



BATTLES OF A GUNNER OFFICER

**TUNISIA, SICILY, NORMANDY AND
THE LONG ROAD TO GERMANY**



JOHN PHILIP JONES

BASED ON THE UNPUBLISHED DIARY OF MAJOR PETER PETTIT, DSO, TD, HAC

FOREWORD BY GENERAL SIR RICHARD BARRONS, KCB, CBE, ADC GEN.

Battles of a Gunner Officer

This book is dedicated to the members of the
Honourable Artillery Company
who sacrificed their lives for their country

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Foreword

by

General Sir Richard Barrons,
KCB, CBE, ADC Gen.
Commander, Joint Forces Command,
and Colonel Commandant HAC

More books and papers have been written about the Second World War over the last sixty years than any other event in the last century and quite probably more than any other event in history. This is no surprise; the tumultuous events of 1939 to 1945 were truly definitive in charting the course of our world into modern times, determining for millions how they lead their lives in the modern age. The Second World War has been examined from every angle, from the personal detailed recollections of individuals who participated or were affected by it, to sweeping strategic histories and all aspects in between. These accounts have covered politics, history, sociology, technology, and many other themes. Some have been written to try and justify individual decisions or actions and others to try simply to comprehend how mankind could descend into such tragedy and chaos. Like most wars, the Second World War goes beyond reason and logic and the explanation of what occurred reaches into every recess of why the human race has turned out how it has.

This addition by Professor John Philip Jones breaks new ground as it brings into the light for the first time the private record of one rather special participant. Peter Pettit's personal and contemporaneous notes detail his journey from the first encounters with a determined enemy in Tunisia, through the difficult invasion of Sicily, and finally onto the astounding events of Normandy in 1944 and the subsequent bitter fighting that led to the end of the war in Germany in 1945. To any student of military history and military matters more generally, these diaries provide a very rare and comprehensive record of how one thoughtful reservist soldier managed his part in a huge theatre of war.

This story is made much more interesting and accessible for the general reader by the accompanying succinct historical overview of the events of which Peter Pettit was part. This context not only provides the backdrop against which Peter Pettit fought his war, but also a concise reminder of the strategic and operational decisions and actions which shaped the course of the war and the destiny of nations. The combination of context and personal history conveys the sheer scale, effort and strategic risk of the struggle between states and it also

succeeds in painting a realistic and sympathetic picture of how hard it is for the officers and men drawn into war who must do their duty in all manner of conditions – determined to succeed, paying the price, whilst at the same time longing for it to end and to go home.

For me, the small things that are recorded in the diary entries are the most poignant, touching as they do on familiar aspects of my own service. The death of officers as a result of not wearing the issued steel helmet but the same colourful side hat that I still wear in barracks. The constant interest in finding good sleep, decent food and shelter from the elements. The massive importance of serving with friends and the sadness of simply having to carry on when they die in battle. The randomness of events, where people are alive one moment and stone dead the next for the smallest of chances, and the pervasive uncertainty about what will happen next and how it will affect individual lives. For a field gunner like me, the drills employed by Peter Pettit and his regiment in deploying the guns and sending observers forward into the fight are directly relatable to those that apply today, with all the same frictions and challenges of finding the right places to go, the best route to get there and then performing well in action. All of us in this business remember long frustrating and tiring nights looking in vain for comrades who must be somewhere nearby in the same dark wood. And in typical fashion the diary underplays the gritty resilience of those who were manning the guns. Peter Pettit skips easily over the manhandling of equipment weighing several tons in the dark and the mud with the huge physical effort required to pass a thousand rounds of ammunition, each weighing 25 pounds, through each gun over a twenty-four hour period. For anyone looking for a rare insight into the hard business of field soldiering in the crucible of war, these diaries paint a very colourful, accurate and illuminating picture.

As the author points out, Peter Pettit was not a regular officer, but a member of the Territorial Army. He was a solicitor with a practice in London and his soldiering was a matter of duty and passion, never a full-time career. So the book also makes the vital point that major conflicts between states are fought and won by civilians. Responding to the call to arms, men and women from all walks of life join the ranks and commit to training and operating to the best of their ability until the job is done. They fight in armies that are led by regular forces and where there are regular counterparts alongside, but for much of the Second World War the regulars were very much in the minority. The fact is, after enough training and experience in battle the civilian soldier more than matches the skill and professionalism of the regular. Quite apart from making forces as big as they need to be, reserve service draws on the full spectrum of talents found in society at large and applies them to the limit in the pursuit of victory in war. Properly led and resourced, civilians who stand up to fight make Armed Forces not just bigger but better.

This quality applies in particular measure to the Honourable Artillery Company (HAC) which has been a pillar of Peter Pettit's life and service. The diary records the particular pleasure he had in encountering his friends from 11th HAC Regiment during the course of the War and his sadness at the news of the loss of many. The names of the members of the HAC who did not return are recorded and displayed with due honour in the Headquarters of the Regiment in its historic setting in London. It goes without saying that there are very senior veterans of today's HAC who remember Peter Pettit and his son Charles as prominent, dedicated and very highly regarded members of a military organisation that traces its history back almost five-hundred years. The diaries set out splendidly how much can be achieved when the brains and characters of people who make their lives in the City of London in all manner of ways are drawn into military service and fight for their country. And so it will be in the future.

