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# Field Marshall Douglas Haig: A Negative Leadership Lesson in Military History

Major Joshua E. Kastenber

Professional military education course materials contain some analysis on leadership, and in particular military leadership. By the time a student completes Air Command and Staff College, he or she will have read brief passages on Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, John J. Pershing, Omar Bradley, and - though not a personal favorite of this author - Douglas MacArthur. (Of note, Chester Nimitz is given short shrift). More attention is placed on successful military leaders than on unsuccessful and unpopular ones. Few officers study, in any detail, the failings of George B. McClellan, George A. Custer, Lloyd Fredendall, or even William Westmoreland.

Likewise, there is a dearth of time spent on the leadership qualities of foreign officers. Thus, for example, while Napoleon is generally known to be innovative, hardly any analysis of his charisma, personality, decision making, and innate intelligence occurs. What can military officers, or for that matter the JAG Corps learn from such a study? A great deal. Below is one very brief analysis of leadership, as pertinent to today's military (and JAG Corps), as at any time.

## "Bloody Mindedness"

There is a leadership trait coined by British military scholars describing a commander steeped in his own confidence to the point of inflexibility. "Bloody-mindedness" evokes images of stolid and unflinching British generals, ordering regiments into the fray. In their great military tradition, which includes exceptional commanders such as Horatio Nelson, Arthur Wellsley (the Duke of Wellington), Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, and Field Marshal William Slim, a common trait of extreme self-confidence and absolute competence is found. However, each of these individuals possessed both an intellect and ego able to

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correct initial errors in judgment. (This includes Montgomery who became something of a casualty to the Patton versus Montgomery "battles.")



British military history - and to an extent our own - is also replete with examples of inflexible commanders failing to both recognize errors in judgment, and plans that went awry. Moreover, a common companion to this inflexibility was reluctance in other officers, stationed within the commander's inner circle, to advocate a need for flexibility and change. In some instances a cult of personality developed around a leader by his complimentary subordinates. This was a frequent criticism of the Civil War era Union generals, McClellan in particular, prior to Ulysses Grant assuming overall

command.

Foremost among the examples of bloody-mindedness is Field Marshal Douglas Haig, the commander of the WWI British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from 10 December 1915 through the end of hostilities on 11 November 1918. Nothing in Haig's background suggests he was any more ill-suited to command the BEF than any other senior officer. Born in 1861 to a wealthy aristocratic family - who made their fortune as whiskey distillers - he was educated at both Oxford University and Sandhurst, Britain's premier military academy. He admitted that did not read much, and appeared to be bound by the prejudices of the day. (He viewed French officers as inferior, not only because they were French, but also because many of them had risen through the lower classes).

Haig was described by his contemporaries as distant, cold, and self-assured. Winston Churchill, who worked alongside him as the First Lord of the Admiralty, and later the mister of munitions likened Haig to a 19th century surgeon who was proficient at his job, but unfeeling toward his patients. Pain was not his concern and if a patient died on the operating table, the doctor would simply move on to the next. David Lloyd George, Prime Minister after 1916 described Haig as incompetent, and "refusing to see his own errors in judgment." Haig commanded troops in India, the Sudan, and South Africa, seeing combat in each.

In these colonial battles, Haig led from the front of cavalry charges. There was never any hint of cowardice.

There were inherent flaws in the British system of commissioning officers. Britain had abolished the purchase system of ranks by the time Haig received his commission in 1885, and as a result, his professional advancement occurred through the contemporary flawed merit based process. However, the British Army remained encumbered by a class-based system, and it was exceedingly rare for an officer to have not come from an aristocratic or wealthy background. Ethnic and religious minorities, including Catholics, were unlikely to advance in rank. A World War II British general, Sir Brian Horrocks commented that, having all come from a similar background, the World War One-era generals "were predictable, unimaginative, and dull, in military matters." In the modern era, we might add that diversity was not a desirable feature of the prewar British officer corps.

