

WITH THE FIFTH ARMY IN RETREAT

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[A Personal Footnote to General Gough's *Fifth Army*.]

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OF making war-books, even now, there does not seem to be an end. The flood keeps on, as diverse as ever in character and quality. But it cannot go on much longer, for even the deepest emotions are dried up when memory is their sole inspiration. The books of action, which have all the interest of personal reminiscence, must be written soon or never. And it is a duty alike to the past and to the future that they should be written.

For this reason, we welcome the latest* of the war-books. The writer is a man who has peculiar qualifications for writing the kind of book some of us want to read from time to time in the same spirit as men have a longing to go back and linger over the scenes of youth. It is also the book we would like to put into the hands of our sons to tell them something of the heritage they have received from the generation before them, and that they may learn to live in the spirit in which men knew how to die.

General Sir Hubert Gough was emphatically a war-man. He belonged to that generation, and grew into responsibility with its events. In 1914 he was commanding a cavalry brigade in Ireland: in 1916 he was commanding an army in the field in France, and by 1917 he was being freely mentioned as Sir Douglas Haig's successor. In the spring of 1918, the fortune of war placed him in the position of having to fight the most terrible battle of the campaign, in which he maintains that the men of his command saved the Empire and the allied cause. But, for him, it meant the end of a meteoric and brilliant military career. His book makes no pretension to being dispassionate or unprejudiced. It has all the fascination of an *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. Yet it is not a squealing complaint of harsh treatment. Rather it is written in limpid narrative English, with the noble and dignified restraint of a man who is

**The Fifth Army*, by General Sir Hubert Gough.

heir to all that is best in British chivalry. To some of us, at least, who served under the writer, it is a deeply moving record, for it is also *Apologia pro Exercitii Suo*.

A third of General Gough's book is devoted to telling the story of one battle, which has been widely regarded as a defeat for British arms that almost became a disaster of the first magnitude. It cost him his command and his career. Certainly, it was the most terrible battle of the war. For concentrated fury and fierce fighting, it is doubtful if it has a parallel in all history. If, as *The Fifth Army* contends, it was the turning-point of victory for the allied arms, future history may regard it not only as one of the world's worst battles, but also as one of the greatest.

What did it feel like to be in it? During what many of us can recall only as "the great Retreat", I was a subaltern of the Rifle Brigade, serving with the 16th battalion of the regiment in the 39th division. The publication of General Gough's book has suggested to me that perhaps a foot-note might be written to his narrative, conceived, I trust, in the same spirit, to tell in a necessarily more limited way the same story from the point of view of a man who went through it in the fighting line, and is fortunate enough to be alive to tell the tale.

The year 1918 broke ominously for the allied arms. The continuous battles that raged in the Ypres salient for the last five months of 1917 had ended around that Flanders village with the strangely suggestive name that can even now be recalled only with a sense of horror—Passchendaele. The French were exhausted, and in no spirit for further attack; scarcely even in the mood for defence. The brilliant victories of Allenby in the East were still to be won. The American armies could hardly take the field for another six months. But the major fact in the whole wide scheme of operations was the collapse of Russia. Clearly, that meant the release of German armies for a colossal attack in the West. Everybody recognized that it was "now or never" for the German arms. There was still an opportunity to direct a smashing blow in France or Flanders, and thus win the war or, at least, prevent defeat.

It was obvious duty of the allied commanders to prepare a defensive scheme. General Gough recounts what is now familiar to all students of the war events, and confirms the fact that, in spite of protests, Sir Douglas Haig was forced by Mr. Lloyd George to take over 28 miles of additional front from the French. Thus the plan of defence, agreed upon by Generals Haig and Petain, was practically destroyed so far as the British armies were concerned. There seems no reason to doubt that this was the determining fact

in the direction of subsequent events, and only British pluck saved us all from inconceivable disaster.

