



The Language of Business: Understanding the British 'war machine'

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In 1917, the American journalist Isaac Frederick Marcossion visited the General Headquarters [GHQ] of the British Expeditionary Force [BEF] at Montreuil-sur-Mer following a tour of the Western Front. He recorded his experiences of this visit for *Everybody's Magazine* and in a short pamphlet entitled *A Visit to Sir Douglas Haig*. Aside from offering a portrait of the 'impressive' figure of Haig himself, which stress the British Commander-in-Chief's soldierly characteristics such as 'dignity?', 'reserve' and the ubiquitous 'imperturbability?', Marcossion's account also includes a series of observations on the nature of the army itself. It is the language of these observations which form the subject of this post, as the words used by Marcossion to describe GHQ to his readers illustrate a conflict far removed from the image of an inert bloodbath overseen by backward-looking, cavalry-obsessed 'donkeys'.

The First World War on the Western Front was an industrial conflict. The armies that fought it required men, munitions and materials on a scale hitherto unimagined. Without food, men cannot fight. Without ammunition, guns cannot fire. As an illustrative example, in the first two weeks of September 1917, during the Third Battle of Ypres, the British fired 4,283,550 rounds of ammunition. All of which had to be produced, transported and delivered to the right place at the right time. Popular images of the war, transfixed by the horrors of trench warfare, have succeeded in almost completely eradicating this vast organizational challenge from the historiography. Marcossion's contemporary account, however, does not diminish the importance of this challenge, but instead marvels at the scale of the operation required simply to feed the voracious appetite of the Western Front.

The language used evokes a very precise impression: Haig's GHQ is 'the nerve centre of the mightiest English military machine ever created?', the 'scientific incarnation of the greatest of all business problems'. The challenge facing GHQ is, according to Marcossion, 'strangely familiar' to those accustomed to the mechanics of a huge corporation. The war is not written of as a battle between the innate martial qualities of competing nations, but rather as a contest between competing industrial systems. 'Go behind the scenes and you find that, like every other detail of the war, it is merely a matter of systematic, calculated detail. It is like a super-selling campaign conducted by the best organized business concern in the world'.

GHQ housed the 'directors' of this concern, the men charged with coordinating a seemingly infinite number of processes and procedures, meticulously seeking more efficient, dependable ways in which to move the 'endless ammunition trains, the tailing squadrons of motor trucks, the rattling processions of artillery?', to where they could deliver their cargo, be it food for the troops or shells for the guns. Within this establishment, professional soldiers mixed freely with experts drawn from Britain to utilize their particular skills within a hybrid, civil-military structure. Railway men, chemists, technicians, meteorologists and myriad others were amalgamated into the immense organization which lurked behind the walls of that modest chateau at Montreuil-sur-Mer.

Marcosson's account, first published in June 1917 ' less than two months after the United States had decided to enter the war ' was clearly designed to show the American public that the war effort in Europe was being commanded by men in whom the lives of the 'doughboys' crossing the Atlantic could be entrusted. As such, his glowing report of the dedication, toil and efficiency of GHQ is hardly a surprise. But the *words* used to help his audience understand both the man, and the army he commanded, are instructive of the image Marcosson wished to paint in the minds of his readers. The BEF was not a brain dead relic of the nineteenth century engaged in a primitive slogging match in the Flanders mud, but a scientific, business-like, well-oiled machine; a great corporate enterprise of complex, interconnected, synchronized organizations. And Haig' Far from being a 'donkey?', he was the centralizing force responsible for overseeing the entire 'business' on the Western Front. To quote the title of Marcosson's original article as it appeared in *Everybody's*, Sir Douglas Haig was the 'General Manager of War'.

Further reading:

Marcosson, I.F., *A Visit to Sir Douglas Haig* (London: The Avenue Press, 1917) is available to download from the [Internet Archive](#).

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