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The German Offensive on the Somme – 1918

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To commemorate the 90th anniversary of the great German offensive on the Western Front in March 1918 – which was intended to win the war for Germany; and was timed to capitalise on the availability of German troops released from the Russian and Italian fronts at the end of 1917 and to pre-empt the expected arrival of American reinforcements for the Allies in the spring of 1918 – Philip Carey, in this paper, summarises the strategic situation from both the German and British perspectives, outlines the tactics employed by both sides, and described the overall battle and its outcomes. He notes that the Australian role in the outcome was less significant than local legend might have you believe.

March 2008 marks the 90th anniversary of the opening of the German Army's massive offensive on the Western Front, known as the *Kaiserschlacht*, the Imperial Battle, against the British and French Allies. The German High Command, *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL), under Field Marshal von Hindenburg, Chief of the General Staff, with General Eric Ludendorff as First Quartermaster General controlling operations, had contemplated this offensive since April 1917. Heavy losses on the Somme in 1916, followed by withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in 1917 and losses in the battles of Third Ypres, coupled with the political and economic situation in Germany itself and among the Central powers generally, produced a sense of crisis. The entry of the United States into the War on the Allied side, and the failure of the unrestricted submarine campaign, forced OHL to consider a last ditch effort to drive Britain out of the War, secure a dominant negotiating position and force France to sue for peace; to win the war in other words. They nearly succeeded.

The German Situation

The collapse of Russia and successes on the Italian Front in 1917, presented the Germans with a rare opportunity to transfer a large number of divisions westwards. They eventually deployed 192 divisions to that front. OHL planned a series of five successive attacks against the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the French Army further south. The first of these attacks, code named *Michael*, was to be delivered against the British Third and Fifth Armies on a front stretching from Arras to La Fère, south of the River

Somme (see map on p. 10)². Ludendorff, obsessed with achieving a quick breakthrough, selected this option on tactical rather than strategic grounds. His operational objectives were vague. The centre of his attack would be along the Somme out of St Quentin.

Ludendorff's plan required the employment of three armies: the Seventeenth (General von Below) on the northern flank opposite the British Third Army, the Second (General von der Marwitz) further south holding the Flesquières salient facing the northern area of the British Fifth Army, and the Eighteenth (General von Hutier) facing the southern area of Fifth Army. The first two German armies were to break the British defences, capture the old Somme battlefield, burst into open country and wheel northwest to take the BEF in the flank. The Eighteenth Army was to provide flank protection against French movement to assist the British; and to support the Second Army if necessary (Stevenson 2004, 402; Sheffield 2001, 187-8).

It was a complicated plan requiring careful coordination by the High Command; coordination that Ludendorff seemed ill-equipped to provide. He has been criticised, even by German historians, for a lack of competence at both the strategic and operational levels. During the entire Spring Offensive he appears to have concentrated on the tactical level and consequently made serious errors of military judgement (Howard 2002, 124; Sheffield 2001, 189; Stevenson

¹ The author thanks Mr Joe Crumlin for valuable assistance in the preparation of this paper.

² The planning process included a series of conferences from 11 November 1917 to 10 March 1918 between OHL and the Army Group Commanders, Crown Princes Rupprecht of Bavaria and Wilhelm of Prussia and their staffs. After considerable disagreement, Ludendorff eventually decided to begin with Michael on 21 March and Hindenburg issued the orders on 10 March (Stevenson 2004, 401-2).

2004, 401)³. He declined to set and maintain a major objective for his offensive and dismissed the idea of a strategic aim saying, "We will punch a hole for the rest we shall see. We did it this way in Russia" (Keegan 1998, 424).

