

1. Field Service Regulations, 1909 (FSR) – An Introduction

Despite appearances, Field Service Regulations 1909 is a thing of beauty. By 1900, the British establishment had appreciated that their professional army, and its highly trained men, were valuable; and that hunger, disease and incompetent leadership had long been the real enemies of their armies away from home. It was recognised that, in both colonial and continental war, the small British army was likely to be heavily outnumbered and that its main resource was its professional soldiers. So *FSR* was written to suggest that firm arrangements be made for the care and supply of any expeditionary force; and that its fighting leadership should win battles by good tactics and firepower. Unlike Germany, England had no wish to introduce conscription; and thereby, almost plan for huge losses of poorly trained conscripts on any field of battle.

Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief in South Africa from 1899, was one of the first to recognise these facts of life, and he commissioned two handbooks. A treatise on army training was put together by J F R Henderson, a brilliant military theorist, by 1901. A proposal, to overhaul the administration of an army overseas, was written, in 1900, by Gerald Ellison, an equally brilliant staff officer, who later served as secretary to both the Esher Committee, and Richard Haldane, Secretary of State for War. After many years of debate, orchestrated mainly by Henry Wilson and Henry Rawlinson (*Part I, Operations*), and Haldane and Lord Esher, (*Part II, Organisation and Administration*), *FSR* was published in 1909, by command of the Army Council; and robustly implemented by direction of Sir William Nicholson, Chief of the General Staff.¹

¹ See Chapter 3, *FSR – Genesis and Evolution*, on this website. Fully referenced.

What was the impact of FSR?

FSR was written as a basic guide for all officers in the British army. It was intended to standardise tactical training, and lay down a staff structure for a professional army. It became the main textbook at officer training establishments, and the main reference for officers of all ranks and all arms when on active service, or training for it. All subsequent training manuals, specific to arms or even the staff, were required to comply with it, 'by command', ultimately, of the Secretary of State for War, for the entire First War.

In summary, *FSR (1909)* directed that the Commander-in-Chief, alone, under political direction, took strategic responsibility; ensuring that no maverick general might engage in activities that might have unforeseen military or political consequences.

It imposed an administrative structure on the staff officers of the Service corps, who were required to transport, house, supply and otherwise care for the front-line troops. It also introduced the unfamiliar concept of financial accountability.

It demanded that all front-line generals should be measured in their decision making, setting up a collegiate staff, with a strong intelligence input, to support them; and that they should then issue 'brief' orders, in the expectation that their subordinates would intelligently interpret these orders, using the regulations as a guide, but modifying them, if necessary, as a battle unfolded. The regulations also demanded that all officers, of all ranks, orientate themselves, plan, and liaise intelligently, to ensure battle readiness at all times, with appropriate reconnaissance and firepower support.²

² See Chapter 2, Field service Regulations, on this website. Fully referenced.

What was the impact of FSR on the British army during WW1?

The administrative structure described in *FSR, Part II*, was robust and flexible enough to act as the basic template for the logistical nightmare that was the Western Front from 1914 to 1918. It was revised in 1917, but the changes were minor.

FSR, Part I, was meticulously observed by all junior and middle ranking regular army officers in August 1914, and, as closely as they were able, thereafter. Its strictures were generally quietly followed in defence and defensive battles. In attack, most senior infantry commanders, including Robertson, Rawlinson, Wilson and Plumer generally conformed where they were able. Some senior officers, particularly from the cavalry, rejected its ethos. Haig was the most notable of these, and Hubert Gough the most extreme. Undeniably, some aspects of the doctrine were unsuitable for poorly trained civilian levies, and the artillery, in an army that was expanding exponentially in 1915 and 1916, and this is a fertile area for study. But by 1917, it was generally being followed, except by Gough, supported by Haig. The idiocies of heavily manned front lines engaging in attrition; of prolonged pre-ordained field artillery barrages on the first day of battle; and of expecting infantry to advance beyond artillery support; were then abandoned. A general acceptance of the applicability of *Part I* to war on the Western Front was recognised even by Haig, in 1918. The campaigns of that year demonstrably follow its advice on modern warfare, albeit influenced by technological development, etc. Orders to smaller units became briefer; and planning was consciously devolved to those doing the fighting. All arms cooperation was re-asserted as key to success, with fire-power, mainly artillery, closely supporting infantry in all phases of battle.

