

1914, by John French, *Viscount of Ypres*

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY

For years past I had regarded a general war in Europe as an eventual certainty. The experience which I gained during the seven or eight years spent as a member of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and my three years tenure of the Office of Chief of the General Staff, greatly strengthened this conviction.

For reasons which it is unnecessary to enter upon, I resigned my position as Chief of the Staff in April, 1914, and from that time I temporarily lost touch with the European situation as it was officially represented and appreciated.

I remember spending a week in June of that year in Paris, and when passing through Dover on my return, my old friend, Jimmie Watson (Colonel Watson, late of the 60th Rifles, A.D.C. to the Khedive of Egypt), looked into my carriage window and told me of the murder of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort. I cannot say that I actually regarded this tragedy as being the prelude which should lead ultimately to a great European convulsion, but in my own mind, and in view of my past experience, it created a feeling of unrest within me and an instinctive foreboding of evil. Then

came a few weeks of the calm which heralded the storm—a calm under cover of which Germany was vigorously preparing for "the day."

One afternoon, late in July, I was the guest at lunch of the German Ambassador, Prince Lichnowski. It was a small party, comprising, to the best of my recollection, only Princess Henry of Pless, Lady Cunard, Lord Kitchener, His Excellency and myself. The first idea I got of the storm which was brewing came from a short conversation which I had with the Ambassador in a corner of the room after lunch. He was very unhappy and perturbed, and he plainly told me that he feared all Europe would be in a blaze before we were a fortnight older. His feeling was prophetic. His surprising candour foreshadowed the moral courage with which Prince Lichnowski subsequently issued his famous apologia.

On July 28th Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. The military preparations of the Dual Monarchy inevitably led to a partial mobilisation by Russia against Austria, whereupon the German Emperor proclaimed the "Kriegsgefahrzustand" on July 31st, following this up by declaring war against Russia on August 1st. On August 2nd German troops entered Luxemburg and, without declaration of war, violated French territory. Great Britain declared war against Germany on August 4th and against Austria on August 12th, France having broken off relations with Austria two days earlier.

On Thursday, July 30th, I was sent for by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and was given private

intimation that, if an expeditionary force were sent to France, I was to command it. On leaving the room I found some well-known newspaper correspondents in the passage. I talked a little with them and found that great doubt existed in their minds as to whether this country would support France by force of arms. This doubt was certainly shared by many.

I remember well that on the morning of Saturday, August 1st, the day upon which Germany declared war on Russia, and it was known that the breaking out of hostilities between Germany and France was only a question of hours, I received a visit from the Vicomte de la Panouse, the French Military Attaché in London. He told me that the Ambassador was much disheartened in mind by these doubts and fears. We talked matters over, and he came to dinner with me that night. Personally, I felt perfectly sure that so long as Mr. Asquith remained Prime Minister, and Lord Haldane, Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Winston Churchill continued to be members of the Cabinet, their voices would guide the destinies of the British Empire, and that we should remain true to our friendly understanding with the *Entente* Powers. As the result of the long conversation I had with the Vicomte de la Panouse, I think I was successful in causing this conviction to prevail at the French Embassy.

England declared war on Germany on Tuesday, August 4th, and on the 5th the mobilisation of Regulars, Special Reserve and Territorials was ordered. On

Wednesday, August 5th, a Council of War was held at 10, Downing Street, under the Presidency of the Prime Minister. Nearly all the members of the Cabinet were present, whilst Lord Roberts, Lord Kitchener, Sir Charles Douglas, Sir Douglas Haig, the late Sir James Grierson, General (now Sir Henry) Wilson and myself were directed to attend. To the best of my recollection the two main subjects discussed were:—

1. The composition of the Expeditionary Force.
2. The point of concentration for the British Forces on their arrival in France.

As regards 1.

It was generally felt that we were under some obligation to France to send as strong an army as we could, and there was an idea that one Cavalry Division and six Divisions of all arms had been promised. As to the exact number, it did not appear that we were under any definite obligation, but it was unanimously agreed that we should do all we could. The question to be decided was how many troops it was necessary to keep in this country adequately to guard our shores against attempted invasion and, if need be, to maintain internal order.

Mr. Churchill briefly described the actual situation of the Navy. He pointed out that the threat of war had come upon us at a most opportune moment as regards his own Department, because, only two or three weeks before, the Fleet had been partially mobilised, and large

reserves called up for the great Naval Review by His Majesty at Spithead and the extensive naval manœuvres which followed it. So far as the Navy was concerned, he considered Home Defence reasonably secure; but this consideration did not suffice to absolve us from the necessity of keeping a certain number of troops at home. After this discussion it was decided that two Divisions must for the moment remain behind, and that one Cavalry Division and four Divisions of all arms should be sent out as speedily as possible. This meant a force of approximately 100,000 men.