Preface

Diary, 28 April 1943

Quiet day. Moved 10 Battery forward to behind Longstop. Saw Denis's tank, something very heavy hit it bang on the turret where hinges are, blew them off, bashed in top of turret and track shield and made a horrid mess inside the turret. He must have been killed instantly.

Diary, 30 April 1943

Cooler, found a lark's nest with four eggs in the middle of our Regimental HQ in a grassy fold in the ground. Big battle on 1st and 4th Division fronts.

Peter Pettit, whom I refer to as PP, was a major aged 34 and Second-in-Command of 17th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. He was a Territorial officer serving in a Regular regiment, but his military experience and keenness had prepared him well for this appointment. At the age of 19 he had joined the ranks of the historic London regiment of part-time soldiers, the Honourable Artillery Company (HAC), having followed his father into B Battery. His brother later joined it, and much later so did PP's two sons.

Peter Pettit took his military training seriously particularly when, during the two years leading to the outbreak of war, the Territorial Army (TA) was increased in size and a great boost was given to the pace of preparation for active service. After twelve years of service, he had progressed from Gunner to acting Major in command of B Battery, now in 11th (HAC) Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery, the first of the gunner regiments that were formed from the ranks of the HAC. By this time PP had qualified as a solicitor and was a partner in his old-established family firm in Baker Street, London.

The TA was mobilized just before war was declared in September 1939, and PP spent more than three years of full-time service in Britain, first with 11th Regiment and later with the 17th. By the end of this period he was a seasoned and experienced field officer, ready to go to war. In December 1942, 17th Field Regiment was sent overseas to join the Anglo-American force that had invaded North-West Africa in November. The invasion was improvised, which is not surprising since the two separate national armies had been thrown together at short notice. Although victory was won in May 1943, the intervening months were characterized by unpleasant winter weather on the Tunisian battlefield, and little military movement except some setbacks.

One of the main obstacles on the ground to the eastward advance on the city of Tunis was a dominant feature that was less than 40 miles short of it: a position

strongly fortified by the Germans that the British named Longstop Hill. Longstop was captured with considerable heroism on the night of 22/23 December 1942. Almost immediately, the relieving force was driven off by a German counter-attack, and an Allied effort to evict the Germans failed. The battlefield now congealed and a wintry status quo prevailed until April 1943. Then at last the Allied armies were strong enough in numbers and firepower finally to take Longstop and advance beyond it.

In the early stages of this last battle for the feature the North Irish Horse, an armoured regiment mounted in Churchill tanks, was supported by 17th Field Regiment. An intrepid young Forward Observation Officer (FOO), Captain Denis Higgins MC, one of the regiment's Troop Commanders, advanced forward in a Churchill tank. But it was unfortunately hit and Higgins was killed. Longstop was finally taken on 26 April by a Highland battalion, 8 Argylls, led by Major Jack Anderson who had taken over when his Commanding Officer had lost his life as a result of enemy shellfire. Anderson led from the front, firing his Tommy gun, and was awarded the Victoria Cross.

This in brief is the context in which the two diary extracts at the beginning of this Preface can be fully understood. Readers will also be struck by the sudden change of pace after the first extract. After contemplating the horrors of war, the thing that took PP's attention was a lark's nest. He was an Englishman imbued with an English love of the countryside. The diary reads well and this is helped by its abruptness, caused by the conditions in which it was written. Its unvarnished descriptions of military life – on occasions violent and on other occasions tedious – illustrate how words scribbled on the spot and in the midst of battle or resting from it can bring life and immediacy to a work of military history.

In the vast literature of war there has been no shortage of diaries and letters, written day-by-day by combatants of all ranks. They fall into two broad categories which are quite different from one another. The first is the diaries kept by high-level military decision-makers; the second is those kept by soldiers in or near the firing line, especially regimental officers, and men in the ranks. Of the two categories, I have always found the first the more interesting, because such diaries integrate the activities of armies into the broad framework of history. The issues can be recognized immediately, although the generals' diaries manage to introduce many unknown aspects. They also illustrate the oppressive loneliness of high command when a general is under pressure and – a related point – the usually difficult relationships between top generals and their political masters. Here are three examples to make the point. These come from very different wars.

*General Wolseley, Commander of the Khartoum Relief Expedition,
17 February 1885*

With Khartoum in the Mahdi's hands my present force is totally inadequate to meet him except under very advantageous circumstances.

I have telegraphed this home in a secret despatch. It will kill the Government I think: I am sorry for Hartington but I have no mercy on that most ignorant of *soi-disant* statesmen, Mr. Gladstone. He is responsible for Gordon's death and all the bloodshed and horrors attendant upon the fall of Khartoum.

Field Marshal Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the BEF,

29 March 1918

Met General Foch at Abbeville about noon. I told him that I thought the Allies were fortunate that the attack had fallen on the British and not on the French because the latter could not have withstood it. I also pointed out

- (1) British infantry in France at the beginning of the battle were 100,000 less than a year ago!
- (2) We now have three times as many Germans on our front as we had last year.
- (3) We had also extended our front (by order of the British Government) fully one-fifth more than it was last autumn. This may have been necessary, because the French had inadequate numbers and the Americans had not arrived, but it rendered our front precarious.

