

# General Ferdinand Foch and the French Contribution to the Battle of the Somme

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## ABSTRACT

*As commander of the Northern Army Group, General Ferdinand Foch was responsible for the major French contribution to the Battle of the Somme. Using lesser known archival sources this article illuminates the tensions both between the allies and within the French army, looking at the planning, the prosecution of the battle and the aftermath. Although frustrated by having to fight on a battlefield he considered to be unfavourable, the lack of what he considered sufficient resources and the general slowness of operations, Foch learned much about alliance warfare and worked hard to build a relationship with Haig that benefited him as Generalissimo in 1918.*

In Anglophone countries especially, the name of Ferdinand Foch is rarely associated with the 1916 Battle of the Somme, usually considered to be a British affair. Even in France, 1916 is remembered for Verdun in eastern France rather than for the Somme in Picardy in northern France. The fighting at Verdun began on 21 February 1916 and continued for ten months as a solely Franco-German battle. Yet Foch, the general who was appointed to supreme Allied command in March 1918, had an important role to play during the 1916 Somme fighting. This article analyses that role and reveals not only the difficulties of fighting a coalition war but also the strains within the French high command and government.

These two overarching themes – tension between allies, and tension within the French Army – are illustrated very clearly in General Foch's handling of the fighting on the Somme. The huge historiography of the battle pays him little attention (excluding, of course, studies of Foch himself).<sup>1</sup> This is because the strategic decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Recent studies of Foch include: Jean Autin, *Foch ou le triomphe de la volonté*, (Paris: Perrin, 1987, 1998); Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Michael S. Neiberg, *Foch: Supreme Allied commander in the Great War* (Washington DC: Brassey's,

about the place and the timing were taken by the French commander-in-chief, General Joseph Joffre, and his British counterparts, Field Marshal Sir John French, succeeded by General Sir Douglas Haig. Then the story of the prosecution of the battle became predominantly British. The arguments over the origins of, and reasons for, the battle are not treated here; they have received considerable attention elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the role of the German commander, General Erich von Falkenhayn, his intentions in launching the offensive at Verdun that imposed far-reaching changes on the French command, and his replacement at the end of August 1916 by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, are not discussed in detail.<sup>3</sup>

Rather, the focus is on the role of Foch, and is based on little used archival sources. These include Foch's own notebooks with their scribbled musings and annotations, so very different from Haig's daily diary entries; Foch's letters to his wife and her own informative diary record; the diary record of the British Fourth Army commander, General Sir Henry Rawlinson, and of Foch's British liaison officer, Colonel Eric Dillon; and finally the wealth of documentation in the annexes volumes of the French official history. For the three volumes dealing with 1916, there are an additional ten volumes of documents (7516 in all). The relevant records of the two French armies, their corps, divisions and regiments are often to be found among these annexes. They are rarely abbreviated; even marginalia on the original documents are reproduced.<sup>4</sup>

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2003); Jean-Christophe Notin, *Foch* (Paris: Perrin, 2008). For a full bibliography see Rémy Porte and François Cochet (eds), *Ferdinand Foch (1851–1929): Apprenez à penser*, (Saint-Cloud: Soteca/Éditions 14–18, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See the 'debate' in *War in History*: Elizabeth Greenhalgh, 'Why the British were on the Somme in 1916', *War in History* Vol.6, Iss.2 (1999), pp.147–173; William Philpott, 'Why the British were really on the Somme: A reply to Elizabeth Greenhalgh', *War in History* Vol.9, Iss.4 (2002), pp.446–471; Elizabeth Greenhalgh, 'Flames Over the Somme: A Retort to William Philpott', *War in History* Vol.10, Iss.3 (2003), pp.335–342.

<sup>3</sup> Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994); Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the development of attrition, 1870–1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, 103 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1922–38) [cited hereafter as AFGG]. The three volumes of tome 4 cover 1916, including, of course, Verdun. I have cited operational records from AFGG, rather than the originals, so that interested readers may follow up the references. The *Bibliothèque nationale de France* has digitised the volumes except for the maps ([gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr)). The original documentation is held in the French Army archives: *sous-séries* 18N for the Northern Army Group (especially volumes 147-9); 19N for Sixth

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After a brief analysis of Foch's position relevant to the French Army and to the British authorities, his role in the planning of an operation in which he had little faith is examined. This sheds light not only on his thinking about tactical developments, but also on Haig's thinking. Next, his actions during the course of the battle are discussed, concentrating on the lesser known battles during the last three months of the campaign, rather than the usual emphasis on the fighting on 1 July or on the tanks in September, because it is the later battles which illustrate a greater degree of Franco-British cooperation. With the exception of William Philpott's study of the Somme campaign, most accounts adopt a national perspective and ignore the international aspects of a battle in which British, French and German armies fought for almost five months.<sup>5</sup> In short, this article exploits rarely used sources to illuminate the international battle of the Somme in its centenary year from the perspective of a level of command, that of the French army group, which receives little attention in the literature. It is at this level of command that the difficulties of fighting a coalition war are revealed most acutely.

### **Command of the French Northern Army Group**

At the beginning of 1916 the Northern Army Group consisted of two of France's armies, the Sixth and the Tenth, and the Dunkirk garrison. The army group was a new level of command, created provisionally in October 1914 when the fighting in France had moved northwards to Ypres, and then confirmed in June the following year. It had proved too difficult to manage the nine French armies, holding a line across the whole of France from the North Sea to Switzerland, solely from Joffre's Chantilly headquarters (Grand Quartier Général, or GQG). Three army groups shared the task of high command, their commanders having 'full authority to settle

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and Tenth armies (especially volumes 1040-52, 1060 and 1666-67, respectively); 22N and 24N for their constituent corps and divisions respectively.

<sup>5</sup> William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century*, (London: Little, Brown, 2009). The bibliography of the Somme battle is vast. The most recent titles include, for the British: Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Gary Sheffield, *The Somme*, (London: Cassell, 2003); for the French, Alain Denizot, *La bataille de la Somme: juillet–novembre 1916*, (Paris: Perrin, 2002); Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*; for the Germans: Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on the Somme 1914–1916*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2005); Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Irena Renz (eds), *Scorched Earth: The Germans on the Somme 1914–1918*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009), being a translation from the original (2006) German edition, *Die Deutschen an der Somme 1914–1918: Krieg, Besatzung, Verbrannte Erde*.

the zones of action of their armies, to share out the front between them, to create their own reserves of men and mobile heavy artillery, and to conduct the operations that they propose themselves or are ordered by the commander-in-chief.<sup>6</sup>

Appointed to command the Northern Army Group from its inception, Foch had the additional task of acting as Joffre's 'adjoint' or deputy and also of coordinating French action with that of the Belgian and British armies. Foch's successful coordination of the tangled fighting around Ypres in October 1914 had impressed Haig and King Albert of the Belgians.<sup>7</sup> Joffre and Foch worked closely together at this time, with frequent meetings and communications between them. In 1915 Foch had the responsibility for the fighting in Artois, carrying out the northern portion of Joffre's double-pronged offensive strategy to drive the Germans out of the salient that they occupied. So Foch was an experienced general, well qualified to coordinate the 1916 campaign on the Somme.

