PETER HART

VOICES FROM THE FRONT

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR

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ALL OVER BY CHRISTMAS!

THE GENESIS OF THE GREAT WAR was not a simple matter, but it can be stated in simple terms. Europe was beset by political and economic rivalries that reflected both the bloody history of the continent and the conflicting ambitions of its constituent nation states. That these nation states cared little for the common weal, but only for their own ambitions, is undeniable. There were many possible causes, many underlying threats to the peace of Europe in 1914: the explosive powder keg of the Balkans, the wide-ranging rise of separatist nationalist ambitions, the colonial stresses between the great empires, German insecurities at being surrounded by enemies, French determination to regain her lost provinces from Germany, the economic determinism that set the leading capitalist economies in a vicious winner-takes-all competition – or even the increasing willingness to contemplate violence that seemed to permeate everything from domestic politics to art and literature. All this is true. Any one of these factors, alone or in concert, may have had the power to trigger war. But the fact is that in the end they were not the *prime* cause of war.

What caused the war in August 1914 was the underlying threat

emanating from the German Empire, a militaristic power that was actively seeking to establish the domination of Europe. Behind the blustering persona of Kaiser Wilhelm II lay a very real threat to the status quo in Europe. Modern Germany had been forged on the anvil of war, first by victory over Austria in 1866 and then by the stunning defeat of France in 1870–71. By 1914, the German Army, based on an efficient conscription system, was the most powerful in the world. It had a long-standing general staff which had mastered – at least to their own satisfaction – the study of the art of war. The infantry, cavalry and artillery were all equipped on a de luxe scale, and their regular drill and constant training-ground exercises had burnished their collective military skills to a fearsome degree. Germany's economy was booming, penetrating markets across the globe and offering competition where Britain and others would rather have preserved a privileged monopoly. Then in 1898 came the final piece in the jigsaw: successive Naval Laws began a programme of warship construction that presented a serious challenge to the pre-eminence of the Royal Navy.

The rise of Germany had not gone unnoticed in London. The defeat of Napoleonic France at Waterloo in 1815 had left a Europe free from domination of any one power. The Great Powers were in balance – not harmony – but at least a rough equilibrium that prevented any country attaining supremacy. For most of the nineteenth century the Royal Navy had ruled the waves and, with her huge colonial empire covering significant sections of the globe, Great Britain was *apparently* the strongest power in the world, even though chronic unwillingness to invest in the sinews of Imperial governance left her with a laughably weak army. The rise of Germany changed everything. It was axiomatic to any British statesman worth his salt that no one state could be allowed to secure the hegemony of Europe, so the threatened permanent defeat of France by Germany could not be countenanced.

The signs of this underlying change in British attitudes were soon evident. A colonial rapprochement of the *entente cordiale* was reached with France in 1904. This smoothed away many of the historical conflicts by allowing both countries clearly defined untrammelled spheres of influence in Africa and the Middle East. A far more serious signal that the ground was shifting occurred with the signing of the Anglo-Russian

Convention in 1907. Britain and Russia had been playing the 'Great Game' for most of the previous century, competing for power and influence across a great swathe of central Asia from Persia to Tibet. Now the threat of Germany far closer to home meant that these rivalries were buried by an agreement that managed to define borders and areas of 'interest' to their mutual satisfaction.

With both her main former rivals safely 'within the tent' of a loose Triple Entente, the British began to explore what war with Germany might mean. Step by step military arrangements were negotiated, which drew Britain ever closer to the French. It was a marriage of convenience as the two countries had interlocking strengths and weaknesses. The German Navy was such a threat that the Royal Navy had to gather all its forces together to face the German High Seas Fleet across the North Sea. In consequence, arrangements were drawn up whereby the British would undertake to protect the French Atlantic coastline, while the French Navy would concentrate its forces to secure Anglo-French interests in the Mediterranean area. Secret staff talks were also underway to commit the British Army to supplying an expeditionary force to fight alongside the French on the mainland. From the French perspective the actual numbers contributed were of little matter compared to the symbolism of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fighting at their side, giving a clear indication of positive intent that, in due time, the whole strength of the British Empire would be thrown into the fight.