Field Marshal Brooke, CIGS,

5 June 1944

Winston had returned on Sunday evening in a very highly-strung condition. He invited the Chiefs-of-Staff to lunch, which was a bore. I found him over-optimistic as regards prospects of the cross Channel operation and tried to damp him down. I knew only too well all the weak points in the plan of operations. First of all the weather, on which we were entirely dependent; a sudden storm might wreck it all. Then the complexity of an amphibious operation of this kind, when confusion may degenerate into chaos in such a short time. The difficulty of controlling the operation once launched, lack of elasticity in the handling of reserves, danger of leakage of information with consequent loss of that essential secrecy. Perhaps one of the most nerve-wracking experiences when watching an operation like this unroll itself is the intimate knowledge of the various commanders engaged. Too good a knowledge of their various weaknesses makes one wonder whether in the moments of crisis facing them they will not shatter one's hopes.

Brooke's chilling fears about D-Day are directly relevant to this book. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to the invasion of Normandy, and PP's most intense experiences of military action during the war are recounted in Chapter 5.

This brings me to the deficiencies in the diaries of top commanders. Generals

live in a world above the battles, and they move formations and units like pieces on a chessboard. Their diaries do not therefore help us smell the whiff of powder or hear the whistle of bullets, which are what war is most obviously about. And they are indeed what PP's diary is all about. To balance the above three diary extracts from the stratosphere of command, here are three examples from soldiers much lower down the military pyramid. Again they came from very different wars.

Lieutenant Gordon-Duff, 1 Gordon Highlanders, Magersfontein, South Africa.

13 December 1899

The country is quite treeless with very little water, and scant grass and scrubby prickly plants on most horrid red sand and boulder-covered hills. There were all sorts of relics. Old bullets, cartridge cases, shells etc. Also a partially buried Boer, old saddles, helmets – every blessed thing in fact. We pitched our tents by the Seaforth and Highland Brigade lines. Numbers of them were absolutely crippled owing to the effect of the battle, when they were on their faces for hours with the backs of their knees being burnt off. They could hardly hobble with great bandages.

Captain Crofton, 2 Life Guards, Ypres, Belgium.

18 November 1914

At 7 o'clock we made a breakfast of rum and bully beef. The day got warmer later on and was very clear and bright. About 10 o'clock the first shells fell over our trench. These increased in number very shortly until about 10:30 when a perfect inferno was raging over the whole of our line of the trench. They were chiefly of the Black Maria and Lyddite types. It was all very shaky. We lay prone on the bottom of the trench, but from time to time looked out from the peep-hole to see if there were any signs of a German attack. The shells pitched very close in front, the Germans obviously had the correct range, and tore in the parapet, thus causing the sandy sides of the trench to silt in. We were half stunned, choked with sand and half buried in the debris. The explosions deafened us.

Trooper Merewood, The Queen's Bays, Mareth, Tunisia.

27 March 1943

Then the quiet was suddenly shattered by a terrific bang. Anti-tank guns hidden in the trees ahead opened fire. I saw Jim's tank hit and it immediately burst into flames. He and his turret crew bailed out, all three of them on fire. They ran about screaming . . . and all died. The other two crew members never got out of the tank. Then we were hit too. I

found myself covered with blood, but it wasn't mine, it was Nobby's. He'd been hit on the head and he dropped straight down into the turret beside me. Our wireless operator lay on his back on the floor in a state of terror, beating the floor with his fists and his heels. Colin, our driver, shouted over the intercom: 'My periscope's shattered, I can't see where I'm going.' Without stopping to think, I jumped up, took Nobby's seat and, half out of the tank, saw we were still heading straight for the trees. Shells were flying everywhere. Any minute I expected we'd be hit again. 'Jink, Colin, jink,' I shouted. Colin zigzagged but we were still going forward. I yelled at him: 'Pull on your right stick as hard as you can.' He did as I said and we made a complete U-turn: 'Put your foot down. Let her go.' Colin kept his head, did as I directed and we kept going until it was safe to stop.

The Battle of Mareth, which was eventually successful, opened the way for the advance of the 8th Army on Tunis from the south. Meanwhile, 78th Division, in which PP was serving, was making preparations for a major attack and then an advance on the city from the west. The pincers would before long be closing.

Readers may wonder why these six extracts from battle diaries, four of which are unrelated to the Second World War, have a place in a book about the campaigns in Tunisia, Sicily and North-West Europe. The answer is simple. The diaries illustrate a dichotomy, with three from the top of the military hierarchy telling one sort of story and three from the bottom telling another. Diaries written by generals seem detached and remote from the actual battlefield. They need the addition of something from the firing line. On the other hand, the diaries written by men at the 'sharp end' have too little background. The action described is an isolated event. The episodes in these diaries may be very exciting, but when they are read they inevitably raise questions: 'What is this battle all about?' 'What is the larger scheme of things?' 'Did the difficulties eventually get resolved?' 'Who won?' Such diaries need a strong injection of the 'big thinking' that comes from the generals.

