

1914, by **John French**, *Viscount of Ypres*

CHAPTER XVII

THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR 1914

I had a long discussion with the Prime Minister at Walmer. Mr. Asquith possesses the rare quality of being able to discuss the most difficult and threatening situation with the utmost calmness and deliberation. He is a very attentive listener, and as he quickly appreciates and understands all that is told him, it did not take him long to become fully acquainted with the entire situation.

As I have said before, all the Cabinet were at this moment very anxious as to the general outlook, but neither by word nor gesture did the Prime Minister display the least want of hope and confidence.

During my sojourn in France I had received several most kind and encouraging letters from Mr. Asquith, in which he expressed his warm appreciation of all that we had done, and said how truly he realised the very trying circumstances which surrounded us. He personally reiterated these kindly sentiments; but it was evident that the Government had just begun to entertain doubts and fears which had induced them to call me into council. It was the faith inspired by this constant kindly sympathy, and his power as Prime Minister, which helped me to believe that the shortage in guns and

ammunition which threatened ultimate destruction would be overcome. The glorious troops under my command had gone valiantly to their death when a few more guns and a few more shells would have many times saved their sacrifice. And still no sufficient supplies came.

The question of munitions and the fear of invasion formed the basis of our long conversation at Walmer. After lunch, I left with Kitchener and travelled by motor to London. With deep sorrow I recall the fact that this was the last of all the many days of happy personal intercourse which I spent with my old South African chief. As a soldier and a commander in the field I had always loved and venerated him; in his capacity as a politician and Minister my sentiments and feelings towards him were never the same.

I am willing to admit that our differences — which were great and far-reaching — may have been to some extent my own fault; but, be that as it may, our subsequent relations, down to the time of his tragic death, were always clouded by a certain mistrust of one another.

It rejoices my heart, and alleviates the pain and regret which I feel, to look back upon this one day spent almost entirely *tête-à-tête* with him. On our way to London we had to pass by his country place at Broome, and he insisted on stopping for an hour to show me round it. To describe what I saw would only be a repetition of what is already very well known. As he

stood in the midst of its beautiful scenery and surroundings, the true spirit of the great soldier shone out as distinctly and clearly as it ever did in the many and varied experiences we went through together in the South African War.

The eloquent and touching tribute paid to this great soldier's memory by Lord Derby in the House of Lords in June, 1916, brought out with telling force and happy expression Kitchener's deep affection for his "beloved Broome." [\[7\]](#)

Indeed, beneath that seemingly hard and stern exterior there existed a mighty well of sensitive feeling and even of romance, which it appeared to be the one endeavour of his life to conceal from the observation even of his most intimate friends.

All the next day, and far into the following, my whole time was employed in discussing the situation with the War Cabinet.

The principal ground for all their fears proved subsequently, in the course of the year 1916, to be only too well founded as regards the Eastern front. But the reports of large movements of German troops to the West, which really induced Mr. Asquith to send for me, were not true. Constant reports, however, continued to reach the Government from secret and reliable sources, that the Russians were even then running very short of ammunition, and that their condition, as regards the supply of war material generally, would certainly oblige

them to evacuate the enemy territory they had already won, and even necessitate a retirement behind the Vistula, if not the Bug, with the loss of Warsaw and other important fortresses. The home authorities were undoubtedly influenced in forming this opinion by reports which, however, did not emanate from any part of the Western theatre of war, and I believe their judgment was generally hampered and warped by paying too much regard to unauthorised statements. The divergence of views which existed on various dates during the month of December is curiously illustrated by the following quotations from letters and telegrams.

On the 2nd, Kitchener wired to me :

"It is reported new corps are arriving in Russia and that some of the old corps lately between La Bassée and the sea have disappeared from that front. Can you ascertain what truth there is in this? It is thought possible the Germans may be replacing active corps by immature formations along northern portion of Allied lines so as to use their best troops in the Eastern theatre, where they are apparently developing great strength."

