



# BATTLE ON THE AISNE 1914

THE BEF AND THE BIRTH OF  
THE WESTERN FRONT

JERRY MURLAND

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the Western Front

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In memory of Captain Robert Frank Hawes of the 1st Battalion Leicestershire Regiment who fought and died on the Aisne in September 1914.

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A hundred of Thy sunsets spill Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice, Ere the sun swings his noonday sword Must say goodbye to all of this; By all delights which I shall miss, Help me to die, O Lord.

W N Hodgson

# Acknowledgements

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Once again I owe a heartfelt debt of gratitude to the men who fought on the Aisne in 1914 and recorded their experiences for future generations to read. Without their observations and accounts of the four weeks of the campaign, this book would have been all but impossible to write. In tracking down those accounts I must thank the Institution of the Royal Engineers for permission to quote from the *RE Journal*, the Imperial War Museum, the British Library, The Grenadier Guards archive, the Royal Air Force Museum, 9th/12th Lancers Museum at Derby, the Somerset Light Infantry archive, the Leicestershire Record Office and the National Archives. To Maurice Johnson I must extend my special thanks for allowing me full access to his extensive personal archive of Aisne material and for his advice and opinions on numerous questions which arose during the writing of the book.

No book of this nature could be written without first covering the ground on foot and following the footsteps of those who fought in the valley nearly 100 years ago and in which respect my thanks must go to Dave Rowland, Paul Webster and Bill Dobbs who spent three days with me in March 2011 walking the battlefield and sampling the local brew, and to my wife Joan who first discovered the steep hillsides and valleys of the Aisne with me in 2008. Thanks must also go to the myriad of Great War Forum members who have answered questions, corrected my errors and sent me material. In particular I must thank Doug Lewis, Keith Iles, Stuart Cole, Adam Llewellyn, Jonathan Saunders and John Etheridge who have gone out of their way to collect or transcribe material for me. Sebastian Laudan in Germany pinpointed exactly which German units were involved in the fighting on the British front. Rebecca Jones of Glory Designs in Coventry has again made sense out of my sketches producing some excellent maps and The History Press very kindly gave permission to quote from *Tickled to Death to Go*. The photograph of Jock Marden is courtesy of his grandchildren John, Stephen, Tom and Richard Espley through his daughter Hazel. My thanks also go to Jon Cooksey who has once again edited this volume with his usual diligence and enthusiasm. In all instances every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders where any substantial extract is quoted. The author craves the indulgence of literary executors or copyright holders where these efforts have so far failed.

Jerry Murlan  
Coventry 2011

# Introduction

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*The question has often been posed whether the trench stalemate would have come to pass if France had possessed a Napoleon.*

Basil Liddell Hart – *A History of the First World War*

The First Battle of the Aisne officially ended on 15 September 1914. It was an encounter which to all intents and purposes, began three days earlier when Brigadier General Hunter-Weston's 11 Brigade crossed the river under the cover of darkness at Vénizel and very nearly caught the German defence above Bucy-le-Long off-guard. After 15 September the nature of the fighting changed as the two sides paused for breath and began to consolidate their respective positions. As the space became the most sought after weapon along the British lines, the notion of trench warfare reared its head for the first time and with it, the war of movement, which had characterized the first weeks of the Great War, slowly ground to a halt. For the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) this 'stalemate' continued for another three weeks until units of the French Army began to relieve them in early October 1914 to facilitate the move to Flanders where the last great battle of 1914 was to be decided.

This book does not aspire to be a definitive account of the First Battle of the Aisne – Edmond's *Official History* already serves that function well enough. When I began researching the primary source material for this book, however, I determined to take a fresh look at a battle which has, over the years, been almost forgotten; overshadowed as it was then and is now by the Retreat from Mons and the First Battle of Ypres. My primary intention in re-examining the battle is to give voice to those who took part in the fighting, lived through it and chronicled their experiences in diaries and letters at the time. Consequently the text leans heavily on their written accounts. Needless to say, it is through the accounts that the personal stories of battle allow us to temporarily share the hardship and terror of warfare and the brutality of the battlefield. Perhaps more importantly they provide us with a glimpse of the irrepressible humanity of man which was occasionally allowed to surface – no better illustrated than in Captain Guy Ward's journal of 18 September 1914 when he records going out under fire with several men of the South Wales Borderers to help bury thirteen Cameron Highlanders because they couldn't bear to see them lying out in the open so pitifully. Consider too, the action of 23-year-old Lieutenant George Hutton of 3/Signal Company who drowned swimming across a swollen River Aisne attempting to take a telephone cable to the north bank. Hutton refused to allow an enlisted man to accompany him so on the grounds that the man was married and Hutton was not. Greater love hath no man.

In those early weeks of the war the BEF was fighting very closely alongside its French allies but given the size of the British force, it was a very minor player on the wider strategic canvas then unfurling across France and Belgium. That said, this account of the fighting in the Aisne valley

focuses solely on the men of the BEF and the German units they were in contact with and only describes the actions of French army units where it is necessary to provide an appreciation of the wider strategic picture. To place the role of the BEF in perspective, by the time the British arrived on the Aisne in September 1914 the battle line stretched some 150 miles from Noyon in the west to Verdun in the east and it was only along a tiny 15-mile sector in the centre which the British were engaged.

The geography of the valley of the Aisne was very much on the side of the defending German Army and held few, if any, advantages for the British whose efforts were directed at pushing the enemy off the northern rim – the Chemin des Dames ridge – a hog's back feature which acquired its name in the eighteenth century when it was in frequent use by the two daughters of Louis XV when visiting Françoise de Châlus, a former mistress of the king at the Château Boves, near Vauclair. The Chemin des Dames commanded – and in places enfiladed – the whole valley, the river itself was deep and unfordable and for most of September 1914 was swollen to full capacity by almost continuous rain. It flowed through numerous bends along a wide valley which was enclosed by a succession of steep spurs, between which ran deep ravines bordered by woods and dense copses. It was the ideal place for an army to stand firm, an opinion echoed by the Northamptonshire regimental historian: 'The battalion was confronted by hostile forces determined to stand their ground and to maintain the hold upon the strong natural position they had occupied'.