The value of the army group level of command, with its principal purpose as coordination, is best illustrated by comparing the case of the German armies in 1914 at the Battle of Marne. The three army commanders on the German right flank – First Army under Alexander von Kluck, Second under Karl von Bülow, Third under Max von Hausen – acted independently of each other, having no means of rapid communication. Furthermore, Chief of the General Staff (de facto commander-in-chief) Helmuth von Moltke was many miles away. The arguments over whether his envoy, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch, exceeded his authority in ordering a retreat has continued over the years since 1914. The necessity for an army group commander on the German right flank is patent. Indeed, by 1916 Moltke's replacement von Falkenhayn had realised this and made a group of his armies on the Somme.

In theory, therefore, Foch should have coordinated the entire planning and prosecution of the Somme battle yet his role was limited by two important factors. First, his position as army group commander was a hindrance because it had no equivalent in the British Army. The Somme sector had been chosen in order to widen the front of attack: the French and British lines met there, and the original proposed front, running from Hébuterne in the north to Lassigny in the south, extended for about 75 kilometres. However, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was no longer what it had been in 1914 and 1915. The professional British army had been almost wiped out at Ypres and the British contributions to the 1915 fighting had been small. Foch had found it difficult to cope with Sir John French, although his

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<sup>6</sup> AFGG, tome 3, annex 581, GQG, Ordre général #39, 13 June 1915,.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Ypres fighting, see Ian F.W. Beckett, *Ypres: The first battle*, (Harlow: Pearson, 2004), and, on Foch's role, Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command*, pp.56–73.

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friendship with General Henry Wilson, chief liaison officer between GQG and GHQ, eased the problem. In 1916 Foch had to interact instead with General Sir Douglas Haig as the new C-in-C of a much bigger BEF. The arrival in France of Kitchener's new volunteer recruits meant that the BEF consisted in 1916 of four (later five) armies, in effect the equivalent (more or less) of a French army group. As C-in-C Haig preferred to deal with Joffre, the French C-in-C. The two army commanders involved, General Sir Henry Rawlinson (Fourth Army) and General Emile Fayolle (French Sixth Army), communicated with each other at the same level of command, and had liaison officers attached to each other's headquarters to deal with the difficulties of language. This left Foch in a sort of limbo with no direct British counterpart and he had to work hard at creating an effective working partnership.

The second factor affecting Foch's role in the Somme battle was his own thinking and his relationship with Joffre. He did not consider the Somme to be the right sector for an operation of any magnitude; he did not believe that he had the material means to carry it out successfully; his strategic thinking was beginning to diverge from that of his C-in-C whom he believed was becoming increasingly tired. Foch's experience of the 1915 offensives had convinced him that the key to success lay in guns, lots of them, and especially lots of heavy artillery. His notebooks leave no room for doubt about what came to be known as the 'scientific method'. In order to carry out a successful attack, he argued, each army corps should have 100 heavy guns – that is to say 3000 guns for the 30 corps. This required that the output from French factories be about 125 per month whereas it was lower than 100. If the French were to be ready in 1917, this situation must improve immediately and certainly *for 1916 will not give any results*.<sup>8</sup> So, in 1916, Foch had a complicated and difficult role to play.

### Planning

The broad outlines of the 1916 campaign had been settled in conference at French GQG the previous year. Then Joffre had insisted that French losses had already been so high that the Allies had to shoulder more of the burden of expelling the enemy from France. To this end, the BEF must play a larger role, and all the Allies must undertake coordinated action on all fronts so as to prevent the Germans from moving troops along their interior lines to meet emergencies on one front or another. Foch was not present at this conference; nor was he present in February 1916 at the meeting between Joffre and Haig when they reached agreement that the British and French contribution to Allied coordinated action was to be a joint attack around 1 July on a 65-70km wide front in Picardy, where the two armies joined. For this operation Joffre would allocate to Foch three armies (39 infantry divisions, plus three territorials).

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<sup>8</sup> Service historique de la Défense, Département Armée de Terre, Vincennes (SHD/T), 1K 129/10, Foch carnets, 6 June 1916.

Already, before the end of 1915, Joffre had asked his three army group commanders to indicate what operations they might undertake in the 1916 campaign. Clearly Foch believed in the need for some declared strategic purpose beforehand because he wrote in the margin of Joffre's letter: 'Offensive en vue de?'.<sup>9</sup> Foch's response indicated that the most useful operation was the completion by his Tenth Army of the capture of Vimy Ridge. In 1915 Tenth Army had mounted two large offensives against the ridge, in May/June and again in September. Some progress had been made, and French troops now clung to its western side, but that progress had been bought at enormous cost in men. The purpose of the repeated assaults had been to gain good observation over the German communications around Douai. The Germans recognised that occupation of the crest of the ridge was crucial; this is proved by their tenacious defence, again at great cost. Although an attack on the Vimy Ridge meant hitting again at the same points that had been attacked in 1915, there was no other sector of the Northern Army Group's front that offered the same possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Joffre was not convinced, and maintained the Somme region as the sector and 1 July as the approximate date, with the Russian and Italian offensives to begin slightly beforehand. Foch was obliged to begin preparations for action on the Somme, despite the start of the German offensive at Verdun on 21 February just a week after Joffre and Haig's agreement. On 20 April Foch sent out a long document containing his 'general directives' for Joffre's operation.<sup>11</sup> The depth of the enemy defensive positions, Foch emphasised, required a sustained offensive, conducted methodically and supported by the artillery. Only the artillery could destroy the enemy positions and the infantry should attack only once these had been destroyed. A longer artillery preparation was required for the first defensive position, because this was the strongest, but once this was captured there should be a rapid shift to the next and any successive positions. Action should be on a wide front and the creation of small local salients should be avoided. The methodical nature of the preparation is seen clearly in the listing of the tasks for each calibre of artillery (counter-battery work, for example, was the province of the corps artillery) and in the insistence that firing must be controlled. Likewise, the infantry action was to be directed closely. Simply committing troops *pêle-mêle* created disorder and made it impossible to coordinate their action. Speed was of the essence after the position had been taken and consolidated and the artillery should be moved up for the attack on the second and subsequent positions even before the capture of the previous one was complete.

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<sup>9</sup> AFGG 3, annex 3018. 'An offensive with what aim?'