The Boer War of 1899–1902 had drawn attention to the manifold imperfections of the British Army. The most obvious fault was its inadequate size. Over the course of four years, some 450,000 men had been deployed to South Africa, but even a mobilisation on this scale would have been of little relevance in a full-scale continental war. That would be a war of heavyweights. Yet this fault would never be resolved in peacetime, for British governments lacked the political resolve to embark either on the serious increases in taxation, or on the introduction of conscription, which would be required to compete on an equal military footing with Germany. Any reforms to improve the army would have to be made from within existing parameters. It was certainly unhelpful that the army was not highly regarded in polite society throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Although there was a superficial

sentimentality over the 'thin red line', this masked an indifference to the fate of the men that actually had to police the Empire.

It is therefore no surprise that conditions of service in the British Army were at times dire. Barrack accommodation was often run down and lacking in basic amenities, the food was barely adequate and the pay dreadful. But in this the army was not unique, for Edwardian Britain was a relatively harsh social environment, and the army still offered a way out for youths dogged by unfortunate personal circumstances or trapped in mundane jobs. Young William Holbrook from the Hornchurch area was one such recruit to the colours. His family had fragmented after the death of their father and Holbrook had subsequently endured, for a period, the tender mercies of parish relief. After working as a greengrocer, a farm labourer and a household servant, by the autumn of 1908, aged 15, he was ready for something different. From Holbrook's experience of the recruitment process there would still appear to have been a relaxed attitude to legal requirements.

> This gardener he'd been in the army and he used to tell me all the tales about India and all these rajahs he made out he'd seen. I thought, 'This is the job for me!' So one morning, instead of going to work, I went up the post office where I saw, 'Recruits wanted in the army: 30 Southchurch Street, East Ham.' I found the place and knocked – a woman came to the door and she said, 'Yes?' I said, 'I want to join the army, please.' She said, 'How old are you?' I said, '15!' She said, 'You can't join the army at 15; you've got to be 18. Come in I'll make you a cup of tea – you stop here till my husband comes home and you talk to him.' About an hour later he came in, a smart looking man with an army uniform, khaki cap. He looked and said, 'What have we got here?' 'He wants to join the army.' 'You can't join the army. When you're 18 I'll put you in the finest regiment in the British Army, but not before.' I suppose I looked miserable because he said, 'Stand up against that door.' So I stood against the door and it was marked off in inches. He said, 'You're a tall boy, you know.' I was about 5 feet 8 inches. He said, 'Can you tell a white lie? Can you say you're 17?' I said, 'Yes!' He said, 'Right, tomorrow morning you come with me.' Next morning he took me up to Stratford to the doctor. When it was my turn to go in he said, 'Strip'.

> I took everything off, I'd never done it in front of anybody so I was a bit nervous at first! He said, 'Hop on your left foot and right foot alternately.' Well that done me. I'd never heard the word alternately, what that meant. So I started hopping, 'The other left foot you bloody fool!' I thought, 'I've come to the right place!' Never been spoken to like that before! Anyway I passed.[1]
>
> William Holbrook

He would hear plenty more language in a similar vein before he was a civilian again.

The British Army may have been small, but the regular soldiers were extremely well trained. The standard of drill was first rate, as recruits underwent the classic parade-ground regime that sought to break them down as individuals before building them back up into the standard mould of a trained soldier. There was a particular concentration on musketry, with both accuracy and speed prized highly. It was expected that the trained regular would be able to achieve some fifteen aimed rounds per minute. Whether infantryman, sapper, cavalry, gunner or medic, they were all inculcated with the principle that they were fortunate above measure to be a member of the best unit in the whole British Army. It may seem trite, but it had the enormous advantage in that it worked.

> One of the first things that happened was Captain Lock explained our cap badge to us. He said, 'This is your cap badge. There is a Latin motto at the foot, "*In Arduis Fidelis*" – faithful in difficulties – that's the translation from the Latin. That's the *esprit de corps*.' In other words you were there to look after other people and be faithful to them. That used to drum itself into me on the battlefield, I used to say to myself, 'Boy, no matter how afraid you are, you have got to live up to your cap badge'. And it helped.[2]
>
> Stretcher Bearer William Collins, Base Depot, Royal Army Medical Corps, McGrigor Barracks, Aldershot

In the contest of a continental war, this elite force of just 250,000 men was nigh-on irrelevant. In a logical world it might have been best used to provide a reservoir of the officers, NCO instructors and trained soldiers from which a mighty new volunteer army might be created, yet

to achieve this, Britain would have had to renege on her commitments to the French. The BEF was therefore duly dispatched to war on the Western Front, with the inevitable result that the training of the greater armies that were later needed would be left to older soldiers returning to the colours.