As regards 2.

The British and French General Staffs had for some years been in close secret consultation with one another on this subject. The German menace necessitated some preliminary understanding in the event of a sudden attack. The area of concentration for the British Forces had been fixed on the left flank of the French, and the actual detraining stations of the various units were all laid down in terrain lying between Maubeuge and Le Cateau. The Headquarters of the Army were fixed at the latter place.

This understanding being purely provisional and conditional upon an unprovoked attack by Germany, the discussion then took the turn of overhauling and reviewing these decisions, and of making arrangements in view of the actual conditions under which war had broken out. Many and various opinions were expressed; but on this day no final decisions were arrived at. It was

thought absolutely necessary to ask the French authorities to send over a superior officer who should be in full possession of the views and intentions of the French General Staff. It was agreed that no satisfactory decision could be arrived at until after full discussion with a duly accredited French Officer. I think this is the gist of the really important points dealt with at the Council.

During the week the Headquarters of the Expeditionary Force were established in London at the Hotel Metropole, and the Staff was constituted as follows:—

- Chief of Staff Gen. Sir Archibald Murray.
- Sub-Chief Brig.-Gen. H. H. Wilson.
- Adjutant-General Major-Gen. Neville Macready.
- Quartermaster-General Major-Gen. Sir William Robertson.
- Director of Intelligence Brig.-Gen. Macdonogh.
- C.R.A. Major-Gen. Lindsay.
- C.R.E. Brig.-Gen. Fowke.
- Military Secretary Col. the Hon. W. Lambton.
- Principal Medical Officer Surg.-Gen. T. P. Woodhouse.
- Principal Veterinary Officer Brig.-Gen. J. Moore.

It was about Thursday the 7th, or Friday the 8th, August, that Lord Kitchener was appointed Secretary of State for War, and on Monday, the 10th, the Mission sent by the French Government arrived. It was headed by Colonel Huguet, a well-known French Artillery Officer who had recently been for several years French Military Attaché in London.

As before mentioned, one of the most important matters remaining for discussion and decision was finally to determine whether the original plan as regards the area of concentration for the British Forces in France was to be adhered to, or whether the actual situation demanded some change or modification. There was an exhaustive exchange of views between soldiers and Ministers, and many conflicting opinions were expressed. The soldiers themselves were not agreed. Lord Kitchener thought that our position on the left of the French line at Maubeuge would be too exposed, and rather favoured a concentration farther back in the neighbourhood of Amiens. Sir Douglas Haig suggested postponing any landing till the campaign had actively opened and we should be able to judge in which direction our co-operation would be most effective.

Personally, I was opposed to these ideas, and most anxious to adhere to our original plans. Any alteration in carrying out our concentration, particularly if this meant delay, would have upset the French plan of campaign and created much distrust in the minds of our Allies. Delay or hanging back would not only have

looked like hesitation, but might easily have entailed disastrous consequences by permanently separating our already inferior forces. Having regard to what we subsequently knew of the German plans and preparations, there can be no doubt that any such delayed landing might well have been actively opposed. As will be seen hereafter, we were at first hopeful of carrying out a successful offensive, and, had those hopes been justified, any change or delay in our original plans would have either prevented or entirely paralysed it. The vital element of the problem was speed in mobilisation and concentration, change of plans meant inevitable and possibly fatal delay.

Murray, Wilson, Grierson and Huguet concurred in my views, and it was so settled.

The date of the embarkment of the Headquarters Staff was fixed for Friday, August 14th.

During the fateful days which intervened, daily and almost hourly reports reached us as to the progress of mobilisation both of our Allies and our Enemies. From the first it became quite evident that the German system of mobilisation was quicker than the French. There was reason to believe that Germany had partly mobilised some classes of her reserves before formal mobilisation.

The splendid stand made by the Belgians in defence of their frontier fortresses is well known, and the course of the preliminary operations on the Belgian and Luxemburg frontiers, as well as those in the neighbourhood of Nancy, gave us hope that the

wonderful army of which we had heard so much, was not altogether the absolutely invincible war machine we had been led to expect and believe. During this most critical time, my mind was occupied day and night with anxious thought. I will try to recall those days of the first half of August, 1914, and crystallise the result of my meditations. This will serve to show the doubts, fears, hopes and aspirations, in short the mental atmosphere in which I awaited the opening of the campaign.

In the ten years previous to the War, I had constantly envisaged the probable course of events leading up to the outbreak of this world-war, as well as the manner of the outbreak itself. In imagination I had seen the spark suddenly emitted in some obscure corner of Europe, followed by the blowing-up of one huge magazine, such as the declaration of war between Russia and Austria would prove to be, then the conflagration spreading with lightning speed, and I had seemed to have a foretaste amid it all of the anxious hesitation which would precede our entry into the war.

