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Spencer Jones, ed., *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Co., 2013. Pp. xvi, 375. ISBN 978-1-909384-45-3.

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In the judgment of its official historian, Sir James Edmonds, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) that went to war in 1914 was “incomparably the best trained, best organised and best equipped British Army which ever went forth to war” (19). This sweeping claim about the “Old Contemptibles” of the small regular British Army has largely held up, as historians have praised the superior performance of the BEF against vastly greater numbers during its “retreat into victory” in autumn 1914. Its commanders, however, were long lambasted as “donkeys” leading “lions,” amateurish antediluvian cavalrymen. In the last two decades, however, their reputation has been rehabilitated by a wave of revisionist British historians.¹ In *Stemming the Tide*, one of these, Spencer Jones (Univ. of Wolverhampton), has recruited both leading First World War historians and some lesser known scholars to contribute biographical essays about the BEF’s leaders, from its commander in chief down to its motorcycle dispatch riders. Fifteen essays are grouped in five sections in descending order of the subject’s rank.

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1. Stephen Badsey, “Sir John French and Command of the BEF”
2. J.M. Bourne, “Major-General Sir Archibald Murray”
3. Brian Curragh, “Henry Wilson’s War”
4. John Spencer, “‘The Big Brain in the Army’: Sir William Robertson as Quartermaster-General”

Corps Command

5. Gary Sheffield, “The Making of a Corps Commander: Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig”
6. Mark Connolly, “Lieutenant-General Sir James Grierson”
7. Spencer Jones and Steven J. Corvi, “‘A Commander of Rare and Unusual Coolness’: General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien”

Divisional Command

8. Simon Robbins, “The Bull and the Fox Terrier: Edmund Allenby and Command in the BEF in 1914”
9. Richard Olsen, “An Inspirational Warrior: Major-General Sir Thompson Capper”

Brigade Command

10. Michael LoCicero, “‘A Tower of Strength’: Brigadier-General Edward Bulfin”
11. Spencer Jones, “‘The Demon’: Brigadier-General Charles FitzClarence V.C.”
12. James Pugh, “David Henderson and Command of the Royal Flying Corps”

Command at the Sharp End

13. Peter Hodgkinson, “The Infantry Battalion Commanding Officers of the BEF”
14. John Mason Sneddon, “The Company Commander”
15. Michael Carragher, “‘Amateurs at a Professional Game’: The Despatch Rider Corps in 1914”

The authors take pains to avoid the discredited canard of the indolent, aristocratic British officer, ever wary of seeming “too keen” about his profession (178). Many of the generals profiled were men of high intel-

1. See, e.g., Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum, 2012), Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), and Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 2012).

lect, from passionate ornithologist Edmund Allenby to doctrine writers like Douglas Haig and staff college commandants like Henry Wilson. And, unlike their German counterparts, most British commanders were combat tested: just 12 percent of the British Army's 157 battalion commanders in 1914 had no prior war service (299).

The writers highlight in vivid detail the tremendous stresses of the long retreat from Mons to the Marne. Conducting that most difficult of military operations—a fighting withdrawal—exposed the BEF to the constant danger of annihilation at the hands of a far larger German army. A captain in the Loyal North Lancashires later wrote that

No one who did not go through that retreat can possibly imagine what it was like. Up and away at dawn every day, marching all day in a tropical sun and amidst clouds of dust, generally on the terrible rough pavé roads, or pushed down into the equally rough and very stony gutter by other columns of troops on the same road, or by staff cars rushing past and making the dust worse than ever. Never any proper meals, never a wash or a shave, never out of one's clothes, carrying a terrific weight of arms and equipment. (216)

Gen. Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien estimated that he averaged two hours of sleep a night for nearly a week, while a Cpl. John Lucy wrote that “Men slept while they marched, and they dreamed as they walked” (167–68). The strain often proved too much: many officers were invalided out for exhaustion or nervous breakdowns; at least one, Col. G.F. Boileau of the 3rd Division, broke down and shot himself (64).

