A Short Guide to the Principles of Field Service Regulations (FSR)

This new article was added November 2022. The full article, **Field Service Regulations – the Doctrine Explained**, first posted December 2020 commences on page 18 of this pdf.

In 1909, *FSR* was introduced to define the British army in its preparations for war. *FSR* was published in three parts and updated regularly.[1] 'The principles given in this manual ...are to be regarded by all ranks as authoritative, for their violation, in the past, has often been followed by mishap, if not by disaster.'[2] Four broad 'principles' can be identified.

First Principle –	**Basic Education**	Page 1
Second Principle –	**Command Structures**	Page 3
Third Principle –	**Intelligent Soldiering**	Page 7
Fourth Principle –	**Tactical Concepts**	Page 13
Minor Principles		Page 17

The first Principle expounded in Field Service Regulations (1909)

Basic Education *In 1900, training and procedures varied from unit to unit, dependant on arm or tradition. Official, and unofficial, guidance abounded, but much of it concentrated on the perfection of ceremonial drill.*

FSR lays down firm rules to be followed in the performance of routine tasks. Many of these rules were already widely followed as best practice, but adherence to them became mandatory in 1909. Chapter II of *Part I*, for instance, instructs all officers how

[1] *Field Service Regulations, Part I, Operations, 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1912*, (London, General Staff War Office, 1912); *Field Service Regulations, Part II, Organisation and Administration, 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1913*, (London, General Staff War Office, 1913), title pages. Note that all subsequent references to *FSR* refer to the revised editions of 1912 and 1913 respectively.
[2] *Field Service Regulations*, *Part I,* p.13.

orders should be issued, messages passed, reports framed, and communications set up.[3] The chapter also refers to ideas, relevant to other principles, but it is the description of procedure that constitutes basic education. Chapter III rules on marches, down to the pace to be set in different circumstances, and how many men should walk abreast on a road.[4] Chapter IV deals with billets, bivouacs and camps in equal detail, describing, amongst much else, the organisation of latrines and how far apart tents should be pitched, or horses picketed. These rules are variously applicable to life in base camp, on the march, in billets and in battle. Many such can be identified.

The intention was to educate officers in consistent practice, ensuring that they could move between units without a lengthy induction period to learn idiosyncrasies. This was a first step towards the professionalisation of the army. Familiarity with these rules was demanded when undertaking training or manoeuvres; and knowledge of them was tested in promotion exams. The rules should be 'thoroughly impressed on the mind of every commander.'[5]

The Second Principle expounded in Field Service Regulations (1909)

Command Structures *In 1900, junior officers obeyed orders from any more senior officer. There was no uniformity in the administration of supply and support services, leading to inefficiencies, and unacceptable attrition through malnutrition and disease.*

FSR defines two command structures within an expeditionary force. The first pertains to **administration**; the second to **operations**, that is, the direction of fighting men.

[3] *Field Service Regulations, 1912, Part I*, pp.21-43.
[4] *Field Service Regulations, 1912, Part I*, pp.47-51.
[5] *Field Service Regulations, 1912, Part I*, p.13.

The Commander-in-Chief of an Expeditionary Force heads both structures. 'Unity of control is essential to unity of effort. This condition can be ensured only by vesting the supreme authority in one man, the C.-in-C. of the forces in the field,' though even he is 'subject to such orders as he may from time to time receive from the Government.'[6] The Commander-in-Chief's authority is channelled. He 'exerts his authority over a limited number of subordinates.'[7] Thus he issues orders only to his immediate subordinates at the top of both chains of command. He is not allowed to issue specific operational orders, or specific administrative directives, to individual lower subordinates within these pre-ordained hierarchies. There is no impediment to him issuing general advisory directives to all the men under his command.

Administrative Command Structure

In 1909, the administrative branches of the army were totally reorganised. The new structure allocates sharply defined responsibility for all aspects of the transport, supply and support of an expeditionary force, regardless of destination. *Part II* defines directorships and sub-directorships, branching out from the very highest level.[8] The top of this hierarchy is within the General Headquarters (GHQ) of an Expeditionary Force, with, amongst other senior staff posts, the Quartermaster-General directing the transport, quartering, supplies and ordnance of the army; and the Adjutant-General, managing the detail of military organisation, including personnel and medical services. This command structure is quite consciously modelled on bureaucracies such as existed

---

[6] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* pp.23,22&28.
[7] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.
[8] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* pp.44-48.

in government departments or industrial enterprises in civilian life.[9] Meticulous attention to detailed paperwork, and firm compliance with defined administrative procedures, are the talents required of the officers so employed. The heads of administrative directorates issue detailed orders direct to the level of implementation. No feedback is required, and no questioning of the content of the order is encouraged. It is the responsibility of the senior manager, not his sub-directorate commander, to ensure that the content of the order is distributed to those who need to know it. Policy decisions come from the top. For example, the head of the medical directorate is responsible for allocating sectors for hospitals and determines where they are to be established.[10] Consultation and feedback are not necessary under the regulations. Some basic prerequisites for the siting of hospitals are additionally laid down in *Part I*.[11] All administrative officers, in all specialities, needed to be familiar with both parts of *FSR*.

Of necessity, this basic hierarchy evolved with the exponential growth of the complexity and size of the bureaucracy required to sustain the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in the field in 1914. It proved relatively easy to staff this bureaucracy as it expanded, since many jobs in civilian life had similar hierarchies of responsibility and required similar skill-sets. *FSR*, mostly *Part II*, and staff manuals based on it, remained the definitive guide for the allocation of administrative responsibility for almost the entire war. It was not inviolate. *FSR*, for instance, allocates responsibility for the movement of heavy goods on canals and rivers to a Transport Directorate, while heavy

---

[9] See *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.53 (2).
[10] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* pp.117,122&124, within pp.116-126.
[11] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.69,171-172

goods moved by train are the responsibility of a Railway Directorate.[12] In December 1914, Major-General Sir William Robertson, as Quartermaster-General, transferred waterborne transport, in its entirety, to come under the Director of Railways, thus rationalising transport planning.[13] Initiative, if it was required, came from the top. In August 1914, Robertson instructed supply and distribution directorates to forego routine paperwork in dumping supplies of food and ammunition on the roads taken by the retreating British army, in defiance of required practice.

Operational Command Structure

The operational command structure governing the relationship between the Commander-in-Chief and his front-line officers is quite different. It is best described as incorporating two basic concepts.

Concept one – the Division. 'The basis of the field army organization is the division.'[14] The Commander-in-Chief puts his divisions into position and tells them what to do. He has no further responsibility, except to react to events that require a change in a division's position or intent. He issues only 'brief and very general instructions' to his divisional commanders; and they action his intentions, using the regulations as a guide as to how.[15] Every division contained all the military elements that enabled it to fight as a free-standing force. This, of itself, had important

[12] See *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* ch.VIII.
[13] John Spencer, The Big Brain in the Army: Sir William Robertson as Quartermaster-General; Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide, Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914,* (Solihull, Helion and Company, 2013), p.105.
[14] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.
[15] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.28.

implications. Units of the Royal Field Artillery, the Royal Garrison Artillery, and the Royal Engineers, were attached to infantry divisions; and units of the Royal Horse Artillery and Royal Engineers to Cavalry Divisions. In divisional manoeuvres, all were deployed in support of purely divisional objectives.[16] The Commander-in-Chief and his corps commanders had no executive control over their own artillery or engineers.

It was recognised that, in a major war, the number of divisions deployed would be too great for the Commander-in-Chief to manage, so an extra layer of hierarchy, a Corps Commander, was included. A corps consists of two or more divisions.

Concept two – Hierarchy by Rank. Every officer knew the one immediate superior officer from whom he should accept operation orders. The Commander-in-Chief issues 'brief' operation orders to his corps commanders. They direct divisional commanders, who issue orders to brigade commanders, and thence down the command hierarchy. Missing out a level is forbidden. Strong communication links down the hierarchy are established, allowing a flow of information back up the same route. This structure enables total control to be maintained by the Commander-in-Chief. Independent variation in intent is forbidden at any command level.[17] If a general, or other officer, absents himself from his headquarters, he is required to formally delegate his responsibilities to a named individual. His nominated delegee temporarily assumes all the authority of his rank in order to maintain the integrity of the hierarchy.[18] If a junior officer is irretrievably separated from his commanding officer, he reports to the nearest

[16] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.14-19.
[17] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.26-28.
[18] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.21.

relevant senior officer and requests temporary acceptance into his hierarchy until he locates his missing superior.

Summary. There are very clear differences between these two command structures. Administrative orders are detailed and prescriptive, and the hierarchy is from director to relevant sub-director, regardless of their respective ranks. Operation orders are brief, and follow a strict unit hierarchy of descending rank. All officers are guided in the performance of their duties only by those *FSR* regulations, which are applicable to their current job, be it fighting a battle, supervising logistics or working in an office.

The Third Principle expounded in Field Service Regulations (1909)

Intelligent Soldiering during Operations *In 1900, junior officers were not expected to think. They obeyed orders. Displays of initiative in training were discouraged. In consequence, valuable professional soldiers were sometimes mindlessly squandered.*

There are four concepts which address these issues.

Concept One. Operational Command Hierarchy Flexibility.

Officers accept brief operation orders from their immediate superior and give them to immediate subordinates, ensuring that appropriate tactics are used to achieve the Commander-in-Chief’s intent at the level of implementation. But a senior officer sometimes needs to issue orders direct to a sub-subordinate unit. If he did so, there was a risk that the subordinate unit might receive two contradictory orders simultaneously, one from his immediate superior, and another from a more senior officer.

There was a simple solution. The senior officer orders his immediate subordinate to release the lower unit to his direct command. The subordinate cannot then use that lower unit, or issue orders to it, until it is formally returned to him.[19] By this mechanism, a corps commander could take command of an infantry brigade, or a divisional commander could direct a battalion. Exceptionally, ‘in case of urgency’, and if the order is a one-off, this process can be foregone, but both the senior officer and the recipient of the order have to inform the intermediate commander of the details immediately.[20]

Activation of this process was routine in the artillery. The Divisional Commander of Royal Artillery, a brigadier-general, deployed his guns under direction of his divisional commander to support divisional objectives. Often, there were advantages in allowing the guns to combine with brigade formations.[21] A junior artillery commander, therefore, routinely, had one of two command pathways; that from his usual artillery commander; or that, seconded to an infantry or cavalry brigade.

Concept Two. Professional Duties - Location, Communication and Liaison

Many *Part I* regulations pertain not to an officer’s personal conduct, but to his duties in command of a unit on campaign, however small that unit might be. They apply as much to junior subalterns as they do to generals. These regulations, taken alone, can be classified as basic education – the first principle. But if grouped with interlinking regulations on slightly different aspects of their military duties, a professional ethos is defined. For instance, officers are required to observe a number of regulations which

---

[19] See Appendix A at the end of this article for examples of this mechanism in practice.
[20] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.32-33.
[21] General Staff, War Office, *Field Artillery Training*, (HMSO, London, 1914), p.240-244.

pertain to **location**. They are required to know exactly where they are; where their immediate commander is; where any supporting or neighbouring units are; and to have estimated the probable location of any enemy forces. Another cluster of regulations refers to **communications**. Officers are required to establish robust communications, back to their commander, and forward to any subsidiary units. A further cluster refers to **liaison**. The requirement to liaise laterally, both with neighbouring units of their own arm, and with neighbouring units of other arms is of particular importance. This requires the establishment of communications with varying degrees of robustness.[22] At its most basic, contact with neighbouring units establishes agreed boundaries. The principle that officers accept operation orders only from their immediate superior, and give them only to immediate subordinates, is no barrier to cooperative flexibility at all levels of command. Lateral cooperation is not founded on the giving or taking of orders. A unit selects its exact position, particularly on its flanks, in a spirit of cooperative support. Sometimes, there is a wide disparity in rank between the commanders of two adjoining units. But assuming that vertically delivered operation orders to both parties are compatible, clear in stating intent, and not over prescriptive in detail, units are enabled to deploy effectively and cooperatively. To give a simple example of the importance of this even in trench warfare, the forward observation officer of a battery, usually a very junior officer, is required under *FSR* to liaise with, say, the company commander of those infantry in the forward trenches that his battery is supporting. And both are

[22] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.21,32,104,109,121.

required by *FSR* to arrange appropriate communications to facilitate cooperation.[23] If these links are not formed, artillery support at the front line becomes disassociated from the needs of the infantry in those trenches.

These regulation clusters pertaining to **location, communication and liaison** establish an ethos of intelligent awareness and independent thinking in the fighting soldier. They define the duties, and shape the ethos, of a professional officer at war.

Concept Three – Reconnaissance, Intelligence Collection and Staff Duties

There is a similar cluster of regulations on various aspects of information collection.[24] Commanders of front-line units, of all ranks, are required to reconnoitre. 'The commander even of a large army should rarely omit to reconnoitre personally.' Additionally, 'information in war may be obtained from maps and reports prepared in peace, by reconnaissance, by means of special agents, from statements of inhabitants, by tapping telephones or telegraphs, from newspapers, letters, telegraph files, and documents found in the area of operations, from statements of deserters, prisoners, and sick or wounded left behind by the enemy.'[25] All officers are required to be alert to any opportunity to gather such intelligence. Associated regulations demand the speedy transmission of all intelligence information back up the command hierarchy. They emphasise the importance of robust communications not just down the command hierarchy, but up it as well.

---

[23] See, for instance, WO 95/1638/4, 7th Infantry Division, Artillery Cooperation with Infantry, 11 Aug 1915, pp.32-34.
[24] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.110-119.
[25] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.112.