There were three battles on the Aisne during the Great War and the focus on each occasion was the Chemin des Dames ridge. The 1914 Battle of the Aisne came about as a direct result of the German retirement from the Battle of the Marne as the huge conscript armies of France and Germany jostled for position over great swathes of Belgium and France. In 1914 the German Army held onto its positions along the Chemin des Dames and although the French gained ground during the Nivelle offensive of April 1917 and established themselves on the Chemin des Dames, they lost heavily in both casualties and morale. (In the first week's fighting alone the French suffered 96,000 casualties of which over 15,000 were killed). The French gains were short-lived as their efforts were reversed in the German Blücher-Yorck spring offensive of 1918 when many of the British Regiments which struggled on the Chemin des Dames in 1914 were represented again by legions of fresh-faced youngsters in the ranks of IX Corps.

When war was declared on 4 August 1914, overall command of the BEF was placed in the hands of Field Marshal Sir John French; his chief of staff was Lieutenant General Sir Archibald Murray with Major General Henry Wilson as his deputy. The principle staff officer with responsibility for operations (GSO1) was Brigadier General George Harper, and GSO1 (Intelligence) was Lieutenant Colonel George Macdonogh. This core group of senior staff officers formed the nucleus of the British General Headquarters (GHQ) whose task it was to exercise overall command and control of the BEF. Sir John French was 61-years-old in September 1914 and had made his reputation commanding the British Cavalry Division in the South African War. Nevertheless, this brave and resourceful soldier was not in tune with the management of strategic command. He was one of the few senior officers



the BEF who had not attended the Staff College at Camberley and in the opinion of many – including Sir Douglas Haig – lacked the intellectual focus necessary to exercise effective command and control over a force as large and complex as the BEF.

Exacerbated by fears in England of a German invasion of the home country and the recent trouble in Ireland over Home Rule, the British Government was initially cautious and had committed only four of its six available infantry divisions and one cavalry division. Consequently the fighting strength of the BEF was made up of I Corps (1st and 2nd Divisions) commanded by Lieutenant General Sir Douglas Haig, II Corps (3rd and 5th Divisions) commanded by Lieutenant General Sir James Grierson and the Cavalry Division under the command of Major General Edmund Allenby. In addition there were five infantry battalions designated for the protection and maintenance of the lines of communication clustered together in 19 Brigade. Sadly Grierson died from a heart attack on the way to Le Cateau on 17 August and was replaced by General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien two days later. The 4th Division would arrive just in time to take part in the Battle at Le Cateau on 26 August and the 6th Division would make its first appearance on the Aisne in mid-September.

Almost immediately upon the declaration of war nearly 70,000 reservists began to pour into regimental depots across the country as the smooth machinery of mobilization organized Britain's army for its first war on the continental mainland of Europe in almost 100 years. Screened by the battleships of the Royal Navy, embarkation began on 11 August and was completed nine days later when the BEF assembled near Maubeuge. By 22 August – the eve of the Battle of Mons – the BEF was in position on the left of the French Fifth Army. Smith-Dorrien's II Corps lined the canal between Mons and Condé facing north while Haig's I Corps was posted along the Beaumont–Mons road facing northeast. To the west Allenby's cavalry and units of 19 Brigade guarded the canal crossings as far as Condé. The battle along the canal at Mons on 23 August was the BEF's first clash with the German First Army commanded by General Alexander von Kluck. The outcome was inevitable, outnumbered and out-manoeuvred and with General Charles Lanrezac's French Fifth Army already retiring on his right flank, Sir John French had little recourse but to retire. It was a retirement which eventually saw the BEF reach a position south of the River Marne and drew attention to Sir John's shortcomings as commander-in-chief.

In fairness to Sir John and his commanders, they were faced with a huge task in August 1914, a task which placed a massive burden of responsibility on men who had very little experience in manoeuvring such large masses of troops over extended periods of time. Even so, at Le Cateau Horace Smith-Dorrien defied an order from GHQ to continue the retreat of II Corps and stood his ground with three divisions along the line of the Le Cateau-Cambrai road. History agrees that this decision was not only courageous, but the correct one in the circumstances; nevertheless it did add fuel to the long-held animosity between Sir John and Horace Smith-Dorrien.<sup>1</sup>

The retreat from Mons was an episode from which the BEF emerged by the skin of its teeth. It was not handled well by GHQ which was conspicuous by its absence and achieved notoriety for the ambiguity of its operational orders. To the eternal credit of the British soldier the end of the retreat

and the subsequent advance to the Marne was seen as an opportunity to hit back at the enemy. Exhausted and footsore they turned to pursue what they understood to be a thoroughly demoralized German Army. Brigadier General Count Edward Gleichen noticed an enormous difference in the spirits of his men as the BEF moved north, a mood which was unfortunately not replicated at GHQ where senior officers were still hesitant to engage the enemy. Even after it became obvious that the German Army was in full retreat British staff officers handled the logistics of the advance badly due to inexperience. The daily operational orders which issued forth from GHQ gave little direction to the fighting units and even within divisions staff officers failed to deliver effective movement orders or prevent instances of friendly fire as divisional boundaries became blurred in the move north. The end result was inevitable; the German Army escaped and proceeded to withdraw in an orderly fashion to the Aisne while the BEF struggled to pursue them, leaving an astonished Lieutenant Alexander Johnston to express surprise that they had not 'tried anything in the nature of a night advance or night attack, particularly when the Germans are in retreat'.