At this period of the war, the British Intelligence Service was conducted with wonderful efficiency. Battalions in the line used to be furnished with an amazing array of details about the troops opposite them; who they were, where they came from, at times we were even informed as to the names of the commanding officers. All information gradually began to indicate that the attack of the German forces, which had been training and refurnishing throughout the winter, was to be directed at the junction-point between the French and British armies. The successful issue of such a thrust was of obvious strategic value. It meant the separation of the two armies, but it was to be only the first stage in a more ambitious project. Not only were the British armies to be compelled into the abandonment of the channel ports, while the French armies fell back on Paris, but a second blow was to follow rapidly on the first. The Germans were to capture the channel ports, but they also proposed to round up the British Expeditionary Force in Flanders. If these magnificently conceived operations had proved successful, Germany would have won the war. Certainly she would not have lost. But the plan failed, and the explanation is very simply stated. The Germans did not smash through at the junction-point of the two armies. They hurled the whole force of their attack against the British Fifth Army. Sir Douglas Haig, distracted by uncertainty, and without reserves, could do nothing to support Sir Hubert Gough in this hour of supreme crisis. The Fifth Army reeled before the blow and retreated for thirty miles, but it never broke. The result was not only to frustrate the first part of the German plan, but so to exhaust the enemy that when they came to launch their grand attack in the North it had lost its punch. Such is the epic tale of *The Fifth Army*.

My memory travels back very clearly to 20th March, 1918, the day before the battle. The 39th Division was in Corps reserve, but such were the exigencies of the necessity for preparing defences that we were where even an amateur soldier like myself knows that main reserves should not be—a mile or so behind the front line. Still, it was what the men called “cushy”. It was very quiet. Scarcely a shell came over, except for certain ominous black bursts overhead, by which we knew that the enemy was ranging on our most vulnerable positions.

In the evening the air was very still. An ominous quiet hung over the front. As we now know, behind that curtain of silence, long columns of German infantry, guns and transport were moving

up into forward positions—such an army as had not taken the field since 1914, with well-trained freshly-equipped troops inspired by the thought that victory at last was in their grasp. For the last time, the gay and happy brotherhood of youth gathered round the mess-table—shall we ever know a comradeship just like that again? Dinner over, we listened to the most solemn address that has ever fallen upon my ears. It is the colonel, an old South Africa man, a regular soldier, who is speaking. He is the oldest man among us, and he has just turned forty. He tells us of how all information indicates that what we had come to expect as the inevitable attack would be let loose to-morrow morning at dawn. It would be very terrible in its character. We were greatly inferior to the enemy in man-power and ammunition. The most desperate battle of the war was about to commence. Every officer must show an example of personal courage, and be ready to stand fast, if necessary, to the death. The Empire looked to us—and above all, there was the honour of the regiment. It was the kind of speech one expects to hear only once in a life-time, but which nothing can ever blot out of the memory. Thereafter we subalterns went, each to his own platoon, and in a boyish half-shy way tried to communicate something of what we had heard to our men.

Dawn—the 21st March! Suddenly, pandemonium itself let loose! High explosive and gas shells seemed to drop like heavy rain into the battalion encampment. There was a heavy ground mist which kept chlorine gas hanging around, while the reeking fumes of successive high explosive bursts, not to speak of the masses of flying metal that whirred in all directions, produced a scene of almost indescribable confusion. The first shell of all had registered a direct hit on the signal hut, killed the signal-sergeant with most of the headquarters men, and so put us out of telephonic communication in the first five minutes of the battle.

Our distinct orders were to proceed to a pre-arranged battle position in the event of an attack. This assembly point was an open field, and thither with all expedition we groped our way in gas-masks. We have the authority of Mr. Winston Churchill, who has devoted one of his most glowing passages to its description, for stating that no bombardment such as broke upon our ears that morning had ever been heard before. I had heard and experienced some of the great artillery displays in the battles of the Somme and Ypres, but this was something quite different. It was like a devil's tattoo. Such incessant cannonading came to be known as "drum-fire", and the description was apt. It was like the very rapid beating of a tom-tom; but when one considers that every beat

was a burst of high explosive, the effect was such as to strike terror to the bravest heart. Mr. Churchill, who describes it so vividly, must have been within a mile of our assembly-position that morning.

The day was one of rumours, confusions and alarms. It was apparent that a terrific battle was proceeding less than two miles away. All communications were cut and, as we now know, very few of the messengers who were dispatched from the battalions in the line ever reached their destinations. The day brightened, and the fog disappeared. The enemy put up his "sausages" (observation-balloons) and sent over his aircraft, with the result that we were the object of much attention from his artillery. But compared with what the poor fellows were encountering in the advanced posts, we got off lightly. It was a day of anxious waiting.

At dusk, orders reached the battalion. Evidently the advanced posts were still holding out. It seemed incredible that anything had lived through those murderous bombardments. But the courage and devotion of the front-line men had been magnificent. They had obeyed their orders quite literally. They were standing, to the last man. A runner of a Scots battalion in the 9th division which was immediately in front of our position, one who had got through with a despatch, told me that they were practically surrounded, but that they were actually firing their rifles back and front over the parapets and parados of their trenches at the same time. However, there was a gap in the line, and our orders were to counter-attack and dig in. We were now definitely in the big fight.