'Systematic arrangements must be made to ensure that every possible source of information is fully utilised, that all information received is immediately transmitted to the proper quarter, and that it is carefully sifted before any conclusions are formed.'[26] This regulation is of particular importance, since it is applicable to the staff of every general on campaign. A general's personal staff is required to function in a 'cooperative' way, with intelligent 'delegation of duties.'[27] Given this, and the fact that both junior and senior officers have tasks to perform, the efficient performance of which are equally vital, it is implicit that a collegiate, rather than a formal hierarchical, structure should be fostered in them. In operational analyses, it is often easier to identify failure to follow these regulations, than to confirm compliance. If a general's orders are not informed by information that was available to his staff, then the structure of his staff, by definition, does not conform with *FSR*. If there is unwarranted delay in the issue of orders, likewise.

Concept Four. Operation Orders at a Distance

There is one set of *FSR* regulations, which is both integral and problematic. It is recognised that significant time might elapse between the issue and receipt of an operation order. All subordinate commanders who are 'at a distance', should therefore 'take on themselves, whenever it be necessary, the responsibility of departing from, or of varying the orders they may have received'. So, if an officer, commanding a subordinate unit is out of touch, and obeying old orders, or receiving new orders, which do not acknowledge changed circumstances, the subordinate officer is not only allowed,

[26] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.112.
[27] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.38.

but required, to modify his orders; and to act as he thought his senior officer would have acted, if he knew of the altered situation. He would be held accountable if he did not, and disaster occurred as a consequence. Very clear guidelines are given as to when, varying an order might be desirable.[28] In practice, as a consequence of this clause, some operation orders issued were sufficiently directive to forbid variation, including phrases such as 'hold at all cost'. Also in practice, an enquiry not uncommonly followed the activation of this regulation by more junior officers. Generally, larger formations were very seldom out of touch with their immediate superior for long enough to undertake unilateral action without recourse to obtaining updated orders. The regulations recognise the danger of unilateral action. 'Should a subordinate find it necessary to depart from an order, he should at once inform the issuer of it, and the commanders of any neighbouring units likely to be affected.'[29] This was not optional. Again, and again in the regulations, the importance of two-way communication, laterally and vertically, in retaining control of an army in the field is reiterated.

The Fourth Principle expounded in Field Service Regulations (1909)

Tactical Concepts *In 1900, the tactics derived from drill manuals were archaic. Units only learnt appropriate tactics for the small wars of the Victorian era, including the South African War, on campaign, and their learning was not uniform.*

There are only three core tactical concepts. *FSR* was a pragmatic training document, based on consensus, not a mandatory tactical manual. It was accepted that the annual

[28] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.31-32.
[29] *Field Service Regulations*, *Part I,* pp.31-32.

Manoeuvres held almost every Autumn from 1902 to 1913, and which were designed to test the detail of current training regulations, including *FSR*, could never fully simulate war conditions; and that with munitions, ordnance, communications and air power all evolving rapidly, no one tactical regulation was set in stone. Not only infantry, but cavalry and artillery, developed best practice, almost on a monthly basis. Many of *FSR*'s detailed tactical training ideas were debateable almost before they were printed. Much can be learnt of detailed tactical evolution by examining contentious regulations, which stimulated debate at annual amendment conferences, and by reading secondary manuals or directives based on *FSR*. But it is the accepted core concepts, applicable to all types of modern warfare, which define *FSR* as a doctrine.

Concept One. An Offensive Mentality

An army should be offensive, even in defensive operations. 'Every commander who offers battle must be determined to assume the offensive sooner or later.'[30] Caution is not a feature of *FSR*. The need for an offensive spirit is repeatedly emphasised. In the context of the small wars of the late Victorian era, this was an unchanged message. Arguably it was not actually helpful to carry this ethos into a great continental war against overwhelming odds, particularly if other core concepts were ignored in its name, but it can be regarded as a historical imperative. The importance of an offensive mentality to the officers of the British army of August 1914 is reflected in the tone of the unit diaries of those units which fought at Mons, generally upbeat and defiant,

---

[30] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.126. See also pp.135,149,151.

despite losses; and those of units which merely manoeuvred without confrontation, often confused and disorientated. This concept is fundamental.

Concept Two. All Arms Combination

'The full power of an army can be exerted only when all its parts act in close combination.'[31] The use of the word 'army', in this statement, is significant. 'The basis of the field army organization is the division.'[32] The regulations which follow do not just refer to divisions. Air power is obviously included.[33] Infantry and cavalry divisions are required to 'combine' in defined circumstances. Coordination or cooperation is not sufficient. The concept of 'all parts' acting 'in close combination' is repeated again and again in *Part I*, referring to ever smaller sections of the army. It is reflected in regulations on the order of march, and on the representation of the various arms in flank guards, advance guards and rear guards. Artillery or mounted support should be considered, even when posting the smallest outpost. Specifically, if infantry or cavalry advance, they should never be allowed to outrun their artillery support. 'The greater the difficulties of the infantry, the more fully should the fire-power of the artillery be developed.'[34] If all arms combination is being ignored, *FSR* is not being followed.

Every infantry and artillery officer, after the South African War of 1899 to 1902, accepted this concept, and it was completely engrained in their training for war. However, the concept of a cavalry 'advanced guard', sometimes disdaining even

---

[31] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.14.
[32] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.
[33] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.41,118-120.
[34] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.51,69,94,102-102,130,137-140.

artillery support, was deeply engrained in the psyche of many senior cavalry generals. It was still partially accepted in *Combined Training 1905*. Even *FSR 1909*, although its regulations largely limit totally independent cavalry action to small patrols, has some caveats.[35] The idea of a 'break-through' with unsupported infantry or cavalry exploiting a break in enemy lines, was powerful and had been a feature of many notable victories from ancient times. But any battle of World War I, which was planned, using infantry or cavalry insufficiently supported by artillery in initial attacks, or with a breakthrough, unsupported by artillery, as its objective, is not following *FSR*.

Weaponry development imposes increasing complexity on the interpretation of this concept. Machine guns can be considered equivalent to massed infantry fire. Trench mortars and the like are light artillery. Tanks, when they arrived, were analogous to mobile artillery, or slow armoured cavalry. But the basic concept of all arms combination remains valid.

Concept Three. Deployment in depth

Every unit at war is required to post outposts to protect against surprise. These outposts can be offensive, if a further advance is envisaged, or defensive, if an attack is anticipated. Offensive outposts are generally larger, and more likely to be supported by other arms, since they are the springboard for advance. Defensive outposts are not to be held in the face of a sustained attack. They are there to give warning, and to hold up the enemy, if necessary, giving time for the formation behind them to deploy

[35] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.89-90,114-115.

appropriately.[36] Hopeless defensive positions should not be held without very good reason. Every officer, regardless of circumstances, is required to plan how and where his unit should fall back if that becomes necessary.[37] Every force planning concerted action, be it offensive or defensive, is required to maintain a reserve close to hand.[38] That reserve should generally be larger in attack than in defence. There is no one section which draws together this set of regulations; but it was in the best possible observance of them, on the day of any action, offensive or defensive, in trench raid, or major battle, that success was most likely to be achieved. Long range artillery and air observation made their general observance difficult. But it is the concept which is important. *FSR* recommends deployment and close support, in depth. Trench warfare did not alter the relevance of these regulations. If a commander places all his machine guns and most of his men in the front line, he is breaching *FSR*. If a hopeless piece of trench is being held just for the sake of it, as in a salient enfiladed from all sides, or if there is no prepared second line, manned by reserves, *FSR* is being breached.

Additional Minor Principles expounded in Field Service Regulations (1909)

Reference has already been made to the requirement that the Commander-in-Chief adhere to political guidelines as laid down by the Government in his prosecution of war. In addition, the Treasury was involved in the drafting of *Part II*, and there are a series of regulations which set out how money should be spent, and then accounted for, during the course of any campaign. General financial principles are laid down in Chapter III,

[36] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.94, 101-102,142.
[37] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.32.
[38] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.73,96,101-105,131,137,143,173.

and developed in later chapters.[39] There is also consideration of the legal position of belligerents in friendly or hostile countries. Reference is made to the Hague Convention of 1907.[40]

Summary

FSR was a doctrine for the British army, incorporating a command doctrine within it. 1909 was the point at which its ideas altered from best to imposed practice. All four principles are inextricably linked. Both parts of *FSR* were re-issued, *Part I* in 1912, *Part II* in 1913, incorporating amendments previously agreed at annual conferences set aside for that purpose. *FSR* delineated only a bedrock of guidance and there were training manuals specific to the infantry, cavalry and the multitude of smaller specialties in the army. These publications had to be revised to acknowledge the primacy of *FSR*, and to conform with it. New staff manuals had to be written. Much work was done to reconcile them, and most conformed with *FSR* by 1914.

David Keable-Elliott September 2022

A full bibliography is appended to this set of chapters. Whilst all these chapters can be considered to be in the public domain, reference to them should acknowledge the contribution of the author.

****

The following article is a long version, first put on this website in December 2020. It gives examples of *FSR* in action and discusses some of the problems with it.

[39] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* see pp.43-44,48&Ch.VI.
[40] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.66.

2 Field Service Regulations (FSR) – the doctrine explained

Abstract and introduction Page 18
Organisation and Structure of army Page 26
Standing Orders and Doctrine for officers Page 30
Doctrine for the army Page 33
Infantry Drill Regulations, German Army Page 52
FSR in wartime Page 58
Key features of FSR Page 74
Conclusion Page 75

No doctrine, be it military or religious, can be understood without study of primary texts. Interpretations, especially brief interpretations, can be positively misleading. With that proviso, this chapter attempts to explain, in detail, the nuances of the military doctrine that is *FSR (1909)*.[41] **As with any new imposed doctrine, it was not universally accepted in its entirety. And, as with any doctrine, non-believers were circumspect in their behaviour and writings; while true converts felt no need to emphasise their compliance, in the belief that adherence was universal. This can make it difficult to tease out the beliefs of individual officers between 1914 and 1918, but doing so is critical to understanding the tactical development of the British army at war on the Western Front. Broadly, military success, or failure, on that front was strongly correlated with compliance, or otherwise, with *FSR*. Operational analysis, allied to an understanding of the key *FSR* concepts, is the best method of determining the degree of compliance.**

---

[41] There is apparently no current academic study which attempts this task. Dr Spencer Jones, Senior Lecturer in Armed Forces and War Studies, University of Wolverhampton, personal communication, January 2020.

Field Service Regulations, Parts I and II, (*FSR*) were first published, by the War Office, together, but as separate documents, in 1909, when they were formally accepted and imposed on the British army by the Army Council. They were updated in 1912 and 1913 respectively. From 1909, *FSR* defined British army doctrine, and by 1914, it was supported by many secondary manuals. *FSR* delineated the basic, and required, administrative and tactical guidelines by which the British Army fought the First World War. All previous such handbooks had been for 'guidance'. *FSR* was not guidance; it was to be followed 'by command', and was binding on all serving officers.[42]

So, what were Field Service Regulations from 1909?

They can best be thought of as 'army' textbooks, which present all the basic information that a young officer had to absorb during the course of his training. They were required reading, and remained relevant at every stage of his development into an experienced officer. They were supplemented by training manuals, specific to military speciality, which developed its ideas. Broadly, *Part I* lays down detailed rules to guide the professional conduct of those serving in the army; and *Part II* allocates responsibility and accountability within an expeditionary force, taking into account a new military structure, which had been set in place by the Esher and Haldane reforms between 1904 and 1908. The two parts of *FSR* had their origins in separate documents. *FSR, Part I* was largely based on a training document, *Combined Training, Field Service*

---

[42] *Field Service Regulations, Part I, Operations, 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1912*, (London, General Staff War Office, 1912); *Field Service Regulations, Part II, Organisation and Administration, 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1913*, (London, General Staff War Office, 1913), title pages. Note that all subsequent references to *FSR* refer to the revised editions of 1912 and 1913 respectively.

Regulations, Part I, which was published, for guidance only, in 1905, although its true origins date back to 1900. *Part II* was based on a document originally entitled, *A Staff Manual*, written between 1900 and 1902, and updated in draft form between then and 1909. *Part I* and *Part II* have different principal agendas, but they do overlap. Both need to be read to understand the doctrine *FSR* presents, but each of the regulations in them can be allocated to one of four distinct 'subjects', each 'subject' having a different agenda. The regulations are presented in a logical sequence, but all four 'subjects' are covered in most sections of the documents. As many authors have pointed out, this mode of presentation is archaic, and differs from current military practice, but that does not mean that it is illogical. This analysis of *FSR* will cover these four principal agendas.

What were the aims of adopting Field Service Regulations (1909) as army policy?

The first aim was to lay down a detailed administrative framework, defining **organisational responsibilities** in an expeditionary force, based on an army structure, as broadly laid out in *King's Regulations, 1908*.[43] This latter document was kept up-dated, and had developed significantly since *Queen's Regulations 1899* which had applied when *FSR* was first conceived. The sections in *FSR* which deal with the necessary supply, administration and organisation of an Expeditionary Force are concentrated in *Part II* of the document. These regulations set the basis for of the doctrine. It is demanded that all officers have a clear understanding of how the army should be organised; and that all staff officers fulfil their allocated roles within this pre-ordained bureuacracy in a uniform and professional way.

