

GORDON GEORGE STUART

THE RETREAT FROM
MONS

George Gordon

The Retreat from Mons

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George Stuart Gordon

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PREFACE

I am told that it has been thought advisable to publish short accounts in pamphlet form of prominent and important operations which have been carried on during the course of the war which is still raging.

Such war stories may undoubtedly be beneficial, and in the belief that such "propaganda" is productive of more good than harm I have consented to indite this very brief preface to *The Retreat from Mons*.

Any hesitation I may have felt arises from my profound conviction that no history of a war or any part of a war can be worth anything until some period after peace has been made and the full facts are known and understood.

This pamphlet however, is not so much a "history" as an interesting summary or a chronology of leading events, and the writer carefully avoids according praise or blame in connection with any event or group of events which can ever become the subject of controversy.

In a Preface to so brief and so unpretentious a military work as this, it is impossible to put before the reader more than a glimpse of the situation in regard to which plans had to be conceived and put into execution as suddenly and speedily as the demand for them was unexpected.

That it is the "unexpected" which generally happens in war, and that it is the "unexpected" for which we must be ever ready, has of late years been deeply instilled in the mind of the British officer. A cardinal axiom in his military creed is that he must never be taken by surprise.

When, therefore, the Germans, on the same principle as they subsequently used poison-gas, sank hospital ships, and disregarded every known rule of civilized war, suddenly and quite unexpectedly overran a neutral country in such a drastic manner as to nullify all preconceived plans and possibilities, and the British Army found itself on the outer flank of the threatened line exposed to the full weight of the German menace, it was this previous careful training which formed the sure foundation upon which to plan and conduct the inevitable retreat and carry it to a successful conclusion.

When men are told to retire without fighting, when they see no reason for it, when they remain full of ardour and longing to get at the enemy, and are not allowed to, demoralization is very apt to be the result. Why was such a feature of the Retreat conspicuous by its complete non-existence? Because of another result of British military training, namely, the absolute confidence of the men in their leaders and officers and the wonderful mutual understanding which existed between them.

The magnificent spirit which animated the British Expeditionary Force was seen at every phase of these operations; in the skilful handling and moral superiority of the cavalry which covered the Retreat; in the able conduct by the respective leaders of the several battles and encounters which local circumstances rendered necessary; and lastly, in the extraordinary marching powers and capability of endurance which animated all ranks.

Controversies loud and bitter will certainly rage in regard to all the dispositions and plans under which this war has been conducted; as to the operations of the first three weeks, perhaps, more than as to those of any other period. But I venture to hope and believe that no sane person can dispute in the smallest particular the claims which I make in this very short Preface on behalf of the forces which it is the great pride and glory of my life to have commanded.

FRENCH

F.M.

WHITEHALL

April 23, 1917.

The Operations of the British Army in the Present War

INTRODUCTORY

The first quality of British military operations in the present war-and so it will strike the future historian-is their astonishing variety and range. Beginning on the ancient battlefields of France and Flanders, they have spread, in a series of expanding and apparently inevitable waves, over a good part of three continents, so that, wherever the enemy was to be found, – whether in Europe, or Asia, or Africa, or in the islands of the high seas, – there also, sooner or later, were the British arms. There was a time when one or two campaigns were thought amply sufficient for the military energies of the most warlike nation. We have never pretended to be warlike, meeting our emergencies always, with a certain reluctance, as they arose; but in the present war we have seldom had fewer than six considerable campaigns on our hands at one time, and these in areas separated often by thousands of miles from one another and from us. It is one of the obligations of a great empire at war that it should be so; it is one of the privileges of a great maritime empire that it should be possible. It is undoubtedly the grand characteristic of the operations of the British Army in this war, and gives the only true perspective of our military effort in the field. To our share in the Allied front must always be added the fighting frontiers of the Empire.

The British Army, now grown out of all recognition, was small, and known to be small, when the war began. It was a voluntary army, numbering approximately 700,000 men, of whom about 450,000 (including reservists) were trained soldiers, liable for service abroad, and the remainder, a half-trained Territorial Force, enrolled for service at home. Besides being small, it was, from the nature of its duties, widely scattered. Over 100,000 of our best troops were serving at the time in India or on foreign stations. For all purposes, therefore, when war broke out, we had in this country a mobilizable army of something under 600,000 trained and half-trained men, 250,000 of whom were liable only for service at home. The striking or Expeditionary Force of this army was a fully equipped and highly professional body of six infantry divisions and one division of cavalry, and with this force we entered the war. Intended primarily, as its name implied, for protective or punitive operations within the Empire, it was on a scale proportionate to its purpose and to the size of our army. Our army, judged by a European standard, being small, our Expeditionary Force, judged by that standard, was diminutive; and the chief problem which confronted the Government, when it was decided to send this force to France, was how to support and supplement it. The story of how this problem was faced and overcome, of how "Home Service" men became "Foreign Service" in a day, and our little army of 700,000, by a gigantic effort of British determination and Imperial good-will, was expanded into an army of millions-all this is a separate narrative, to be related elsewhere; but we cannot afford to overlook it as we follow the fortunes of the Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders. It is the military background of all their triumphs and vicissitudes, and had an effect upon the tone of the war almost from the first. Even to our Expeditionary Force itself, with all its cheerful self-confidence and efficiency, it meant something to know that the country was in earnest; that as early as August 23, while they were still fighting among the coal-pits of Mons, the first 100,000 volunteers had been enrolled, and were already deep in the mysteries of forming fours.