<sup>10</sup> AFGG 4/1, annex 151, 'Projet d'Attaque', sent to Joffre on 2 February 1916.

<sup>11</sup> AFGG 4/2, annex 2.

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These directives reveal a huge problem, one that would not be solved in 1916. Methodical artillery preparation was essential, however long a time was required for the purpose, but so too was speed in moving the artillery forward to deal with second and subsequent enemy defensive lines. Yet the more methodical and lengthy, hence successful, the preparation on the first position, the more the ground was churned up, and so the slower the re-positioning of the guns. More method in the first meant less speed in later phases.

Of course, this problem had already been overtaken by an even greater one. Although at Verdun the Germans had achieved some startling captures in the opening days, Foch had been confident that the offensive would lose momentum and, indeed, the enemy made little further headway in March and April. However, as pressure began building there again in May, the resources available to Foch for the Somme dwindled. Instead of 39 infantry divisions plus three territorials, supported by 1700 heavy guns, on 26 April he was promised 30 divisions supported by only 312 heavies. On 28 May the number of divisions fell once more, to 20 (plus two territorial and one cavalry) supported by 136 heavies. Thus Foch now had about half the original number of infantry and, much more importantly, only about a twelfth of the heavy artillery.

From this, he drew the obvious conclusion: there was little point mounting the operation. He made this very clear at a meeting on 31 May with Joffre and Haig and the French politicians – the premier, the war minister and the President of the Republic, Raymond Poincaré. At this meeting Haig described Foch as looking ‘untrustworthy and a schemer’, adding that he ‘came in for a reprimand’ because he had ‘spoken to politicians against taking the offensive this year’.<sup>12</sup> According to Poincaré’s account, Foch had to be pressed to give his opinion although his staff were free with their views that there should be no offensive. The war minister managed to get Foch to admit that an offensive might be useful, necessary even. Nevertheless it should not be an offensive aiming at breakthrough, but rather at simply easing the pressure on Verdun. A serious offensive, Foch declared, should only be undertaken in 1917 when they had more resources. Thus did Foch stand by his ‘scientific method’ in the face of the war minister, his commander-in-chief and the President of the Republic. Poincaré recognised that Foch was at odds with his commander-in-chief who hankered after ‘strategic results’.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The National Archives, Kew (TNA), WO 256/10, Haig diary, 31 May 1916. The typescript does not differ here from the ms in the National Library of Scotland.

<sup>13</sup> Poincaré’s account of this meeting, whose importance is usually ignored in the literature, is the fullest available since no minutes were taken in the absence of staff officers: Raymond Poincaré, *Au Service de la France: Neuf années de souvenirs*, 11 vols (Paris: Plon, 1928–74), vol. 8, pp.250–2.

Two important consequences followed from this meeting. First, Foch's dislike of the proposed operation was now patent to the French government and would be factor in his removal from command at the end of the year. Second, Haig seems to have taken renewed confidence from the meeting and expanded his strategic objectives. He even mentioned reaching the Rhine, requesting that troops be brought back from Salonika to achieve this. He expanded Rawlinson's initial plans to include Bapaume as an objective and converted his reserve force of infantry and cavalry into a Reserve Army under General Hubert Gough. This force was given the task of exploiting the advance northwards towards Arras and rolling up the enemy's lines 'in flank and reverse'.<sup>14</sup>

So British and French planning continued, but had diverged.<sup>15</sup> Foch calculated the length of front that he could attack with the reduced numbers of guns now at his disposal and concluded that 15 kilometres—not the original 40—was as much as he could handle. Haig, on the other hand, was obliging Rawlinson to aim further and wider without reference to the number of available guns. On 6 June Joffre released Haig from his original support role. Instead of the French forcing a passage across the Somme upriver from Péronne, supported by British troops on the northern bank, the operation became one of French support for British action.

Foch's dislike of the operation became irrelevant, therefore, and now he put all his energies into practical details. No meetings between Foch and Haig have been recorded in June following the 31 May conference, the result perhaps of Haig's known dislike of receiving orders from the army group commander. Foch had made a particular effort to make friends soon after Haig succeeded Sir John French, inviting an unwilling Haig to dine at his headquarters.<sup>16</sup> Haig may have been suspicious of the Wilson–Foch friendship throughout 1915, considering Wilson to be an intriguer. Because Wilson had left GHQ on 22 December 1915 to take over a corps

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<sup>14</sup> On the expansion of Haig's strategic thinking, see Prior & Wilson, *Somme*, pp.49–52; and J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.222, where Harris describes Haig's overall conception of the campaign as becoming 'more grandiose', and his failure to adapt to the reduced French contribution to it as '[o]ne of the strangest aspects' of his planning.

<sup>15</sup> For a list of planning meetings between the various British and French Somme commanders see Table 3.1 in Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.57–9.

<sup>16</sup> TNA WO 256/7, Haig diary, 10 January 1916. 'I shall have to go', Haig wrote, but afterwards Foch thanked him 'profusely for the honour' of dining with him (*ibid.*, 11 January 1916).

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command, Foch had lost his ready access to British thinking at GHQ, but Colonel Eric Dillon was appointed to act as Haig's liaison officer at Foch's Northern Army Group HQ, taking up his duties on 17 May. He spoke frequently with Foch's trusted chief of staff, Maxime Weygand, and so got a good insight into Foch's thinking. He described Foch as a 'good old thing', and recorded him as being 'in roaring spirits' on 25 June.<sup>17</sup>

Foch had also made an effort to get to know Rawlinson. In February Rawlinson found Foch 'most amenable and amusing', and during March they had lunched in each other's messes. Foch told his wife that Rawlinson was a great friend of Wilson's whom he was cultivating.<sup>18</sup> He and Rawlinson met several times during June,<sup>19</sup> as French units began arriving (some of them from Verdun) to man the three corps of Fayolle's Sixth Army. This was now the only army in Foch's Northern Army Group to begin the campaign, all the Tenth Army units having gone to Verdun, leaving behind only a headquarters staff. Next to the British and north of the Somme, XX Corps was in line by 3 June; the two corps south of the river were in place a week before the battle began. Foch was involved, therefore, in such practical details as settling boundary lines, dates and timings. In addition he paid particular attention to improving road communications and the aeronautical service.<sup>20</sup>

On 20 June Foch issued his final tactical notes, incorporating the lessons from the Verdun fighting.<sup>21</sup> Verdun had shown that dense attacking formations were to be avoided, replaced by a strict minimum of troops in first line, with the remainder

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<sup>17</sup> Imperial War Museum, London, Brigadier Lord Dillon papers (Dillon diary), 66/145/1, 15 and 25 June 1916.