This dichotomy has led me to construct the book from two elements. First, I have written an abbreviated work of history. The campaigns in which PP served – Tunisia, Sicily and the various phases of the invasion of Europe – are described in six chapters (numbers 2 to 7). I narrate the history of each campaign, with an emphasis on the overall command and the strategy. In every case the story is complex, with much evidence of differences of views at the top. I have done my best to write this history component both comprehensively and succinctly, and have based the narrative on the best of the vast literature published since 1945, supplemented with unpublished war diaries. These works are listed in the Bibliography. The second component is the diary itself. In the

chapters describing the campaigns, the narrative begins with the history and is followed by the diary. But often afterwards I return briefly to the history in connection with episodes described in the diary. The two elements work closely together. Although the narrative is based on many published and unpublished sources, I decided to avoid endnotes flagged by numbered references in the text itself. A forest of numbers in the narrative would impede the flow too much, and in any case the Bibliography is detailed and comprehensive.

In Chapters 2 (Tunisia), 3 (Sicily), and 4 (the first phase of Normandy), the history contains more words than the diary. The opposite is true of Chapters 5 (the second phase of Normandy), 6 (the advance across north-west Europe) and 7 (the surge across the north German plain). In editing the diary I have omitted many daily entries when little was happening. But I have made very few changes to the text itself and kept the telegraphic style, with incomplete sentences and abbreviations (which are described *in italics* and also amplified in the Glossary).

Besides writing such a splendid story, PP deserves my thanks for yet another reason. He wrote his diary in tiny handwriting in a series of six-by-four inch blank notebooks made for laundry lists. One of them fitted into one of the breast pockets of his battledress, so that it was accessible for him to write a day's entry. (A typical page of the original diary is illustrated in Plate 13, together with a typed transcript.) PP's writing is unfortunately very difficult to decipher. Because of this, after the war he had the whole diary transcribed and printed in clear typescript and bound in four volumes that included various maps and ephemera: newspaper clippings etc. These four volumes have made life much easier than it would have been if I had had to wrestle with the handwritten notebooks. (I would probably still be at work making sense of them all!)

The book also has a 'top and tail': Chapter 1 and the Afterword. Chapter 1 is devoted to artillery. Since the diary describes the battles of Royal Artillery Field regiments during the Second World War, readers will benefit from some understanding of what guns can do and how they are deployed in action. I have tried to avoid technical language, and Chapter 1 is supplemented by a full Glossary (at the end of the book) which gives explanations of the more arcane aspects of gunnery and how it works in cooperation with the other engines of war.

The Honourable Artillery Company always retained PP's special loyalty. Chapter 1 gives a brief account of the long history of the regiment. It provided 4,000 officers, mainly to other regiments, during the Second World War, and PP's diary records the many occasions when he came across pre-war regimental friends on his peregrinations over the battlefields.

The Afterword describes the Territorial Army's major contributions to Britain's military effort during the two world wars. However, since it was re-

formed in 1947, it has had a checkered history. Its members have maintained the old volunteer spirit and never lost their loyalty to their regiments. But the problem has always been too few men (and women) in the ranks. In comparison with the years before 1914 and 1939, when there was a threat of war, the TA since 1947 has been almost a shadow organization. In response to the problem, the military authorities have over the years attempted reorganization and rationalization but without long-term success.

In the recent past plans for the armed services have been constantly reviewed, in response both to reductions in the military budget and to different forecasts of future wars and how these would affect the rôles of the various branches of the services. In 1996, a major change took place with the introduction of a scheme for Territorial soldiers to serve on active service at times when the country has not declared general mobilization. Men and women were now encouraged to volunteer (and on occasions could be compelled) to serve for a year, with six months of intensive training, and six months abroad in the front line. Since 1996, 15,000 Territorials have served in this way. In 2013 the scheme was ratcheted-up in anticipation of the greater contribution that the Territorials (now called the Army Reserve) will be expected to make to the army as a whole. It is planned that, within a relatively short period, 27 per cent of the army's strength will be made up of Reservists. There are doubts about the practicability of this proposal, and it has generated a good deal of debate in the 'quality' newspapers.

This book, being based on a contemporary war diary, is concerned with facts and is a record of things that happened in the past. However, the very end of the Afterword makes a transition from the past to the future. One of the things we always know about the future is that it will be different from the past and that forecasts, no matter how imaginative and brave, generally prove to be wrong. Does this mean that planning – including the proposals currently on the table – will inevitably be futile? This is not necessarily so. The central problem that must be faced is how to make contingency plans for a range of possible but unknown emergencies. The army must be prepared. But prepared for what? What form is the army's training going to take? Can the TA reach the same standard as the Regulars? Top professional military planners have greater skills than anybody else for addressing these problems, and the 2013 plan is the result of their deliberations. Their willingness in the present difficult circumstances to think in radical terms deserves direct support, but one qualification is necessary.