The BEF advanced to the southern heights above the Aisne Valley expecting the German Army to be in headlong retreat. The Germans, however, having been reinforced with troops and artillery from the fall of Maubeuge, found themselves in a stronger position than previously thought and were therefore determined to hold the line of the Chemin des Dames if at all possible to give them time to reorganize. They were still a formidable fighting force and never far from the thinking of the strategists. The German General Headquarters (OHL) was the possibility of outflanking the Allied armies by moving west – a strategy which was mirrored by the French and British – and as the Aisne fighting lurched into stalemate, so the sidestep movements towards the channel coast to the north gathered pace.

Expecting to advance in pursuit of a beaten enemy, GHQ had neglected to order any advanced technical reconnaissance by Royal Engineers officers to make assessments as to the equipment required to effect temporary crossings of the Aisne. The heavy bridging trains were still at least a day's march behind the main body of the BEF and there appeared to be a naivety overshadowing the ability of GHQ to consider that the situation ahead of them was fluid and could change at any moment. Yet there was at least one reconnaissance north of the river conducted before the main body of the BEF arrived. Lieutenant Archibald Harrison and trooper Ben Clouting of 4/Dragoon Guards crossed the river on 11 September and reconnoitred as far as the village of Moulins where they apparently remained until the British arrived in the village a few days later. Rather frustratingly Clouting does not disclose if any useful intelligence was gathered and to whom it was delivered and we can only speculate as to why GHQ failed to appreciate that the situation north of the river on the nights of 11 and 12 September was entirely different to that of 13 September. Had Operational Order No. 2 issued on 11 September, been notice of a coordinated plan of attack – instead of one of pursuit – and had Sir John demanded a vigorous assault, there may have been a different outcome to the battle. In fact none of the operational orders issued at this time ever disclosed the intentions of Sir John French.

But although we should be wary of censure, the wording of GHQ orders cannot be ignored. The executive order 'pursuit' had an immediate effect upon the military formation adopted by units

pursuit implied marching in column while 'attack' demanded a different and broader formation. The on 13 and 14 September units began the day's pursuit in column of route covered by advance guard which goes some way to providing an explanation as to why the attack north of the river was conducted in such a piecemeal manner – one example being the advance of 6 Brigade on 14 September up the Braye valley. Here the 1st Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment (1/Royal Berks) acting as vanguard, marched up the valley with the 1st Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps (1/KRRC) on each flank. Lieutenant Alan Hanbury-Sparrow's account describes the battalion's reaction to the unexpected response from the enemy as they passed La Metz Farm, which together with that of Lieutenant William Synge, commanding a platoon of the King's Liverpool Regiment, illustrates the confusion which overtook the brigade as it struggled to respond to an entrenched enemy.

As the BEF crossed the Aisne and began its advance it committed all of its divisions to the fight leaving no reserves available except 19 Brigade, which, after 14 September, came under the temporary command of Brigadier General Haldane on the left flank. Thus at the crucial moment on the I Corps front when reserves were required, none were forthcoming. In this respect more use could have been made of the cavalry brigades; they appear not to have been given a definite role in the battle and apart from sporadic interventions such as supporting the left of Haig's 2nd Division on 14 September and coming to the aid of the West Yorkshires on 20 September, they could have been used far more effectively. In this respect Second Lieutenant Jock Marden's diary provides us with a very different picture of the Aisne campaign than Lieutenant Jack Needham's account. Needham was an officer with the Northamptonshire Regiment and fought on the Chemin des Dames with his battalion where he was involved in one of the 'white flag' incidents which so infuriated British troops. Marden, an officer with the 9/Lancers, spent much of his time in reserve and, apart from short periods of action in the front line, was able to find time on 15 September to sleep all day at Soupir Château and bathe in its fountain.

As British units became engaged all along the BEF front on 13 and 14 September, so the casualties mounted. German shell fire proved to be remarkably accurate and powerful and it was some time before the British gunners could begin to mount an effective reply. The Battle of the Aisne marked the beginning of the ascendancy of artillery as the major weapon of warfare but initially on the British side it was simply not up to the job. Handicapped by the geography of the Aisne valley and confined to some extent by an outdated tactical manual, British artillery was unable to provide the infantry with the firepower it required to take the Chemin des Dames or indeed fully support infantry attacks elsewhere along the valley. Major John Mowbray, the brigade major of the 2nd Division Artillery, shares his frustration in the pages of his diary at not being able to support the infantry effectively; a frustration undoubtedly felt by Cecil Brereton, a subaltern with 68/Battery when he and his gunners suffered badly at the hands of their German counterparts above Bucy-le-Long.

But with the advent of aerial observation carried out by Royal Flying Corps (RFC) pilots the balance began to swing in favour of the British. The work of Lieutenants Lewis and James in developing the use of wireless transmissions from the air to artillery batteries on the ground was the

start of an 'air to ground' partnership which continued to develop through the war. This growing partnership is evident in the diaries of Lieutenants William Read and Kenlis Atkinson, from whom we get a first-hand account of flying above the valley under fire whilst directing artillery fire onto enemy batteries.

The lack of support from the guns of the artillery had profound effects on the infantry advance particularly on the units which had been engaged at Mons and Le Cateau. At Vailly the 3rd Division attack was doomed to failure as the much depleted battalions of Hubert Hamilton's division attempted to storm the heights of the Jouy spur. 8 Brigade, which had fought so doggedly at Mons on 23 August in the Nimy salient, had not a single machine gun between them on 14 September and had to rely solely on rifle fire. On the Chivres spur the 5th Division was still in possession of some of the machine guns but had left a significant proportion of their artillery behind at Le Cateau. Their attack which went ahead in a rather piecemeal fashion and without supporting fire from the gunners, had the commanding officer of the East Surreys, Lieutenant Colonel John Longley, tearing his hair out in frustration at being ordered to withdraw.