On the 18th he writes :

"The Russian news is very serious. I fear we cannot rely on them for much more for some time."

On the 26th I received the following telegram from him :

"I think before you see Joffre it may be useful for you to know I am inclined to think Russians have been bluffing to a certain extent. I cannot get answers to my questions from Petrograd which would clear up the situation. For instance, amount of reserve ammunition in hand, which, according to Military Attaché here, who is kept entirely in the dark by his Government, ought to be very considerable.

"A reason for a certain amount of bluff on their part might be that they are now negotiating to obtain from us a loan of forty millions. Anyway, their action in the field does not look as if they were as badly off as they make out."

All kinds of reports continued to arrive, insisting that masses of German troops were passing through Luxemburg and Belgium *en route* to the Western front; but these turned out subsequently to be either greatly exaggerated or to have no foundation whatever in fact.

The upshot of it all was that I received directions from the Prime Minister to seek out Joffre as soon after my return as possible, put these views and fears of the War Cabinet before him, and to report to them what he was prepared to do in order to meet the supposed threat.

Before leaving I was received in audience by His Majesty the King.

On my journey back to the front, I pondered long and anxiously over all that had passed in London. I had plainly told the War Cabinet that I did not share these

alarmist views, which I considered were not founded on any definite or reliable information, and I had warned them that these views disagreed altogether with our appreciation of the situation at the front. I by no means liked my mission to Joffre; but the orders received were imperative.

On the morning of the 24th, I had a long conference with Murray and Macdonogh, and we once more thoroughly examined the situation in all its bearings.

The daily official reports tended to show that the Russians were still holding their own well, and that there was no immediate fear of a retirement behind the Vistula. Even if pessimistic views held in London were warranted by the actual facts, it did not appear that there was any reasonable probability of the Germans ever being able to mass a sufficient force in the Western theatre to enable them to break through our line.

In accordance with the Prime Minister's decision, I arranged a meeting with Joffre at Chantilly for the 27th.

I found things were going on better in the north on the Yser. The Belgians had been able to resume active hostilities, and the 5th Belgian Division had made good the ground on the right bank of the river about Dixmude.

I began the last of the six Christmas days I have during my life passed in the field by visiting Foch. I told him of my mission to Joffre, and discussed with him the situation in the East. He said he felt sure that the

Russians were exaggerating their deficiencies in ammunition, rifles, etc., in their representations both to the British and French Governments. He thought that they were afraid that the troops in the West were not displaying sufficient energy, and their idea was to stimulate this. Moreover, he said he was confirmed in this view by what the Russians were then doing in Poland and Galicia, which was also confirmed from German sources. He could not believe that, if they were, as they said, so short of ammunition, they could continue these aggressive tactics. He went on to speak of the work of the French at Arras, and said they had been much hampered by weather conditions, but that they were making some slight progress everywhere. He thought we might shortly find some opportunity for action in the neighbourhood of La Bassée.

On my return to Headquarters I met Haig and Smith-Dorrien, who had come to lunch, and I discussed with them my wish to form "Armies" immediately. I wished Haig to command the 1st, 4th, and Indian Corps as the 1st Army, and Smith-Dorrien the 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Corps as the 2nd Army. The cavalry was to remain at my immediate disposal. Orders to this effect came out on Christmas night.

Although I have never heard it actually confirmed, I believe a suggestion was made by the Pope to all the belligerent Powers that an armistice should be arranged for Christmas Day. It was further reported that the Central Powers had signified their assent, but that the

Allied Governments refused to entertain the proposal. The suggestion was certainly never referred either to Joffre or to me.

Whether this statement was true or not, it is certain that, soon after daylight on Christmas morning, the Germans took a very bold initiative at several points along our front, in trying to establish some form of fraternisation. It began by individual unarmed men running from the German trenches across to ours, holding Christmas trees above their heads. These overtures were in some places favourably received and fraternisation of a limited kind took place during the day. It appeared that a little feasting went on, and junior officers, non-commissioned officers and men on either side conversed together in "No Man's Land."