The prewar enlisted ranks tended to come from the lower economic echelons of British society. They served lengthy enlistments in what was a strenuous disciplinary system. A number of colonial-era wars afforded the British army its combat experience. In 1914, the small BEF possessed the best trained and disciplined regiments in the world. However, it was unimaginatively lead and very small in comparison to the continental armies. Through the initial two years of the war, the British Army was composed entirely of volunteers, 500,000 of whom enlisted in the first three months. Conscription did not occur until late 1916.

As late as 1914 Haig believed that cavalry retained a place of prominence on the battlefield. He viewed the machine gun as a luxury and aviation as unnecessary. He had little relationship to the individual soldier, and his view of training was antiquated to the needs of modern warfare. Haig believed in frontal assaults with large masses of men instead of using small units to probe for weaknesses in the enemy lines. He felt that small unit actions required too much training with little final benefit. Haig was not alone in these views although other officers voiced opposition to these beliefs late in the war.

### **The Setting: World War One**

World War I was unlike any prior war in its size and scope. On the western front, a continuous line of trenches ran for over 400 miles from Switzerland to the English Channel. A century of imperial growth stemming from the demands of industrialism, smaller wars driven by ethnic nationalism, and a variety of political instabilities made likely the possibility of a Europe-wide war. From 1871 onwards the major

world powers, with the exception of the United States, formed into two alliances with Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy on the one side, and the British Empire, France, and Russia - known as the Triple Entente - on the other. When war broke out in July and August 1914, only Italy remained absent from the alliance system. By the following year, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria joined Germany, while Italy and Japan joined the Entente.

For the first two years of the war on the western front, a common strategy for each side was to amass large numbers of men and artillery against a section of the enemy's well enforced trench lines. It rarely worked because even when a breakthrough occurred, the opposing forces were able to dig into a secondary line. Additionally, according to the eminent military historian John Keegan, a single machine gun was capable of spitting out 600 rounds per minute - or having the effectiveness of over a platoon of infantry. Even the introduction of new weapons such as aircraft - primarily for reconnaissance, poison gas, and ever larger artillery, such as the 420-millimeter howitzer, could be defensively overcome. Instead of trying to find alternative methods of combat, the French and British chiefs resorted to using even larger numbers of men.

Typically both staff officers and commanding generals had little concept of the conditions of this new type of warfare where the defense retained an advantage. Soldiers lived across this four hundred-mile plus stretch of frontline trenches. They slept in bunkers and even during lull times were exposed to rifle and machine gun fire, artillery strikes, liquid fire, mine warfare, aerial bombardment, and poison gas. They ate poorly, were infested by vermin, and were sent out on night patrols and raids where only a fraction of their number returned. They suffered through the booming sounds of artillery rounds coming from their own guns. They lived in vigilance of enemy raids and patrols, as well as an all out attack. Mostly though, they waited for the sound of a whistle, an unmistakable order to attack.

When the whistle blew, these men went "over the top." This was the most dangerous time of all. As they slogged across "no mans land," often weighted down by forty or more pounds of equipment, they were openly exposed to the enemy's machine gun and rifle fire, artillery, and flamethrowers. If they met their initial objective, the enemy front lines, they had to hold this position against an inevitable counter-attack. In a typical attack, a British company of men, numbering about 100, could expect to lose a quarter of their number just gaining an objective

Haig referred to the daily casualty reports, often numbering in the thousands, as "My daily wastage."

According to his son, Haig visited the front trenches only once because the smell of mass death made him sick, and he felt that he could not effectively command when this occurred.

### **Prelude and Failure: 1 July 1916**

On 21 February 1916, the German High Command launched Operation Gericht (Operation Judgment) against a French stronghold near Verdun. The High Command decided to destroy the French Army before their British ally was able to increase the size of their forces in the Western Front. In five months the French Army suffered 162,308 killed and over 300,000 more wounded. The French barely held on against German attacks, and desperately needed the British to take the offensive.