---

[43] War Office, *King's Regulations, 1908*, (London, War Office, 1908)

The second aim was to ensure uniformity within the army, at home, and on campaign, in addressing any task that was routine and universal, at both the personal and the unit level. This was achieved by the **introduction of standing orders**, for the benefit of both staff and front-line troops. A standing order is an instruction as to how to carry out a specific task. *Part I* lays down many such standing orders, in individual paragraphs, to govern the routines of army life, and to standardise those routines. They are variously applicable to life in base camp, on the march, in billets and in battle. It is a long document and a few examples will suffice to illustrate what is meant. It details, for instance, how billets and latrines should be organised, how far apart horses should be picketed, and how many men should walk abreast on a road march. It also instructs all officers how orders should be issued, messages passed, and communications set up. The detail is sometimes minute. In addition, it gives information to inform tactical thinking, for instance stating the effective range of various artillery pieces. The intention was to standardise the basics of military life and educate junior officers in consistent practice. Prior to this, many regiments, or staffs, had their own way of doing things, not necessarily wrong, but the lack of uniformity was a tiresome impediment to training, and an irritant to any central command.

Again, these individual standing orders merely set the basis for a doctrine. They demanded a uniformity of approach to common military tasks. Professionalism is demanded in observing these standing orders, but little more than this.

But the third aim, defining **an ethos for a professional army officer**, is, quite consciously, doctrinal. Many of the standing orders described above, can be grouped,

although they do not appear consecutively in the document. Clusters of standing orders, pertaining to the duties of officers, if grouped, contribute to a doctrine. It is easiest to illustrate this by example. For instance, if an army force, of any size, was on campaign, every officer, not just the ultimate commander, was expected, as a routine and without specific orders, to ascertain exactly where he was; where his immediate commander was; where any supporting or neighbouring units were; how the enemy might approach; and how his immediate command would fall back if that became necessary. He was also expected to establish robust communications, back to his commander, forward to any subsidiary units, and sideways to neighbouring units.[44] These clusters of standing orders are not grouped together in the document, but they applied as much to a junior subaltern as they did to a general. They were instilled into the earliest training of all officers. They foster, and define, a doctrine of intelligent tactical awareness, without which initiative would be unable to flourish. Similar such groups of standing orders pertained to staff officers, as will be described more fully when individual aspects of *FSR* are more fully addressed.

But the document does not stop there. Having defined, as above, the duties of any officer in the field, it demands that all officers on active service, both delegate, and accept, responsibility appropriately and intelligently. The recent experience of the British army was of colonial war in South Africa, where it had been common for smaller units to be a long way from their ultimate commander. On the spot decision-making was recognised as being essential for success. 'In the aftermath of the conflict, evidence

[44] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.21,32,104,109,121.

presented before the Elgin Commission was virtually unanimous in calling for officers and men to be trained to accept greater responsibility and demonstrate more individual initiative.'[45] This was recognised by two fundamental concepts, which form the cornerstones of the doctrine demanded by *FSR*, as it pertained to individual officers.

First, senior officers were instructed not to give detailed orders at a distance. They should issue only 'brief and very general instructions';[46] and subordinate officers, of all arms, should carry out those instructions, using the regulations as a guide as to how. As an example, Field-Marshal Sir John French, before the Battle of Mons, ordered II Corps to take up outpost positions on the Condé Canal and the heights south-east of Mons on 22 August. He left it to Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, who commanded II Corps, to decide on the weight of forces to be deployed in these outposts; and he, in turn, left it to junior officers at brigade or battalion level, to decide, using *FSR*, exactly how each outpost should be configured. The final arrangement of each outpost was dependant on the results of local assessment and local initiative. Outposts all along the canal, or indeed, away from the canal, differed according to local geography.[47]

The second fundamental concept recognised the delay which often occurred between the issue of an order by a senior officer and its receipt by a subordinate. All subordinate commanders who were 'at a distance', should 'take on themselves, whenever it be necessary, the responsibility of departing from, or of varying the orders they may have

[45] Spencer Jones, *The Influence of the Boer War (1899–1902) on the Tactical Development of the Regular British Army, 1902–1914*, (PHD thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 2009), p.35, referencing as examples: Elgin Commission, Vol.1, Q173, p.7; Q174, p.8; Q10320, p.436; Q10442, p.440; Vol.2, Q13145, p.63; Q14193, p.121; Q19299, p.402.
[46] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.28.
[47] David Hutchison, *Mons, an Artillery Battle*, (Helion Press, Warwick, 2018), pp.47-53.

received'. In other words, subordinate officers should disobey orders if necessary. It goes without saying that very clear guidelines were given as to how, and when, this might be desirable.[48] (The concept of 'distance' was modified by advances in communication technology, such as the telephone. 'Distance' was measured in time elapsing before a subordinate officer could receive updated orders, not in yards or miles.) Nobody could disobey a direct verbal order. But, if an officer, commanding a subordinate unit was out of touch, and was obeying old orders, or received new orders, which did not take into account changed circumstances, the subordinate officer was not only allowed, but required, to modify his orders; and to act as he thought his senior officer would have acted, if he knew of the altered situation. He would be held accountable if he did not, and disaster occurred as a consequence. Thus, *FSR* defines a personal doctrine for all officers, one of intelligent initiative. Unless one understands this personal doctrine, it is impossible to understand why officers, even quite late in the war behaved in the way that they did. Just as an example, a not inconsiderable number of very competent officers were sent home in disgrace from the Battle of the Somme, having followed *FSR* in refusing to obey orders which they considered inappropriate to the circumstances of their units, or to put it more bluntly, suicidal.

The fourth aim of the document was to define the **ethos of the army as a whole**. Again, individual paragraphs pertaining to this topic are often not grouped, and it is necessary to read the whole document to draw them together. There are two principal fundamental assertions. The first is that an army should be offensive, and the second is

---

[48] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.31-32.

that all arms of the army should act in concert. The former is relatively easy to appreciate. 'Every commander who offers battle must be determined to assume the offensive sooner or later.'[49] Caution is not a feature of *FSR*. The need for offensive spirit is repeatedly emphasised. But, just as important is an insistence on all arms cooperation at all times. 'The full power of an army can be exerted only when all its parts act in close combination.'[50] This particular statement applies to an army, but the concept of 'all parts' acting 'in close combination' is repeated again and again in the document, referring to ever smaller sections of the army. The need for artillery or mounted support should routinely be considered, even when posting the smallest outpost or advance guard.[51] If infantry or cavalry advanced, they should never be allowed to outrun their artillery support.[52] These can be regarded as standing orders for the army in general, of which there were many such. Examples of these will be given in the following text.

In addition, the documents had secondary aims, which can collectively be labelled as **political objectives**. *FSR* was intended to stream-line the organisation of an expeditionary force, at many levels, making it easier to allocate and control costs, addressing both financial and military accountability, to the consternation of many, for whom thrift or firm political control were new concepts. And many of the standing orders introduced simplified, and standardised, training and procedures, again saving money. But the publication of *FSR*, in 1909, was merely a fixed point in a developing army. Both parts of *FSR* were revised, *Part I* in 1912, *Part II* in 1913, and many

---

[49] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.126.
[50] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.14.
[51] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.94, 101-102.
[52] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.51, 137-140.

supplementary handbooks were published. But the Army Council had ruled that all these later publications must accept the primacy of *FSR* in defining organisation, ethos and tactical development, and must conform with it, rather than the other way around.

FSR delineated only the bedrock of guidance on which further manuals should build. Very considerable extra detail was required for the training of specific arms of the army, and for specialist elements of it. It took some time, of course, for the various manuals to catch up, and model themselves on *FSR*. Childers, writing in 1911, said that the contradictions between *Combined Training*, *Infantry Training*, *Cavalry Training* and *Mounted Infantry Training* were 'a public scandal,' but that was early days.[53] Much work was done over the next few years to reconcile them, and most conformed with *FSR* by 1914. Perhaps the most significant manual which failed to fully update by 1914 was *Cavalry Training*, revised in 1912, which fails to take on board the necessity of having staff with responsibility for intelligence; and retains, albeit somewhat wistfully, the concept of cavalry as an independent offensive force.[54]

1 Organisational responsibility

The first and most fundamental message, concerning responsibility, relates to the Commander-in-Chief of an Expeditionary Force. 'Unity of control is essential to unity of effort. This condition can be ensured only by vesting the supreme authority in one man, the C.-in-C. [Commander in Chief] of the forces in the field.'[55] Any senior officer

[53] The Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry 1816-1919, Volume 4, 1899-1913*, (Leo Cooper, London1986), p.417, quoting Robert Erskine Childers, German influences on British Cavalry.
[54] War office, *Cavalry Training, 1912, reprinted with amendments, 1915*, pp.230&234.
[55] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.23.

'exerts his authority over a limited number of subordinates.'[56] This means that all significant orders are passed down a pre-ordained chain of command. 'A subordinate commander issues orders on all matters connected with the efficiency and maintenance of his command for the execution of the duties allotted to him.'[57] In simple terms, a Commander-in-Chief put his divisions into position and tells them what to do. He has no further responsibility, except to react to events that require a change in a division's position or intent. Subordinate commanders fight as directed. No subordinate can make decisions that change army strategy. They must follow orders in that respect.

This important set of clauses is situated in *FSR, Part II*, and not in *Part I*, where it perhaps more logically sits. They were inserted at a relatively late stage, at the insistence of Richard Haldane, Secretary of State for War.[58] The Commander-in-Chief answered to his political masters in London, and it was seen as desirable that control over grand strategy remained, as far as possible, with politicians; and that there should be no opportunity for maverick subordinates to unilaterally engage in military action that might have unforeseen political consequences.

It has been suggested that this cornerstone of *FSR* is undermined by the requirement that officers react to military situations intelligently at a distance, as just described, and this is a reasonable point. But, by 1909, technology had improved communications to such an extent that, in a continental war, corps and divisional commanders would never

[56] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.
[57] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.29.
[58] National Army Museum, 8704/35/136, *Ellison correspondence and papers*, War Office document, *The Incidence of administrative responsibility in the Field*, 9 Nov 1906; See Chapter 3, pp.23-24.

be out of touch with their Chief for long enough to justify unilateral action that impacted on strategy. War moved relatively slowly in 1909, and indeed in 1914.

‘The basis of the field army organization is the division,’ commanded by a Major-General.[59] But six, or even four divisions, was recognised as being too many ‘subordinates’, as defined above, for the Commander-in-Chief, to manage, and an extra layer of hierarchy, initially an ‘Army’, later renamed a ‘Corps’, commanded by a Lieutenant-General, was included in a later document. (The new nomenclature took time to be universally observed, which can lead to mild confusion in contemporary records.) A corps, in 1914, initially consisted of two divisions. Commanding an ‘army’ or corps did not confer independence under *FSR*. Simpson draws attention to the fact that corps commanders initially looked to have no obvious role, but goes on to say that this assertion was disproved by the onerous staff duties required of this layer of hierarchy, both in theory (within *FSR*), and in practice, from mobilisation into the Mons Campaign.[60] ‘The BEF formally split into two armies on 26 December 1914’, due to the rapid expansion of the army. This required an evolution of command pathways, well described by Lloyd, although he fails to address the *FSR* implications directly.[61] This development, as it pertains to *FSR*, is beyond the scope of this review.

Part II, supported by a few sections in *Part I*, lays out the lines of administrative responsibility within, and servicing, an expeditionary force. It clarifies command

[59] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.
[60] Andrew Simpson, *The Operational Role of British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914-18*, Doctoral thesis, University College, London, 2001), p.22.
[61] Nick Lloyd, "With Faith and without Fear": Sir Douglas Haig's Command of First Army during 1915, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Oct., 2007), p.1055.

pathways from the highest level. *Part II* is very detailed, running to 200 pages. Of necessity, the structure imposed is rigidly hierarchical. The very top of this hierarchy is within the General Headquarters (GHQ) of an Expeditionary Force, with the Quartermaster-General directing the transport, quartering, supplies and ordnance of the army; and the Adjutant-General, managing the detail of its military organisation, including medical services. Both had responsibilities forward into the fighting force, but much of their work was directed back down the army supply lines to England. Not only administrative directorates, under their auspices, were defined. Financial and legal responsibilities were also allocated, which was politically important at a time when army costs were poorly controlled, and the Treasury was looking for economies.

Of necessity, the basic hierarchy laid out in *Part II* evolved with the exponential growth of the complexity and size of the bureaucracy required to sustain the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in the field, but the document remained the fall-back definitive guide for the allocation of administrative responsibility for almost the entire war. It was not inviolate and was revised in 1917. But as an example, well before then, *Part II* allocated responsibility for the movement of heavy supplies on canals and rivers to a Transport Directorate, while heavy goods moved by train were the responsibility of a Railway Directorate. In December 1914, Major-General Sir William Robertson, as Quartermaster-General, transferred waterborne transport, in its entirety, to come under the Director of Railways, thus rationalising transport planning.[62]

---

[62] John Spencer, The Big Brain in the Army: Sir William Robertson as Quartermaster-General; Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide, Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914,* (Solihull, Helion and Company, 2013), p.105.

2 Introduction of standing orders

The individual standing orders itemised in *FSR, Part I* were largely uncontroversial. Most merely confirmed existing practice, and the phrasing of many allow for a degree of interpretation in special circumstances. Even those officers most resistant to reform accepted that they simplified training, and enabled officers to move more easily from one unit to another, without the need to re-learn the way in which simple tasks were performed. If a single regulation was perceived as unsatisfactory, it could be amended with relative ease. Revised editions of both documents were issued in 1912 and 1913 respectively. But amendments left the rigid frame within which the army operated intact.