When this was reported to me I issued immediate orders to prevent any recurrence of such conduct, and called the local commanders to strict account, which resulted in a good deal of trouble.

I have since often thought deeply over the principle involved in the manifestation of such sentiments between hostile armies in the field. I am not sure that, had the question of the agreement upon an armistice for the day been submitted to me, I should have dissented from it. I have always attached the utmost importance to the maintenance of that chivalry in war which has almost invariably characterised every campaign of modern times in which this country has been engaged. The Germans glaringly and wantonly set all such

sentiments at defiance by their ruthless conduct of the present war; even from its very commencement.

Judging from my own experience, we never had a more chivalrous or generous foe than the Boers of South Africa, and I can recall numerous proofs of it.

For instance, I was in charge of the operations against General Beyers in the Western Transvaal during the latter part of December 1900. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve a flag of truce — that symbol of civilisation and chivalry in war which has been practically unknown during this war with Germany — appeared at our outposts, and a young Dutch officer was brought to my Headquarters carrying a request from Beyers regarding the burial of his dead.

Some important movements were then in progress, and I told him we must of necessity detain him there till the next day, but I hoped we would be able to make him as comfortable as possible. When he started back to his General on Christmas morning, I gave him a small box of cigars and a bottle of whiskey, asking him to present them to Beyers as a Christmas offering from me.

I had forgotten the incident when, a few days later, two cavalry soldiers who had been taken prisoners by the enemy marched back into camp with horses, arms and equipment complete. They brought me a note from Beyers, thanking me for my gift on Christmas Day and telling me that, although he had no whiskey or cigars to

offer in return, he hoped I would regard his liberation of these men in the light of a Christmas gift.

When I told this story at the end of the war to my old friend and redoubtable opponent, General Christian Smuts, he expressed himself as very displeased with Beyer's improper use of what was not his own but his country's property. I pointed out to Smuts that it was the spirit which Beyers displayed which mattered — that spirit which was never more conspicuously displayed throughout the war than in the conduct of this same great soldier and statesman, General Smuts himself.

In the swift and kaleidoscopic changes which occur in world politics, the friend of to-day may be the enemy of to-morrow. Soldiers should have no politics, but should cultivate a freemasonry of their own and, emulating the knights of old, should honour a brave enemy only second to a comrade, and like them rejoice to split a friendly lance to-day and ride boot to boot in the charge to-morrow.

It is satisfactory to know that some such kindly and chivalrous spirit has at least made itself felt at times between the opposing flying services in the present war, for I have heard authentic stories which go to show that this has been the case.

On the 26th I met Willcocks and discussed the recent fighting of the Indian Corps with him. I considered that a certain amount of blame attached to the commanders of the units engaged, for embarking in an attack on

trenches so far away from their own line before ensuring adequate support, especially in view of the muddy condition of the ground, and knowing, as they did, the exhausted state of the Indian troops and the effect of cold upon them. At first the General tried to combat this view; but he soon acknowledged the justice of my criticism.

I decided, regretfully, to make a change in the command of the Lahore Division. A commander very often, after having directed operations of a critical nature, needs rest and change of occupation to restore him to his full capacity for command.

I met Joffre at Chantilly on the morning of the 27th, as arranged.

I explained the mission I had from the British Government, and told him of their fears of impending severe Russian defeats and of the possibility, which they thought might be open to the enemy, of withdrawing large numbers of troops and massing a force on the Western front strong enough to break our line and attain, after all, their original objectives, namely, Paris and the Channel ports. I told Joffre that the English Government were anxious to hear his views and ideas on the points raised.

The French Commander-in-Chief was much astonished to hear that such a view of the situation could be really and seriously entertained. But he added that, of course, the French General Staff had plans ready to

meet any eventuality. He expressed the opinion that the time was not now opportune for the discussion of such contingent possibilities as these.