Since the start of the war, the British Army built itself from a force of roughly 250,000 men into a force of over two million. British imperial forces had engaged in large scale combat operations outside of the western front - notably against Turkey - and medium sized operations in France. In May 1916, Haig decided to amass several divisions numbering 120,000 men for an assault against the German lines in Flanders. He was, however, convinced by the French general in charge, Joseph Joffre, to attack in a combined offensive with available French forces along the Somme River. On 24 June 1916, British artillery began to shell German lines in a continuous bombardment. Very few Germans were killed as a result of the bombardment though survivors later claimed they suffered horrific shell shock. The primary reason for a lack of German deaths was their well-engineered, reinforced dugouts, deep under the chalky Picardy soil.

On the morning of 1 July 1916, the whistles blew and British soldiers went "over the top." Haig expected a complete breakthrough. After all, a week-long artillery barrage, complete air superiority, and the bulk of the German Army fighting at Verdun made a breakthrough seem very likely. But a breakthrough did not occur. British forces suffered astounding casualties: over 19,000 killed and 40,000 wounded, on this first day alone. The day was a complete failure. In fact, 1 July 1916 has been called the worst day in British history. Yet, that very evening, Haig reported to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that, in his view, the day was a success.

### **The Aftermath**

Despite the first day's failure, the battle continued through November. Tactics changed little throughout the battle, and the allies lost a total 210,000 killed for a gain of less than ten miles. (The German Army lost around 180,000). Throughout the battle he and his

immediate subordinates continued to view the small gains - at incredibly high cost - as evidence of success. Haig and his primary subordinates had no problem reporting these views of success to the military and political leadership in Britain. There was a disconnect, however, between their views and the actual gains of territory. First, no breakthrough in the German lines ever occurred. Second, the gains that did occur throughout the battle were typically objectives Haig had expected to take on 1 July.

Today there is a monument on the battlefield's high ground, Theipval. The monument lists the names of 70,000 British Empire soldiers whose bodies were never recovered in identifiable form. A tourist will find that between the towns of Albert and Peronne to the east and west, and Baupame to the north, the countryside is dotted with well-kept Imperial and Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries. As late as this year, the farmers of the local area have unearthed human remains and, the "iron harvest" - referring to the ongoing finds of shells and other war detritus - continues.

The Somme battle did not produce a decisive result, nor did it change the overall thinking of the BEFs commanding general and his staff. Indeed, in the fall of 1917, utilizing similar tactics and strategic thinking, the BEF attacked the German lines at Ypres in yet another big push. This battle has been alternatively called Third Ypres (the British had already fought two other battles there) or Passchendaele. This time the British suffered 120,000 battle deaths over a four-month period. Despite the huge numbers of men committed, neither the Somme nor Third Ypres was decisive in ending the war. In fact, the German Army was able to launch a series of full-scale offensives in that same area in the spring and summer of 1918.

### **Application to the Air Force Core Values and the JAG Corps**

The likelihood of trench warfare recurring rests somewhere between the categories of "never," and "very remote." Moreover our officer corps largely exists on a merit based promotion and assignment system. Class structures, never popular in the United States, hardly even exist in Britain today. Judge Advocates will not command regiments, divisions, or armies. The mindset of Haig, however, remains a salient leadership lesson for a number of reasons.

Haig presents a poignant reminder that knowledge of the field remains important at all levels of authority. This includes listening to the forces "in the field" where improvements and innovation tend to originate. The oft-repeated statement, "flexibility is the key to airpower," recognizes this tendency. To the JAG

Corps, it may mean nothing more than senior officers seeking process feedback from subordinates, and listening to this feedback with an open mind in such areas as military justice, operations law, and contracting. It also extends to informal climate assessments where leadership can gauge its own effectiveness.