3 Doctrine for a professional army officer

It is in the clustering of standing orders to define a desirable ethos that the basis for a new doctrine was most emphatically laid down. Forward-thinking officers, and more progressive units had already introduced these ideas, since they were based on those in *Combined Training, 1905*. But different units, and different arms of the army, moved at different speeds in fully accepting the ethos. It has to be recognised that there is a conflict between disciplined, unquestioning, acceptance of orders, and the demand that all officers on active service demonstrate intelligent initiative. Furthermore, *FSR* frequently admits that individual regulations of a directive nature, may, exceptionally, be inappropriate. However, this thought-provoking flexibility, within a rigid structure, was totally accepted by all young British army officers in training. It was the rule book which guided them in the performance of all aspects of their work.

First published in 1909, every officer, coming into the army after that date, would have used *FSR* as a main reference during training. (Duncan quotes Sandhurst exam questions, from 1911 and 1912, which explicitly test knowledge of command flexibility in *FSR, Part I*, although he fails to emphasise the impact that its introduction had on the curriculum.[63]) Their military education was completely different from that of their seniors. That does not mean that all aspects of *FSR* were universally agreed. As a generalisation, younger officers accepted the documents uncritically, some older officers, perhaps with reservations. And a few individuals, who had developed their own tactical doctrine, whilst having no difficulty accepting administrative and training protocols, may have had some reservations about what the documents had to say on tactics and ethos. Acceptance of *FSR*, as a 'doctrine', was not uniform across the army, despite the fact that it was imposed as such by 'Command of the Army Council' in 1909. But every officer who had trained before 1909 was expected to have made himself familiar with all the Regulations, and was required to show that he adhered to them at on-going assessments. 'They should be so thoroughly impressed on the mind of every commander that, whenever he has to come to a decision in the field, he instinctively gives them their full weight'.[64] And they did. 'The regular officers of 1914 … took the information contained in Field Service Regulations for granted. They carried out procedures almost instinctively.'[65]

---

[63] Andrew George Duncan, *The Military Education of Junior Officers in the Edwardian Era*, (Ph.D. University of Birmingham, 2016), pp.57,59-60.
[64] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.13.
[65] Niall Barr, Command in the Transition from Mobile to Static Warfare, August 1914 to March 1915, in Sheffield and Todman (eds) *Command and Control on the Western Front, The British Army's Experience 1914-18,* Staplehurst, Spellmount, 2004), pp.14-15.

It was not necessarily easy. The conflict between disciplined acceptance of orders and intelligent initiative was a real one. There are clusters of standing orders which apply to staff work. A key section in *FSR, Part I*, deals with the gathering and processing of intelligence. 'Systematic arrangements must always be made to ensure that every possible source of information is fully utilised, that all information received is immediately transmitted to the proper quarter, and that it is carefully sifted before any conclusions are formed. These are duties of the general staff.'[66] This merely summarises the section, which comprises a whole series of regulations. Implementation of these, for individual officers, demanded a change in culture in those senior generals who were rigidly hierarchical. A collegiate structure was required in his staff, so that the junior officers responsible for various strands of intelligence would be enabled to collate their findings, and brief their superior, prior to him issuing an order. By implication, the document states that generals need support from their juniors in making measured decisions on the basis of intelligence received; and they were required to set up an appropriate staff structure to facilitate this. Some generals were receptive to this concept, others perhaps less so. Like many of the principles formulated in *FSR*, the guidance on staff structure was found to be insufficient in detail, and a Staff Manual (War) was subsequently drafted in 1912, primarily for the benefit of the General Staff.[67] But these subsequent manuals were based on *FSR*; they did not replace it. It was not only in the personal staff of a general that a rigid hierarchy, as might be desirable in the

[66] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.112.
[67] John Gooch, *The Plans of War, the General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900-1916,* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London), p.121; Dan Todman, The Grand Lamasery revisited; General Headquarters, the Western Front, 1914-1918, Sheffield & Todman, *Command and Control*, pp.41-46.

bureaucratic branches of GHQ, with junior officers silent as they performed their administrative tasks, might be inappropriate. This understated message permeates much of *Part I.* An earlier section described how all officers on active service, and not just generals, must, under *FSR*, reconnoitre, collect and process local intelligence, ensure good communications, and liaise with neighbouring units. Liaison requires two-way communication, not necessarily between officers of equal rank. And, by implication, under *FSR*, if a junior officer was aware that his senior did not, for instance, know where he was, it was the duty of the junior officer to speak up. Yes, the army was hierarchical, but it was expected that officers would be professional in their relationships. Again, not all senior officers accepted what was being demanded of them in this regard.

4 The Ethos of the Army, its strategic and tactical doctrine

The Mons campaign was the first major test of the military philosophy described in *FSR*. It is impossible to meaningfully assess the performance of any military commander in the First War, or attempt an operational analysis of any battle in it, without an understanding of the 'rules for war' as described in *FSR*. It may only have been a basic handbook, but on it, all other tactical and strategic guides should, by order, have been based. It contains general tactical advice, uncluttered by historical references, and provided a framework within which tactical evolution could occur. Its success in this regard would enable the small British army to contest in a continental war. Much of its contents merely drew together the plethora of guidance already in existence when it came out in 1909.[68] But it is crucial to appreciate how important *FSR* was, as a concept,

---

[68] *The Influence of the Boer War*, pp.41-42.

to the majority of army officers in 1914. Their performance was judged by their adherence to it. They took what it said very seriously. Part I opens with this statement.

> *The principles given in this manual have been evolved by experience as generally applicable to the leading of troops. They are to be regarded by all ranks as authoritative, for their violation, in the past, has often been followed by mishap, if not by disaster.*[69]

Much of *FSR, Part I*, addresses the handling of an army, or part of an army, in a series of strategic situations, be it in advance or retreat, against colonial insurgency, or an all-arms continental army. The key messages are of aggression and all arms cooperation. Specific tasks for specific commanders or staff officers in specific situations are described, but most of the guidance is general, applicable to units, rather than officers. It is assumed that the professional structure imposed on officers, as already described, would enable them to handle units; and that any officer familiar with the regulations would feel comfortable in so doing. Thus, it directs units on how to react, or how to deploy, in a series of different scenarios, on the assumption that the officers commanding those units were complying with other regulations pertaining to, for instance, reconnaissance, vigilance, self-protection and local liaison.

The document was primarily written in anticipation of a continental war against an army of all arms, although it does acknowledge that a different approach might be appropriate in 'warfare against an uncivilised enemy'. 'The full power of an army can

---

[69] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.13.

be exerted only when all its parts act in close combination.'[70] This, and similar statements elsewhere in the document, were widely, and correctly, interpreted as an attempt to curb, some would say the eccentricities, others would say the freedoms, of independent command. Most, if not all, infantry officers accepted the necessity of attached gunners, engineers and mounted troops to support their movements. But as a generalisation, most cavalry officers preferred to consider themselves an elite force, capable not only of rapid and aggressive reconnaissance, but also having the capacity to make a decisive contribution to success as a stand-alone force. Since the document was mainly conceived and written by infantry officers, the views of a group of senior cavalry commanders were to some extent ignored. As a generalisation, the cavalry was significantly slower to embrace the doctrine than other arms, and some cavalry commanders never did, even late in the war.

The Issue of 'Independence'

The importance of this shift away from the concept of total 'independence' of cavalry command, or indeed any other detached force, is fundamental to understanding *FSR, Part I*. But it is first addressed very clearly in the introduction to *FSR, Part II*, already quoted. 'Supreme authority' is vested 'in one man, the C.-in-C. [Commander in Chief] of the forces in the field.'[71] 'The C.-in-C., aided by his Staff, exerts his authority over a limited number of subordinate commanders. These aided by their staffs and assistants, convey his will to a limited number of subordinate commanders under them, each of

[70] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.14.
[71] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.23.

whom carries it down still lower, until eventually all ranks are controlled by it.'[72] Sir John French, and GHQ, in August 1914 thus directed the strategy of the British Expeditionary Force. He directed his subordinate commanders where they should go, and what their forces should do when they got there.

But he had no right, as Commander-in-Chief, to direct the fine detail of the organisation of their movements, or the tactics which his divisions used to carry out his orders when they arrived where he had sent them. These were laid down in *FSR*, and it was up to commanders at that level to follow them. Nor did he, subsequently, have the right to interfere in the dispositions of these units if they were following his 'brief' orders appropriately. Of course, his staff had the responsibility of monitoring if this was the case, and he had every right to intervene if he saw a problem developing. But major units took some time to respond to major orders on deployment, and he had the responsibility of assessing threats to his whole army, not just any small part of it. French has been vilified for going to Valenciennes on the morning of the Battle of Mons, after issuing brief orders to his Corps Commanders.[73] He had told them to fight a battle. But he was responsible for strategy, and an obvious danger was encirclement of his whole army from the west. *FSR* demands that 'a commander even of a large army should rarely omit to reconnoitre personally.'[74] Reconnaissance of this vulnerable flank was highly desirable. He was, in fact, following *FSR* in absenting himself from the immediate battlefield, where he had no role to play at that moment.

---

[72] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.

[73] John Terraine, *Mons, the Retreat to Victory*, (London, B T Batsford Ltd, 1960), p.89. Many other scholars have echoed his criticism.

[74] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.117.

And these same clauses ensured that he retained control of his Cavalry Division. Edmund Allenby, commanding, was given his orders, just like other subordinates to French, and while he, like the others, had freedom to interpret his orders under *FSR*, he could not be described as acting independently. Indeed, French took a particular interest in his manoeuvres and visited his headquarters on 21 August, two days before the battle. But this command structure was not a cavalry tradition. *Combined Training, Field Service Regulations, Part I*, published in 1905, accepts a completely 'independent cavalry force' as conventional. It states that a principal objective of this force is 'to oppose and defeat the enemy's horsemen,' and to 'undertake enterprises against their communications' in the days before two opposing armies made close contact. The commander of the 'independent cavalry' was required to be capable of truly independent aggression.[75] Only a few years later, *FSR, Part I*, as amended in 1912, contradicts this, for political reasons as already described, but for military ones as well.

Although the concept of independent aggression is not totally ruled out in *FSR (1909)*, the long-winded, and somewhat obscure, wording implies that opportunities for pure cavalry actions of this type were likely to be very rare in modern continental warfare. And although the term 'independent cavalry' is retained, and it is stated that their commander will have 'complete freedom of action' in carrying out 'special missions', he is bound to accept 'definite instructions from the commander-in-chief as to the special mission that he is to fulfil.' The next paragraph argues that this 'special mission'

[75] *Combined Training, Field Service Regulations, Part I,* ((London, General Staff War Office, 1905), pp.55,97&106.

will almost always be confined to ‘strategic reconnaissance’, that is, reconnaissance at a considerable distance; and that this will usually best be performed, not by massed cavalry, but by ‘a patrol of from ten to twelve, strong’.[76] (‘Reconnaissance duties were broken into three separate categories. 'Strategic' reconnaissance took place when the armies were distant, and aimed to identify approximate enemy strength, direction, and intentions. 'Tactical' reconnaissance was defined as taking place when the armies were within striking distance of one another, and aimed to identify key points of the enemy's position. Finally, 'protective' reconnaissance was intended to intercept enemy patrols and scouts, thus denying intelligence to the enemy and protecting friendly scout formations.’[77]) The military, as opposed to political, reason for this change in emphasis on independent aggression is implied in the discussion on ‘mounted troops’, providing close cover for an advancing all-arms force, which made up the non-independent half of the mounted contingent. These, if threatened by enemy cavalry, should be supported by ‘other advance troops as the general situation permits’ or ‘reinforced by other arms.’[78] In other words, no single arm (e.g., the cavalry, or even the infantry) of the army should attempt to attack, or allow itself to be attacked by, an all arms force of the enemy.

This point is laboured because key phrases such as ‘independent cavalry force’ and ‘complete freedom of action’ are in the document; and they can easily be quoted out of context. But the concepts are so curtailed by the explanatory text, that it seems they are

---

[76] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.114-115.
[77] Spencer Jones, Scouting for Soldiers: Reconnaissance and the British Cavalry, 1899–1914, *War in History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (November 2011), p.506.
[78] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.90.

mere words, left in to placate traditionalists. Even the cavalry was being bound to accept the dual concepts of firm direction by a commander-in-chief, and all-arms cooperation in battle. How this change in wording came about, and what Haig, in particular, thought of it, will be addressed in future chapters, but it seems likely that this radical change in emphasis slipped through, unnoticed by the most senior cavalry commanders, in 1909.

The Ethos of the Army: command principles

Leaving aside the relatively prescriptive part of the regulations, the next thread to follow is the command ethos that *FSR* demands. This is, perhaps, surprising, at first reading, in what was essentially a conservative army. It could have adopted an authoritarian philosophy – detailed orders to be obeyed without question. This approach had been adopted, particularly in the German army.[79] Doctrinal authoritarianism was perceived as necessary where a very high proportion of the men were conscripted, and in service for a limited period of time. Orders needed to be obeyed, with little latitude for local initiative. And in the continental wars for which these armies were designed, officers were generally expected to be close enough to their subordinates to enable them to give firm unambiguous orders in real time. (This will be a point to bear in mind when comparisons between the British army in 1914, and that of 1916 are made.)

It has already been explained that, under *FSR*, senior officers were mandated to issue only 'brief and very general instructions';[80] and that subordinate officers, of all arms,

---

[79] Herman Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914-18,* (Solihull, Helion, 2001) pp.301-305; *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army, 1906*, translated for US War Department by Francis Behr, (Government Printing Office, Washington, 1907).

