German forces had been blocked on the western front; the enemy strength had been made weaker: even one of these objectives was sufficient, for him, to justify the battle. Some saw in that event not a victory in itself, but a prerequisite for the final victory.

After the war, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, settled the Somme offensive with these words: “ Over 400,000 of our men fell in this bullheaded fight and the slaughter amongst our young officers was appalling... Had it not been for the inexplicable stupidity of the Germans in provoking a quarrel with America and bringing that mighty people into the war against them just as they had succeeded in eliminating another powerful foe— Russia--the Somme would not have saved us from the inextricable stalemate.”

One thing is sure: the thousands of “ innocents” fallen on the Somme, depopulated whole districts in London, Manchester and in many other English cities. In those districts the male manpower almost disappeared, every family mourned one or more fallen, the sorrow took place of the patriotism as main feeling. During the projection of a propaganda film about the battle, many women came out scared from the cinemas, sure to have seen in the deadly wounded soldier appeared on the screen, a friend of their, their husband, their brother.

## **Epilogue**

The dawn has come. The sergeants are screaming the orders. The daily routine is beginning. For more than a hour, ready for fighting, the bayonets fitted, we wait in vain the arrival of the enemy. Then the services begin; there is the first inspection. Everywhere there are huge rats, frogs, cockroaches. And lice. Thousands of lice. Every so often a bomb falls upon the trench, breaking down the parapets, killing the human beings. Life and death are a mere question of luck: a sleepy or tired sniper, a bomb fallen under my position, while I was temporarily far away. Or vice versa.

We have breakfast. For an implicit agreement, when we have breakfast nobody shoots. Neither from one part, nor from the other part. Then we write letters, read or read again the mail, check our weapons. A companion of mine has fever. None knows what is the cause of that fever. Even I am trembling, and I do not know if I am trembling because of the fever or of the fear. Some months ago, some of my companions have contracted the so-called "Trench foot". A fungus causes sores on the skin. It happens when we stand with our feet for a long time into water. And when it rains, in the trench much water is stagnant. Those sores become infected and almost always they become gangrenous. It is often necessary amputating.

It is dusk. We "stand to" another hour, waiting for an enemy who, also this night, will not come. Then we eat our mess: beef, jam, biscuit. The darkness is fallen. The scout patrols go out from our trenches. They go out for looking for information or for taking some prisoners. Will they return?

With the darkness, also the bustle grows. We repair the parapets, we restore the supplies of food and water. This night there is no turnover of troops. It is better. The enemy, alerted by the turmoil, often opens fire. Sleeping is almost impossible, also when the weapons are silent. The stink is unbearable. Stink of corpses, stink of disinfectant, stink of excreta. In the darkness, the rats leave their dens and take possession of the trench.

The dawn has come again. The sergeants are screaming the orders. High in the sky, on this first day of July 1916, a lark is singing.

God save us.

.....

*A lark was singing sweetly as  
The evening fell upon the Somme.*

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