<sup>18</sup> National Army Museum, London, Rawlinson Short Note diary, 18 February 1916; Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, Rawlinson diary, RWLN 1/5, 2 March 1916. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds photographique 4<sup>o</sup>, vol. 39, Foch, letter to Mme Foch, 9 March 1916.

<sup>19</sup> On 2, 16, 20, 23, 25 and 29 June 1916.

<sup>20</sup> There is no room here to describe these measures. See Rémy Porte, *La Direction des Services Automobiles et la Motorisation des Armées Françaises (1914-1919): Vues au travers de l'action du Commandant Doumenc* (Paris: Lavauzelle, 2004), pp.186–190; Alain Morizon, 'L'Aviation française en 1916', *Revue Historique de l'Armée* Vol.85 (1966), pp.40–52; Michel Goya, *La Chair et l'Acier: L'Invention de la guerre moderne (1914–1918)* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004), pp.294–301.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the role of the high command in the development of French tactical doctrine, see Goya, *La Chair et l'Acier*, ch. 7 (pp.261–6 for the Somme); Colonel Pascal Lucas, *L'Evolution des idées tactiques en France et en Allemagne pendant la guerre de 1914–1918*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1932), ch. 4.

ready to reinforce and to manoeuvre as required.<sup>22</sup> Foch's calculation of the length of front to be attacked on the basis of the number of available guns rather than on the numbers of attacking infantry has already been noted. At General Rawlinson's HQ they were calculating the length of front to be attacked with reference to the number of available divisions (using the formula: 8–9 men of an attacking division per yard) and planning to send dense formations to storm the enemy trenches.<sup>23</sup>

Foch's new instructions were distributed down to battalion level.<sup>24</sup> They emphasised the role of the artillery, whereas:

the infantry's role is limited to taking and occupying the ground which the artillery has destroyed effectively and completely, and to holding on to it. Furthermore the capture must be only be carried out after *prudent* reconnaissance, so as to avoid any surprise fire when the artillery destruction has not been effective and *under the constant protection of the guns*.

Therefore, the 'notion of an assault breaking all resistance and sweeping it away with great force must be abandoned', because successive waves of units lead to chaos, excessive losses and powerlessness. The role of the commanding officer was to deploy units in depth and on a wide front, and to maintain an ordered and continuous line of attack, with no wild rushing about. Each commander in the field should be in the midst of his troops so as to be informed of events as quickly and as completely as possible, with divisional commanders placing themselves so as to be in contact with their brigade commanders. The instruction concluded:

Battle at present is a long-lasting struggle. So as to achieve a decisive result, the infantry must be conserved at all costs.

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<sup>22</sup> AFGG 4/2, annex 868, Joffre, 'Note pour les armées', 3 June 1916.

<sup>23</sup> For length of front to be attacked see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The military career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914–18*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.143. For infantry tactics see *ibid.*, pp.155–60. Note 16 of the Fourth Army's 'Tactical Notes' (May 1916) reads: 'Each line of assaulting troops must leave its trenches simultaneously and make the assault as one man. This is of the highest importance.' Reprinted in Edmonds, *Military Operations 1916*, vol. 1, appendix 18.

<sup>24</sup> AFGG 4/2, annex 13693e, Bureau, GAN, 'Note à communiquer jusqu'aux bataillons', 20 June 1916. Emphasis in the original.

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Therefore it is of prime importance to use the infantry with strict economy, only to ask of it an effort of which it is capable, and to direct it methodically and closely.

Foch's final intervention in the planning process came when Joffre found out that Haig did not intend to move eastwards along the Bapaume–Cambrai road, the proposed 'axis of progression', towards the enemy communications hub around Cambrai-Valenciennes-Maubeuge. Instead, after capturing Bapaume, Haig intended to push Gough's Reserve Army northwards towards Arras. The letter informing Joffre of this is dated 26 June, that is to say a day after the start of the artillery preparation, although the change of strategic direction to the north had been ordered earlier, on 16 June. Such is hardly the best way to conduct a joint battle! Foch asked Dillon to explain what Haig intended. Foch pointed out the dangers in Haig's plan of fighting on a narrow front with unconquered German positions on the flank, and suggested an alternative method of advancing on a wide front, with the French to take over more of the line north of the river when there was enough room to do so. Dillon took these criticisms 'in an unsigned paper from Foch' to Haig, who did not respond. Haig refused to have anything to do with it, telling Dillon that Foch 'was a wily old devil'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Prosecution**

Despite having been obliged by his C-in-C to plan for a battle in which he had little faith, Foch acted energetically once it began. As army group commander, Foch's tasks were to coordinate the timing of the attacks of the British and French armies, to bring in the second of the French armies (Tenth Army under General Alfred Micheler) once units and artillery had returned from Verdun and to control the heavy artillery. For this last task, he had placed an officer in his own army group headquarters, so that he could keep as much control as possible over the most important element in his offensive. Much of the necessary coordination amounted to 'administering ginger', to use Dillon's phrase.<sup>26</sup>

The results of the first two days' fighting in the French southern sector of the battlefield were most encouraging. Fayolle's Sixth Army had three corps in action, XX Corps north of the river and I Colonial Corps and XXXV Corps on the south side. Next to the British, XX Corps took all its objectives, carrying the German front line with very few casualties. South of the river, the I Colonial Corps did even better, capturing ground beyond the enemy's first line. As is well known, the only

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<sup>25</sup> Dillon diary, 28 June 1916. Dillon reported back rather more tactfully that 'Sir D.H. was grateful for the paper but that he was going to stick to his original plan'. SHD/T, 14N 48, Fonds EM Foch, 'Note', n.d., unsigned, in file 'Bataille de la Somme: Armées Anglaises Sorties'.

<sup>26</sup> Dillon diary, 13 September 1916.

British success came in the sector next to the French, doubtless helped by the French artillery barrages, whereas further north uncut wire and German machine guns made progress impossible. The French were forced to mark time until the British caught up.