However, there were some commanders who seized the initiative and took opportunities presented to them to forge ahead once they had crossed the river. Sadly these audacious moves were unsupported and thus made little difference to the outcome of the battle. The crossing of the bridge at Vénizel by 11 Brigade and their march across the water meadows to Bucy-le-Long was a masterful stroke which might have taken the brigade onto the Chemin des Dames early on 13 September. But 11 Brigade was far in advance of the remainder of the BEF and at dawn on the 13th was the only full brigade across the river. Once on the heights they were considerably isolated and in the circumstances one has to accept Brigadier General Hunter-Weston's decision that halting the brigade at this point was the best course of action. Isolation and poor communication was probably at the core of the judgement by Brigadier General Richard Haking to withdraw his units of 5 Brigade after they had reached the Chemin des Dames ridge late in the evening of 14 September without encountering any serious opposition. Haking argued that he was in great danger of being cut off by the enemy – and he may well have been correct – but was it really necessary to retire all the way back to Verneuil and would a more daring commander have taken more of a risk?

There was a further bold action on the right flank taken by the Connaught Rangers. By the early hours of 14 September the battalion, under the command of Major William Sarsfield, was only halfway to the brigade objective, in occupation of La Cour de Soupir Farm and in position on the high point of Croix sans Tete, albeit several hours before the Grenadier Guards arrived; yet this advance was not exploited. Ultimately all of these isolated movements only served to draw attention to the lack of effective command and control which dogged the British on the Aisne in those crucial early hours of the battle.

The unsung heroes of the Aisne Campaign were undoubtedly the men of the Royal Engineers and the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). The crossing of the river was in itself a feat of arms which rarely afforded due credit. The bridges the sappers constructed – often under infantry rifle fire and

shell fire from German batteries – were indeed ‘bridges over troubled waters’. The diary entries of Second Lieutenant Kenneth Godsell and Lieutenant Bernard Young give us some idea of the effort required to transport troops across the Aisne on temporary pontoon bridges and improvised rafts. Not only did the engineers repair the two bridges which had been partially destroyed at Vénizel and Vailly, but they enabled I Corps to cross over the hastily repaired aqueduct at Bourg. Had the Bourg aqueduct been destroyed completely it is unlikely I Corps would have been in a position to attack the Chemin des Dames on 14 September. It is a fitting tribute to the bravery and tenacity of the sappers that one of their number was awarded the Victoria Cross for his work on the river.

A Victoria Cross was also awarded to Captain Harry Ranken, the medical officer attached to 1/KRRC who sacrificed his own life while attending to the wounded. On the Aisne, as there had been at Mons and Le Cateau, battalion medical officers in the finest traditions of the profession were conspicuous by their devotion to the wounded and dying and the number of medical officers who were tragically killed attending the wounded is a tribute to their gallantry and sacrifice. Whereas it was the battalion medical officer who provided the wounded with initial treatment in the front line, it was the RAMC staff in the forward dressing stations which dealt with the bulk of the wounded and dying after they had been evacuated. We are fortunate that Lieutenant Henry Robinson, a doctor working with 8/Field Ambulance, kept a detailed account of the time he spent at Vailly. Robinson’s diary is harrowing in its detail and description and his rationalization of the moral dilemma confronting the medical staff over hastening the death of a fatally injured soldier is thought provoking to say the least. The Aisne also saw the long overdue introduction of motor ambulances which eased the suffering of the wounded and speeded up the evacuation to field hospitals south of the river, an evacuation which had to be carried out under the cover of darkness and usually under the constant threat of German shell fire which searched the approach roads.

Despite the lack of progress and the hoped for continuation of the advance, the BEF and its Allies did frustrate any intentions the Germans may have had in launching a new offensive from the Aisne in 1914. Despite the German superiority in fire power the men of the BEF were steadfast in defence and an even match for the German infantryman, yet there is no doubt that the Battle of the Aisne in 1914 was an opportunity missed for both the British and the French. As early as dawn on 13 September General Louis Conneau’s French cavalry corps was opposite a 10-mile gap in the German line and after crossing the river they rode some 12 miles north to Sissonne. Incredibly the French cavalry were at this point 15 miles north of the German Second Army and some 40 miles behind the line of the German Third Army! One hesitates to imagine what the outcome of a move to the east across enemy lines of communication may have been. As it was the French were ordered to retire to the river to avoid being cut off!

For the British the prospects of breaking through and taking the Chemin des Dames was never greater than on the morning of 13 September. Thanks to the Royal Engineers and the initiative of some brigade and battalion commanders, the passage of the Aisne had been achieved on both flanks and information supplied to Douglas Haig still indicated that the gap between von Kluck and von

Bülow was susceptible. The opportunity was lost owing to the failure of GHQ to fully appreciate the situation ahead of them as far back as 10 September, a situation which by the evening of 13 September had changed completely. German reinforcements were known to have arrived and were entrenching on the Chemin des Dames, yet there was no further directive from GHQ other than to continue the pursuit. As a result divisions blundered into the battle piecemeal and without adequate artillery support and out of their failure to make progress grew the trench lines of what became known as the Western Front.

The fighting on the Aisne was going to be very different from anything experienced by the BEF up to that point. All five of its infantry divisions would be engaged along a wide front against a formidable opponent which held the advantages of position and superior artillery. This was not going to be an encounter such as those which had unfolded at Mons or Le Cateau but a sustained campaign that would see lengthy casualty lists and great swathes slashed through the ranks of some of Britain's finest regiments. Moreover, as a situation of 'stalemate' began to set in, the landscape of the Aisne would witness the digging of trench lines which would all too soon run from the North Sea coast in Belgium all the way to the German/Swiss border. Britain was not prepared for a war in Europe in 1914 and the price for failing to do so became more and more evident on the Aisne battlefields. It is this failure which has been captured poignantly in the diary accounts and letters of the men who fought on the slopes of the Chemin des Dames where the bloody concept of the Western Front was born in the autumn of 1914.