[80] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.28.

should carry out those instructions, using the regulations as a guide as to how. And that if subordinate commanders were 'at a distance', they should 'take on themselves, whenever it be necessary, the responsibility of departing from, or of varying the orders they may have received'. In other words, subordinate officers should disobey orders if necessary; and act as they thought their senior officers would have acted, if they knew of the altered situation. If an officer did modify an order, there was one further important task. 'Should a subordinate find it necessary to depart from an order, he should at once inform the issuer of it, and the commanders of any neighbouring units likely to be affected.'[81] This was not optional. Again, and again in the regulations, the importance of two-way communication, laterally and vertically, in retaining control of an army in the field is reiterated. An army that allowed interpretation, or modification, of orders had to insist on prompt feedback.

This need for intelligent initiative laid a considerable onus on subordinate officers. But all British army officers were in the profession for life. They had qualified at school for entry to a military academy, studied the basics of their chosen branch, and then been posted to an infantry, cavalry, artillery or engineering unit within a division for further training. All officers were highly trained. When they received an order at a distance, not, it has to be said, a very common occurrence in peacetime, their first task was to decide whether it was a sensible one to obey; and then, and only then, how to obey it. The regulations specifically distinguish between the letter, and the spirit, of an order, the latter being the more important; and modification of an order was not to be

[81] *Field Service Regulations*, *Part I,* pp.31-32.

undertaken lightly. It is surprising how often officers were faced with the need to modify orders in the first few weeks of war.

A few simple examples from the Mons campaign illustrate the process. The 3rd Infantry Brigade of the 1st Division issued precise orders to its battalions, including the 1st Gloucestershire Regiment, on how to fall back from their front-line positions, facing the Germans, after dawn on 24 August. 'The Glosters [sic] rightly came back through Croix les Rouveroy, and not as suggested in Bde orders past Givry, as the open slope in that direction might have been shelled.'[82] The colonel of the Gloucester Regiment has disobeyed precise orders, for a good reason, and the war diary of his brigade registers its approval. Nobody tried to hide the facts. It was entirely acceptable behaviour within *FSR*. The route of retirement of the other battalions is not mentioned in the brigade diary, because they did obey their orders. But the modification was recorded. It was a serious matter, not to be undertaken lightly.

A further more trivial example emphasises the importance placed on reporting a modified order to the issuer of that order. The colonel of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, on a march south to Landrecies on the 25th, received an idiotic order from a panicky 2nd Division staff officer to forego the routine ten-minute rest each hour until further notice, despite the sultry heat. This was presumably to ease local congestion on the roads, but had the result of convincing all in the battalion that the Germans were close behind them, which they were not. By 9.45 am, 90 men had fallen out with exhaustion. Their

---

[82] TNA WO 95/1274, 3 Infantry Brigade, 24 Aug 1914.

colonel took it on himself to rescind the order, and, rather delightfully, recorded in the war diary that he had 'reported the fact', as per regulations.[83] *FSR* was strictly observed.

There are many other more significant examples of this clause of the regulations being activated during the battle of Mons. The colonel of the 2nd South Staffordshire Regiment, at Harmignies, four miles south-east of Mons, on the afternoon of 23 August, was personally asked for help by the colonel of the 2nd Royal Scots (Lothian Regiment), which was under heavy attack and thinly spread in the line up to Mons. Thus, a 3rd Division Battalion, under pressure, was asking a 2nd Division Battalion to deploy out of its allotted sector to provide support. The colonel of the South Staffordshire Regiment instantly sent his reserve company to their aid, and only then, did he inform Brigadier-General Davies, his immediate superior, at Brigade Headquarters. Davies realised that his left flank had been weakened, and promptly moved some of his own reserves north, to increase the cover allotted to the Staffordshire Regiment, before informing Major-General Monro, at Divisional Headquarters, of his changing dispositions. Monro in turn informed I Corps Headquarters that his troops had had to encroach into a II Corps sector to ensure the integrity of their line.[84] This smooth and impressive tactical redeployment at battalion level illustrates the calm professionalism of an army guided by *FSR*. It required a high level of mutual trust, that, in the small British army, was often informed by personal familiarity. All the examples quoted so far, come from I Corps, which Haig commanded.

[83] TNA WO-95-1342-34, 3 Coldstream Guards, 4 Brigade, 2 Division, 25 Aug 1914.
[84] TNA WO 95/1283, 2 Division, 23 Aug 1914, p.50 and war diaries of all lesser units.

It was not all good. Lieutenant-Colonel N. A. L. Corry, the commanding officer of the 2nd Grenadier Guards, was sent home, after an enquiry, for withdrawing, without orders, from Point 93, just north of Harmignies in the late evening of 23 August, despite using this clause in defence of his actions.[85] (It is fairly clear that he took the blame for *FSR* failings at brigade level. He was re-employed to a fighting command almost immediately.)

The most obvious examples of this clause being activated in the ranks of II Corps, in these few days, concern battalions, or companies, which were in action, and being ordered to retire. For instance, again on 23 August, a company of the 4th Royal Fusiliers refused to immediately comply with 3rd Division orders to retire from their positions on the Condé canal at Mons, their non-compliance being blamed in the relevant war diary, on a 'telephone failing', this or a similar excuse, being not uncommonly used to prevent enquires from above.[86] The true reason is given in the Official History. 'The forward companies of the Fifth (sic) Fusiliers meanwhile stuck to their position on the canal, in spite of the command to retire, in order to cover the engineers who were preparing the bridge at Mariette for destruction.'[87]

Similarly, the next day, in the 5th Division, the 'OC [Officer Commanding] Manchester Regt refused to retire until the guns had gone, as did the OC Yorkshire Light

[85] Peter Hodgkinson, The Infantry Battalion Commanding Officers of the BEF; Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide, Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914,* (Solihull, Helion and Company, 2013), p.308. NB This states the incident took place at Bois La Haut, which is incorrect.
[86] TNA WO 95/1425, 9 Infantry Brigade, 23 Aug 1914.
[87] James Edmonds, *History of the Great War, Military Operations, France and Belgium 1914,* Volume 1, ([1922, revised 1933], Imperial War Museum and Battery Press Inc.,1996), p.86.

Inf of the 13th Brigade on the right of the guns.'[88] Two colonels, one commanding the 2nd Manchester Regiment, 14th Infantry Brigade, the other the 2nd King's Own (Yorkshire Light Infantry), 13th Infantry Brigade, were refusing to obey orders, which would result in abandoning a battery to its fate. The artillery diary in this case candidly records the facts, since the situation was primarily caused by a stubborn battery commander, who was determined to stay where he was. He had received orders to retire, but not by the correct command pathway, (a concept which will soon be addressed). The infantry diary says that the colonel of the 2nd Manchester's 'failed to receive his orders' to retire, quietly sweeping the incident under the carpet.[89] It was more trouble than it was worth to write something which might trigger an enquiry. Activation of this clause was regarded as a serious matter, but in both these cases, the brigade staff covered the officers concerned.

Generally, in the first few weeks of the war, the initiative and independent thinking required of all officers was of great value. Inevitably, in the stress of precipitate retreat from Mons and then from Le Cateau, there were many instances of units getting separated from their immediate command, and their commanders being left with only the vaguest of orders. The speed with which the 3rd and 5th Divisions reformed overnight, in their lines at Bavai on 24 August after the Battle of Mons, and again when they concentrated, in the case of the 3rd Division, around the small hamlet of Villaret on 27 August, after the action at Le Cateau the day before, is impressive. Despite

[88] TNA WO 95/1521, 5 Division Artillery, 24 Aug 1914.
[89] TNA WO 95/1560, 14 Infantry Brigade, 24 Aug 1914.

inaccurate, out-of-date, orders to many units, some quite scattered, most rendezvoused in the right place, reformed and were able to report themselves ready, and waiting for further orders.[90]

It is necessary at this point to pick up on the subject of command pathways. Where initiative was expected of all officers, and where modification of orders at a distance was relatively routine, it followed that ordering down, and reporting back up the correct command pathway was of critical importance, and it is demanded in the Regulations.[91] As an example, if the major-general of a division gave a direct order to the colonel of a battalion, cutting out the intermediate brigadier-general, dangerous confusion might arise. A divisional general, following *FSR*, could only give orders to a battalion commander through its brigade commander. Exceptionally, 'in case of urgency', this rule could be overridden, but both the giver and receiver of the order had to inform the intermediate commander of the full details immediately.[92] Headline clauses forbid the practice. It is a measure of the flexibility of the whole document that the disclaimer is included.

But if the divisional general wanted control of that battalion, he was perfectly entitled to order the brigade commander to release it for divisional duties, at which point the command pathway formally changed. The brigade commander could not then use that battalion, or issue orders to it, until it was formally returned to him. A good example of

---

[90] David Hutchison, *The Young Gunner: The Royal Field Artillery in the Great War,* (Kibworth Beauchamp, Leicestershire, Troubador Press 2016) p.18.
[91] *Field Service Regulations, Part II,* p.25.
[92] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.32-33.

this process in action was before the Battle of Élouges. Major-General Ferguson, commanding the 5th Division, urgently required a flank guard to protect his western flank. The Divisional reserves comprised the 15th Infantry Brigade, two battalions of which were fighting hard on his eastern flank, five miles away, supervised by their brigade commander. He therefore ordered Brigadier-General Count Gleichen to relinquish the command of the remaining two battalions of his infantry brigade to come under his personal control at divisional level. He then ordered these battalions into battle at Élouges, giving Colonel Ballard of the 1st Norfolk Regiment command of the detachment, which included the 1st Cheshire Regiment.[93] After the battle, command of the two battalions was passed by Ferguson, at division, to Brigadier-General Rolt of the 14th Infantry Brigade, since he was commanding the infantry retreating on the road, which the remnants of the two battalions joined for the first stage of their retreat. Command of the battalions then formally reverted to Count Gleichen when the two infantry brigades met later that night. At no time, did the battalion commanding officers not know from whom they should accept orders. During the battle of Élouges, Lieutenant-Colonel Boger, commanding the 1st Cheshire Regiment, was advised that his men should retire, by Brigadier-General Gough of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade.[94] This was not an order. Gough, despite his rank, could only advise. Ballard, at that point, was at a distance and uncontactable. Boger's duty, when he received this advice, was to decide what Ballard would have wanted him to do. As it happened, Boger took Gough's

[93] TNA WO 95/1510, 5 Division, 24 Aug 1914.
[94] TNA WO 95/1571, 1 Cheshire Regt, 24 Aug 1914.

advice, so far as he was able, but he did not have to do so. He decided to use his initiative to comply with the suggestion, but it was his career at risk, and not Gough's.

Command Pathways in the Artillery

The Royal Field Artillery (RFA) was comfortably the largest artillery regiment in 1914, the other two being the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA), which was attached to Cavalry Divisions, and the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) who manned the heavier, less mobile guns. Every division, infantry and cavalry, had artillery attached, and in divisional manoeuvres, the guns moved in consort with other units. 'The function of the artillery is to assist the other arms in breaking down hostile opposition.'[95] The word 'assist' is to be interpreted literally. Nowhere in the document is the artillery expected to 'break down hostile opposition'. Its role was exclusively supportive, and that to the divisions, not to the army as a whole. The commander-in-chief of the British army in August 1914 had no guns under his direct control, and nor, conventionally did a corps commander, although as early as the Battle of Mons, the brilliant Brigadier-General Henry Horne, Haig's Commander of Royal Artillery in I Corps, used *FSR* conventions to ensure that the artillery respected corps, and not just divisional, dispositions.[96] Formally, however, the guns were controlled at divisional level.[97] Very senior generals may or may not have had views on artillery deployment, and this will be an important part of subsequent discussion, but, in 1914, they did not need to. They issued orders,

---

[95] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.15.
[96] Hutchison, *Mons, an Artillery Battle*, pp.62-63.
[97] Sanders Marble, *The Infantry cannot do with a Gun less, the Place of the Artillery in the BEF*, (Ph.D. thesis, London, Kings College, 1998), chs.2&3. This is essential reading for those interested in the subject. He does not totally agree with this interpretation of *FSR* for the artillery.

commander-in-chief to corps commanders, corps commanders to divisional commanders. Only at this level, was the deployment of the artillery determined and implemented. The Divisional Commander of Royal Artillery (CRA), a brigadier-general, would deploy his guns after discussion with his superior, the divisional commander, and his equals, the infantry brigade commanders. He had the choice, either to handle the guns himself, or to allocate some, or all of them, to infantry brigade commanders, if that was appropriate for the tasks in hand, or if communications were such that local handling was the better option. A junior artillery commander, therefore, routinely, had one of two command pathways, that from his usual artillery commander, or that, seconded to an infantry commander. To avoid confusion, whoever currently commanded an artillery unit had to order any switch; and an artillery commander could, and on several occasions at Mons did, decline to accept orders from other than his designated command pathway, until the switch was formally made. An instance of such a refusal has already been described. This command structure was a relatively recent introduction, though it had been formalised as routine in *Field Artillery Training*, the handbook for artillery officers produced in mid-1914.[98]

Applicability of this system of command to the cavalry

The first problem with this system of command pertained to the cavalry. Larger formations did routinely observe this regulation. For instance, the independent 5th Cavalry Brigade was controlled by Edmund Allenby, of the Cavalry Division, on 22 August, but transferred to GHQ command that afternoon. About 12 hours later, the

---

[98] General Staff, War Office, *Field Artillery Training*, (HMSO, London, 1914), p.240-244.