Joffre intervened on 3 July, when he learned that Haig intended to abandon the northern and concentrate on the southern part of the British front, next to the French. This decision negated the principle of attacking across a wide front. Joffre was furious and had a row with Haig, thumping the table hard enough to break it and stating 'you will attack'.<sup>27</sup> Wilson visited Foch two days later and learned that Foch was 'very pleased with his own advance and displeased with ours', judging that Haig had not yet understood the cause of the failure, namely 'not nearly sufficient concentration of fire before an infantry attack'. Foch recounted how an 'infuriated' Joffre 'simply went for Haig and ... was quite "brutal"'. Haig said he was not speaking as one gentleman to another, and old Joffre said he would have no further dealings with Haig over this matter and that Haig must work it out with Foch'.<sup>28</sup> Thus Foch took over Joffre's role, in addition to his frequent visits to Rawlinson (every 3–4 days throughout July), acting, he told his wife, as the 'pot of glue', something he had been doing for two years, to hold the alliance together.<sup>29</sup> Dillon persuaded Haig to invite Foch to lunch following the row, so as to keep on friendly terms.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to giving Foch the primary French role in the continuation of the Somme battle and the opportunity to forge a closer relationship with Haig, the Joffre–Haig row had a further consequence. The significant successes south of the river gave rise to the idea of exploiting southwards and leaving the British to muddle along by themselves.<sup>31</sup> Foch has been blamed for being too slow to seize the opportunity to build on the gains in the south, principally by those commanders who felt deprived of the opportunity.<sup>32</sup> Foch did order Fayolle to establish a front on the Amiens–Péronne road so as to be ready to set off to the south, but several days elapsed before this was achieved. Fayolle had responded correctly that this was a whole new operation

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<sup>27</sup> According to Foch's chief of staff, Colonel Maxime Weygand: Weygand, *Mémoires: Idéal vécu* (Paris: Flammarion, 1953), p.352.

<sup>28</sup> Imperial War Museum, London, Wilson diary, 5 July 1916..

<sup>29</sup> Archives nationales, Paris, 414AP/13, Mme Foch diary, 31 July: 'Je suis le pot à colle et voila deux ans ça dure'.

<sup>30</sup> Dillon diary, 4 July 1916; Haig diary, 6 July 1916.

<sup>31</sup> Guy Pedroncini (ed.), *Journal de marche de Joffre (1916–1919)*, (Vincennes: Service historique de la Défense, 1990), p.38, (4 July 1916).

<sup>32</sup> General M. Abadie, *Flaucourt ou la percée des lignes allemandes en juillet 1916*, (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1933); General J. Mordacq, 'Pouvait-on percer à la Somme (1916)?', in *Les Légendes de la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1935), pp.78–95.

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that would require a new artillery preparation. Hence the legend grew up that a great opportunity had been lost. However, this is to ignore that Foch never lost sight of his primary purpose to support the British; that there was no strategic value to be gained from the area with its many waterways; and finally that the purpose of establishing a position along the Amiens-Péronne road was to cover the entry into line of the Tenth Army. It was GQG and Joffre who wanted to press on south of the Somme, partly in reaction to the failure to get Haig to maintain a wide front north of the river.

So the French could only mark time in their narrow northern sector as the British next to them gradually completed the capture of the German second line with the 'success by night' of 14 July. The frustration was compounded over the following weeks as Foch tried to arrange another 'concerted action similar to 1 July' with 'British and French troops each moving in their own sector but in close liaison' against a known first enemy position and then a second.<sup>33</sup> But throughout the rest of July, the whole of August and well into September there was a significant absence of 'concerted' action with the weather adding to the difficulties. A series of disjointed, frequently delayed, and ineffectual local offensives characterised both British and French operations during this period. Foch was reduced to constant urging and to acting as Joffre's messenger.

It was only in September that the effort to conduct a truly allied offensive, including joint Franco-British action, came to fruition. Joffre had already consulted with Foch over a letter that was sent to Haig on 11 August. In it Joffre urged simultaneous attacks on the 22<sup>nd</sup> so as to reach a suitable jumping-off line for another 'big push' as on 1 July, stretching from the Ancre to the Somme. He wanted a return to the original purpose, namely a joint wide-front offensive, as soon as possible. This renewal of the wide-front offensive was to begin on 1 September.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Joffre had been engaged in negotiating the agreement with Romania to enter the war on the Entente side. The initial success of Russia's Brusilov offensive persuaded the Romanians that the Entente offer of a piece of Austria-Hungary was more achievable than the offer from the Central Powers. A convention was drawn up in Paris on 23 July between France, Romania and Russia and, after some haggling over Russian material support and French-supplied munitions, the Romanian prime minister signed it on 17 August. A timetable was agreed for Allied action to cover the Romanian Army's entry into the war (Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary on 27 August, whereupon Germany, Bulgaria and Turkey declared war also). Because the convention had specified the ten-day interval between

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<sup>33</sup> AFGG 4/2, annex 2491, Note handed to Sir Douglas Haig, 19 July 1916.

<sup>34</sup> AFGG 4/2, annex 2746, Letter, Joffre to Haig, 11 August 1916.

Romania's signature and its declaration of war, the date for the renewed Anglo-French action on the Somme could not be altered.

In addition to support for Romania, Russia was demanding action in France. Brusilov's offensive that had begun in June had run out of steam, and the addition of Romania to the Entente was an added military burden. All supplies of materiel and men had to come from or transit through Russia. Because Brusilov's offensive had eased the pressure on Verdun before the start of the Somme fighting, the justice of Russian requests for action in the west was acknowledged. Faced with this double pressure in the east, Joffre attempted several times to get Haig not to delay the next 'big push', but Haig was waiting for his new weapon, the tanks, to arrive and refused to be hurried.

France's commitments to Romania and Russia, for which Haig refused to advance his own operation, meant that what had been intended as another joint, simultaneous and wide-front offensive became disjointed. The French contribution was bigger than it had been on 1 July, because Tenth Army had now joined the Sixth, having been brought back up to strength during August and gradually extending its front. By September it consisted of six army corps and was commanded by General Alfred Micheler.<sup>35</sup> Although munitions were limited, Tenth Army was well supplied with guns: 708 heavy guns (amounting to one gun for every 29 metres of front); 64 extra heavies (one gun per 328 metres); 636 (159 batteries) standard field artillery, the 75mm gun, being one battery for every 132 metres; plus mortars and other trench artillery.<sup>36</sup> Abominable weather made it impossible to launch attacks on the Somme at exactly the same time as Romania began its offensive. Tenth Army south of the Somme attacked a few days late on 4 and 5 September, making small but significant gains. Because of the huge additional expenditure of shells at Verdun, Tenth Army lacked sufficient munitions to exploit these gains. Foch was frustrated by criticisms made against Micheler for expending too many shells, when Micheler's Army could have had an even greater success if it had been better supplied. Next, Sixth Army attacked north of the river on 12 and 13 September and had a bigger success, capturing Bouchavesnes on the Péronne–Bapaume road. Two days later, 15 September, the British captured Flers and Courcellette, although the 32 tanks that managed to cross the starting-line had not contributed a great deal to that success. In the original plan Fayolle's Sixth Army was to have attacked in conjunction with Rawlinson's Fourth, but the necessity for the French attack to be made as early as possible prevented this. Sixth Army was too exhausted by the capture of Bouchavesnes to offer much support for the British right flank in the latter's

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<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that, by the end of the battle, France's contribution was similar in number to Britain's, each supplying two armies.