# The Marne

*I'm afraid that our nation in its headlong careering towards victory will scarcely be able to bear this misfortune.*

Helmuth von Moltke – writing on the German retirement from the Marne.

For Major Tom Bridges and the officers and men of the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards the first encounter with their German adversaries, in what was to become known as the First Battle of the Marne, came on 6 September at the small hilltop village of Pécy, northwest of Provins. Having been in retreat since 23 August after the BEF's clash with the German First Army at Mons, the regiment was now south of the Marne River and under orders to move north as advance guard for the 2nd Cavalry Brigade. After an opening skirmish with units of Alexander von Linsingen's II Corps during which 24-year-old Sergeant Evelyn Whiteman and Lance Corporal William Ticehurst, both of B Squadron, were killed by shell fire, Bridges and his men were astonished to see 'the enemy columns wheel round in the road and retire to the north.'<sup>2</sup> Bridges admits that their own response to the unexpected enemy retirement took the form of a rather 'impotent sniping', and by nightfall they had lost the opportunity to strike back at an enemy who had been pursuing them for two weeks.<sup>3</sup> As the regiment moved north towards Coulommiers they were completely unaware that Allied forces were now embroiled in the Battle of the Marne and that the wider strategic plan would conclude with the German retreat to the heights of the Chemin des Dames which ran along the northern edge of the Aisne River valley.

The First Battle of the Marne was fought between 5 and 11 September 1914. It was, in the opinion of Holger Herwig, 'the most significant land battle of the twentieth century,' and the most decisive since Waterloo.<sup>4</sup> Why? Because the Marne was the final stroke which brought the German operational strategy – masterminded in 1905 by the Chief of the German General Staff, Count Alfred von Schlieffen – to an end and changed the course of European history. Schlieffen's master plan was for a war on two fronts but not at the same time: a rapid forty day advance through Belgium and Northern France to encircle the French armies concluding in a victorious entry into Paris before unwieldy Russian forces in the east were able to mobilize effectively against them. Although more recently some historians have argued that there was in fact no 'Schlieffen Plan', the balance of evidence does not support this rather blinkered view of German military aspirations in the years preceding 1914. That there was a German war plan for 1914 is not in dispute, the original Schlieffen blueprint for war was inherited by Helmuth von Moltke when he was appointed Chief of the General

Staff in 1906 and it was a version of this plan which the German OHL used in its preparations for war in Europe. Unquestionably the Schlieffen Plan had been modified by von Moltke – who admittedly had reservations about some of its aspects – but the fundamental goals were similar: the French armies would be ruthlessly and rapidly crushed in a battle of encirclement or *Kesselschlacht*.

German military planners were confident that the strike against France would be concluded before Russian forces could mobilize effectively against them and with France defeated, German divisions could be transferred quickly to the Eastern Front by rail. The essence of the plan was speed and therein lay its Achilles heel, there was no real alternative plan to fall back upon and success depended almost entirely on maintaining the timetable of advance. The great fear was the prospect of fighting a war on two fronts resulting in the division of resources.

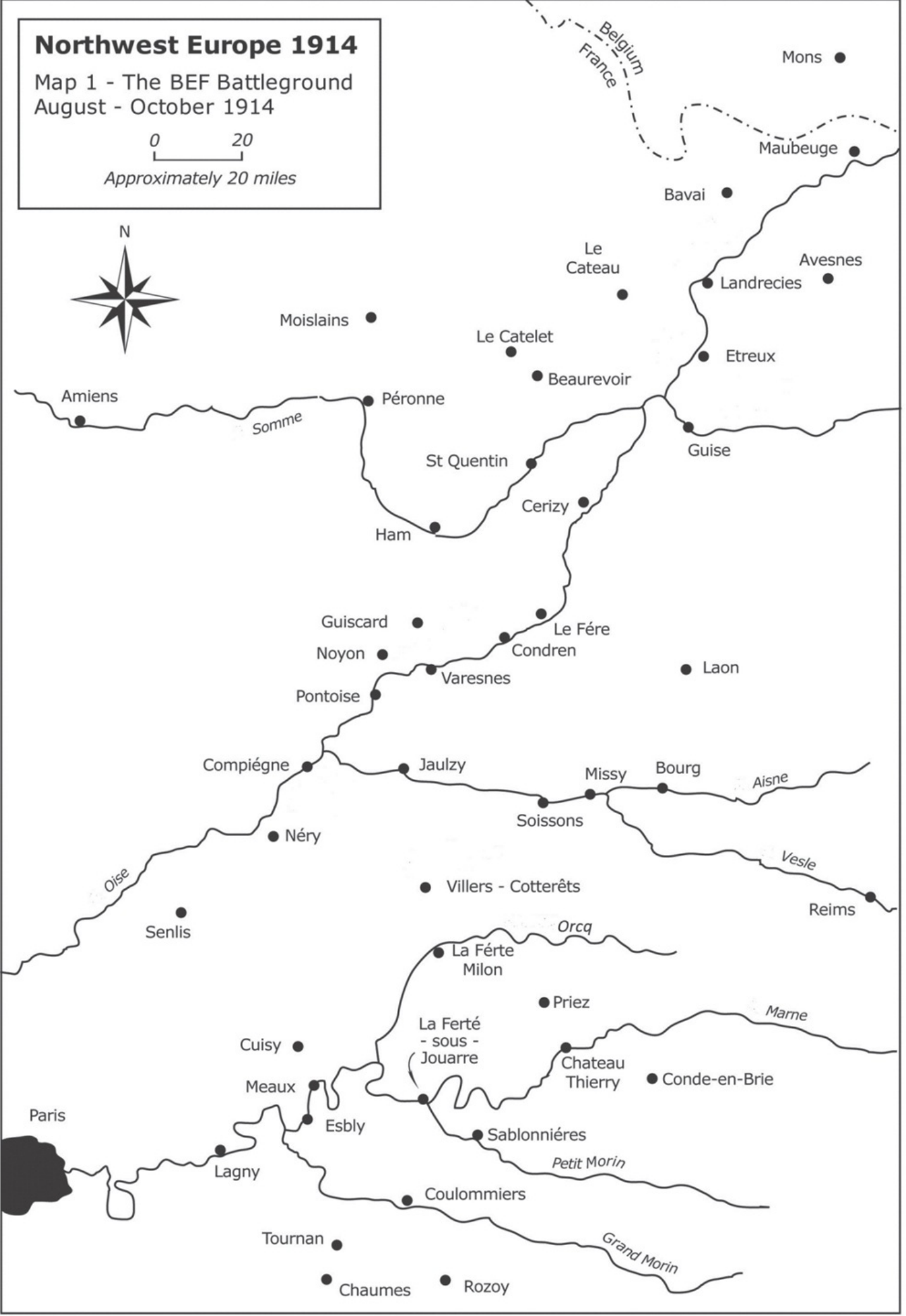
However, despite the initial success in the opening weeks of the war, by the end of August it was becoming increasingly clear that the plan was slipping behind schedule. Contrary to expectation Belgian forces had vigorously resisted the invasion of their country and the First Army, under the command of General Alexander von Kluck, had unexpectedly encountered the BEF at Mons on 23 August and again three days later at Le Cateau. The German Second Army, under the command of General Klaus von Bülow, had been held up by the French Fifth Army on the Sambre during the Battle of Charleroi, and in the east the Russian Army had mobilized in just ten days which had the immediate effect of drawing off two whole army corps which were transferred to the Eastern Front. Moreover the German Second Army had been stopped in its tracks again for some thirty-six hours by the French Fifth Army at Guise on 29 August when General Charles Lanrezac had launched his counter attack.