Brigade came under I Corps.[99] But, within brigades, or even divisions of cavalry, decisions, during the course of reconnaissance missions against an advancing army, had to be made quickly. Rapid decision-making was the marker of a successful cavalry commander at brigade or divisional level. And a cavalry squadron or regiment, unencumbered by baggage during the day, could react very quickly to a command to redeploy in the event that it had advanced too far, or looked like being cut-off. Cavalry commanders were themselves mobile, in marked contrast to their infantry counterparts who established headquarters for the day and generally stayed there. Cavalry communications were far more rapid than that of the infantry. Thus, formal secondment of units to a different line of command hardly ever happened in the heat of the moment; and cavalry commanders could, and occasionally did, order subordinate units to move without first consulting intermediate tiers of command, or formally taking command of them, confident that their force was sufficiently consolidated for the intermediate to become very quickly aware of the changed dispositions, and to react accordingly. This was allowable 'in case of urgency,'[100] but had perhaps become a little routine. Everything is urgent on active service.

In addition, the cavalry, even at divisional level had minimal staff, which may have led to a certain lack of formality in the issuing of orders. The cavalry had not even implemented *FSR* in developing routine intelligence capabilities into their staff by 1914, meaning that cavalry generals had no experience of working with this facility despite

---

[99] TNA WO 95/1138, 5 Cavalry Brigade, 23 Aug 1914.
[100] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.32-33.

the problems this caused in the 1912 Manoeuvres.[101] This ‘lack of a genuine intelligence section within the cavalry during manoeuvres [also] meant that when information was received by cavalry headquarters, it often took an unacceptably long time for it to reach the infantry or army commanders.’[102] (Jones goes on to say that this problem was not resolved prior to the outbreak of war in 1914, and that, ultimately, the Cavalry Division went to France with an ad hoc intelligence section whose principal officer had been recruited by Edmund Allenby in a corridor at the War Office.)

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the modus operandi of cavalry also mitigated against the use of initiative, and modifying orders, by junior officers. Infantry and artillery brigades carried their baggage with them at all times, and their constituent units were often several miles apart, meaning that their commanders were sometimes out of personal touch with both their superiors, and their subordinates, for hours on end. Communications, and movements, were slow. Thus, infantry and artillery intermediate commanders were far more likely to be required to show initiative than cavalry officers of similar rank. Communication for advice could be very difficult for small infantry or artillery detachments. In contrast, it was far easier for the cavalry to communicate. They simply had to access suitable high ground to signal, or send a message on a galloping horse to obtain advice or give instruction; and senior commanders were very mobile.

---

[101] Batten, Simon, "A School for the Leaders": What did the British Army learn from the 1912 Army Manoeuvres? *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. 93, No. 373 (Spring 2015), p.44.

[102] Jones, Scouting for Soldiers, p.510., referenced to pre-war army manoeuvres e.g. TNA, WO 279/40, Irish Manoeuvres, 1910, p. 61.

Junior cavalry officers were familiar with the Regulations, though most of their standing orders on billeting, horse care and march orders were laid down in *Cavalry Training*, their specific handbook, but orders, on active service, were generally directive, and could not be defined as being ‘at a distance’. This is not to say that senior cavalry officers discouraged initiative, but there was less call for their subordinates to exercise it, since they themselves were mobile, and usually on hand. Cavalry generals, as a generalisation, were more likely to expect unquestioning compliance. Thus, some regulations, of importance to the infantry and artillery, were perhaps less relevant to, and less closely observed by, the cavalry. This statement does not only apply to the cavalry in its active manoeuvring, but to its staffing arrangements as well. It has already been said that the divisional staff of a cavalry division was almost non-existent prior to 1914. It follows therefore that a cavalry general would, in training for war, almost never have had to accept reports from his staff on which to base his decisions. He would have relied on reports from his immediate subordinates, as he surveyed the battle field himself. The whole culture of the cavalry was such that a rapid and full acceptance of *FSR* in its entirety was never going to be easy. This is perhaps recognised by the somewhat inconsistent wording in describing their role, already referred to.

At this stage, it is worth diverting briefly to discuss the German Regulations, and how their military doctrine differed from *FSR*. The genesis of the German doctrine from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 is well described by Jackman.[103] It is worth reading the

[103] Steven Jackman, Shoulder to Shoulder: Close Control and "Old Prussian Drill" in German Offensive Infantry Tactics, 1871-1914, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Jan., 2004), pp. 73-104, p.101 on limitations of 1906 regulations.

following analysis with some understanding of the differences between British infantry and British cavalry thinking.

Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army

Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army (*IDR*), was published in 1906. There is a subtle difference in the definition of a Commander-in-Chief in battle in the German Regulations. The Commander-in-Chief in the British document was expected to be at a distance, issuing orders to his front-line generals, the spirit of which should be obeyed. This, of course, catered for colonial war. In the German version, the Commander-in-Chief was expected to make decisions from the front. 'If there is a prospect of contact with the enemy on the advance, the post of the commander is as far to the front as possible, and usually with the leading divisions.'[104]

The German Commander-in-Chief makes his own assessments. 'If the actions of the commander are not fixed by the situation, or by orders, he must determine whether he will fight an offensive, defensive, delaying or any other sort of combat; or whether he will refuse combat by marching away.'[105] The document is not definitive on who decides strategy, allowing independence to senior generals in certain circumstances. 'He dismounts at places which afford a good view and reconnoitres with the field glass. He thus gains information at first hand concerning the conditions of the enemy, the neighbouring troops and the terrain, which cannot be furnished by communications, reports or maps. Thus, he will be in a position to give his first instructions properly, to

---

[104] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.69.
[105] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.68-69.

gain an advantage over the enemy by his prompt dispositions.' No reliance on staff is recommended, in marked contrast to *FSR*.

British front-line generals were not expected to make decisions on intent. That was for the Commander-in-Chief, and bold offence was the default strategy. *IDR* states that 'in preparing orders for a battle, the commander must not let preconceived ideas influence him since no exact plan can be prescribed for a conflict.'[106] *FSR* expects the front line general to accept his commander-in-chief's 'plan'; although the latter is advised not to have pre-conceived ideas. If the German army did decide to fight, the general on the spot had total responsibility for his dispositions. He first had to decide on the placement of his artillery. 'The artillery forms the skeleton of battle. On its position the grouping of the remainder of the field forces will, in a very great degree, depend. For that reason, the commander must reserve for himself the choice of the artillery position and indicate to the artillery commander what cooperation he expects from him.'[107] Expectation of a continental war in the near future had concentrated German minds on the potential of the improved guns now available. Artillery was not just support to divisions, as in *FSR*. 'Attacking batteries, protected by troops in advance, begin the artillery combat as early in the day as possible. Heavy artillery is particularly effective'. In contrast to their British counterparts, German corps commanders directly commanded heavy howitzer batteries, and had a duty to allocate these guns for the good of the army, not just to support any one part of it. This forced on them an awareness of

[106] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.69. This admonition is repeated on p.81.
[107] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.72.

the dispositions of their own lighter artillery. As previously explained, Senior British generals, at Corps and Army level, had no direct responsibility for their own artillery dispositions.

Having set the scene, 'the commander most effectually insures [sic] his control over the activity of the units engaged on the firing line by assigning definite tasks to them.'[108] The German regulations leave little doubt that an attritional battle is anticipated. 'Infantry is the principal arm. In union with the artillery, it overcomes the enemy with its fire. Alone, it breaks down the last resistance; it bears the main burden of the battle and suffers the greatest losses.' 'The infantry must cherish its inherent desire to take the offensive; its actions must be guided by one thought, viz, forward upon the enemy, cost what it may.' 'The officer is the model for his men; his example drives them forward. He maintains the strictest discipline, and leads his men to victory, even after stupendous exertions and heavy losses.'[109]

As a description of the war to come, these statements are eerily prophetic. *IDR* was, after all, setting out the rules for a continental war of attrition, using conscripts, in contrast to the British *FSR*, which were mainly designed for a war of mobility, using professional soldiers. It is true that a British regulation does state that 'the advance of the firing line must be characterized by the determination to press forward at all costs', but it is qualified.[110] The advance must be assisted by 'covering fire from the rear', by

---

[108] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* pp.69-70.
[109] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.65-68.
[110] Stuart Mitchell, *An Inter-Disciplinary Study of Learning in the 32nd Division on the Western Front, 1916-1918*, Thesis, Ph.D., University of Birmingham, 2013, p.35.

the support of neighbouring units and 'in conjunction with the artillery and machine guns.' 'Superiority of fire' is the aim, not attrition.[111]

The German Regulations are noticeably more prescriptive than its British equivalent in describing the desirable hierarchy of command for a middle-ranking officer. There are thirty-four admonitions in the section devoted to the subject of leadership.[112] Most emphasise the importance of officers retaining cohesion by remaining close to their subordinates, with considerable insistence that even senior commanders should lead from the front. Officers and men should 'obey orders scrupulously', and not 'wish to do better than obey'. Initiative is not a primary virtue. Having said that, 'where it becomes evident to the subordinate that …events have rendered previous orders nonsensical; it becomes his duty to change or to disregard the orders received.' But prior to this, he has been warned that 'the initiative of subordinates must not degenerate into independence', despite the fact that 'independence within proper limits is the foundation of great success in war'.[113] It is all slightly confusing. Possibly some subtleties have been lost in translation, but the default position is strict adherence to orders.

There is a further regulation within the pages of the German document which is supportive of this strict, top-down, command structure. A commanding officer should issue his orders 'principally to the commanders immediately subordinate to them', but, and it is a big but, 'this must not prevent the commander from giving his orders directly

[111] *Field Service Regulations, Part I*, p.135.
[112] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.68-74.
[113] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.68-74.

to subordinate units where the conditions require it'.[114] This is significantly at odds with the British policy, as described above, where the hierarchy of command was expected to be scrupulously observed, in order to allow for tactical flexibility in, and intelligent feedback from, subordinate units.

IDR covers both close attack and close defence with equal emphasis. 'Deep trenches afford the best protection', it says. This was advice the German infantry took to heart in the war. Other defensive advice included the routine use of dummy unmanned trenches.[115] *FSR* goes into similar detailed advice on trenches, but even in describing defensive arrangements, retains a firm eye on offence to follow.[116] Jones points out that the BEF divisions trained for offensive mobility, and that their initial idea of a trench was sometimes little more than a scrape in the ground.[117]

German Field Artillery, in attack, was mainly handled at local level, and batteries were expected to be well forward. In an assault, 'accompanying the infantry attack by single batteries up to short range' may be desirable, since it 'increases the morale of the infantry and may prevent repulse.'[118] This particular practice was conspicuously unsuccessful at Mons, and was quickly abandoned. Attacking infantry are instructed to rush the enemy 'with hurrahs', bayonets fixed and bugles sounding. German generals, commanding conscripts, were fully aware of the lability of morale; hence the bugles and 'hurrahs', and the perceived necessity for close artillery support. British generals,

---

[114] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* p.69.
[115] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* pp.88-90.
[116] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.146.
[117] Jones, *The Influence of the Boer War*, p.93; See also Batten, The 1912 Army Manoeuvres, p.45.
[118] *Drill Regulations for the Infantry, German Army,* pp.74-85.

commanding professionals, relied on 'spirit' which was not quite the same. This is reflected throughout both documents in the consequent doctrine they project.

IDR is intended for the infantry and its integrated artillery; and thus, cavalry and mounted troops seldom feature. Their use is advised for reconnaissance purposes, before contact has been established between opposing armies; and on the flanks of the pursuit of a beaten enemy, but the tone of the whole document implies that they were unlikely to be of great relevance in the battles that were envisaged. *Drill Regulations for the Cavalry of the German Army* rejects this, forecasting an even greater impact on the battlefields of a continental war than its British equivalent.[119]

This summary is necessarily superficial, but the German *Infantry Drill Regulations*, translated in 1907, would have been required reading for British generals. It is a matter of speculation how far they might have been influenced by them before the war, or even as the war progressed. Its ethos was very different from that of the British Regulations. What is important at this juncture is to understand the various influences determining the military thinking of senior generals in the British army before the war. To add focus to that thought, did some British generals, even before Britain developed a large volunteer and conscript army, reject the doctrine of *FSR* as a blueprint for military action in a continental war? - on the grounds that it is too directive in its description of battle scenarios; that it allocates too much responsibility to a commander-in-chief, who is not on the battlefield; too little to the senior general who is; and then allows too much leeway

[119] General Staff War Office translation, *Drill Regulations for the Cavalry of the German Army 1909*, (His Majesty's Stationary Office, London, 1909); J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 47.

in the interpretation of orders by front-line middle ranking officers further down the command chain. If any British general did have these thoughts, and wanted to act on them, it meant a major departure from the doctrine that is *FSR*.

FSR in wartime

In the summer of 1914, the British army went to war. All units kept a War Diary, and it was not unusual for the keen young officers who wrote them up to subtly highlight any breach of *FSR* incorporated into their orders. There are many examples. The normally chatty 3rd Division war diary, records the start of its march, without artillery, into Belgium on 21 August, with one disapproving sentence: 'Division (less 23rd, 42nd and 30th FA Bdes, Amm Col, 40th Bde FA, and Div Amm Col not yet detrained) marched as per operation order.'[120] ('Every force that takes the field against an organised enemy should be composed of all arms,'[121]) The 15th Infantry Brigade War Diary, the next day, pointedly records the proportion of II Corps troops on forward defensive outpost duty on 22 August, well above that which was allowed, under *FSR*, for further offensive advance.[122] The diaries of the 2nd Division on 22 August, and the 3rd Infantry Brigade on 23 August, draw barbed attention to command irregularities.[123]

But it is difficult to find any evidence of *FSR* breach at sub-divisional level in August 1914, or in II Corps once Smith-Dorrien had imposed his authority on it. However, some problems with the general application of *FSR* became apparent almost immediately.