In Britain, the system of politico-military decision-making is modelled on the method developed during the Second World War, when the chiefs-of-staff of the three services – three men including a chairman – answered to Churchill as Minister of Defence. He was an especially tough taskmaster; the scars from his bruising conflicts with his service chiefs can still be seen in Field Marshal

Alanbrooke's riveting war diary (which made him unpopular with the Churchill family). What Churchill demanded was complete justification for all recommendations, which meant that the chiefs and their immediate staffs never stopped working on assembling supporting data and exploring alternative plans that the Prime Minister constantly put forward. However, Churchill's understanding of the British political system was such that he always in the end accepted what his advisers had to say. He knew that he ultimately had to take their recommendations – or accept their resignations.

This relationship was a war-winner, because of the experience and powerful personalities of the men who ran military affairs at that time. This is not to criticize the people who have had this responsibility in later periods. But there is a point of principle that remains as important as ever. Plans must be constantly questioned; they must be (as it were) 'tested to destruction'. If they remain intact after this process, then it can be assumed that they are as sound as human judgement can make them.

As with all my books, my first thanks go to my wife Wendy, who can with difficulty decipher my handwriting, and (in generally good spirits) puts up with my dictation. She always produces immaculate typescripts of the manuscript on her computer, and she has the patience to handle endless amendments to the drafts.

I am extremely grateful to General Sir Richard Barrons for contributing the Foreword. It is a lucid and elegant essay that gets to the heart of the book, and will be an ornament to the work. General Barrons is a serving soldier who has had an impressive career. He joined the army direct from Oxford University and was commissioned in the Royal Artillery. He progressed through the regimental ranks, graduated from the Staff College, and in 1997 he was given command of 3 RHA and served in Germany and the Balkans. Thereafter he interspersed command and staff appointments of increasing responsibility in England, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011 he returned to Britain as Assistant Chief of the General Staff, then Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff responsible for military strategy and operations. In 2013 he was appointed Joint Forces Commander, as a four-star General and received the KCB. He also became Colonel Commandant of the Honourable Artillery Company and an ADC to HM The Queen.

I am also most grateful to friends who have read all or parts of the work and suggested amendments that have always led to improvements. They are James Colquhoun (HAC); James Gray, MP (HAC); Brigadier James Groom (ex-RHA); Charles Pettit (HAC); Richard Pettit (HAC); Valerie Pettit; Major David Robinson; Lieutenant Colonel John Ross; Professor David Rubin; Professor Roger Sharp (once an artillery officer in the United States army); Anthony Simpson (21st SAS Regiment – Artists); Justine Taylor (Archivist, HAC); James

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Chapter 1

‘Artillery, A Great Battle-Winning Factor’

The title of this chapter comes from the tribute that Field Marshal Montgomery paid to the artillery at the end of the Second World War. No one was better qualified to appraise the contribution of the Royal Artillery (RA) to British arms in defeat and victory. In land battles, success depends on synergy between infantry, armour, artillery, air and engineers: the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. This book concentrates on one of these factors, gunnery, and is written from the standpoint of a successful battery commander who was not a Regular soldier. The Royal Artillery expanded greatly during the First World War, and even more during the Second. One of its most serious problems was the shortage of junior officers. In both conflicts, a substantial number were commissioned from the ranks of the historic regiment of citizen-soldiers, the Honourable Artillery Company, universally known as the HAC. Peter Pettit, the author of the diary on which this book is based, joined the HAC in 1927 and had been an officer for seven years when war was declared in 1939. He had the temporary rank of Major.

‘The Last Argument of Kings’

As war was fought in the middle of the twentieth century – conflict on a massive scale between national armies, navies and air forces – bullets and shell fragments in large numbers generally swept the battlefield. The largest volume of fire came from small arms; but small arms, particularly belt-fed machine guns, were essentially defensive weapons operating with deadly effect on the flanks to enfilade enemy infantry. In contrast, the contribution of artillery came from the destructive weight of each shell it fired. Artillery was effective in both defence and attack and it could perform tasks that were beyond the capacity of small arms; in particular it could neutralize armour and aircraft as well as troops in the open. In attack, artillery fire plans could make the difference between overall success and failure.

Complex fire plans were first developed during the siege conditions of the First World War. They set out a precise and elaborate web of fire tasks, with exact timings. These included: barrages on different enemy locations;

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lifting/creeping barrages (i.e. curtains of fire falling 100 yards in front of advancing infantry and moving forward in pace with the rate of advance); counter-bombardment (CB) targets where enemy batteries were located; defensive fire (DF) tasks; and tactical support called for by Forward Observation Officers. Such plans could mobilize concentrations of sometimes 1,000 guns or more. At the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, the artillery of the 8th Army was made up of 37 Field regiments (with a total of 888 guns) plus 33 regiments of other types: Medium, Heavy, Anti-Aircraft and Anti-Tank. The vast majority of these regiments participated in the fire plan, producing an unforgettable barrage that softened the enemy lines before and during the early part of the battle.

The success of artillery depended not only on the excellence of the guns and ammunition, but also on the organization, training and operational efficiency of the men in the batteries, and – very importantly – on totally reliable communications. These things are what this book is about.