# Northwest Europe 1914

Map 1 - The BEF Battleground  
August - October 1914

0 20  
Approximately 20 miles





The first indications of a crack in the carapace of German fortune can be detected after the Guise encounter. Alarmed by his situation at Guise, the ever cautious von Bülow sent out urgent – and as it turned out unnecessary – appeals to the First and Third Armies for support. It was von Bülow's appeal for help, which many felt ultimately changed the course of history. The result was a spur-of-the-moment decision by Von Kluck to abandon his sweep west of Paris and change course to confront the French Fifth Army's flank. However, recent evidence cited by Herwig suggests that von Kluck's change of direction had been anticipated by OHL and was not only carried out with the full backing of German high command, but had been built into the modified Schlieffen plan as an alternative strategy.<sup>5</sup> Von Moltke's General Directive of 2 September to the First and Second Armies would appear to support this view – it not only stressed the necessity of driving 'the French away from the capital in a south easterly direction,' but ordered the First Army to follow the Second Army in echelon as it bypassed the French capital to the east.

While the change of direction may well have been built into the overall plan, von Kluck's report to Moltke's directive was not. In no uncertain terms von Kluck and his chief of staff, the 58-year-old Herman von Kuhl, made it clear that they were unable to follow behind the Second Army if they were to attack the flank of Lanrezac's Fifth Army. To put it simply, von Kluck did not do 'in echelon' with anyone. Indeed, by the morning of 30 August von Kluck and his chief of staff had already come to the decision that the march round Paris was impractical and given the severe wear and tear on his resources and with the French Fifth Army looking vulnerable after its retreat from Guise, he saw the opportunity to strike Charles Lanrezac's army in its exposed flank. Thus, without consultation or approval from OHL, he turned towards the River Oise, a course of action – according to Herwig – which was finally communicated to Moltke on 4 September.<sup>6</sup> Rather than von Bülow's appeal for assistance, it was perhaps von Kluck's refusal to comply with OHL directives which precipitated the Battle of the Marne and changed the course of history.

Of the seven German armies in the field it was von Kluck's First Army which had the task of maintaining the risky right flanking sweep to the west of Paris before turning east to complete the encirclement of the French Army. At 68-years-old he was the same age as von Bülow but there the similarity ended. The First Army commander was essentially more combative in style and, as we have seen, maverick in temperament. At the beginning of the campaign the First Army fielded over 200,000 men and some 750 guns. By the end of August this had been reduced by 20,000 as the toll of those killed or missing in action, together with nearly 10,000 who had simply fallen out with exhaustion, heat stroke and hunger, had reduced many units to below half strength. They had marched over 300 miles in the heat of August, had two serious encounters with the BEF, been in constant contact with British and French rearguard forces and faced the prospect of more of the same. Von Kluck's decision to ignore the OHL directive of 2 September was almost certainly motivated by his personal desire to maintain his role as the right hook which delivered the final blow to the French as they were driven south. This inflexible view – shared it must be said by von Kuhl – was partly responsible for his failure to fully realize the threat of French General Michel-Joseph Maunoury's Sixth Army on his

right. But von Kluck was no fool; he had taken measures to protect his right flank by detaching the fifteen battalions and supporting artillery of Hans von Gronau's IV Reserve Corps. The notion that his right flank was wide open is incorrect.

The discovery of a map that had been retrieved from a dead German Guard Cavalry officer on 3 September providentially supplied corroboration of French air reconnaissance reports that German forces were moving east and attempting to outflank the Fifth Army. The captured map showed clearly the German First Army order of battle and the lines of advance. It was all the evidence which was needed to confirm von Kluck's change of direction. Up until this point the idea of the Battle of the Marne had not been conceptualized on the map table of the French commander-in-chief but now General Joseph Joffre realized that if the two armies which formed the German right flank could be enticed into the 'net' which now hung between the 'horns' of Paris and Verdun he could give battle and perhaps achieve the breakthrough all of France had been waiting for. If the Ninth and Fourth French Armies could hold the centre of this 200 mile wide net, the armies on each flank could catch the Germans in a pincer movement. Furthermore, if the French could disrupt the German lines of communication they stood a chance of destroying the invader once and for all.