[120] TNA WO 95/1375, 3 Division, 21 Aug 1914.
[121] *Field Service Regulations, Part I, 1912*, p.14, and consequential regulations, p.51.
[122] TNA WO 95/1566, 15 Infantry Bde, 22 Aug 1914; *Field Service Regulations, Part I, 1912*, p.141.
[123] TNA WO 95/1274, 3 Infantry Bde, 23 Aug 1914; TNA WO 95/1283, 2 Division, 25 Aug 1914.

Further problems developed with mass enlistment, the first units arriving in France before Christmas 1914, and some of these will also be addressed. As an early example, *FSR* ruled that orders were, to some extent, advisory, at a distance in changing situations. It was necessary for senior generals to bear this in mind. On the evening of 23 August, Smith-Dorrien was coordinating the retirement of his two divisions of II Corps from the Mons Condé Canal, and instructing them to occupy and hold his second line, a few miles back. He had no long-term intention of holding this line, and was merely waiting for orders from GHQ to agree the further retirement of his forces. He could have issued a general instruction to his divisions to hold their lines until orders were received to retire. It was, however, possible that under the pressure of a heavy local attack which threatened disaster to an infantry battalion, or even brigade, the commander of that battalion or brigade, becoming cut-off, might decide to retire early, citing his duty to avoid disaster for his own unit, thus risking a greater disaster for the whole force. As a direct consequence of this fear, Smith-Dorrien issued an order that gave no leeway for modification. All units of both divisions 'received instruction that position was to be held to the last', in writing (G155 for the 3rd Division[124]). He issued a chilling order that he had no intention of enforcing. This was not the sort of order that one could expect a civilian conscript army to accept with cheerful equanimity. But in this professional British army, his senior subordinates, with their baggage beginning to retire, understood the message behind the order, and the rank and file, whether they had the situation explained to them or not, received the instruction, without undue alarm.

[124] TNA WO 95/1413, 7 Infantry Brigade, 24 Aug 1914.

There are similarities between this situation at Mons, at midnight on 23 August, and the situation at 2.30 am on 26 August, when Smith-Dorrien issued the same order at Le Cateau. On both occasions, he knew that he was going to countermand the order, though not when he would be able to do so. But at Le Cateau, he knew that some battalions might really have to hold to the last, have to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. And it was necessary for his generals, at least those below divisional level, to believe that they were going to do just that. Besides, at Le Cateau, there was no time to disseminate a more nuanced message, even if it had been desirable. The men of the 3rd and 5th Divisions believed that they were in a fight to the death. This would have considerable implications for the tactics they adopted under *FSR*.

As has been implied throughout this discussion, *FSR* was suitable for a professional and highly trained army. The general procedural guidance was also very relevant to the Yeomanry battalions who were the first to follow the regular army out to France and Belgium, and the new battalions of Kitchener's Army, who moved to France and elsewhere in 1915 and 1916. But the philosophy of command, just described, was not so easily transferred to these new formations. As Simkins says, inexperienced officers, and this included many who had re-enlisted, after leaving the army before 1909, 'found that they could not adapt to the changes wrought in drill, tactics and equipment in the decade before the war, and particularly since the introduction of the new Field Service Regulations.'[125] They did not have sufficient experience to react to 'brief' orders, nor

[125] Simkins, Peter, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916*, (Barnsley, Pen and Sword, 2007 [1988]), p.217. This is the only reference to FSR in the whole book.

the confidence to issue them. They expected to both give, and receive, detailed orders. With regular officers continuing to adhere to the regulations, there were many accidents waiting to happen. Some of the new units were commanded at a senior level by regular officers, but with very few experienced subordinates. Many artillery units were officered by regulars, but commanded by inexperienced generals with inexperienced staff. These facts were belatedly recognised in training advice issued in May 1916. 'Officers and troops generally do not now possess that military knowledge arising from a long and high state of training which enables them to act promptly on sound lines in unexpected situations. They have become accustomed to deliberate action based on precise and detailed orders.'[126]

There is evidence that this warning circular was not always observed as it should have been. When the very inexperienced 35th Division went into battle on the Somme, two months later, there were only two regular army artillery officers in the division. One was Brigadier-General Staveley, who was Commander of Royal Artillery (CRA). The other was a Captain Pinney who commanded 'A' Battery of the 159th Brigade RFA. Staveley issued brief general orders as to where the batteries should deploy, and left it to his subordinates to follow his instructions. This followed *FSR*. But only 'A' battery, of the 159th, in the whole of the divisional artillery, observed the regulations by interpreting the order appropriately. Pinney dug his battery in for protection, and arranged a good observation post. All the rest, including the heavy battery, without

---

[126] Lieutenant-General L.E. Kiggell, SS109, Training of Divisions for Offensive Action, May 1916, item 9, quoted in Sanders, *The Infantry cannot do with a Gun less*, appendix 12. Source: IWM SS/CDS Pamphlet collection.

direct orders to do so, failed to dig themselves in, and decided to pitch tents for the men to shelter in. Needless to say, the artillery casualties, except in 'A' Battery, in battle the next day, were appalling.[127] This was directly due to Staveley not issuing very detailed orders, against the regulations, as to preparation for battle. He assumed a competence, and ethos of initiative, which did not exist. There were many reasons why there was tension between regular officers and 'new army' officers, particularly those on the staff, but this was one. Regular officers resented having to diverge from their ingrained training under *FSR*, in issuing orders to subordinates, or accepting orders from superiors.

And, throughout the war, regulars continued to use their initiative to modify orders. Only a few days later, Captain Pinney, in the absence of his commanding officer, decided to move his exposed battery a few hundred yards to the east, and set up in a vastly superior covered position, leaving his brigade commander somewhat askance when he heard of it.[128] But it was obviously a sensible move, and since there was enough space for the rest of the brigade, it somewhat sheepishly followed his lead a day or so later, incidentally recording that all batteries had moved together.[129] Occasionally the instinctive reactions of middle ranking officers had decisive effect, although it could cause consternation to their less experienced superiors. In 1915, Major Lambarde, a regular, commanded the 458th Howitzer Battery, 118th Brigade RFA, which was attached to the newly arrived 1st Canadian Division in April 1915. When the Germans attacked, in the battle now known as 2nd Ypres, under cover of the first major chlorine

---

[127] Duke Marshall letters, Aug 1916, as quoted in Hutchison, *The Young Gunner:* pp.157-158.
[128] Hutchison, *The Young Gunner,* p.162.
[129] TNA WO 95-2474-5 159 brigade, 35 Division, 2 Aug 1916.

gas release of the war, the left flank of the Canadian Division was totally exposed, requiring a rapid re-deployment of all the divisional artillery. Brigadier-General Burstall (CRA) ordered the battery to move back to the centre of the new divisional infantry line, but whilst moving, Lambarde encountered British forces covering the yawning hole in the line which had opened on the Canadian's left. This makeshift force of five battalions, under Colonel Geddes, had no artillery support that night, and was facing attack by many times its own numbers. Lambarde took the decision to divert his battery to the left flank of this force, and the battery was arguably decisive in preventing a breakthrough on Ypres at dawn the next morning. Burstall, of course, was understandably miffed, since the Canadian Division needed all the help it could get that night, and it took some time for him to learn where his battery was.[130] But he did not move the battery, when he found it; and Lambarde was subsequently awarded the DSO. Not all such exercises of initiative were rewarded. Captain Blewitt, only the month before, in March 1915, watched the infantry in front of him, being 'thoroughly frightened' by an accurate bombardment. But he 'got properly roasted by the Brigadier for ordering one of our batteries (the colonel being out) to retaliate to [the] annoying German battery that was making a nuisance of himself.'[131]

The issue of modifying orders, or using initiative, was starker with the infantry than the artillery. Returning to the 1st Canadian Division, whose reckless courage was recognised by the whole army in 1915, even they, at Givenchy that year, exercised

[130] Hutchison, *The Young Gunner,* pp.52-54.
[131] Imperial War Museum, Document 92168, Ralph Blewitt, Artillery captain, 54 Battery, XXXIX Brigade, 1st Division, letter, 31 Mar 1915.

restraint, for want of a better word, when given suicidal orders. After a costly, minimally successful, attack on 14 June, a further attack to complete the task was ordered the next day. By then, the Germans had reinforced the position.

> *According to the divisional war diary, enemy small arms fire forced the men to ground immediately, with the action ending almost as soon as it began. An eye-witness recalled 'that very few of us got beyond our own wire'. The incident represents yet another example of combat leader's exercising common sense on the spot, since it appears that the battalion commander committed the smallest possible number of men to what appeared to be a hopeless operation*.[132]

Exercising common sense was almost routine in the first year of the war, and was perfectly acceptable in crack divisions with high élan and competent officers. But it became a problem when exercised too freely in less aggressive units. The line between common sense and defeatism is not a clear one. By 1916, Haig was determined to root out defeatism, and, as an unfortunate corollary, to deny the exercising of common sense. Famously, the 38th Welsh Division was ordered by officers at corps level, to attack Mametz Wood by charging across an open field in broad daylight on 7 July. The division protested the order, requesting that they be allowed to attack on a narrow front, in order to use the available contours as cover, and with a smoke screen to shield the attack. Their request was denied. The division did have supporting artillery, but it was so far away that the batteries were unable to post observers to direct the fire; and the barrage

---

[132] Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring soldiers, The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915*, (University of Toronto Press, 2008), p.231.

failed, even temporarily, to silence the well-sited German machine guns that enfiladed the attack. It was, predictably, a massacre, and Major-General Phillips, commanding the Welch Division, committed only one of his infantry brigades before calling off the hopeless attack. His reward was to be dismissed with immediate effect and sent home.[133] He was certainly not the only officer to be treated as such, and some of the dismissals may even have been justified. Haig was, of course, in some ways, right. But the treatment of Phillips and others caused a ripple of dismay in regular officers. Modification of orders under *FSR* was becoming a dangerous activity. The irony is that this particular attack was carried out without army command applying several key preparations for success, as required under *FSR*. It is worth detailing some of these 'rules' of war, as they relate to Phillips and the Welch Division in the incident above.

FSR laid down many 'rules' of war, to be taken into consideration at all times. None of the rules were completely binding, but disregarding the rules would have been noticed, the more so if it was a policy decision by a specific general. After all, 'they are to be regarded by all ranks as authoritative, for their violation, in the past, has often been followed by mishap, if not by disaster.'[134] A very major failing was not to observe *FSR* strictures on the necessity of gathering local military intelligence, prior to issuing an order, or action plan. At Mametz Wood, the Welch Division did reconnoitre and collate their findings, to formulate a plan, as required by *FSR*; but the senior general, at corps or army level, who took responsibility for ordering a different plan of attack, did not.

[133] Hutchison, *The Young Gunner,* p.142-143.
[134] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.13.

The British Field Artillery QF 18 pounders had a maximum range of about 6500 yards, but *FSR* deems only up to 4000 yards 'effective'. Over 5000 yards was 'distant', implicitly, a waste of ammunition.[135] No field artillery colonel in 1914 would have agreed to even fire, as they did at Mametz Wood, in support of an infantry advance at 6000 yards. It is a fact that field batteries at the Somme in 1916, as in this case, and at Passchendaele in 1917, were routinely ordered to do just that.

In 1914, no infantry brigade, or even battalion, would consider engaging an all-arms force of the enemy without artillery support. Indeed, *FSR* specifically, and repeatedly, forbade them so to do. 'The principle of the employment of artillery in the battle is that the greater the difficulties of the infantry, the more fully should the fire power of artillery be developed,' and 'after a successful assault the infantry should occupy the position that has been seized… Some artillery should be sent rapidly forward to the captured position in order to …support the pursuit, and to resist counter-attacks.'[136] The attack at Mametz Wood was a 'second phase' attack, with the infantry right at the limit of the range of its initially supportive artillery, who had not moved up as the infantry advanced. Further attempts by the infantry to advance, under these circumstances, failed with a monotonous and depressing regularity, as predicted by *FSR*.

In relation to such failures, it was a major defect of *FSR* that no mechanism was established to require honest feedback, or reports, on an action. A source does suggest that there is such a requirement in King's Regulations, but if it is there, it is hard to

[135] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.17.
[136] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.127-140, these quotes pp.138&140.

find.[137] It is beyond the remit of this chapter, but the disguise of failure was routine in all written reports submitted to higher command throughout the war,[138] and the informal, sometimes pungent, verbal criticisms of 1914, which would have accompanied written reports, virtually dried up with the exponential growth of the army and the loss of military expertise in its senior ranks. This factor, on its own, significantly inhibited tactical evolvement.

But it is also undeniable that, by this stage of the war, a serious problem had developed in the British army pertaining to the command of artillery. As has been repeatedly stressed, *FSR* envisaged that the field artillery should support divisions. By 1915, it was clear that artillery was the key to battle. An infantry division was physically unable to remain in the forefront of a battle for more than a few days. But its artillery, being more static and sustaining, as a general rule, fewer casualties, could. So, the guns often remained in the line, while the infantry of different divisions rotated in and out. Unsurprisingly, these guns lacked effectiveness without the robust liaison they were used to within their own division, and a number of different command structures were developed.[139] In the example given above, the CRA of the 7th Division was directing his guns, on orders from Corps, in support of an advance by the Welch Division. The front-line infantry had no way of communicating with him directly, and this command structure routinely failed to deliver.

---

[137] War Office, *The King's Regulations and Orders for the Army, 1912, reprinted with amendments up to 1st August 1914*, (HMSO, London, 1914).
[138] Travers, *The Killing Ground,* pp.23-25.
[139] Hutchison, *The Young Gunner,* pp.293-317, and Simpson, *The Operational Role of British Corps Command*.