An important additional layer was, however, added to the British Army before 1914. This was the Territorial Force created from the Haldane reforms of 1908 which had swept away the previous ramshackle system of 'Volunteer' units. It allowed each of the county regiments to create additional Territorial battalions that would recruit 'part-time' soldiers locally, aged between 17 and 38, who would be liable to call-up for Home Service on the outbreak of any war. The 'Terriers' would undergo basic training at least one night a week at local drill halls and would mobilise once a year for a two-week summer camp. Their perceived role was to replace the regular units when the BEF deployed overseas. Their officers would be a mixture of old regulars and socially acceptable young men who had usually been given their introduction to military life with the Officers' Training Corps (OTC) run by most public schools. One such was Cyril Dennys, the son of an Indian Army officer who was a member of the OTC at Malvern School.

> The war they were preparing for was something like the Boer War: great emphasis on musketry; no emphasis on artillery at all; the machine gun simply wasn't visible at all. One would be manoeuvred in columns of companies and then broken up into lines of skirmishers which would be very much what they would have done in the Boer War.[3]
>
> Cyril Dennys, OTC, Malvern School

In fairness, it should be recognised that the Boer War was the most recent conflict experienced by the British Army.

THE STORY OF THE STUMBLING RACE TO WAR in 1914 is a tragedy from start to finish. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, by a Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip, was the trigger. The exact sequence of events and motivations will forever be

debated, but in the diplomatic crisis that followed it is clear that, rather than working for a negotiated peace settlement, Germany was offering unconditional support to her ally the Austro-Hungarian Empire and actively encouraging them to threaten Serbia. This culminated in the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July. As the rash of mobilisations and counter-mobilisations began, the process became irreversible.

The Germans were ready for war. Their strategy was based on the Schlieffen Plan, which sought to hold the slowly mobilising Russians in the east while seeking a quick decision on the Western Front. It envisaged a strong force bludgeoning through Belgium and northern France before moving south, pushing strongly towards Paris before finally encircling the French Army. For Britain, it would be the invasion of Belgium by Germany that at a stroke clarified the tangle of issues and doubts. It indicated without any ambiguity the true nature of the German state and her ambitions, at any price, for hegemony over Europe. Yet there was still a considerable degree of anti-war sentiment in Britain, as was witnessed by 16-year-old schoolboy Harold Bing.

> When I heard that a big anti-war demonstration was to be held in Trafalgar Square on Sunday, 2nd August 1914, and that Keir Hardie[4] was to be one of the speakers, I walked up from my home to Trafalgar Square – about 11 miles – took part in that demonstration, listened to Keir Hardie and of course walked home again afterwards, which perhaps showed a certain amount of boyish enthusiasm for the anti-war cause. It was quite a thrilling meeting with about ten thousand people there and certainly very definitely anti-war. But at the very same time while we were demonstrating in Trafalgar Square, the Cabinet was sitting at Downing Street deciding on the ultimatum which brought the country into the war two days later on 4th August.[5]
>
> Harold Bing

With the Germans massed on the Belgian frontier on 2 August, the British Cabinet could hesitate no longer; the Germans were going too far. News of the German declaration of war on Belgium drew a final ultimatum and Britain joined the war at midnight on 4 August.

As the last hours of peace trickled away, the popular reaction was

generally enthusiastic. Jobbing actor Jim Davies was caught up in the thronging crowds in London on that fateful day. There was a real holiday atmosphere.

> We expected war to be declared, so I rushed down by 11 o'clock down to Big Ben. The crowds were there and as Big Ben struck 11 everybody cheered! We sang, 'Rule Britannia' and 'Britons never shall be slaves' and then someone said, 'Let's march back to Buckingham Palace.' We all marched back, right down Whitehall, down the Mall. It was very late then, getting on for midnight, and we were shouting for the King and singing songs. I'd met a couple of medical students and we climbed up by the big gates. The King came out and the Queen, we all cheered and sang some more. We said we'd join the army the next day: full of enthusiasm – not drink – just enthusiasm. Next day, I thought, 'Christ, I'm going to join the army, I've got to give two weeks' notice in!' I was young and stupid I suppose, full of patriotism and the *Boys Own Paper* on which my boyhood was based.[6]
>
> Jim Davies

The influence of jingoistic comics and books was marked on men who were too young to have any real experience of life. The horrors of the Boer War had been filtered through a prism of heroism and sacrifice which gave the impression that 'bad things' could only happen to someone else. Every individual thought of himself as the inviolable hero in their very own adventure story: nothing could happen to them.