A leitmotif of the book is the mixed consequences of the Edwardian British Army's lack of prescriptive tactical doctrine. “The British army officer's ‘Bible’ *Field Service Regulations Part I, (Operations)* emphasised the primacy of the ‘man on the spot’ using his initiative should circumstances require it” (96). In short, the commander's intent, or the “general idea” of it, became the basis for subordinate commanders' decision-making in combat (45). When combined with the self-assurance of officers who had waged the fluid small wars of the late Victorian era, Britain's loose army doctrine instilled a bias for action, a willingness to “muddle through.”² As the generals of 1914 struggled to maintain command and control of their vast forces or even to form a coherent picture of their situation, a culture of improvisation made the BEF well suited to fight the chaotic “soldiers' battles” of the Great War's opening months. But ill-defined tactical doctrine gave commanders who had not learned the correct lessons from the Boer and Russo-Japanese Wars too much latitude in deploying their forces. Thus, the 7th Division's use of forward slope trenches exposed them to savage enemy shelling at Ypres (201), while Lt. Gen. Sir James Grierson endorsed artillery firing directly over open sights (148). But the somewhat more tactically regimented Germans had themselves also failed to learn the right lessons from earlier battle experience.³

Britain's imperial commitments and lack of conscription left it with not only a small regular army but also officers with little training in higher-level staff work or the command of large formations. Writing after the Boer War, Grierson lamented:

What a lot we have to learn from this war in every way! I think our first lesson is that we must have big annual manoeuvres and have staffs properly trained. We don't seem to grasp anything higher than a division. And we must have “staff journeys” to teach the control of armies in the field. If we take the field with a force the size of this one against a European enemy and continue in our present happy-go-lucky style of staffing and staff work we shall come to the most awful grief. There is no system about it, and without a system a large army cannot be properly handled. (135)

The situation had scarcely improved by 1914. Above the division level, only Douglas Haig's I Corps went to war with the staff it had trained with in peace (41). Additionally, the War Office was emptied out as offic-

2. Seldom commented on is the similarity of this decentralized, initiative-driven command philosophy to the Germans' contemporary *Auftragstaktik*. The latter term has been fetishized in American military histories over the last quarter century, while the British Army's strikingly equivalent doctrine has aroused little interest.

3. See Steven Jackman, “Shoulder to Shoulder: Close Control and ‘Old Prussian Drill’ in German Offensive Infantry Tactics, 1871–1914,” *Journal of Military History* 68 (2004) 73–104, and Antulio J. Echevarria II, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2000).

ers rushed to fill any billet with the BEF, a situation one of the Royal Flying Corps' officers dubbed "illogical and unpardonable, and [having] bad results later on" (281). These officers (and their men) paid dearly for their unpreparedness in 1914. By the end of the First Battle of Ypres in November, 89,000 of the BEF's original 120,000 men were killed, wounded, or missing (18). Seventh Division, for example, lost 328 of its 372 officers, including every battalion commander (206). Fully a quarter of the Army's prewar officer class were casualties by 30 November 1914.

The book's final essay, by Michael Carragher on the Dispatch Rider Corps, is particularly compelling. Carragher notes that this tiny fellowship of just sixteen men per division was disproportionately composed of the elites of British society—young men who "stepped in off the street and bought new motorcycles almost as casually as proletarians might buy a packet of cigarettes" (336). He attributes their notable success to their class confidence and self-possession even in the turbulent and exhausting conditions of autumn 1914. Given the shortages of telephone cable, let alone wireless equipment, the motorcycle dispatch riders were crucial to the BEF's ability to communicate.

The essays gathered here are the work of mostly British military historians.⁴ This may account for the book's sole disappointing feature: an almost total exclusion of unsuccessful generals. Those who are discussed are provided with excuses or mitigations: thus, the pessimistic, unsteady Archibald Murray was "an able, honorable, dedicated man who was in the wrong job, with the wrong commander, in the wrong place, at the wrong time" (68–69), and the relentless intriguer Henry Wilson was "a part of the team that brought the war to a successful conclusion" (87). True, J.M. Bourne does acidly remark that "For much of 1914 it is difficult to detect Sir John French in the act of generalship" (61). But such barbs are rare in a largely unbroken litany of the heroism and wisdom of the featured commanders. A fuller assessment of failed leaders would have strengthened the collection. Sir Ivor Maxse, for one, was much celebrated by war's end, but in 1914 was, as Spencer Jones notes, "relieved upwards" from his command of the elite Guards Brigade and sent home to lead the newly-formed 18th Division (246). An unbiased examination of Maxse's performance in 1914 would have been a welcome contrast to the book's laudatory handling of more effective field commanders and staff officers.

This caveat aside, Spencer Jones and his collaborators provide their readers with well researched and highly readable portraits of BEF officers in the crucible of the opening months of the Great War. Any serious student of that conflict or of leadership and command in battle generally will enjoy and learn from the essays in *Stemming the Tide*.

4. Six hold master's degrees from the University of Birmingham's First World War Studies program.