Cannon, both guns and mortars, were originally employed by the Chinese during the late twelfth century, and their use spread slowly to the West during the late Middle Ages. They were large, heavy weapons, few in number; a typical example weighed 19 tons and needed sixty oxen to draw it. These early cannon were essentially immobile; they were smooth-bored and both inaccurate and muzzle-loaded, a process that meant a slow rate of fire. They fired at relatively short ranges, which meant that they could only be used for direct fire, described by gunners as ‘over open sights’. Their projectiles were crude solid cannon balls, which could do a great deal of damage to the walls of fortresses, making it possible for infantry to force an entry. One of their effects was the important matter of shaking the enemy’s morale. This is an extremely demoralizing result of artillery in all wars, especially the two big conflicts of the twentieth century.

During the two-hundred years between the early eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries, five technical improvements transformed artillery into the weapons used so effectively during the First and Second World Wars:

- i. Guns became smaller and more mobile;
- ii. Rifling began to replace smooth bore;
- iii. Breech-loading began to replace muzzle-loading;
- iv. Projectiles were improved, with canister shot containing shrapnel (named after an officer of that name in the Royal Artillery); and, even more importantly, explosive shells;
- v. Increasing ranges, which made it possible to use guns for indirect fire.

The first of these innovations, mobility, transformed artillery during the eighteenth century. A typical 12-pounder (with a bore of about 4in) could be mounted on wheels and drawn by teams of horses across the battlefield, with

groups of guns assembled in batteries. When these guns were in position they could fire at targets a mile away. A visit to one of the many well-preserved battlefields of the American Civil War (1861–1865), invariably shows such batteries *in situ*, normally on high ground from which they could fire on advancing enemy troops.

Napoleon, who was trained as a gunner and never forgot it, came into his own at the sound of the guns and in all his battles deployed his artillery with finesse and great effectiveness. After the Napoleonic War, Prussian guns were handsomely engraved with the motto '*Ultima Ratio Regum*': an appropriately classical aphorism meaning, in English, '*The Last Argument of Kings*'. This was a succinct commentary on the many wars at that time between European nation states, mostly kingdoms and empires. Guns had become the single weapon of decisive importance.

The next three improvements, breech-loading, rifling and improved projectiles, were all introduced more or less at the same time, the middle of the nineteenth century. They were employed to a limited extent during the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the American Civil War, and widely rolled out afterwards in all large armies. The final improvement, extending the range of guns and the introduction of indirect fire, meant a major transformation of gunnery at the end of the nineteenth century. There was little opportunity for this during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) because it was mainly a war of movement. But the Japanese practised indirect fire with great effect during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1906, using fixed Observation Posts (OPs), connected with the Gun Positions by telephone. European armies were not too aware of the details of this fighting on the other side of the world. Field Marshal Lord Roberts, the greatest British soldier of the Victorian era, was a gunner and even he was not au fait with this development. Although the Field Marshal had retired in 1905, he remained a *guru* whose views on military policy were widely respected, but he now devoted his attention to the controversial question of Compulsory Service.

In 1914 the British artillery was in general well prepared for a European war, which was universally expected in military circles. This war is, even today, often described as a conflict dominated by artillery.

The Royal Regiment

The Royal Regiment of Artillery has had a long and distinguished history. Artillery was first used by the British army during the reign of Henry VIII (1509–1547). However, it was first permanently established as a branch of the service in 1716, which was the official birth date of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. The Royal Artillery is one of the army's three (curiously named) 'teeth-arms', i.e. those in direct contact with the enemy. The others are armour (cavalry in its modern incarnation) and infantry. The RA's 'head count' has

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always been in total very large. And unlike most cavalry regiments and infantry battalions, the Royal Artillery was planned to have no affiliations with specific regions of Great Britain.

However, the Territorial Army has always been regionally affiliated, and many TA regiments became gunners after the First World War. One such regiment was the West Somerset Yeomanry, which became 55th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, and whose active service in the Second World War will be discussed in this book.

There has been a long-established tradition for officers and other ranks to be cross-posted between RA batteries, which are small units that generate considerable *esprit de corps*. But in spite of the system of cross-posting, and also the absence of regional loyalties, the overall *esprit de corps* of the Royal Artillery has always been remarkable, even by the standards of the British army. It has invariably contributed to the operational efficiency of British regiments, and the gunners continue to gain special satisfaction that the RA has fought in every battle in which the British army has been engaged: hence their motto '*Ubique*': in English, 'Everywhere'. Infantry regiments have Colours which are in effect the distillation and point of focus of each regiment's *esprit de corps*. Cavalry regiments similarly have Guidons. The Royal Regiment has no embroidered silken banners. The guns themselves are the Regiment's Colours, and are accorded the proper respect. The beautiful Royal Artillery Slow March was composed by the Duchess of Kent, Queen Victoria's mother.

For more than two centuries, there were three branches: Royal Horse Artillery (RHA), supporting the cavalry; Royal Field Artillery (RFA), supporting the infantry; and Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA), mainly fortress troops, although during the First World War RGA batteries were in the field, operating the large-calibre Medium and Heavy guns that became so important during the years of siege warfare. The RFA and RGA were amalgamated after the First World War, but the RHA maintained its unique status, although cavalry now meant armour.