<sup>36</sup> AFGG 4/2, annex 3138, *Comparison des dotations en artillerie*, 30 August 1916.,

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operation two days later. So Joffre's renewed 'big push' for 1 September became three staggered operations: Tenth Army a week after Romania; Sixth Army a week later; British Fourth Army two days later still. Nonetheless, each army had made gains.

Although Joffre's return to direct contact with Haig after the conclusion of the Romanian negotiations left Foch with the sole task of bringing Tenth Army into the offensive, September's events brought Foch further benefit. First, despite his reaching retirement age for generals in October on his sixty-fifth birthday, this was not to become effective and he was to retain his rank and position. Second, he was able to profit from the tank experiment. He noted that during an artillery battle the new weapon could help the infantry to get beyond an enemy's first captured position; tanks could take a lightly held enemy position in a surprise attack, but, because the tank's enemy was artillery fire, it would be especially important to develop powerful counter-battery procedures.<sup>37</sup> Finally, he was able to ingratiate himself further with Haig.

When Lloyd George visited the front in September as Secretary of State for War, he went to Verdun (where he made an emotional speech in the citadel to the 'sentries on these impregnable walls', praising their 'victorious resistance'), thence to Foch's HQ where he compared the British (unfavourably) with the French – so few prisoners, so little ground, such heavy losses. Immediately, Foch recounted Lloyd George's comments to Henry Wilson: 'L.G. [sic] said he gave Haig all the guns and ammunition and men he could use, and nothing happened'. After telling Wilson what had transpired, Foch then went to see Haig in person (17 September) and told him confidentially the same thing. This was more than the military trade union closing ranks against the politicians. Foch took advantage of the opportunity to get on better terms with Haig.<sup>38</sup>

Much more important was the reaction on 'the other side of the hill' to September's events. Romania's defection to the Entente had proved the final element in the campaign to unseat the German C-in-C, General Falkenhayn. His failure to achieve anything other than enormous losses for the German Fifth Army at Verdun had already eroded support. The Kaiser gave way and replaced him with the pair who had done so well as commanders in the east: Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff. On 8 September in Cambrai they met Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria and the German Crown Prince, Wilhelm, together with their chiefs of staff. The forces of the former had faced the onslaught on the Somme and the latter had failed before Verdun. The Germans were obviously shaken severely

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<sup>37</sup> Foch carnets, 14 November 1916, fo. 208.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson diary, 12 September 1916; Haig diary, 17 September 1916.

and suffering from manpower shortages. Rupprecht reported that his two armies were stretched by the addition of an active front south of the Somme, while at the same time munitions supply was increasingly difficult because of bombing attacks on stations by British and French airmen. His infantry was out-numbered two to one, and they faced one-and-a-half times as much enemy artillery.<sup>39</sup> Although they did not visit the Somme front, Ludendorff made changes immediately on learning of events there. First, offensive action at Verdun was halted; second, the tactic of immediate counter-attacks to recapture lost ground was abandoned, because it was too costly in manpower; third, the defence was to be made more 'elastic'. This elasticity meant that front lines were no longer crowded with troops, but were replaced by outposts, usually machineguns in shell craters, with a deep defensive zone behind. Ludendorff sanctioned the production of a new instruction on defensive warfare based on these principles.<sup>40</sup> It was published in December but was already being applied by troops who had learned from experience. These changed tactics made it much more difficult for the British and French on the Somme to repeat the successes of the first half of September.

Nevertheless, success had been a boost to morale and the advent of Romania meant that the Entente Allies, including Italy, were making their biggest joint effort of the war. Even at Verdun, the planning had begun for the operation against Fort Douaumont that succeeded (on 24 October) in recapturing the fort, lost so spectacularly only a few days after the start of the German offensive. Foch began, therefore, to press for a continuation on the Somme of the operations that, at last, were beginning to pay dividends. Indeed, in the opinion of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, the British operations in the second half of September, despite their limitations, 'were the most successful carried out on the Somme'.<sup>41</sup>

As happened so frequently, the weather intervened to prevent an immediate exploitation of the gains of 15 and 16 September, and so a short delay ensued. Foch did not waste any time. His visit to Haig on the 17<sup>th</sup> about Lloyd George was not

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<sup>39</sup> Reichskriegsministerium, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, vol. 11, (Berlin: Mittler, 1938), pp.57, 59 [hereafter *Weltkrieg*].

<sup>40</sup> *Grundsätze für die Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskriege*, (Berlin, 1916). It was translated into English at GHQ as 'The Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare', being S.S. 561. See the analysis in Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1981), pp.11–21, and Matthias Strohn, *The German Army and the Defence of the Reich: Military Doctrine and the Conduct of the Defensive Battle 1918–1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.47–54.

<sup>41</sup> Prior & Wilson, *Somme*, p.261.

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only intended to improve mutual relations, but Foch wanted to ensure that Haig would continue the battle. There was little risk that the British C-in-C would want to call a halt and Haig ordered Rawlinson the same day to prepare a further attack, with Gough of Reserve Army to do likewise. Also the same day, Foch informed Joffre that Haig was in an 'excellent state of mind', and ready to undertake a joint Franco-British 'general offensive from the Ancre [conducted by Reserve Army in the north] to the Somme' in four days' time. Foch asked for an extra French infantry corps to be made available for this operation.<sup>42</sup> In the event, the renewed offensive began on 25 September and, for the first time in the Somme campaign, the French and British managed a common start time. William Philpott writes that it was 'their most powerful combined attack since 1 July'.<sup>43</sup>

With British Fourth Army's capture of Morval and Les Boeufs on the first day, 25 September, combined with Sixth Army's earlier capture of Bouchavesnes on the Bapaume–Péronne road, the small town of Combles was now encircled from the northwest by the British and southeast by the French. Combles sits in a small valley, surrounded by hills and connected by roads to all the villages around and to the Bapaume–Péronne road as well. Because of these relatively good communications, it had become a well-defended German strongpoint with the cellars of the houses converted into *Stollen* (shelters), and storage for a great stockpile of munitions. Foch saw the potential for a joint operation to pinch out the town, instead of a bloody frontal assault, and so he intervened in Fayolle's orders to his Sixth Army. Fayolle had ordered two separate actions: the left of his army was to advance northwards up the Bapaume–Péronne road towards Rancourt and St Pierre Vaast wood, and the right-hand units were to move eastwards towards the line of the Tortille river and the unfinished canal du Nord. At 10am on the 26<sup>th</sup>, however, Foch sent a personal instruction to Fayolle to limit the action on the right. The situation on the British front had so developed that it was imperative to push northwards along the Combles-Morval road in order to maintain contact with the British, and even further north along the Bapaume–Péronne road so as to reach Saily-Saillisel, thereby establishing an east–west line from Morval (in British hands), across the road to Bapaume, as far as Haplincourt, even further north.