The British Situation

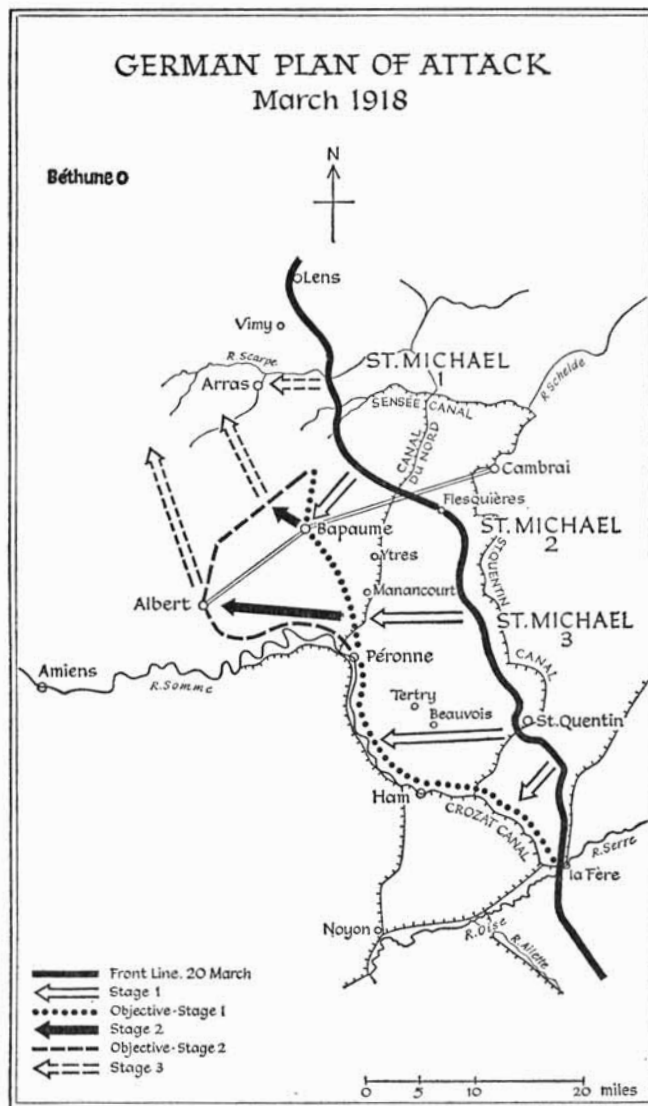
The British were not Russians and it could have been expected they would make a stronger stand, but their internal wrangling offered unknown advantages to Ludendorff. Their plans were complicated by long standing tensions between Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and the Commander-in-Chief BEF, Sir Douglas Haig. The situation was one which, in a democracy like Britain, should have been resolved by the Leader of the Government. Lloyd George, however, was a complex character, a strong war leader, clever if devious politician and a formidable orator. Haig, on the other hand, was a dour and powerful if stubborn military leader, a poor communicator prone to obfuscation and, overall, an enigmatic personality. The two never really understood each other and were never prepared to try.

The Prime Minister, as a long time proponent of an 'Eastern' strategy, was constantly horrified by the huge casualties so typical on the Western Front and deplored Haig's apparent lack of concern. From early 1917, he sought to limit the Commander-in-Chief's capacity to mount operations that might result in further high casualties. Unable to find the support and excuse to dismiss him, or to find a suitable replacement, Lloyd George resorted to covert means to hobble the Commander-in-Chief (Corrigan 2004, 326-7; Griffiths 1994, 89)⁴.

Haig's requests for reinforcements in both combat troops and labour force were repeatedly denied or downgraded. The Cabinet's manpower committee had downgraded the Army to the bottom of the priority list. Whereas the military wanted 600,000 of the fittest men withdrawn from civilian life by November 1918, the committee agreed to only 100,000. More could certainly have been provided and were, once the German attack developed. There were also 175,000 trained soldiers retained in Britain on grounds they were needed for home defence in the event of an invasion. It was a specious excuse. In reality, Lloyd George and the Cabinet feared Haig would waste them in further costly and futile attacks. Not without justification, they saw Haig as 'the boy who cried wolf'. But there were major manpower problems, the political situation was becoming fractious as war weariness set in and Haig had undermined his own argument by expressing confidence that he could hold the Germany Army with what he had, for at least eighteen days (Stevenson 2004, 406-7).

³He certainly had a choleric temperament. Perhaps the best illustration of Ludendorff's brittle grasp of strategy and operational concepts is given in Keegan (1998, Ch 10).

⁴In the next War there would be no doubt about the subordination of the military to the elected civilian authority.



*The German plan of attack March 1918
(from Pitt 1962, 48)*

Furthermore, the Government ordered re-organisation of the BEF to offset manpower shortages. Divisions were reduced from 12 battalions to nine, effectively wiping 145 battalions from the order of battle. Disruption caused by moving soldiers to new, unfamiliar units in unfamiliar formations and working with unfamiliar supporting arms, artillery in particular, has to be experienced to be understood. A disproportionate percentage of these changes occurred in Fifth Army, which ultimately bore the brunt of the German assault. Each division was still required to defend the same length of front, now with fewer battalions. The re-organisation commenced in January and was not completed until early March, but the integration work it spawned was incomplete when the Germans struck (Stevenson 2004, 406; Keegan 1998, 424-5).