Field Artillery specific difficulties with FSR

FSR itself gives only very basic guidance on the tactical concepts to be followed by the artillery in August 1914; and specific difficulties with this paucity of advice had become apparent well before that date. Smith-Dorrien, as an umpire to the 1912 manoeuvres, observed that 'the cooperation of infantry and artillery in the attack still leaves much to be desired.'[140] He was merely one of many saying that *FSR* guidelines for the handling of artillery needed augmenting.

What *FSR* did say was that a Commander-in-Chief, issuing brief orders, was not expected to concern himself with the placement of artillery. The field artillery was to be deployed in support of infantry or cavalry at a sub-divisional level. *FSR* states that if guns are exposed, they should be escorted, but it does not say that they should be in the front line.[141] It emphasises the necessity of artillery support to both infantry and cavalry, and advises an order of advance that allows the artillery to deploy quickly in the event of contact with the enemy.[142] It also states that if infantry advance to capture a position, the artillery should immediately move forward to consolidate the gains.[143] But *FSR* is disparaging of the artillery in the section on siege warfare, emphasising that infantry are the primary resource in this situation, and doubting if bombardment by artillery could be effective.[144] This arguably reflected the realities in the British army in 1912. The ammunition routinely used by the field artillery was shrapnel, which was ineffective

---

[140] TNA WO/279/47 Army Manoeuvres 1912, pp.138; Batten, The 1912 Army Manoeuvres, p.45. Batten asserts that lessons were not learnt by August 1914, a claim that will be challenged.
[141] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.134-135.
[142] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.51.
[143] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.137-140.
[144] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* pp.163-169.

against fortifications or deep trenches. Nor indeed could the batteries carry much ammunition. Heavy guns, of course, might be effective, but the sad truth was that the British army had very few heavy guns, four sixty pounders to a division in 1914.

But there was robust debate at divisional level on the role of the artillery even before 1912, and certainly in the best divisions, a consensus had been reached on tactical principles.[145] This was crystalised, as supplementary guidance for the field artillery, in a new handbook, *Field Artillery Training*, published in April 1914 which was in compliance with *FSR*.[146] In it, there is a section on 'employment of artillery in war'. It starts by referring back to *FSR*, reiterating that 'to help the infantry to maintain its mobility and offensive power by all the means at its disposal should be the underlying principle of all artillery tactics.'[147]

Space does not allow for the tactical advice given in *Field Artillery Training* to be fully addressed, but suffice it to say here, that a primary concept is that field guns, and their vulnerable horses, should retain mobility by being concealed whenever possible.[148] They should <u>not</u> be in the front line with the infantry.[149] If they were, they could not easily move, or re-supply. Local liaison was impeded, target selection reduced, and they could endanger their own infantry with premature detonation of shells, a not infrequent occurrence. In addition, guns should definitely not be sited 'within effective rifle range'

---

[145] TNA WO 95/1510, 5 Division, *Lecture on Co-operation between Artillery and Infantry*, Aug 1913.
[146] General Staff, War Office, *Field Artillery Training*, (HMSO, London, 1914).
[147] *Field Artillery Training*, p.230.
[148] *Field Artillery Training*, p.231.
[149] Marble, *The Infantry cannot do with a Gun less,* p.23, suggests otherwise, referencing *Field Artillery Training*, p.260, which discusses artillery deployment in dense woodland. One of the features of *FSR* is that there are exceptions to almost every rule.

(about 1000 yards) of the enemy, a lesson learnt the hard way in South Africa.[150] For all these very good reasons, field guns were sited at least 1000 yards, and preferably more, behind an infantry line under, or in, attack, with an observation post to direct fire. It is extraordinary how many books can be quoted to assert the opposite. 'The general policy followed [at Mons] was to push batteries or sections of batteries up to the infantry for close defence,' says one impeccable source.[151] This did not happen. Batteries sometimes stayed in position as the infantry fell back, delaying their departure till the last minute, but that is not the same.

Le Cateau, a digression

To forestall the question, there was one exceptional circumstance. *FSR* states that 'it must be a point of honour with troops, never to retire without orders, from a position they have been detailed to hold to the end.' In that, the artillery should assist the infantry. Therefore, 'concealment, both as regards position and manoeuvre, must be foregone for adequate reasons,' and 'when it is a question of ensuring the safe withdrawal of the main body, artillery must be ready to take any risk, and loss of materiel is then fully justified.'[152] This very rare combination of circumstances occurred at Le Cateau on 26 August. Brigadier-General Headlam, CRA, 5th Division was a very competent commander, and pursued the policy of concealment and mobility of his guns with conspicuous success at Mons.[153] At Le Cateau, on 26 August, he made the decision that

---

[150] *Field Artillery Training*, p.235.
[151] Edmonds, *History of the Great War*, Vol 1, p.75.
[152] *Field Artillery Training*, pp.232&263.
[153] Hutchison, *Mons, an Artillery Battle*, pp.69-72,87-88.

the front line infantry, tired, hungry and facing their second battle in three days, deployed in badly sited trenches, dominated and enfiladed from high ground, would hold their positions, as ordered, if their supporting guns were in sight, close behind them; but that they would not hold, if the guns were, as initially placed, out of sight, behind the brow of the hill above them. Despite fifty per cent casualties in some units, the battalions held their positions for over six hours, but many of the guns were lost. Le Cateau was the glorious exception to pragmatic rules. It should not, as it often is, be cited either as a mistake, or as default artillery tactics, in 1914.[154]

Field Artillery specific difficulties with FSR - continued

The critical importance of infantry artillery cooperation was well recognised in 1914. That 'the British went to war without a formalised method for infantry and artillery cooperation,'[155] is true; but it is not fair to say that 'pre-war cooperation between artillery and infantry was largely absent'.[156] It is true that this cooperation was not formalised, and it is true that generals at Corps and GHQ level did not, in 1914, organise that cooperation. But the importance of constant liaison with the infantry, at sub-divisional level, was well understood. 'It is of the utmost importance that communication should be maintained between the artillery and infantry commanders,' and a wide range of communication methods is reviewed in *Field Artillery Training*.[157] But true to the

---

[154] Batten, Simon, The 1912 Army Manoeuvres, pp.45-46; Even Shelford Bidwell, *Gunners at War, a Tactical Study of the Royal Artillery in the Twentieth Century*, (revised paperback edition, Arrow Press, London 1972), pp.15-33, implies this. No recent account of Le Cateau suggests anything otherwise.
[155] Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army, Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914*, ([2012] Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), p.85.
[156] Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground, The British Army, the Western Front & Emergence of Modern War, 1900-1918,* ([1987] Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2009), p.72.
[157] *Field Artillery Training*, p.235-238.

British army ethos, it concludes by saying that 'the actual method by which this co-operation should be obtained will vary in accordance with the general nature of the operation'.[158] The final choice of communication method was left to personal initiative; and there was, undeniably, and very unfortunately as it transpired, no formal mechanism laid down for such communications. But, in 1914, it worked. Liaison, arranged on personal initiative, was the duty of every officer.[159] But it was one of the first qualities to be lost, as line officers became less experienced, and personal relationships within a division were eroded by heavy casualties in the first six months of the war.

This was only one of the reasons why a decision was taken, very soon after the war started, to increasingly concentrate the control of artillery at division and corps level. An influx of very inexperienced staff to artillery headquarters, and the need to ration ammunition in 1915 contributed to the policy. It was by and large a disaster. The ability of the field artillery to support, in a meaningful way, the infantry in their locality was severely impeded. Junior artillery officers were intensely aware that they were being ordered to ignore *FSR*, and generally eschew local liaison. The logical development of this policy was the introduction of artillery assault by barrage, a less effective technique than is generally appreciated; when planning of them failed to take into account detailed local reconnaissance; and application of them inhibited intelligent response to the ebb and flow of battle. Colin Hutchison commanded a battery on the first day of the Somme.

---

[158] *Field Artillery Training*, p.247.
[159] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.21.

'The Manchester's were held up at their first objective, by about 100 German reserves, who took up position on a crest, soon after our artillery barrage, moving strictly to time, had got beyond them. I could see this party opening a heavy fire on our attacking troops. I stopped the fire of the battery and had all guns put onto this target, at the same time informing brigade headquarters. But, before fire could be opened, I was ordered to keep up the barrage fire as per programme. I switched the guns back onto the barrage away beyond, and hurried personally to the colonel. I got permission to fire on the Germans, and the battery did some very pretty shooting. The Col. told us the General was very pleased with the battery's work, but the delay cost us many casualties.'[160]

Where all guns were used in a barrage, this scenario was repeated over and over again. There were also hideous friendly casualties, for instance at Bazentin Wood on the Somme, and at Messines Ridge the next year. Suffice it to say now, that the *FSR* concept of close cooperation between forward infantry and forward artillery was largely forgotten for the middle years of the war, with dire consequences for too many.

As a generalisation, it is possible to assert that the British army based their tactical thinking on *FSR* in 1914, lost focus in 1915, tried to follow them on the first day of the Somme, again lost focus, and then followed them again in the victory at Messines Ridge in 1917. Then occurred the aberration that was Hubert Gough and Passchendaele. He can be cited as the one general above all others, who, almost systematically, ignored all

---

[160] Hutchison, *The Young Gunner,* p.139.

aspects of *FSR*, in his planning.[161] Then in 1918, with the increasing influence of Rawlinson and Wilson, the principal authors of *FSR*, the concepts outlined in it were once again embraced in the successful push for victory.[162]

So, what are the key features of FSR, Part I, apart from an offensive mentality?

- All arms cooperation. No single arm should be left unsupported by other arms at any stage of battle.
- Close 'artillery' support for infantry, but not in the front line. Usually field artillery, but arguably including mortars, tanks and air support by 1918.[163]
- Defence in depth, utilising outposts, as variously defined.
- A collegiate staff structure, within headquarters, to ensure thorough evaluation of available intelligence before orders are formulated; and the efficient transmission of orders once they have been framed.
- Brief and unambiguous orders from very senior officers, coordinating strategy, transmitted down the command hierarchy for tactical implementation.
- Time allowed for brief orders to be disseminated and amplified at subordinate levels of command, incorporating local conditions and intelligence.
- Robust local liaison and feedback, during battle, allowing local initiative and modification of orders, 'at a distance' in the light of changing circumstances.

---

[161] Hutchison, *The Young Gunner,* pp.210-216,311-312.
[162] Travers, *How the War was won: Factors that led to Victory in World War One,* ([1992] Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2005), pp.130&142-143; See also, Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front : The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Though neither make reference to *FSR*, they describe the tactics.
[163] Travers, *How the War was won*, p.145.

Of course, the urgency of war, the inexperience of half-trained soldiers, the development of more sophisticated weapons, and the sheer logistics of war on the Western Front, made some of these concepts difficult to implement, but a general forgot them at his peril. Even in 1914, it can be recorded that a certain senior subordinate officer took strategic action which was at odds with that of GHQ; failed to obtain intelligence advice from his staff before issuing orders; and even ignored command hierarchy by issuing orders direct to junior subordinate units; all with results that certainly caused 'mishap', if not 'disaster'.[164]

Conclusion

Field Service Regulations, Parts I and II, 1909, was, a consensus document addressing a number of agendas. The first, on (1) Organisational Responsibilities, derived mainly from *A Staff Manual*, first drafted in 1902. The other three, (2) Army standing orders, (3) Tactical Concepts and (4) Ethos in Command, derived from *Combined Training, Field Service Regulations, Part I*, which was published in 1905. The first was controversial when first mooted, but as is the case with most major organisational reforms, once it had bedded in, a new staff structure for the army was universally accepted as the new norm. It was intelligently developed as the British army massively expanded from 1914 onward.[165] Standing orders were also largely accepted.

Implementation of the last two elements of the documents was reflected in a training revolution in the British army as new tactical principles were accepted; and a new

---

[164] *Field Service Regulations, Part I,* p.13.
[165] Anthony John Vines, *The Heroic Manager: An Assessment of Sir Douglas Haig's role as Military Manager on the Western Front*, Doctoral thesis, Kings College, London, 2015.

command ethos imposed. This latter demanded a loosening of top-down direction; and the limited acceptance of intelligent initiative in lower ranking officers. Regular army officers were required to implement *FSR* thinking into their daily military lives. But, during the war, some regulations of key importance to the regular officers of the infantry and artillery were not embraced so readily by some cavalry generals; and not, at least initially, understood by a large proportion of new army officers.

Nevertheless, to ‘a steady adherence to the principles of our Field Service Regulations, Part I, are our successes to be attributed,’ wrote Haig to Henry Wilson, in September 1918.[166] And at the end of the war, Haig asserted in his final, valedictory, dispatch in 1919 that ‘this war has given no new principles’, and that ‘the principles of command, staff work, and organization elaborated before the war [*FSR, Parts I and II*] have stood the test imposed upon them and are sound. …the good work done by our staff colleges during the past 30 years has had an important influence on the successful issue of the war.’[167] If Haig thought *Field Service Regulations* were an important contributor to final victory in 1918, they probably were.

David Hutchison December 2020

I have had no template to use in preparing this article. One of the advantages of presenting my work on a website is that errors can be easily rectified. I would be delighted to hear, through this website, from any who wish to discuss the issues raised.

A full bibliography is appended to this set of chapters. Whilst all these chapters can be considered to be in the public domain, reference to them should acknowledge the contribution of the author.

---

[166] John Terraine, *Douglas Haig, the Educated Soldier*, ([1963] Leo Cooper, London,1990), p.43, quoting letter, Haig to Wilson.
[167] J. H. Boraston (ed) *Sir Douglas Haig's Command, 1914-1918*, (New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1923) pp.320&343.