> I thought it would be like I had read about in the Boer War. I'd read about the Siege of Mafeking, about Baden Powell and how he held out at Ladysmith. Everything was a victory as far as we were concerned. I remember a drawing of Spion Kop and there was a chap lying there with his leg off, in a pool of blood with his hat on one side. I thought, 'How terrible – the chap's lost his leg.' Never did I realise that I would lose my own leg![7]
>
> Jim Davies

From end to end the country was buzzing with excitement as everyone realised that nigh on one hundred years after Waterloo, they would once again be at war with a western European power.

> It was a lovely morning. I can remember it; I see it as plain as now. I was going to work for 7 o'clock. As I got to the end of Richmond Road, there was a newsagent's shop and outside was a big placard, 'War Declared on Germany'. Mobilisation had taken place. In the evening I went to Bellevue Barracks. There were crowds round there, everybody was excited. Anytime they saw a soldier he was right at the top of the tree – cheering and all that. The people welcomed it: a challenge had been thrown down over Belgium and they were eager to take that challenge. Everybody was stood in groups talking, 'We've got to beat the Germans!' Quite a number were already setting off to enlist that day as it broke out. Very patriotic songs singing – 'Rule Britannia', 'Land of Hope and Glory'. All the favourites. I stayed there till late at night – half past ten – I should have been back by nine![8]
>
> Horace Calvert

The minority who continued to hold on to their anti-war views found themselves overwhelmed in the popular rush to war.

The Regular Army was mobilised on 5 August. The regiments called in their reservists – older men who had already served their time with the colours, left the army and started to build a new life. By this time often married, drifting into middle-age with a sedentary civilian lifestyle, they suddenly found themselves pitched back into the army, some struggling to reach the required fitness levels. It would be these men that formed a significant element within the BEF dispatched to France.

The advent of war meant that the Territorials also found themselves called up for war service. One young Territorial officer was Lieutenant Eric Wolton whose time in the OTC qualified him to command a platoon in the 1/5th Suffolk Regiment. He and the volunteers of Lavenham had trained together and would now go to war together. It was a strangely happy time.

> About 2 o'clock in the morning of August 5th the post office man came along. My brother had made arrangements, showed him in which bedroom he slept. He made a noise outside and then delivered the telegram. I at once had to go down and wake up the sergeant major in Lavenham and he sent people out to the villages round about to tell them they must come in. The local haberdashery opened straight away so that people could get their kits all completed. The

> whole village was woken up. One felt one was taking part in history; the excitement – it was like a holiday – everybody was moving about. We paraded in the market place at about half past nine – full marching order. My brother had to go off early to Bury St Edmunds, so I was in charge of the detachment. We paraded on the Market Hill, crowds all round us. The Salvation Army band had all turned up so we marched to the station with the band. My father and mother said goodbye to us all there. My three brothers and my cousin were all of us in the Territorials before the war. We went to Bury St Edmunds, marched up to the old barracks. As every detachment was coming in we'd greet them, laugh at them and say, 'You're late! Are you afraid of war?' A wonderful spirit. Whether it was sensible or not I don't know but the whole spirit was ecstasy – Rupert Brooke has got it absolutely right in his poems.[9]
>
> Lieutenant Eric Wolton, 1/5th Suffolk Regiment

With this kind of atmosphere it was hardly surprising that many of the Territorials were more than keen to waive the right that they should only be employed on Home Service and not sent overseas to war. The dominant mood was of pride in themselves, their friends and their Territorial status, though many were unknowingly signing their lives away. These Territorials represented at least a small investment for the future, but most were not ready to be sent into action until 1915. In the summer of 1914, the regulars of the pitiably small BEF would have to face the might of the German Army, participating in the battles on the Western Front that would decide the future of the world.