It was the first time a plan looked coherent enough to suggest success but in order for all the pieces of the allied jigsaw to fit, Joffre required the cooperation of the BEF whose commander-in-chief, Sir John French was not at his best in these opening weeks of the Great War. He and his staff had been badly shaken by the retreat of the BEF from Mons and it was Sir John's considered opinion that the small British force of five divisions required urgent re-fitting and recuperation before it could re-engage the enemy. Not only did this expose Sir John's overall misunderstanding of the magnitude of the events he and the BEF were now caught up in but underlined his somewhat entrenched distrust of all things French.

By 3 September Joffre's plans for a counter attack were falling into place. Commanded by Maurice Sarrail, the French Third Army faced the German Fifth Army opposite Verdun, the Fourth and Ninth Armies under Fernand de Langle de Cary and Ferdinand Foch held the centre opposite von Hausen's Third Army. Between the Fifth Army – now under the command of the more dynamic General Franchet d'Espèrey – and Maunoury's Sixth Army, a gap existed which Joffre anticipated would be filled by the BEF.

The optimism expressed to his chief by Louis Franchet d'Espèrey went some way to assuring Joffre that the British would take their place on the right of the French Sixth Army and fill the gap between d'Espèrey's left and Maunoury's right. But Joffre still harboured doubts about the commitment of the British Commander-in-Chief. The cooperation of the BEF on the right flank of the Sixth Army was vital and with this in mind General Maunoury was despatched to the British GHQ at Melun on 4 September where, in Sir John's absence, the chief of staff, Sir Archibald Murray, agreed to British involvement – subject of course to Sir John's approval. But even at this juncture there was apparently some confusion as to when exactly Joffre intended to begin his attack. Under the false impression that it was 7 September and that the BEF was required to retire further south to make way

for the French Sixth Army to move into position on its left, Murray issued Operational Order No. 1 which instructed the BEF to continue its retirement the following morning.

Later on 4 September Joffre ordered the offensive to begin a day earlier – on 6 September – a decision which did not reach GHQ until nearly 4.00am on the 5th by which time it was too late to prevent some of the British units from continuing their retirement. There was still ample time, however, to halt the movement of the BEF before it concluded its day's march. Despite his apparent enthusiasm it appears very much as though Sir John French was not entirely convinced of the effectiveness of Joffre's plan and was intending to create a buffer zone which would provide the BEF with room to continue the retreat should that be necessary.

However, seizing the opportunity before him, Joffre planned to launch his counter-offensive on the morning of 6 September 1914. The French Sixth Army – which was all that stood between the German First Army and Paris – was poised to strike at the right flank of von Kluck's First Army but still needed time to fall into position. Early on 5 September Maunoury marched his ten infantry divisions to a line northwest of Meaux from where he anticipated engaging the German First Army along the Marne the next day. Maunoury's cavalry screen let him down badly, although they found no German forces along the line of march, they completely overlooked the presence of von Gronau's I Reserve Corps and the first shots of the Battle of the Marne were fired from the high ground around Monthyon – a day earlier than Joffre had intended. Severely under strength and outnumbered by the units of the French Sixth Army, the German IV Reserve Corps held on for the remainder of the day, finally withdrawing that evening northeast towards Puisieux.

Nevertheless, the damage had been done. Not only had Maunoury been prevented from crossing the River Ourcq but the element of surprise had evaporated. Von Kluck now knew his right flank was in serious trouble and typically turned to meet the new threat by attacking across the Ourcq. Orders were dispatched to Sixt von Arnim's IV Corps and von Linsingen's II Corps, now south of the Marne and approaching Pécy, to about turn and march post-haste to add weight to von Gronau's position which he had now taken up north of the River Théroanne. It was the execution of these orders which Major Tom Bridges and 4/Royal Irish Dragoons witnessed with incredulity on the morning of 6 September 1914. The British cavalrymen were positioned at the high water mark of von Kluck's advance and, had they but known it, were witnesses to events which began the process of opening a substantial gap between von Kluck's left wing and the right wing of von Bülow's Second Army.

The so-called gap occurred as von Kluck swung his forces through ninety degrees to face Maunoury and was increased by Bülow whom – without first informing the First Army – pulled back his right flank beyond the Petit Morin River on 7 September, claiming his troops were too tired to take on another frontal assault by the French Fifth Army. It was an altogether surprising move by the Second Army commander; while von Kluck was preparing to attack Maunoury to the west, Bülow was in fact pulling his right flank back northeast. He must have realised he was widening the existing gap and

gambled on his First Army counterpart falling into line as instructed by Moltke. In his defence von Bülow cited the OHL directive of 2 September and maintained that the First Army's role was to protect his flank, he was adamant that von Kluck should pull back from his counter offensive against Maunoury and fall into line with the Second Army.

Von Kluck was equally obstinate in his view that the only possible course of action was to destroy Maunoury's Sixth Army before the BEF appeared on the left of Franchet d'Espèrey's Fifth Army and pushed through the gap. It was a concern which was confirmed later on 7 September when German cavalry observed the British vanguard advancing over the Grand Morin River at La Ferté Gaucher, a movement which served only to galvanize von Kluck in his offensive against the Sixth Army. The morning of 8 September would thus see two battles: von Kluck and Maunoury on the line of the Ourcq and von Bülow and Franchet d'Espèrey on the Grand and Petit Morin.

