

5 FSR – 1914 - 1918

The narrative presented thus far in these chapters is deeply contrarian. Almost every significant historian, writing on World War One, asserts that Haig influenced the whole ethos of *FSR*, and supported its implementation.¹ Some historians have even taken this one step further to assume that Haig's style of command and tactical assumptions, during World War One, were *FSR*. These chapters, in first defining *FSR*, then laying out its genesis from primary sources, demonstrate exactly the opposite. It is undeniable that *FSR* was imposed as a doctrine, on the British army, between 1909 and 1914; and that it was broadly followed by most regular officers between 1914 and 1918. But, is it possible for *FSR* to be defined as a doctrine for the British army between 1914 and 1918 with Haig as its commander? And if so, what are the implications?

There is no broadly accepted definition of military doctrine. Sloan, in addressing this subject, suggests that there are three fundamental elements to any doctrine. The first is that it should, by definition, given the derivation of the word, be taught. The second is that it should be broadly accepted by the population to which it pertains, and the third

¹ J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 45; Michael Howard, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 13, No. 8, 25 April 1991, p.5; Albert Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front, The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp.11&17; Hew Strachan, *Operational Art and Britain, 1909–2009*, in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, (Oxford Scholarship on line, 2011 [2010]), p.105; Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, (London, New Haven, 1994), p.77; Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground, The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918*, ([1987] Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2009), pp.49&92; Gary Sheffield, *The Chief, Douglas Haig and the British Army*, (Aurum Press, London, 2011), p.60; Denis Winter, *Haig's Command, a Re-assessment*, (Viking 1991), p.34. Ian Becket, Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2017) p.41. This list is far from exhaustive.

that there should be an authoritative text, with a mechanism to rule on any disputes over its interpretation. He goes on to say that for military doctrine, this last condition means that it must have ‘institutional approval’; and that it must, in addition, ‘provide [both] the means of succeeding in warfare’ and an ‘ability to steer transition’.²

Many historians have debated whether *FSR* constituted a doctrine in 1914. Hew Strachan discusses operational art in the run up to the war, tracing the history of *FSR* from Henderson and his predecessors.³ He goes on to assert, wrongly, that ‘its preparation’ was in Haig’s hands, and emphasises, again wrongly, Haig’s acceptance of them. Not surprisingly, he then struggles, as do all modern historians in the light of these pre-conditions, to explain Haig’s obvious non-compliance with them; his assertion that *FSR* should not be defined as a doctrine;⁴ and then developments in operational methods through the war with Haig in overall charge. His logical conclusion, given his assumptions, is that *FSR* cannot be described as a doctrine followed by the British army.

Others who have written on this subject have come to a similar conclusion, though few have examined *FSR* with his forensic skill to distil the essence of the doctrine that he is denying. There has been a move recently, amongst younger historians, to try to explain why they are not putting *FSR* more central to the debate on tactical development on the Western Front. And, as a consequence, *FSR* has been variously described as a

² Geoffrey Sloan, Military doctrine, command philosophy and the generation of fighting power: genesis and theory, *International Affairs* 88: 2 (2012) 243–263, pp.244-245.

³ Hew Strachan, Operational Art and Britain, 1909–2009, in John Andreas Olsen and Martin van Creveld, *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, (Oxford Scholarship on line, 2011 [2010])

⁴ The National Archives (TNA) WO 279/532, *Report on Staff Tour, held by the Chief of the General Staff, India, 1911*, p.44.

‘subtle’ doctrine; a semi-formal doctrine; an ethos; or a culture. But the facts that those contributing to the debate have no agreed academic analysis of what constitutes *FSR* on which to base debate;⁵ that participants seize on different aspects of *FSR* to contribute to their definition of what it means; that most believe that Haig was responsible for the genesis of them, and that, therefore, his actions, in some way, showcase the doctrine; renders much of the debate theoretical, and not particularly helpful.⁶ Most then dismiss *FSR* as a factor in, either command structure, or tactical, development; and go on to completely ignore it in their subsequent deliberations.

With the exception of Barr, writing in 2004, one has to go back to the beginning of the inter-war period to find opinions more firmly based on what can only be called reality.⁷ Fuller, in 1926, questions the adequacy of the 1909 edition of *FSR*, asserting that, because it failed to define ‘principles of warfare’, it could not therefore be useful as a guide as to how to win a war.⁸ But since he had thrown himself with enthusiasm

⁵ Dr Spencer Jones, Senior Lecturer in Armed Forces and War Studies, University of Wolverhampton, personal communication, January 2020.

⁶ The following have interesting view-points. Gary Sheffield, *The makings of a Corps Commander: Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig*; Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide, Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*, (Solihull, Helion and Company, 2013), p.114; 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.46; Albert Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front, The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp.8-12; Andrew Simpson, *The Operational Role of British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914-18*, Doctoral thesis, University College, London, 2001), p.7; Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight, Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914 – 1918*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018), referencing the sentence to A. Simpson, ‘Launcelot Kiggell and Herbert Lawrence’, in D.T.Zabecki (ed), *Chief of Staff: Napoleonic Wars to World War I*, I (2 Vols, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), p.316; 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, pp.30-32. This list is not exhaustive.

⁷ See page 11. 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.