We then talked over the reported Russian deficiencies in munitions of war, and he entered into some most interesting details as to the state of the French manufacture of ammunition and guns. He told me that they were producing almost entirely high-explosive shells and hardly any shrapnel, and that an enormous improvement was being made in the pattern of fuze, from which great results were expected. The latest manufactured ammunition for the "75" gun had shown wonderful results, particularly in the matter of destroying wire entanglements.

Joffre went on to say that the Russians were in close touch with the French factories, and were benefiting greatly by the experiments which had been carried out. Moreover, the French were able to supply the Russians with a considerable quantity of munitions of war. It took a long time to transmit; but he entertained great hopes that Roumania and Bulgaria would soon be in such sympathy with the Allies as to permit the transport of material to Russia *viâ* Salonika. The reports he had received indicated that the Russians had sufficient ammunition at hand, if they remained on the defensive, for six weeks.

He expressed himself as fairly satisfied with the Russian position and outlook, and thought the Germans

were being so heavily punished that whole corps would have to be reorganised.

These views were subsequently embodied in a memorandum which I sent to Lord Kitchener for the information of the War Cabinet.

I then arrived at an understanding with Joffre as to future plans. I again urged strongly upon him my conviction that an advance on the extreme north, in co-operation with our Navy, was the proper *rôle* for British troops to fulfil, and went over all the old arguments. In effect he rejected my plans again, although holding out hopes that, at a later stage, the French Army might co-operate in such an advance.

In the absence of support from my own Government, it was hopeless to say anything more. Joffre's plan was as follows. He meant to break through the enemy's line from the south at Rheims and from the west at Arras. He desired to mass as many French Corps as possible behind these two points; therefore, at all other points of the line the *rôles* must be twofold: (1) to economise troops as much as possible in the trenches, so as to spare more men for action at decisive points, and (2) to organise good local reserves to keep the enemy in the front employed and prevent his sending troops to threatened points in the line.

As the history of the operations during 1915 will show, this general strategic idea was the foundation of all our efforts throughout that year. It brought about for

the British Army the Battles of Neuve Chapelle, Ypres (second), Festubert, and Loos; and for the French other important actions, which, although local successes, did not result in achieving any appreciable advance towards the objectives which the plans sought to attain.

Those objects were not clearly defined till September, when we began our last combined attack to attain them and practically failed.

The attitude of our War Office in failing to speed up the manufacture of munitions of war and the practical collapse of the Russian Armies were to some extent responsible for the lack of success of our endeavours. But the detailment of troops and war material to the Dardanelles was undoubtedly the chief cause.

There was no other course for me to take, under the circumstances, than to fall in with Joffre's view; and in accordance with his plan I agreed to take over, in conjunction with the Belgians, the whole line from La Bassée to the sea, but only by degrees as troops became available.

Although Joffre at the time agreed in my wish to work the northern section entirely with the Belgian Army, it would appear that the French Government still insisted on keeping some hold on that part of the line with French troops.

On returning to my Headquarters I sent for Bridges, who was now my representative with His Majesty the

King of the Belgians. On the morning of the 28th, we had a long conference on the subject of co-operation with the Belgian Army.

I had evolved a scheme in my own mind of amalgamating the Belgian and British Armies. I wanted to see Belgian brigades of infantry embodied in our own Army Corps at convenient sections in the line, and to apply the same process to the cavalry and artillery. This apparent surrender of independence was no doubt a heavy trial to impose upon the Belgian General Staff; but I believed it to be the surest and best method to adopt if we wished to get the highest efforts out of the two Armies.

When all is said, it must be acknowledged that the standard of training and war efficiency was higher in our troops than in the Belgian. This applied particularly to the leaders and the Staff; and, in spite of the drastic experiences of the Belgian Army during August and September, our own higher ranks certainly possessed a wider and more extensive experience in the field.