THE RETREAT FROM MONS

When a country goes to war the first test of its military efficiency is the mobilization of its army. This is a stage in the history of wars which the public is apt to overlook, because the arrangements are necessarily secret and complex, and are carried out in that first hush which precedes *communiqués* and great conflicts in the field. It is nevertheless true that every war starts in the Department of the Quartermaster General, and that by the nature of this start the issue of a war may be decided. We started well. From August 5, when mobilization began, – in spite of bank holidays and Territorials *en route* for summer camps, – the whole scheme of concentration and despatch was carried out almost exactly to schedule, and without a hitch. It is calculated that, during the busiest period, the railway companies, now under Government control and brilliantly directed by an executive committee of general managers, were able to run as many as eighteen hundred special trains in five days, an average of three hundred and sixty trains a day, and all up to time. The concentration of the Home Forces and of the Expeditionary Force proceeded concurrently. On August 9 the first elements of the Force embarked, and nine days later the greater part of it had been landed in France, and was moving by way of Amiens to its unknown fortunes. The smoothness, rapidity, above all the secrecy with which the transportation was carried out, made a great impression at the time, and will always be admired. The question of how it was done excited, characteristically enough, less interest. We are a people accustomed to happy improvisations, and it was generally assumed that this national talent had once more come to our rescue; the truth being that in these matters improvisation can seldom be happy, and that for instant and complete success the only method is long and careful preparation in time of peace. For several years the military, naval, and civilian authorities concerned had been engaged upon such a scheme of preparation, and had, indeed, concluded their labours not many months before war broke out. When the day came all railway and naval transport officers were at their posts, and the Railway Executive Committee, in its offices in Parliament Street, was calmly carrying out a timetable with every detail of which it had long been familiar. Such perfect preparedness is rare in our history, and worthy of note. Amidst the vast unreadiness of the nation for war the despatch of the Expeditionary Force, and the magnificent readiness of the fleet which made it possible, stand out in grand relief, not to be lost sight of or forgotten.

The Expeditionary Force was commanded by Field Marshal Sir John French, and consisted, up to August 23, of four complete divisions of infantry (the First, Second, Third, and Fifth) and five brigades of cavalry; that is to say, about 80,000 men. On August 24 it was joined by the Nineteenth Infantry Brigade, which added 4000 more; and on August 25 by the Fourth Division, which added another 17,000. Our total strength, therefore, during the fighting at Mons and in the Retreat, varied from 80,000 to a little over 100,000 men. It was a small force, but of a quality rarely seen. No finer fighting unit ever entered the field. In physique and equipment, in professional training and experience of war, in that quality of skilful and cheerful tenacity against odds which distinguishes the veteran, it was probably unrivalled by any body of troops of its time. The French, who gave our men a warm welcome, dwell always on their youth and good spirits, their wonderful cleanness and healthiness, the excellence of their equipment, and their universal courtesy.

"À Argenteuil-Triage," writes a French infantryman who fought in the Retreat and on the Marne, "nous croisons un train de fantassins anglais; figures rasées, ouvertes, enfantines, riant de toutes leurs dents. Ils sont reluisants de propreté. Nous nous acclamons réciproquement." (Sept. 2/14: Garnet de Route; Roujons.)

At Bucy-le-long the French relieve the English. It is a matter of outposts. "De deux cents mètres en deux cents mètres, un groupe de six Anglais est couché à plat ventre dans les betteraves, en bordure d'un chemin. Ils se dressent et nous allons prendre leurs places en admirant ces beaux soldats, bien équipés, silencieux, et qui ont des couvertures." (*Ibid.*, Oct. 6/14.)

Such opinions were worth much. For though it is a great thing to be welcomed, as our men were welcomed, by a whole people, to have the hearty professional approval of its soldiers is a greater thing still.