I have been a member of the Committee of Imperial Defence since 1906, and have assisted at the innumerable deliberations of that Aulic Council. It was somewhere about 1908 that the certainty of a war was forced upon my mind. Lord Haldane was then Secretary of State for War and I was Inspector-General of the Forces. Lord Haldane was himself alive to the possibility of war; but, while he hoped to ward it off by

diplomacy and negotiation, he fully acquiesced in the desirability of making every preparation which could be carried out in complete secrecy. He told me that were he in power, if and when the event occurred, he would designate me to command the Expeditionary Force, and requested me to study the problem carefully and do all I could to be ready. It thus fell out that in August, 1914, the many possibilities and alternatives of action were quite familiar to my mind.

It is now within the knowledge of all that the General Staffs of Great Britain and France had, for a long time, held conferences, and that a complete mutual understanding as to combined action in certain eventualities existed.

Belgium, however, remained a "dark horse" up to the last, and it is most unfortunate that she could never be persuaded to decide upon her attitude in the event of a general war. All we ever had in our mind was *defence* against attack by Germany. We had guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium, and all reports pointed to an intention by Germany to violate that neutrality. What we desired above all things was that Belgium should realise the danger which subsequently laid her waste. We were anxious that she should assist and co-operate in her own defence. The idea of *attacking* Germany through Belgium or in any other direction never entered our heads.

Pre-war arrangements like these were bound in such circumstances to be very imperfect, though infinitely better than none at all.

It will be of interest at this point to narrate a conversation I had with the Emperor William in August, 1911. When His Majesty visited this country in the spring of that year to unveil the statue of Queen Victoria, he invited me to be his guest at the grand cavalry manœuvres to be held that summer in the neighbourhood of Berlin.

It was an experience I shall never forget, and it impressed me enormously with the efficiency and power of the German cavalry. It was on about the third day of the manœuvres that the Emperor arrived by train at five in the morning to find the troops drawn up on the plain close by to receive him. I have never seen a more magnificent military spectacle than they presented on that brilliant August morning, numbering some 15,000 horsemen with a large force of horse artillery, jäger and machine guns.

When His Majesty had finished the inspection of the line, and the troops had moved to take up their points for manœuvre, the Emperor sent for me. He was very pleasant and courteous, asked me if I was made comfortable, and if I had got a good horse. He then went on to say that he knew all our sympathies in Great Britain were with France and against Germany. He said he wished me to see everything that could be seen, but

told me he trusted to my honour to reveal nothing if I visited France.

After the manœuvres of the day were completed, at about 11 or 12 o'clock, I was placed next to His Majesty at luncheon and we had another conversation. He asked me what I thought of what I had seen in the morning and told me that the German cavalry was the most perfect in the world; but he added: "It is not only the Cavalry; the Artillery, the Infantry, all the arms of the Service are equally efficient. The sword of Germany is sharp; and if you oppose Germany you will find how sharp it is."

Before I left, His Majesty was kind enough to present me with his photograph beautifully framed. Pointing to it, he remarked, semi-jocularly: "There is your archenemy! There is your disturber of the peace of Europe!"

Reverting to my story. Personally, I had always thought that Germany would violate Belgian neutrality, and in no such half measure as by a march through the Ardennes, which was what our joint plans mainly contemplated. I felt convinced that if ever she took this drastic step, she would make the utmost use of it to pour over the whole country and outflank the Allies.

The principal source of the terrible anxiety I felt took its root in the thought that we were too much mentally committed to meet an attack from the east, instead of one which was to come as it actually did. It reassured

me, however, to know that our actual dispositions did not preclude the possibility of stemming the first outburst of the storm so effectively as to ward off any imminent danger which might threaten Northern France and the Channel Ports.

To turn from the province of strategy to the sphere of tactics, a life-long experience of military study and thought had taught me that the principle of the tactical employment of troops must be instinctive. I knew that in putting the science of war into practice, it was necessary that its main tenets should form, so to speak, part of one's flesh and blood. In war there is little time to think, and the right thing to do must come like a flash—it must present itself to the mind as perfectly *obvious*.

No previous experience, no conclusion I had been able to draw from campaigns in which I had taken part, or from a close study of the new conditions in which the war of to-day is waged, had led me to anticipate a war of positions. All my thoughts, all my prospective plans, all my possible alternatives of action, were concentrated upon a war of movement and manœuvre. I knew perfectly well that modern up-to-date inventions would materially influence and modify our previous conceptions as to the employment of the three arms respectively; but I had not realised that this process would work in so drastic a manner as to render all our preconceived ideas of the method of tactical field operations comparatively ineffective and useless. Judged by the course of events in the first three weeks

of the War, neither French nor German generals were prepared for the complete transformation of all military ideas which the development of the operations inevitably demonstrated to be imperative for waging war in present conditions.