Finally, Lloyd George agreed to a French request that the British Army take over some 28 miles of front south of the Somme. This imposition fell squarely on the Fifth Army. The new area was found to be poorly

maintained and required significant renovation, adding to the strain on manpower (Keegan 1998, 425; Griffiths 1994, 89-90).

On 20 March, the Third Army (General Byng) held the northern sector around Arras on a front of 28 miles with 14 divisions. It was the stronger army and well dug in. The Fifth Army (General Gough) to the south, held the old Somme battleground of 1916 on a front of 42 miles with only 12 divisions. Not only was it the weaker, its defensive positions were accordingly thinner, more widespread and in some places incomplete. Byng faced 19 German divisions and Gough a daunting 43 (Sheffield 2001, 188).

A Question of New Tactics

Both sides attempted to learn from their enemies' successes of previous years. For most of the war the Germans had defended and so the British tried to employ what they thought to be similar techniques. Conversely, the British had been the primary attackers and the Germans attempted to emulate the successful British tactics of 1916-17. Neither was as successful as they hoped.

On the German side, Ludendorf sought to build on the successes at Cambrai and the Russian and Italian Fronts. He proposed to develop the Storm Troop concept to a new level. OHL, therefore, distilled the principles in a new manual, *The Attack in Positional Warfare*, issued in January 1918. The intention of the new tactics was to eat through Allied defences in order to regain manoeuvre and keep the enemy off balance by pressing the attack continuously without relief and regardless of casualties, using infantry specially trained in storm troop penetration tactics. Small group *sturmgruppe* were to consist of an NCO and nine men armed with rifles, grenades and light machine guns, with attached specialist flamethrowers and heavier weapons. The artillery was to surprise, neutralise and disrupt communications beforehand and effect a creeping barrage as the main body of infantry moved forward. All infantrymen were to be trained in assault group methods. Scorn for the British, and determination to overwhelm the Allies, led Ludendorf to specifically exclude the concept of the 'limited objective' (Stevenson 2004, 400).

On the British side, the BEF introduced a new concept of defence-in-depth modelled, or so they thought, on German defensive deployments. In place of multiple lines of trenches, they created a system of defensive zones; the Forward, Battle and Rear zones, centred on machine gun posts and redoubts. The Forward Zone was to be held lightly, its purpose being to delay an attacker and channel the attack so that it could be broken up more easily in the Battle Zone by stronger positions, artillery and local counter attacks. The Forward Zone was to be held to the last, but in greater strength than the Germans used. The Battle Zone was to be held rigidly, counterattacks were to be fewer and less discretion was allowed to their

commanders; major differences from German techniques. Manpower shortages in Fifth Army ensured that when the attack came the forward zone was complete and the Battle Zone contained satisfactory strong-points and artillery positions, but the Rear Zone to which the defenders could withdraw as a last resort had hardly been commenced (Stevenson 2004, 406-7; Sheffield 2001, 188; Keegan 1998, 425-7).

Haig had correctly anticipated the timing and place of the offensive and, recognising the relative weakness of his southern flank, authorised Fifth Army to withdraw to the Somme and Crozat Canal in the event of a threatened breakthrough, because this was furthest from the coast and an area where he could afford to give ground. But he misjudged the eventual axis and strength of the German attack. Both he and Gough were confident about their dispositions and their effectiveness. But, in an extraordinary act of complacency, or perhaps irresponsibility, Haig further compounded a dangerous situation by approving home leave for 88,000 troops on the eve of battle (Stevenson 2004, 407).

The Attack⁵

The German storm broke over the British Third and Fifth armies at 4.40 a.m. on 21 March in a tremendous artillery bombardment that included gas. It targeted both the forward positions and the command centres and gun positions in the Battle Zone. Worse, the weather was favourable for the Germans; a dense mist accompanied their attack. Five hours later, their infantry left its front line and, led by the storm troop detachments, 76 first-rate German divisions leapt upon 26 in the two British Armies; a clear case of the application of overwhelming force.

The shock to the British was devastating. Headquarters found themselves unable to direct the battle and had to address their own survival. Individual units and posts in the Forward Zone were cut off and isolated. Some fled and others surrendered after a stiff fight. By evening the situation was critical. Almost everywhere, the Forward Zone had been captured and the Battle Zone was in danger of being overwhelmed. In the far south, Hutier's Army broke into Gough's Battle Zone and had penetrated the Rear Zone. The British sustained 38,000 casualties and lost 500 guns.