Another application has to do with the nature of command and responsibility. After WWI, several generals and politicians claimed to harbor reservations about Haig's approach to the Somme and Passchedaele operations. Uniformly, none of them sought an active engagement with Haig over his vision for victory. Had Haig's subordinates approached him with their misgivings about his tactical, operational, and strategic plans, the Somme might have had a different result. No leader is flawless, yet the more confident a leader is, the less likely a subordinate is to respectfully approach a leader's plan with suggested alternatives. Axiomatic to this observation is the behavioral trait that the more confident a leader is, the more that leader ought to seek input and feedback. One of Haig's great weaknesses was his reluctance to seek any feedback. Had he listened to the reports and warnings from four brigadier generals on the night of 1 July 1916, he might have ended the battle. Instead, on 2 July 1916, he informed Prime Minister Herbert Asquith that the battle was "an enormous success." His immediate commanders went willingly along with Haig's 2 July assessment. Even as the battle continued, Haig reported exaggerated and excessive gains and German defeats. His immediate army commanders supported these reports. It was not until the conclusion of the war where political recriminations began that these commanders expressed their had inner doubts about the battle, but failed to voice these doubts. Here, there was a failure both in integrity and excellence.

The failure to voice doubts throughout the battle might have not only spared lives, but placed the British forces in a position where they could have ended the war earlier than 1918. To be sure, the BEF would ultimately have to engage in battle, but other factors worked to weaken the German position including the naval blockade surrounding Germany. One of our core Air Force values is "service before self." This value has its roots as an expression against the very type of subordinate conduct found in the British Army of WWI, or for that matter, the Civil War era leadership under McClellan. Every officer wants to achieve a promotion, and there is an inherent risk in opposing a commanding officer's plans. However, the overall cost to a military institution can be devastating. For the BEF, it meant the expenditure of over one million lives between 1914 and 1918. This does not suggest that WWI was not a worthwhile conflict. Indeed, on the

western front it pitted three democracies against a totalitarian regime bent on destroying twentieth century freedoms and creating a new world order based on its belief in Germanic ethnic supremacy. There is a distinct difference between fighting a worthwhile conflict, and fighting an intelligently led worthwhile conflict. This is little different for the JAG corps. For example, there is a difference between prosecuting a case to the desired result, and prosecuting a case smartly, where the image of a fair and professional military justice system is maintained.

Finally, the profession of arms requires adherence to standards of conduct beyond what is expected in civilian communities. These standards of conduct reinforce both external and internal confidence in military leadership. A lack of confidence degrades mission effectiveness. By late 1917 British soldiers could be heard bleating like sheep when they passed high-ranking staff officers. The French Army mutinied in the trenches in that same year. Neither force regained its full effectiveness until the arrival of the American forces in large numbers in the summer of 1918. The mission degradation did not occur because Haig and his French counterparts failed to adhere to our current core values, but a common denominator is the loss of confidence in military leadership. This is why guarding the merit based promotion system, and adherence to core values is so important. Simply put, a widespread lack of confidence in leadership degrades the effectiveness of the JAG corps. Corruption, if it occurs in a merit based promotion and assignment system, has a similar degrading effect. In Haig's time, the BEF possessed an inherent flaw where an officer's "breeding," was still thought to have a relation to the officer's ability. In our current military and JAG Corps, unchecked favoritism means that officers of ability may be deprived of the opportunity to fully contribute to the various important missions of the JAG Corps. Favoritism stemming from unprofessional relationships, a distinct failure in integrity, is a degrading force to effectiveness. Both the core values and high expectations of leadership are directly influential to mission effectiveness. So too is the need to guard against the Haig leadership style.

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Further Suggested Reading:

Phillip Warner, Field Marshal Earl Haig, (1983)  
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Captain Basil H. Liddell Hart, The Real War 1914-1918, (Little Brown & Co. 1930)  
James Stokesbury, A Short History of World War One, (Harper Collins 1981)  
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John Keegan, Face of Battle, (Penguin, 1980)