It is easy to be "wise after the event"; but I cannot help wondering why none of us realised what the most modern rifle, the machine gun, motor traction, the aeroplane and wireless telegraphy would bring about. It seems so simple when judged by actual results. The modern rifle and machine gun add tenfold to the relative power of the defence as against the attack. This precludes the use of the old methods of attack, and has driven the attack to seek covered entrenchments after every forward rush of at most a few hundred yards.

It has thus become a practical operation to place the heaviest artillery in position close behind the infantry fighting line, not only owing to the mobility afforded by motor traction but also because the old dread of losing the guns before they could be got away no longer exists. The crucial necessity for the effective employment of heavy artillery is observation, and this is provided by the balloon and the aeroplane, which, by means of wireless telegraphy, can keep the batteries instantly informed of the accuracy of their fire.

I feel sure in my own mind that had we realised the true effect of modern appliances of war in August, 1914, there would have been no retreat from Mons, and that if, in September, the Germans had learnt their

lesson, the Allies would never have driven them back to the Aisne. It was in the fighting on that river that the eyes of all of us began to be opened.

New characteristics of offensive and defensive war began vaguely to be appreciated; but it required the successive attempts of Maunoury, de Castelnau, Foch and myself to turn the German flanks in the north in the old approved style, and the practical failure of these attempts, to bring home to our minds the true nature of war as it is to-day.

About the middle of November, 1914—after three and a half months of war—we were fairly settled down to the war of positions.

It was, therefore, in a somewhat troubled frame of mind that I began to play my humble part in this tremendous episode in the history of the world. The new lessons had to be learned in a hard school and through a bitter experience. However, for good or for evil, I have always been possessed of a sanguine temperament. No one, I felt, had really been able to gauge the respective fighting values of the French and German Armies. I hoped for the best and rather believed in it; and in this confident spirit, although anxious and watchful, I landed at Boulogne at 5 p.m. on August 14th, 1914.

It will be a fitting close to this chapter if I add the instructions which I received from His Majesty's Government before leaving.

"Owing to the infringement of the neutrality of Belgium by Germany, and in furtherance of the Entente which exists between this country and France, His Majesty's Government has decided, at the request of the French Government, to send an Expeditionary Force to France and to entrust the command of the troops to yourself.

"The special motive of the Force under your control is to support and co-operate with the French Army against our common enemies. The peculiar task laid upon you is to assist the French Government in preventing or repelling the invasion by Germany of French and Belgian territory and eventually to restore the neutrality of Belgium, on behalf of which, as guaranteed by treaty, Belgium has appealed to the French and to ourselves.

"These are the reasons which have induced His Majesty's Government to declare war, and these reasons constitute the primary objective you have before you.

"The place of your assembly, according to present arrangements, is Amiens, and during the assembly of your troops you will have every opportunity for discussing with the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, the military position in general and the special part which your Force is able and adapted to play. It must be recognised from the outset that the numerical strength of the British Force and its contingent reinforcement is strictly limited, and with this consideration kept steadily in view it will be obvious

that the greatest care must be exercised towards a minimum of losses and wastage.

"Therefore, while every effort must be made to coincide most sympathetically with the plans and wishes of our Ally, the gravest consideration will devolve upon you as to participation in forward movements where large bodies of French troops are not engaged and where your Force may be unduly exposed to attack. Should a contingency of this sort be contemplated, I look to you to inform me fully and give me time to communicate to you any decision to which His Majesty's Government may come in the matter. In this connection I wish you distinctly to understand that your command is an entirely independent one, and that you will in no case come in any sense under the orders of any Allied General.

"In minor operations you should be careful that your subordinates understand that risk of serious losses should only be taken where such risk is authoritatively considered to be commensurate with the object in view.

"The high courage and discipline of your troops should, and certainly will, have fair and full opportunity of display during the campaign, but officers may well be reminded that in this, their first experience of European warfare, a greater measure of caution must be employed than under former conditions of hostilities against an untrained adversary.

"You will kindly keep up constant communication with the War Office, and you will be good enough to inform me as to all movements of the enemy reported to you as well as to those of the French Army.

"I am sure you fully realise that you can rely with the utmost confidence on the wholehearted and unswerving support of the Government, of myself, and of your compatriots, in carrying out the high duty which the King has entrusted to you and in maintaining the great tradition of His Majesty's Army.

"(Signed)
"Secretary of State"

KITCHENER,