Up to the 1950s and to some extent even today, the British army has had an implicit 'social' pecking order, largely governed by the attraction of certain regiments to rich and well-connected officers. The regiments at the top of the list were (and still are) the Foot Guards and Household Cavalry, the Cavalry of the Line and the Green Jackets, who altogether account for about 10 per cent of the overall strength of the army. These regiments all have long and splendid fighting histories, but so have many less prestigious ones. For whatever reason, the officers in these regiments have always had a strong *amour propre*, which is transferred as if by osmosis to the men in the ranks. The Royal Artillery is a large force and has many historic batteries. But there is no inbuilt 'social' gradation between them. However, some of the cachet of the cavalry inevitably rubs off onto the Royal Horse Artillery, because they fight closely together.

Some RHA batteries were named, with great pride, after notable battery commanders and battles, mostly dating from the Peninsular War. Young subalterns are unable to join the RHA after they have been first commissioned, but if they show promise they may be invited to transfer: in gunner language, 'get their jacket'. Second Lieutenants are called Cornets, following the practice of the Household Cavalry. RHA uniform has a delightful idiosyncrasy. Nearly all British soldiers have buttons that are fairly flat but the surface is raised and stamped with a regimental 'sealed pattern'. However, in the RHA the brass buttons are shaped like small round cannon balls.

In 1914, the Royal Artillery had 279 Regular batteries, plus another 82 in the Territorial Force. The 25 Regular RHA batteries approximately matched the number of cavalry regiments in the army, and the number of 147 Regular RFA batteries was not far different from the number of infantry battalions. There was therefore a planned match of one cavalry regiment to one RHA battery, and one infantry battalion to one RFA battery. This held good until the Second World War, when the amount of gun support provided to the other 'teeth-arms' was boosted. Before the First World War, a group of three batteries was organized into a brigade, commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel. The name 'brigade' was always rather ambiguous, and Royal Artillery brigades were renamed Royal Artillery regiments after the First World War.

When the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) went to France in 1914, the average infantry division of twelve battalions was supported by four RFA brigades, containing twelve batteries. The one-to-one balance was firmly in place. The RFA was armed with the 18-pounder gun, an excellent weapon for its time, with a range of 9,500yd. It was directly comparable with the French 75mm and the German 77mm. All three had a reasonably high rate of fire, and they were mobile; a single gun and its limber, containing ammunition, were drawn by a team of horses. However, the British 13-pounder used by the RHA had very little 'punch'. These are the guns that are today fired on ceremonial occasions by the King's Troop RHA, and they are obviously military ornaments rather than effective weapons of war. The Royal Garrison Artillery had few Medium and Heavy guns, but the numbers of these increased greatly during the course of the war.

The siege conditions that characterized the First World War meant that virtually all gunfire was indirect. The concept of one battery supporting one battalion was predicated on the idea that battalions would engage in independent action. When this occurred, in particular when battalions were assaulting specific objectives as part of a large-scale attack, the Forward Observation Officer system was developed, with FOOs marching with Battalion Headquarters. But inadequate communication was a real problem. In the absence of portable radios, FOOs were accompanied under fire by sweating signallers unrolling telephone cables from large drums, and also using an array

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of other equipment, e.g. periscopes, trench ladders and semaphore flags. Aircraft were used experimentally for artillery spotting, but the radio sets available were very rudimentary. Air Observation Posts (AOPs) had to wait until the Second World War.

However, over the course of the First World War, independent unit action became less and less important. Very soon battles were being planned, not at a battalion or a brigade or even a divisional level. They were conducted by corps and armies, which meant inevitably that artillery would be concentrated. This was the genesis of the large-scale fire plan: a major innovation of the war. Field Marshal Brooke, a gunner, and Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) during the Second World War – and the most effective soldier ever to hold the post – made his early reputation devising complex fire plans for large formations. He did this job as a Major, later a Lieutenant Colonel, and a gunner staff officer with the Canadian army in the BEF.

In these ways gunnery evolved. But did the large fire plan for a set-piece battle make a major contribution to future victory? We now hit a roadblock. In the big attacks, notably at the Somme and the Third Battle of Ypres, the punctiliously prepared and powerfully executed fire plan was a method of waging war that did not work. One unfortunate effect was that the days of preparatory bombardment warned the enemy that an attack was imminent. The German lines were protected by dense entanglements of barbed wire, and parallel lines of trenches with deep and well-protected dugouts. The British bombardment mostly employed 18-pounder guns, which were not powerful enough for siege conditions. The projectiles were a mixture of high explosive and shrapnel. The result was that the wire was generally not destroyed because the shrapnel was useless and there were not enough high-explosive shells. The enemy troops manned the front line thinly, and then emerged from their dugouts and moved to the front-line trenches when the bombardment stopped. The result was that the unprotected British infantry, who were advancing in the open in broad daylight and soon impeded by German wire, were hit by enfilading machine-gun fire. In most cases the result was far worse than decimation.