When the offensive was renewed on 22 March, the situation within Fifth Army worsened considerably and, on 23 March, Gough withdrew to the Somme-Crozat Canal. The withdrawal became confused and some units went further back than intended. Nevertheless, the British managed to achieve a modest success in spite of chaos at some headquarters and on the field.

⁵ The following account is condensed from: Keegan 1998, 427-434; Stevenson 2004, 408-412; Sheffield 2001, 189-191; and Griffiths 1994, 90-92. Griffiths (1994) is one of the most important analyses of tactics on the Western Front ever written.

Fighting with grim determination, some units had held back the German steamroller long enough to ensure Ludendorff's initial aim of breaking through on the first day was denied him. It was not until 23 March that he achieved even his first objective, the Crozat Canal. Nevertheless, the Germans had driven gaps between Byng and Gough and had opened a 40-mile wide hole in the British Front.

In the north, General Byng's better-prepared positions foiled Ludendorff's plans. Here had been his real target, but Byng still held his Battle Zone and the progress of both German armies was severely disrupted. Characteristically, Ludendorff lost patience with both Below and Marwitz and made his first major error. Complaining of lack of progress in their Armies, he abandoned the thought of a wheel to the northwest and changed the point of main effort to Hutier's Army in the south in an effort to capitalise on success and drive a wedge between the British and French. It was too late; reinforcement for Gough was moving. Effectively, Ludendorff had failed to select and maintain his aim.

Just the same, the British Government and General Headquarters (GHQ) went through several days of high anxiety and the French descended into confusion about priorities. Gough was sacked, perhaps unreasonably because he had conducted his withdrawal with some skill in difficult circumstances, but his record from 1916 and 1917 made him the ideal scapegoat. After some strain in Anglo-French relations, General Foch was appointed to coordinate the Allied effort and thereafter Allied action improved.

As the German advance slowed, Ludendorff made another error. He failed to concentrate his force. On 25 March, he ordered a subsidiary attack around Arras, which took place on 28 March and quickly failed. At this point, he gave up hope of a general breakthrough and scaled down his objectives to attempt to capture Amiens, or least the high ground around Villers-Bretonneux that dominated the city. After failing to do either and determined to attack elsewhere, he called *Michael* off.

Outcomes

The initial German attack on 21 March delivered a tremendous shock to both the British Government and GHQ. The Prime Minister soon realised his own strategic judgement had been flawed, though he would not acknowledge it until well after the War. Within two days, the reinforcements held back in Britain began to stream across the Channel and elements of the general reserve joined them. After some confusion between Haig and the French C-in-C, Pétain, French divisions were sent in relief and Haig moved some of the best BEF divisions south from Flanders. He eventually committed 48 of his 56 divisions, and those that remained with Fifth Army were seriously depleted. The Germans were held in front of Villers-Bretonneux with great difficulty, but Ludendorff had done a great deal of

damage. He had inflicted 212,000 casualties on the Allies, taken 90,000 prisoners and captured 1300 guns. It had been a close shave (Stevenson 2004, 412).

Perhaps the most important outcome for the Allies, was the recognition that their separate approach to coordination of the war effort by gentleman's agreement between their respective heads of government and C-in-C was ineffective and the agreement to have Foch operate as a sort of generalissimo was the more effective arrangement

The Australian contribution to *Michael* was proportionately small and, contrary to popular accounts, the Anzacs did not stop the German Army single-handedly (Dennis *et al.* 1995, 663). However, four of the divisions were sent from their quiet area in the north. John Monash's Third Division was first to arrive on 26/27 March and took up defensive positions in the area of Sailly and Sailly-le-Sec on the Somme, as Monash said, when the German assault was petering out. Their contribution was nonetheless extremely valuable (Monash 1920, 29).

On the German side, Ludendorff continued with his sequence of offensives until mid-summer; each of them as costly as the last. But with the end of *Michael*, the signs were there that the German Army had 'shot its bolt'. Casualties in *Michael* amounted to 239,000, a high proportion of whom were the elite storm troopers and crack infantrymen who were irreplaceable. The ground captured was of dubious strategic value. Again, contrary to popular perceptions, the British Army demonstrated a remarkable resilience, especially at the local tactical level where the initiative and determination of junior commanders and soldiers alike were responsible for stubborn resistance and a fierce refusal to lose their spirit. It was, as Gary Sheffield (2001, 196) has said, "a forgotten victory".

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