The Expeditionary Force, thus landed in France, was organized in two army corps-the First, consisting of the First and Second Divisions, under Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig; the second, consisting of the Third and Fifth Divisions, under Lieutenant-General Sir James Grierson, who was succeeded, on his sudden and much lamented death, by General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien. General Allenby commanded the cavalry division, consisting of the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Cavalry Brigades, and the Fifth Cavalry Brigade was commanded independently by Brigadier-General Sir Philip Chetwode. By the evening of Friday, August 21, the concentration was practically complete, and during Saturday the 22d the Force moved up to its position on the left or western extremity of the French line. (Plan 1.)

The general situation in this region, as it was known at the moment to the leaders of the Allies, may be briefly stated. It was at last plain, after much uncertainty, that the first great shock and collision of forces was destined to take place in this northern area. It was plain, also, that Belgium, for some time to come, was out of the scheme. Liège had fallen, and with it how many hopes and predictions of the engineer! Brussels was occupied; and the Belgian field army was retiring to shelter under the ramparts of Antwerp. Except for Namur, there was nothing in Belgium north of the Allied line to stop the German advance. Von Kluck and Von Buelow, with the First and Second German Armies, were marching without opposition towards the French frontier-Von Kluck towards the south-west and Von Buelow towards the crossings of the Sambre. By the evening of the 20th, Von Buelow's guns were bombarding Namur. So much was known to the leaders of the Allies: of the strength of the advancing armies they knew little.

To oppose these two armies-for of the seven German armies already in position we shall consider only these two-the Allies were disposed as follows: Directly in the route of Von Buelow's army, should he pass Namur, lay the Fifth French Army, under General Lanrezac, with its left resting on the river Sambre at Charleroi, and its right in the fork of the Meuse and the Sambre. This army, it should be noted, made a junction in the river fork with another French Army, the Fourth, under General Ruffey, which lay off to the south along the Middle Meuse, watching the Ardennes. On the left of the Fifth French Army, along a line presently to be defined, lay the British Expeditionary Force, facing, as it seemed, with equal directness, the line of advance of the army of Von Kluck. Subsidiary to the Fifth French Army and the British Force were two formations, available for support: a cavalry corps of three divisions under General Sordet, stationed to the south of Maubeuge, and, out to the west, with its base at Arras, a corps of two reserve divisions under General D'Amade. Both these formations will be heard of during the subsequent operations, and it is important to remark that General D'Amade's two divisions were at this time, and throughout the first days of the fighting, the only considerable body of Allied troops in the eighty miles of territory between the British and the sea.

The line occupied by the British ran due east from the neighbourhood of Condé along the straight of the Condé-Mons Canal, round the loop which the canal makes north of Mons, and then, with a break, patrolled by cavalry, turned back at almost a right angle towards the southeast of the direction of the Mons-Beaumont road. The whole of the canal line, including the loop round Mons, – a front of nearly twenty miles, – was held by the Second Army Corps, and the First Army Corps lay off to its right, holding the southeastern line to a point about nine miles from Mons. There being no infantry reserves available in this small force, General Allenby's cavalry division was employed to act on the flank or in support of any threatened part of the line. The forward reconnaissance was entrusted to the Fifth Cavalry Brigade, assisted by some squadrons from General Allenby's division, and some of its detachments penetrated as far north as Soignies, nine miles on the way to Brussels. In the occasional encounters which took place with the enemy's Uhlans, to the north and east, our cavalry had always the best of it; then, as always in this war, when the opportunity has occurred,

mounted or dismounted, they have proved themselves the better arm. Their reconnaissance was more than supplemented by four squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps under the direction of Major-General Sir David Henderson.

Throughout the Saturday our men entrenched themselves, the North-Countrymen among them finding in the chimney-stacks and slag-heaps of this mining district much to remind them of home. The line they held was clearly not an easy line to defend. No salient ever is, and a glance at the map will show that this was no common salient. To the sharp apex of Mons was added, as an aggravation, the loop of the canal. It was nevertheless the best line available, and, once adopted, had been occupied with that double view both to defence and to attack which a good commander has always before him. The first object, when an enemy of unknown strength attacks, is to hold him and gain time; the line of the canal supplies just the obstacle required; it was therefore held, in spite of the salient, and arrangements made for a withdrawal of the Second Corps should the salient become untenable. If, on the other hand, the enemy should be beaten back, the Second Corps, pivoting northeast on Mons, could cross the canal and move forward in line with the First Corps, already in position for such an advance. If, finally, – for a commander, like a good parent, must provide for everything, – a general retirement should become necessary, the British Commander-in-Chief had decided to rest his right flank on Maubeuge, twelve miles south of Mons: and here was his First Corps ready for it, clustered about the roads that lead towards Maubeuge, and able, from this advantage, to cover the retirement of the Second Corps, which had fewer facilities in this way, and would have farther to travel. Tactically the arrangements were as good as could be made.

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