Every man was supplied with a pick or shovel. In the fading light we marched silently, and I must add, solemnly, platoon by platoon in single file up to an assembly point for the attack. For me it is a night of melancholy remembrance. It was the last time I was to march at the head of these brave men with whom I had lived in that fatherly comradeship which existed between an infantry subaltern and his own little command. Twenty-four hours later, three out of every four men in the battalion had become casualties—killed, wounded or prisoner—and when the battle was over, not one of my own riflemen was present to answer the roll-call.

The counter-attack was not a serious affair. The enemy had not exploited his local success, and doubtless was both confused and exhausted after what must have been a very trying day for him. We made a few prisoners, and simply cleared the others out. A staff-officer appeared, and a line of trenches was sighted. Every man was set his task, and soon was digging as men dig for their very lives. For the Germans, alarmed by the sudden counter-

attack and its swift success, summoned artillery to their aid, with the result that we were the object of a heavy bombardment.

Morning (22nd March) found us in a commanding position, sitting on a saddle-like piece of ground, holding the gap between two divisions and a little to their rear. We were looking down a gentle slope with a good field of fire. Despite some weariness, for none of us had slept since dawn the previous morning, the men were in excellent spirits and ready for a day that we knew in our heart of hearts was to test our manhood to the limit,—not improbably, to the ultimate trial of all.

General Gough has established that the Germans outnumbered the British by more than three to one. On the first day of the battle, 42 German divisions attacked 12 British divisions in the Fifth Army, while the enemy had 12 divisions in reserve, and the British mustered to their help before the end of the battle only three British and three French divisions. Certainly we faced overwhelming odds. I can still recollect looking over the top of the shallow trench which I occupied with the men of my platoon, and through the heavy ground-mist, which so greatly aided the attack, I could see long columns of German infantry massing up, getting into extended order, preparing for those insidious “infiltrating” tactics which they used so skilfully during the battle.

Language cannot describe the desperate character of the fighting during that day. There was a short, sharp but very terrible bombardment, and then the attack commenced. The Germans had developed a new technique in infantry assault. Small columns went forward, armed with light automatic rifles, fired from the hip. The plan was to penetrate through gaps between our posts, and then to infilade from the flank with their fire. In the use of these tactics they were well trained, and they carried them through with great success.

Our orders were simply to hold out to the last. Memory brings back an experience of being continuously surrounded by Germans whom we beat off by rifle-fire. We were huddled together by sheer weight of numbers and devastating superiority in ammunition. Casualties were very heavy, but I am glad to say that we were able to get most of the wounded away. By mid-day I was the only officer of my company who was unwounded. The battalion adjutant was killed outright. The headquarters dug-out was overwhelmed, and such of the staff as escaped, among them the colonel and the regimental sergeant-major, came flying across the open and dropped into the trench beside me, where the whole of the company, which I was now commanding, were standing

together. The enemy had penetrated behind our position, having driven a wedge clean through the battalion front. Communication to the rear was impossible, and no orders reached us. I have since learned that the brigade-major, in a very gallant attempt to get through, was severely wounded and had his horse shot under him.

At four o'clock in the afternoon there were twenty of us left in the trench—all that remained of two companies. What had happened to the other two, it was impossible to discover. The commanding officer realized that they were faced with one of two alternative courses, neither of which appeared to serve any useful purpose. We could wait to be annihilated, or we could surrender. The men were unanimous in rejecting the second of these alternatives; and since the position was hopelessly lost, we agreed that the first would be an act of foolhardy courage. We resolved to withdraw, if the opportunity presented itself. We made a run for it, and rushed back to the crest of the slope. I looked back for a moment, and saw the Germans swarming into our evacuated trench. On the hill-top our action was confirmed, for a message reached us ordering a general withdrawal to a place of assembly in the rear. This position was the edge of a wood; and on reaching it, we found the poor shattered remnants of the brigade, including a few of our own stragglers who, in the heat of battle, had become separated. The most eloquent commentary on that day's fighting is found in the fact that my first duty as battalion adjutant, which position I had now to occupy, was to send in a strength return of 4 officers and 52 men in the line. Twenty-four hours previously we had numbered 26 officers and over 500 men. I judge that on the whole we were more fortunate than most. It is not difficult to understand General Gough's indignation with the politicians who, in the British House of Commons, said that the Fifth Army ran away.