Reinforcements for Maunoury's Sixth Army in the form of the French 7th Infantry Division began arriving from Paris by rail on the night of 7 September, but mindful of a possible breakdown in the railway network, Joseph Gallieni famously decided to send the 103rd and 104th Infantry Regiments by road using a fleet of several hundred Paris taxi cabs. But it is here that the story which has become a part of almost every account of the Battle of the Marne falters. The true picture of the dash to save the Sixth Army is one of traffic chaos, mechanical breakdown and missed destinations which did little more than create pandemonium on the 30 mile stretch of road between Gagny and Nanteuil-les-Meaux. While it may have been a successful publicity scoop for Gallieni, 'militarily' wrote Herwig, 'it was insignificant'.

Yet despite this the French plan for victory was in trouble. In several places they had been pushed back with heavy losses and Von Kluck's encounter with Maunoury was very much in the balance. Maunoury had already prepared Joffre for a retreat with his declaration that if von Kluck attacked him again he would retire to the west, secretly – as the French *Official History* confirms – he had already issued orders to that effect. But it was now that the fog of war – created by an almost complete lack of lucid communication between OHL and the German First and Second Armies – descended in the form of Colonel Richard Hentsch, chief of the OHL's Intelligence Section.

Doubt and uncertainty was undermining the decision making process at German General Headquarters. Von Moltke was losing his nerve and since 5 September he and the staff at OHL had had no clear idea as to what exactly was taking place on the Marne. Reports from the front were often contradictory and suggested that the First and Second Armies were in danger of being outflanked by the French Fifth Army and the BEF by exploiting the gap between the two. In the mind of von Moltke the worst-case scenario would see von Kluck forced further to the west, surrounded and destroyed resulting in defeat and a long drawn out retreat. If the line of the Marne was impossible to hold then the First and Second Armies must retire north to close the gap. In a move which was to prove the most contentious of the entire campaign, von Moltke sent Richard Hentsch to the front to establish exactly what was happening.

Although nothing was ever put in writing, it is almost certain that Hentsch was given full powers by Moltke to initiate a retirement of the German right wing if the First Army's situation demanded it. Hentsch left OHL in Luxembourg to complete a full assessment of the strategic situation, arriving at German Fifth Army headquarters at Varennes-en-Argonne on 8 September. Later that day he motored to Courtisols to confer with the Fourth Army and then to Châlons-sur-Marne where he met Ernst von Hoeppner, the chief of staff for the Third Army. It was only after his arrival in the late afternoon at Montmort-Lucy to hear von Bülow's appraisal of the Second Army's situation, that the cautious optimism generated by his earlier discussions would be dashed.

Von Bülow was unwavering in his criticism of von Kluck's failure to remain in echelon with his Second Army and of the apparently separate battle he was now fighting on the Ourcq with Maunoury's Sixth Army. According to its commander, the Second Army was in no condition to continue its offensive and, he explained to Hentsch, matters were being made worse, by the ever widening gap between the two armies, a gap which was in great danger of being exploited. The Second Army reiterated Bülow, could only maintain its present line of battle if the First Army withdrew to the east away from the Ourcq, to link up with Second Army along the northern side of the Marne and thereby close the gap. By the end of the meeting there was no doubt in Hentsch's mind where von Bülow felt the blame for the current crisis should rest: solely and completely with the First Army.

The German Second Army was, in truth, in a potentially difficult position. Franchet d'Espèrey's Fifth Army was hotly engaged with von Bülow's right wing and the BEF had finally put in a significant appearance between the two armies. Although more of a potential menace than an actual threat, this added to the weight of pessimism which was gripping German Second Army headquarters. If von Bülow remained in position there was no guarantee that either von Hausen on his left or von Kluck on his right would be victorious. It was this precarious situation which dominated Hentsch's thoughts and he drove over to First Army headquarters early on the morning of 9 September. Yet almost as soon as Hentsch had left Montmort that morning, von Bülow – alarmed by intelligence of allied forces crossing the Marne between La Ferté-sous-Jouarre and Château Thierry – ordered the Second Army to retreat north of the Marne, informing OHL and von Kluck that he was moving north to avoid being outflanked.

At Mareuil-sur-Ourcq, Hentsch met von Kuhl, the First Army's chief of staff, who reportedly greeted him with the words: 'Well if the Second Army's going back, we can't stay here either.' Despite the sour tone of the greeting, von Kuhl brought his OHL colleague quickly up to speed. The French Sixth Army had attacked in force that morning along the Ourcq and aerial reconnaissance had confirmed the BEF's advance into the gap north of the Petit Morin River. Von Gronau's IV Reserve Corps had been reduced significantly by the fighting but, added Kuhl, the situation was now under control with the arrival of the German IV and IX Corps. Incredibly neither officer conferred with von Kluck who was literally within hailing distance at his command post. Kuhl's confidence in the First Army being able to envelop Maunoury's left flank, and the total dismissal of any ability the BEF might have had of endangering the First Army's position, astounded Hentsch. There were too many

imponderables at stake and it was clear to him that retreat was a necessity rather than an option. History has subsequently blamed Richard Hentsch for the German failure on the Marne but in reality he didn't initiate the retreat as it had already been set in motion by von Bülow earlier that morning. Reaching for the map which was spread out before them, Hentsch drew on it the lines of retreat which would begin the First Army's withdrawal to the Aisne valley.

Thus the Battle of the Marne was not decided by outstanding generalship or even by von Kluck's change of direction to the east of Paris, it was, as Correlli Barnett points out, a victory handed 'to the French and British by an unjustifiable failure of nerve and resolution on the part of the German command'.<sup>8</sup>

Was the Battle of the Marne over or was the cessation of the fighting phase merely a pause for breath while German forces retired to regroup behind the Aisne River? Herwig suggests that the Marne was the culmination of a series of battles which had begun with the French reversals in the earlier Battle of the Frontiers fought in eastern France and Belgium. There are grounds for extending this argument further and it is not entirely out of the question to suggest that the battles which opened with the German invasion of France and Belgium in early August 1914 were not concluded on the Marne but finally culminated on the high ground north of the River Aisne where the concept and the tangible manifestation of the Western Front was born.



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