The question that must be faced is: whose fault was it? The British army, including generals from all arms of the service, was totally unprepared for the new type of warfare. And the British were not alone, because every other country was equally unprepared. General Staffs everywhere followed their normal practice of preparing for the last war not the next one. Moreover, in the British army, not many of the top generals had come from the ranks of the gunners. In 1918, the six most senior generals in the BEF were three from the cavalry (Haig, Birdwood and Byng), two from the infantry (Plumer and Rawlinson) and only one gunner (Horne). The influence of the ‘cavalry mentality’ was felt during and after the First World War and had a long-range influence on British armoured tactics.

On the Western Front during the painful years 1915, 1916 and 1917, the British and French armies were constantly on the attack. Attackers always lost more men than defenders. Except for three major German offensives, the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, the assault on Verdun in 1916 and the March 1918 attack at St Quentin, the German armies spent the time defending what they had won during the early months of the war. But the fact that the hated enemy occupied large tracts of French soil drove the French, with British support, to make constant and expensive efforts to evict them. This meant that the French and British suffered the greatest penalty from the failure of the deeply flawed tactics of artillery bombardment followed by daytime infantry assault. As the failures mounted, the only remedy from the military chiefs and their staffs was to apply greater force next time: with predictable results.

In the summer of 1916, after almost two years of war, the British unveiled and used on a tiny scale the first tanks: the crawling monsters that were the first major innovation of the war. (Poison gas, first used by the Germans during the Second Battle of Ypres, was an unpleasant surprise, but protective masks to counter its effect ensured that gas was never going to be a decisive weapon.) However, the British had not applied enough rigorous thought to how tanks should be effectively employed, and the attack on Flers on the Somme in 1916, and the larger offensive at Cambrai in 1917, gave no indication of the ultimately war-winning importance of this new weapon. The first major innovation to break the deadlock of trench warfare – the tank – was exploited for its weaponry more than for its mobility.

The second major innovation, developed by the German army, was based on new battlefield tactics. The dramatic use of these tactics, against the British at St Quentin on 21 March 1918, was considered after a few days to be the method by which the deadlock would be decisively broken. But this was not to be.

The technique, which can be described as 'crumbling', is associated with the name of General Ludendorff, the *de facto* Commander-in-Chief of the German army; but it was actually conceived by Colonel Georg von Bruchmüller, an officer who deserves to be remembered, especially since the techniques of the March 1918 offensive were echoed in the German Blitzkrieg of 1940. Von Bruchmüller's first principle concerned the point of attack. He was less interested in the long-term strategic value of the objective than in the fact that it was a weak spot in the British line; the first assault was on the thinly held front of the British 5th Army in front of St Quentin. The second principle was surprise, which was achieved by a very short artillery bombardment of unprecedented intensity, using high-explosive and gas shells fired on the British front line, and then quickly shifting to the rear areas to prevent reinforcements from moving forward. The third principle was the use of small parties of highly trained infantry named 'Shock-Troops', armed with machine guns, whose job

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was to find and exploit small patches of weakness in the British positions. They succeeded startlingly well, and the result was confusion in the British ranks, widespread infiltration and a rapid crumbling of the British positions. Within days, the 5th Army had virtually ceased to exist.

The first attack was followed later by two others on different parts of the long front in France and Flanders. Nevertheless, taking the long view, the Bruchmüller method was not a war-winner. By concentrating on tactics at the expense of strategy, the German assaults had no real focus, since the attacks led in different directions. The result was that the German effort ran out of steam despite the fact that it left huge dents in the Allied line. The Germans had shot their bolt and were therefore vulnerable to a major riposte later in 1918.

In the summer of 1918, the British gave birth to a third innovation, and this at last was the fighting technique that proved decisive. The underlying principle was *cooperation* between fighting arms that led to synergy (a point raised in the first paragraph of this chapter). The concept was developed by General Rawlinson's 4th Army and put into effect in August 1918. The attack saw the total integration of infantry, armour, air, engineers and artillery: the complete orchestra of war. The climax of the battle was, in Ludendorff's words, 'the black day' of the war for the German army. On top of all this General Foch, Generalissimo of the Allied armies, and Field Marshal Haig, British Commander-in-Chief, made planned switches in the Allied attacks on different parts of the long battle line. These disrupted German defensive preparations. Eventually Ludendorff lost his nerve and suffered a collapse, and victory came on 11 November 1918.

The contribution of the Royal Regiment was universally recognized, and the most visible tribute paid to it was the finest of all the monuments to British soldiers who had fallen in battle. This is the massive Gunner Memorial at Hyde Park Corner, near the Duke of Wellington's house in Central London.

However, the lesson from the British offensive in August 1918 – the vital importance of synergy resulting from cooperation between all arms, including air power – was all but forgotten by the British. The senior officers of the army continued to focus in a general way on mobility to overcome the curse of the siege warfare of 1914–1918. But the proven method of introducing mobility to break the deadlock, the all-arms offensive, was frustrated by at least four impediments. The first was the lack of a formal all-arms doctrine that could form the basis of planning and training. This is related to the second point, thinking in 'silos': something that in particular led to a lack of cooperation from the Royal Air Force. The third was a technical factor, the feebleness of tactical radio communications that were crucially important on a rapidly moving battlefield. The fourth – rather decisively – was the perpetual shortage of funds.

However, the Germans did not forget the lesson and it had a huge influence on the German tactics of Blitzkrieg that achieved dazzling results during the