Why have you hardly heard of Field Service Regulations?

They are seldom discussed by modern historians. It is widely asserted that Douglas Haig had a major influence on, or even wrote, *FSR*, and that he implemented the doctrine in the British army. This ‘fact’ accompanies almost every reference to *FSR* in WW1 histories and biographies, although any supporting evidence offered is easy to challenge. The fiction was dreamed up, in 1929, in a book by Brigadier Charteris, an early biographer of Haig; and has been accepted uncritically ever since. Haig had no input into the drafts of *FSR* agreed by the Army Council in 1908, and he did not comply with *FSR* in his own commands. It is true that he did strongly support the precise hierarchical staff structure which supplied and supported the army in the field, as described in *FSR (Part II)*, but he rejected, almost in its entirety, the core of the doctrine, which describes command responsibility, command structure and desirable tactical priorities.³

Given that Haig accepted the administrative structure described in *Part II*, modern historians have found it impossible to believe that he did not accept *Part I*. So rather than address this inconsistency, they have chosen to ignore *FSR* altogether, and have done so for many years. Even books describing the evolution of command structure or frontline tactics, between 1914 and 1918, ignore it completely! But if the ideas in *FSR* are understood as army doctrine, and not Haig’s doctrine, then many of the tactical and command controversies of war on the Western Front achieve a consistent narrative.⁴ The theses presented in many ‘classic’ books on the war simply collapse. You may not

³ See Chapter 4, *FSR – Haig’s doctrinal development*, on this website. Fully referenced.

⁴ See Chapter 5, *FSR – 1914 - 1918*, on this website. Fully referenced.

agree with this, but no serious historian can afford to ignore the fact that *FSR* was a training doctrine specifically designed for the professional British army; and enthusiastically espoused by all ranks between 1909 and 1914.

These Manuals *'are issued by command of the Army Council. ...The training manuals of the various arms are based on these regulations, which, in case of any doubt arising, are the ruling authority.* Field Service Regulations, 1909, Parts I & II, Introduction.

All Staff Officers *'should make a careful study of'* *FSR*, Part II, and, as for Part I, *'General Officers commanding will ...instruct senior regimental officers in methods suitable for the instruction of the junior officers under their command.'* Memorandum on Army Training, issued by the Army Council, 1908, p.8.

These regulations should *'be regarded by all ranks as authoritative, for their violation, in the past, has often been followed by mishap, if not by disaster.'* They should be *'thoroughly impressed on the mind of every commander.'* Field Service Regulations, 1909, Part I, (p.13 of 1912 edition).

Staff College students should *'act in accordance with circumstances and the spirit of Field Service Regulations'*. William Robertson, Commandant, 1909.

'Manoeuvres should comply with 'Field Service Regulations'. Officer on Haig's staff, 1910.

Army Manoeuvres should be assessed *'in conjunction with Field Service Regulations.'* John French, Chief of the General Staff, 1912.

For a forensic examination of the consequences of non-compliance with *FSR* in the battles of 1915, see Lieutenant-Colonel A Kearsley's 1929 book, *1915, Campaign in France*.

The staff *'cannot say that their orders were always framed on sound tactics based on Field Service Regulations (FSR) Part I'*, forcing *'brave men to do what was impossible'* M C Ferrers-Guy in 1937, writing to Brigadier Edmonds, official historian.

To *'a steady adherence to the principles of our Field Service Regulations, Part I, are our successes to be attributed,'* Haig [sic] in a letter to Wilson, September 1918.

David Hutchison, December 2020.

For detailed references to the points made in this introduction, it is necessary to refer to the relevant chapters. A full bibliography is appended as chapter 6. Whilst all chapters can be considered to be in the public domain, reference to them should acknowledge the contribution of the author.