It can indeed hardly be doubted that a Division composed of two British infantry brigades and one Belgian would probably have done more, either in attack or defence, than such a unit composed entirely of Belgian troops.

Whatever views may be held on this point, it must be allowed that the scheme I proposed would have ensured a much greater unity of effort.

I talked it all over at great length with Bridges, and on leaving me he went back to put the proposal before the King of the Belgians. I entertained little hope of getting a favourable hearing; for, although I knew the King's lofty spirit and generous impulses would prompt him to make any personal sacrifice to attain greater power and efficiency for our united forces, yet I was also well aware of his difficulties with his own Ministers.

Two days later Bridges brought me His Majesty's answer. He told me it was possible the King himself might fall in with my suggestion. Ten thousand rifles would have to be retained for the "inundated" line, leaving 40,000 rifles available for the proposed amalgamation. This, I thought, would at once render the united Armies strong enough in the north to justify me in allowing Joffre to remove the 9th and 20th French Corps to the points where he so much needed strength for his own line.

This amalgamation of the British and Belgian Armies would certainly, have effected a great economy of force and fighting power, and have perhaps led to important results; but the scheme never came to fruition, both because the King of the Belgians was unable to gain the consent of his Government and because the French would not agree to the plan. Finally, I could get no support or help from our own people at home.

On the 27th, the French had some success at Carency (north of Arras), capturing several German trenches and advancing the line some 500 yards.

In spite of the "growls" in which I have so freely indulged, the close of 1914 yet found me in a hopeful and sanguine frame of mind.

When the state of affairs which might have been came to be compared with the situation as it was, there was really very little reason for pessimism. We had scored one great offensive and another great defensive victory, and we had suffered no severe defeat.

The Germans were bound down behind their entrenchments from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier, and under the highest trial, the Allies had proved their ability to hold their actual lines inviolate.

Our Fleet had gained command of the sea, from which they had finally and completely driven the German flag. The spirit of the Allied nations was high and confident. On the other hand, had the enemy shown more of the skill and intrepidity of those great leaders of the past — Frederick, Napoleon, and von Moltke (whose teachings German writers of to-day claim that their commanders have so closely assimilated) — and the Allies a little less watchfulness and keenness, we might have seen Paris and the Channel seaboard in the enemy's hands, the British Army, irretrievably separated from its Allies, driven to the coast, and the French holding the southern provinces of the Republic with their capital at Bordeaux.

Finally, Russia, our great hope and mainstay for the future, was inspiring the utmost hope and

encouragement amongst the Allies by the splendid deeds with which she heralded the close of the year.

The last entry in my diary — December 31st, 1914 — is as follows :

"Our night conference showed more and increasingly important Russian successes."

It was good to end the year with courage born of hope and confidence in the future. Time works wonders in all directions. Just as we could not foresee the utter collapse and failure of our great Eastern ally, so we could not discern the hidden forging of that sword of justice and retribution whose destined wielders were even then stirring from their fifty years of slumber and dreams of everlasting peace, to rise like some giant from the shores of the Western Atlantic and, with overwhelming force, to stride eastward and help lay low the German dragon once and for all time in the dust.

Footnote 7 : A short speech which I made on this occasion in the House of Lords expressed my great appreciation of Lord Kitchener's capacity as a leader in the field.

I told the House that, after I received intimation of my appointment to command in France, my first act was to seek out my old South African Chief and suggest to him that we should repair together to the Prime Minister and

ask that he might be appointed to command, with me as his Chief of Staff. He could not be persuaded to do this.

He was then on the point of leaving to return to Egypt, and had no idea that he was to be Secretary of State for War.

I do not think Lord Kitchener was always credited by the country with the talent for command in the field which I know he really possessed, whilst, on the other hand, a *rôle* for which he was not well fitted was thrust upon him. As Commander-in-chief in France it would have helped him very much to have had a Secretary of State *other than himself* to deal with.