He makes it very plain that the day following was one of grave anxiety for him. Mr. John Buchan says that "it was perhaps the most difficult in the whole annals of the British Army", and he is a cautious historian. For the Germans were over the Somme, and it looked as if the whole Fifth Army was to be thrown back against the river, and probably driven into it. That event would have been an incredible disaster. Orders were given for a withdrawal, first to the main corps line of defence, but that position was never occupied. The new stand must be made in front of Amiens, behind the river Somme.

The withdrawal was a very difficult operation. The Fifth Army was smashed, but still unbroken. I do not think we shall

ever forget the scenes of confusion which met our eyes when we reached the Somme bridges. Imagine a continuous stream of transport, ambulances, artillery, ammunition columns, groups of infantry, walking wounded, all making across the river, while the enemy kept up an incessant bombardment, killing and wounding men and horses. The famous Red Squadron, commanded by Baron Rich-toven, circled around the bridge-head, swooping down and directing devastating fire from machine-guns in the air. If you ask what happened—well, we simply ran for it.

Even the most desperate situation has its ludicrous experiences. I recollect that when I got over the Somme, one of the first sights that met my eyes was a soldier lugging a huge bass-fiddle. Naturally, I asked him who and what he was. The reply came back, "Divisional concert party, Sir!" Could such an army ever be defeated? Well, the fact is that we very nearly were. Personally, I felt the most desolate man on earth. I had been at the rear of the battalion seeing all our men safely over; and when I crossed the bridge, the remainder of the battalion had gone on, leaving me with three riflemen. I trudged disconsolately down the road, and in the gathering dark found our transport. Soon I was seated at a hearty meal of bully-beef stew and potatoes, the first hot food for 48 hours, and the last for another six days.

The battalion was at Feuillers, protecting a bridge-head on the Somme. I climbed on an ammunition limber bound for the front, and I must have been very tired, for when I awoke, it was to be rebuked soundly by the colonel for having lost touch with the battalion. The bully-beef stew was ample compensation!

Battalions were now virtually companies, and weak companies at that. Brigades were at battalion strength, and we organized accordingly. For two days we held the bridge at Feuillers. It was then that Sir Douglas Haig's famous message was distributed among the troops. Type-written copies were broadcast among us. Shall any of us who read that message ever forget its words? "Our backs are to the wall! There must be no more retirement!" But, there was to be more retirement. We did not know of it at the time, but a study of the battle-movements reveals that we were in a thoroughly dangerous position. We were ordered to form a defensive flank and get back as quickly as possible. On the morning of the 26th we understood why, for the Germans had forced the crossings of the Somme further south, and once more were behind us. The line of the river was gone, and we had to run, literally for our lives, down the road that led to Bray-sur-Somme.

We were now under conditions of open warfare, for most of us quite unfamiliar conditions. We were "trench-soldiers," ac-

customed to siege-tactics. This fact added not a little to the perplexities of these distracting days. Orders were given for withdrawals which we did not appreciate. We were definitely in retreat, and no reinforcements had appeared. Small wonder that we kept on wondering when and how it was all going to end!

Every effort was now concentrated on making a stand before Amiens, not only for the sake of the city itself, but because it was a strategic railway centre. For individual officers and men, decisions of that kind mean nothing. They particularise themselves into much more concrete and specific objectives. For us it meant the defence of a village, by name, Proyart. A trench-line was dug and occupied. We found some quilts and blankets in the abandoned homes of the unfortunate French inhabitants, who had evidently just left, and were now streaming down the roads to Amiens, a tragic and pathetic company. We wrapped these bed-clothes around us, and snatched some sleep.

The next day (27th March) was one of fierce battle. We were making yet another stand. The enemy came on in great force, using his infiltrating tactics with deadly effect. We lost two more officers and ten men. We fought until our left flank was "in the air"; and to save a complete break-through, once again the order was given to retire.

From this time on, I began to observe a certain psychological change in my own mind, which I believe was a reflection of a general attitude on the part of our soldiers. We had got the "retreat" mentality, a most demoralizing mood. Consider our situation. We were in the midst of what was obviously a great battle, in which operations were proceeding on a wide front. The first two days of the struggle had reduced our effective fighting strength so that we were only a poor remnant of a well-disciplined battalion. For five days we had been fighting a rear-guard action, evidently conducting a strategic retreat. Not a single soldier or gun had come to our support as a reinforcement. We had received a very moving appeal from our Commander-in-Chief. Were we the last battered remnants of a defeated army? This could not last much longer. I do not think that any of us was greatly concerned about himself. We had seen our brothers die, and we could die too. But we were a pathetically thin line of survivors. I began to see the Germans in Boulogne. It was in this mood of profound seriousness, which evoked a spirit of desperate resistance, that the rest of the battle was fought. Never were the tasks of commanding men so difficult as during these dark days of retreat.