In this way, on 26 September, a degree of Franco-British cooperation that had not been seen hitherto produced a truly joint action. In order to cut off and capture as many enemy as possible, the 73e *Régiment d'infanterie* (73 RI) entered Combles from the south and the British 56 Division from the north after completing the encirclement. Although, following the new doctrine of not defending every square inch, the Germans had already ordered the evacuation of Combles, the Allies took

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<sup>42</sup> AFGG 4/3, annex 468, ms letter # 3060, 17 September 1916.

<sup>43</sup> Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, 371.

over 3000 prisoners and huge stocks of shells, grenades, and medical supplies. It had been an extraordinarily speedy operation and it was not the only successful action on 26 September. The British took Gueudecourt, the next German strongpoint north of Morval/Les Boeufs; Reserve Army began its operation against Thiepval and completed its capture on the 27<sup>th</sup>; the French took Rancourt and Frégicourt, reaching the northwest corner of St Pierre Vaast wood.

After three whole months, the Battle of the Somme seemed to be making progress. Rupprecht reported to OHL (German headquarters) that attacks against his army group were likely, both on the north bank of the Ancre and against Péronne. He was suffering great shortages in officers and trained soldiers. Indeed, September proved to be the costliest month for the German First and Second armies on the Somme: 135,000 casualties. Among this number were higher than usual numbers of men taken prisoner, an indication of lowered morale amongst German troops.<sup>44</sup>

As the rain began to fall in October the Franco-British battle had reached the original German third line. However, in order to protect Bapaume, the Germans had begun to construct another defensive line through Le Transloy and two more in front of Bapaume. The village of Le Transloy lay on the Bapaume–Péronne road, only five or so kilometres from Bapaume itself, and the new German position ran north-westwards from the village along a slight ridge. The October operations, for the British against the ridge and for the French up the road from Rancourt to Sailly-Saillisel and then to Le Transloy, did not meet with the same success as in September. The lesson about the efficacy of wide-front and joint (simultaneous) operations seemed not to have penetrated, although the volume of rain that fell during October – it rained on 21 of the 31 days – was a great impediment to progress.

Le Transloy and the ridge line were attacked repeatedly during October. The action on the 18<sup>th</sup> illustrates the contrast with the earlier joint capture of Combes. Joint attacks made on 7 and 12 October, the British against the ridge and the French against Sailly-Saillisel, had achieved little. The next attack on the 18<sup>th</sup> was remarkable for the huge gap in the start times. The British division on the right, next to the French IX Corps, was 4 Division (XIV Corps); the French unit had arrived only on 6 October. The British and French commanders had agreed that the 4 Division's 11 Brigade was to 'keep in touch with' the French unit alongside, linking the French and British troops by 'a series of posts strongly held'. The advance of 11 Brigade was to

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<sup>44</sup> *Weltkrieg*, pp.77–8; Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.151, table showing ratio of soldiers taken prisoner and missing to those killed.

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'conform' to the French movements 'in order to protect its left flank'. The Brigade order continued with the seemingly contradictory statement that zero hour for 18 [French] and 4 Divisions 'will not coincide'.<sup>45</sup> It seems that the brigade commander was left to his own devices to reconcile the differing start times with the instructions to maintain contact and protect the French flank. Since it was pitch black and pouring with rain when the British set off at 3.40am,<sup>46</sup> it is not surprising that by the time that the French 18 Division too began to move at 11.45 (eight hours later) the British cover of its left flank was of little use. The battalion on the left of the French line 'was unable to leave its jumping-off trenches, being caught in machine-gun fire'.<sup>47</sup> South of the river Tenth Army was to attack as well on the same day, but was left free to choose the hour – yet another example of uncoordinated start times.<sup>48</sup>

The lack of progress prompted Joffre to write again to Haig. Although acknowledging what had been achieved, Joffre pointed out that once again the principle of wide-front operations was being breached. Public opinion would not understand how the British could 'slow down and stop', when they were so well supplied with artillery and munitions, and when the enemy was in disarray.<sup>49</sup> This caused outrage at GHQ, and Haig replied that he alone was the judge of what could be achieved and when. At a lunch Haig reinforced the message: the British Army could never be placed under Joffre's orders. If Foch had had a hand in writing the letter, as Dillon claims, the tactic had backfired.<sup>50</sup>

The final *joint* action of the campaign on 5 November was a disaster, with a minor British revolt by the XIV Corps commander causing the cancellation of British infantry support of yet another French attempt to take Le Transloy. Rawlinson had found 'things on the flank next to the French most "irritating"', and accepted the XIV Corps view that it would be nothing but a sacrifice of men to attack the ridge in support of the French. Foch managed to persuade Haig that the British attack should take place but, in the end, Haig changed his mind and ordered only counter-battery fire against the enemy guns 'as if we were about to attack'. Unsurprisingly Rawlinson had found Foch 'rather stuffy', when they all met on the 4<sup>th</sup> to arrange the matter.

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<sup>45</sup> TNA, WO 95/1445, Supplementary Order no. 72, 17 October 1916, in 4 Division War Diary, October 1916.

<sup>46</sup> Prior & Wilson, *Somme*, 271.

<sup>47</sup> SHD/T, 22N 580, IX CA, Compte-rendu des Evénements du 17 Octobre (18h.) au 18 Octobre (18h.), [d] 9C.A., 3eme Bureau, Sorties, 10 October–3 December 1916.

<sup>48</sup> AFGG 4/3, annex 1078, Fayolle, Instruction personnelle et secrète #1428, 17 October 1916.

<sup>49</sup> AFGG 4/3, annex 1094, Joffre to Haig, 18 October 1916; also in TNA, WO 158/15, together with Haig's reply of 19 October.

<sup>50</sup> Dillon diary, 19 October 1916.

The French attacked the next day, but with 'mediocre' results.<sup>51</sup> Despite this failure of *joint* action, *separate* successes were recorded in the final days of the campaign: in the north, by Fifth Army at Beaumont Hamel and, in the south, by French Tenth Army's capture of the two villages of Pressoir and Ablaincourt. Then mud put an end to the Battle of the Somme. 'Of all the muds that were, for the *poilu*, one of the most cruel sufferings of the war, that of the Somme occupies the first place in his memories. Heavy, sticky mud, which you don't risk disappearing into as in the Woëvre [east of the Meuse, south of Verdun], but which you cannot get out of.'<sup>52</sup>

### **A frustrating year**

In conclusion, then, it had proved a frustrating year for Foch; the tensions between allies and within the French Army had not been resolved. First, Joffre had overridden Foch's preferred sector for the 1916 campaign and imposed the Somme. Next, because of his 'scientific' calculations, Foch knew that he did not have the necessary guns and munitions to achieve a great success; he would have preferred to hold and wait for French industry to produce what was required. Then, Verdun reduced even the limited means at his disposal and imposed a secondary role for the French on the Somme. Foch could only try to be patient as the British edged their way forward to the original second German defensive position throughout July. The weather had proved a further frustration as a very wet summer in Picardy turned the battleground into a muddy quagmire, so that by October men were wading forward to attack with mud up to their thighs.