Proyart was to be re-taken. I was assigned the duty that normally falls to a staff-captain on Brigade Headquarters (I was

really only a subaltern); to organize ammunition supplies for the attack. The carrying-parties who undertook this task were exposed to a very wicked machine-gun fire, so fierce that I do not understand how any of us remained alive and unwounded. But it was a hopeless business. How could exhausted men face overwhelming numbers such as were still matched against us? Proyart was not re-taken, and we had to be content with holding on in grim determination to a ridge behind the village.

That night (27th-28th March) the Germans surrounded the division. Our transport officer was bringing up rations and ammunition, and his leading mules charged an enemy post. He told me afterwards that the Germans scattered and ran. Doubtless they had the impression that they were being attacked by cavalry! But the rations never reached us, for there was no road through from the rear. It is very evident that the German staff did not realize that they had a whole British division, or what was left of one, bottled up; or, if they did, somebody blundered. Before dawn, the bottle was presented with a neck, and the cork removed, and we promptly proceeded to get out of it. This highly exciting operation was in progress when it was discovered. On that narrow neck of country, our door of hope, it seemed to us as if the artillery of a whole army corps was directed. But it was a case of out or nothing. And yet it meant still another line of defence was gone.

In the inevitable confusion that followed upon this movement, it was very difficult for men like myself, subalterns virtually commanding battalions under the most trying circumstances, to know what to do. By this time, our colonel was called away to lead a brigade, leaving me with the battalion, which was a mere handful of men who looked ferocious enough, for we had more than a week's growth of beard on our chins. Battalions were really platoons, and brigades had become less than companies. A battalion of the Black Watch beside us had nobody to direct them except their medical officer and one sergeant. Every combatant officer was gone. But somehow we hung together, and formed a defensive flank under the command of our brigadier general.

A new line of defence had to be fomed nearer Amiens, and this involved a hurried right movement to a map-reference which turned out to be the edge of a wood—the Bois de Hangard. There the retreat stopped, and the Germans came on no further. For two days the battle raged like a shuttle-cock through the wood and back again. But the worst was over. The Germans must have been at least as exhausted as we were, and the great attack fizzled out like a game of hide-and-go-seek among the trees. On the

31st March the first fresh troops arrived, with the exception of some cavalry, who had helped to clear the wood, and a miscellaneous group of locomotive drivers, who had been rounded up at Amiens. They were Australians, and passed up through our lines carrying the enemy back with comparatively few casualties. At long last, a message came that we were relieved, and I marched, or rather staggered, down the road to Amiens through the town of Villers-Brettoneux to billets at the head of fewer than thirty men with one other officer—"all that was left of them, left of six hundred."

I do not think that the Great War can provide a parallel to the story of this battle. Sir Hubert Gough deserves well of his country for having given it a permanent record. Were we defeated? If an army is compelled to give way before the attack of overwhelming forces and to retire, you may call it defeat, but in this reverse there lay the germ of victory. Certainly the Germans never attacked with the same vigour again. Did we run away? Well, those of us who were left to do the running did not run very far. To cover thirty miles in ten days is not very fast travelling. And if we did give way, the line was never broken.

However, the time is long past, if it ever existed, when those of us who shared the comradeship of that gallant army felt any resentment against the statesmen who slandered the dead and the maimed. Some of these politicians have already been apportioned that ignominy which undoubtedly they have earned. This story is written for nobler and less personal reasons. Perhaps it may convey some little sense of the great cost at which freedom has been purchased. I hope in its own way it may help to destroy, for ever, foolish ideas about the glory of war. And yet, I should be sorry to think that in any order of society, however pacific in purpose and friendly of disposition to all mankind, there did not remain men who know how to die rather than surrender, and who with their lives can fight for what is worth while even "when their backs are to the wall."

Meantime, there are those of us who have found a new inspiration in life since we read the closing words of this noble book written by a very gallant soldier:

To those who survived, I say: hold your heads high with pride. History will proclaim the greatness of what you did. It can be said of no other troops that they did more to win the War. You are the remnants of a gallant band of brothers buffeted by adversity, and grievously maligned; yet your spirit is too fine to be damped by such misfortunes: you are the men on whom Britain is based.