In his notebooks Foch expressed this frustration very clearly. Slowness was a constant theme. No successful action had been followed up swiftly so as to take advantage of a momentary superiority. This permitted the enemy to improve or construct more defences, thereby negating the progress made. Partly this was caused by the methods employed, heavy shelling making the movement of guns so difficult; partly also, the need to agree dates and times with an allied, not subordinate, army caused extra delays.

Foch's notebooks reveal his thinking about this problem and how to fight a modern industrial war in coalition. The planning for the Somme reveals a commander taking account of his limited means and drawing up a plan in accord with those limitations. Afterwards he amended his 'scientific method' to take account of the Somme lessons. He believed that rapid-firing and mobile heavy artillery was the answer, along

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<sup>51</sup> Rawlinson diary, 3 and 4 November 1916; Haig diary, 4 November 1916; Prior & Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, pp.257.

<sup>52</sup> Comment cited in André Ducasse, Jacques Meyer, Gabriel Perreux, *Vie et Mort des Français 1914-1918: Simple histoire de la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Hachette, 1962), pp.184-5.

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with tanks. The German tactic of placing machineguns in shell holes had to be overcome by 'armoured infantry'. 'Thinking of combating machine guns with artillery is to take a cudgel to hit a fly.'<sup>53</sup> In addition, at the Northern Army Group HQ Foch's artillery chief was preparing a 105-page document that would distil the artillery experience of the battle.<sup>54</sup>

Now his thinking was diverging from that of his C-in-C. On several occasions Foch complained that Joffre was too tired, lacked energy and authority.<sup>55</sup> Foch's political agitation over the provision of heavy artillery – as already noted, in his view the essential element for success – was doubtless a factor. In his view, the establishment of a programme for heavy artillery, submitted by GQG only in May 1916, ought to have been pushed much more vigorously by Joffre. In Joffre's defence it must be said that he was under considerable pressure in 1916: Pétain's constant calls for reinforcements; the Balkan front at Salonika; negotiations with Romania; unremitting criticism from French politicians demanding the right to inspect and meeting in secret sessions to air grievances about the state of Verdun's defences.<sup>56</sup>

A further frustration had been the necessity to deal with a prickly British C-in-C, who first resented having to deal with someone lower in the hierarchy than Joffre, and then came to resent having to deal with the French at all. The reports to GQG from the French military mission at GHQ emphasise Haig's increasing desire for independence from French influence. This frustrating experience was not without some benefit for Foch. He had worked with Haig in 1914 in front of Ypres, and during 1916 he made a real effort to handle Haig in an effective manner, revealing (he told his wife) depths of patience that he did not know he possessed.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Foch's experience of both Haig and the Somme battlefield proved an advantage in August 1918, when the second Allied attack on enemy forces was delivered in the Amiens–Montdidier offensive. This time Foch had the authority to insist that

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<sup>53</sup> Foch carnets, 16, 19, 29 November, 11 December 1916.

<sup>54</sup> SHD/T, 16N 1982, Commandant Pagézy, 'L'Artillerie dans la préparation de l'attaque du 1er juillet à la VIe Armée et pendant la Bataille de la Somme', 29 March 1917.

<sup>55</sup> For example, after meeting Georges Clemenceau in early May, Foch told his wife that Clemenceau was 'the only man in the government, the others neither governed nor directed; Joffre is the same', Archives nationales, 414AP/13, Mme Foch diary, 9 May 1916.

<sup>56</sup> Joffre was 'perpetually distracted by the politicians': Philpott, *Bloody Victory*, p.606. Rémy Porte's chapter on 1916 in his study of Joffre's command concentrates on Joffre's fall from grace ('Du Capitole à la Roche Tarpéienne'): *Joffre* (Paris: Perrin, 2014), ch. 13 (pp.316-18 for the Somme).

<sup>57</sup> Letter, Foch to Mme Foch, 9 March 1916.

Rawlinson act in concert with the French First Army, and to insist that Haig both launch the offensive on the date proposed and continue it by extending operations laterally.<sup>58</sup>

At the end of the battle, there were mixed feelings. Gradually the BEF took over Sixth Army's front down as far as the river Somme, amid a lot of ill-tempered disagreements over dates (yet again) and the state of the trenches. Foch believed that it would be dangerous to leave the only offensive area, that is to say the northern bank of the river, in British hands. He pointed out to Joffre 'the dangers of leaving to the large British army the area north of the Somme which constitutes a magnificent domain bounded by the Somme and with easy access to England ... deliver[ing] up provinces which constitute the only offensive front of the French armies without ensuring that we will be able to return and use them as the route of an offensive of liberation which we cannot entrust entirely to our Allies.'<sup>59</sup> The frequent complaint that the British were fighting to the last Frenchman re-surfaced. A French Army morale report of mid-November stated: 'The idea that the British owe it to us to extend their front in order to allow us to shorten ours is spreading.' On the other hand, a letter home from a soldier of 69 Infantry Regiment asserted, after seeing the British at work: 'I assure you that this mix of British tenacity and French *furie* was not unconnected to our success, which is only a beginning.'<sup>60</sup>

Finally, on 15 December, Foch was sacked from his command of the Northern Army Group. Even more frustratingly, Haig's reward was a field marshal's baton. The circumstances of Foch's removal are somewhat mysterious, but it is clear that there was a campaign of denigration mounted against him and Joffre had not defended him. Joffre too had lost the confidence of the government and the parliament and he was promoted to a shadowy powerless position, from which he resigned. Foch was furious, but he had the sense to bend before the storm and obey orders. He would not be long in the wilderness.

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<sup>58</sup> For more on the laments over Haig's increasing independence and on Foch's role in the August 1918 offensive, see respectively: Greenhalgh, *Victory Through Coalition*, p.71, pp.98–9; Elizabeth Greenhalgh, 'General Ferdinand Foch and unified Allied command in 1918', *Journal of Military History* Vol. 79, Iss. 4, (October 2015), pp.997-1023 & especially pp.1006-10.

<sup>59</sup> AFGG 5/1, annex 117, Foch carnets, 3 November 1916; Foch to Joffre, 15 November 1916.

<sup>60</sup> SHD/T, 16N 1485, GQG 2e Bureau, Service spécial: moral—rapports mensuels, Report (derived from postal control of correspondence 25 October–10 November 1916), 15 November 1916, p.7; and letter of a soldier of 69 RI, 5 October 1916.