⁸ Colonel J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*, (London, Hutchinson, 1926), p.13.

into the task of filling this perceived gap in the regulations, when they were revised immediately after the war, it seems that he merely regarded *FSR* as a doctrine which was inadequately defined. Indeed, what is clear is that Fuller, as a regular army officer, took it as read that a written statement, describing army doctrine was desirable; and assumes that his military audience will be as completely familiar with its intricacies as he is himself. This is a feature of writing from this era. None attempt to define *FSR* when writing on it. Its doctrine was self-evident to regular army officers.

Almost the only author who addresses *FSR* as a central theme is Colonel Alexander Kearsley. Kearsley entered the army in 1896, and served in the South African War from 1899, winning a DSO. Between the wars, he married into the aristocracy, attended Staff College, and, in August 1914, served on the Embarkation Staff at Southampton. He fought at First Ypres, with the 7th Cavalry Brigade, in November 1914, and subsequently in the Dardanelles' and Palestine campaigns, being wounded in 1917. In 1918, he was appointed to the command of a cadet college, having been mentioned in dispatches twice. He was a conventional, and respected, regular army officer, and he retired, after the war, as a Lieutenant-Colonel.⁹ His most significant book, published in 1929, analyses the battles on the Western Front in 1915.¹⁰

In this book, he follows the battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos with forensic precision, quoting specific regulations at each point. It is clear that he is writing primarily for a professional audience that was familiar with *FSR*. He is at pains to be

⁹ Biographical detail from WW1 Resource Centre on line, Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Kearsley.

¹⁰ A Kearsley, *1915 Campaign in France, The Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos, considered in relation to the Field Service Regulations*, (Naval and Military Press reprint, [1929] 2007).

‘impartial’, recording the detail of departures from *FSR* without emotion, leaving it to his reader to decide whether the departure was built in to the plans, was avoidable in the course of carrying out those plans, or unavoidable in the heat of battle. In his narrative of the Battle of Loos, he identifies twenty-six occasions when *FSR* supplied appropriate guidance, which can be broken down into twelve instances where the British army complied, and fourteen instances where they did not.¹¹ He even points out a further six instances when the Germans successfully followed British *FSR* in their reactions to events. The main interest in the book is that it was written at all. His *Introduction* makes it clear that it is a reactive book, responding to the ‘interesting’ account of events given in the recently published Volume of ‘*Military Operations*’, (James Edmond’s *Official History of the War*) which covered the 1915 campaign on the Western Front. Kearsey is writing to crystallise points made in debate about these events within his social circle. He makes no attempt to define the ‘doctrine’ of *FSR*, assuming that his audience already has that knowledge. Nor does he attempt to apportion blame. The book is a compelling testament to the importance with which middle ranking regular soldiers regarded *FSR*, even years after the war. Many were still angry that *FSR* had, during significant battles, been ignored during the course of the war. As late as 1937, Ferrers-Guy was writing to Edmonds, the official historian, saying that the staff ‘cannot say that their orders were always framed on sound tactics based on Field Service Regulations (*FSR*) Part I’, and that this failure had required ‘brave men to do what was impossible’.¹²

¹¹ Kearsey, *1915 Campaign in France*, pp.39-62.

¹² Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front, 1914-18: Defeat into Victory*, ([2005] Taylor and Francis, 2005), pp.21, M C Ferrers-Guy to Edmonds, 29 July 1937 CAB45/116, PRO.

This statement comes to the heart of the debate. What were ‘sound tactics, based on’ *FSR*? This is not as difficult a question as might be imagined, though operational analysis is invaluable in teasing out the detail. Because *FSR* is only a very basic guide, the bedrock on which all tactical decisions should have been based, it is relatively easy to identify major lapses in compliance. One such, and it is but one of many, is the failure, in many battle plans, to insist on effective all-arms cooperation at all stages of battle.

Any battle plan which envisaged infantry advancing beyond the range of their supporting artillery is fundamentally non-compliant; that is any plan which predicted, or hoped for, an infantry or cavalry break-through. Harris and Sanders elegantly analyse planning failures at Neuve Chappelle in 1915, quoting Major General John DuCane, artillery adviser at GHQ, who wrote a critique of the battle, mainly pertaining to the handling of reserves. But DuCane finishes with an almost direct quote from *FSR*. ‘The first assault should be prepared and delivered as at NEUVE CHAPELLE, but it should not be pressed so far as to carry the infantry beyond the range of our artillery support. The first step should then be consolidated, counter-attacks repelled and a fresh advance prepared for.’ Harris and Marble say that this addendum ‘muddies the waters’ of the previous analysis.¹³ Anything but. It is a statement which almost every regular infantry and artillery officer would have thought self-evident, hardly worth stating. Asking infantry to advance without artillery support was an unthinkable and fundamental breach of *FSR*. Why, DuCane is saying, very forcibly, is the army not following *FSR*?

¹³ Paul Harris and Sanders Marble, The ‘Step-by-Step’ Approach: British Military Thought and Operational Method on the Western Front, 1915–1917, *War in History* 2008 15 (1), p.23.

It was Rawlinson, who articulated this aspect of the *Regulations* most clearly, after the failure of his IV Corps to make significant progress in this same battle - Neuve Chapelle in March 1915. 'What I want to do now is what I call "Bite & Hold" - bite off a piece of the enemy's line like Neuve Chapelle & hold it against all counter-attacks...there ought to be no difficulty in holding against the enemy's counter attacks & inflicting on him at least twice the loss that we have suffered in making the bite.'¹⁴ It should be no surprise that Rawlinson held this view. He had spent years thinking about infantry tactics in war, and was one of the principal authors of *FSR*. Prior and Wilson fail to mention this fact in their book on him, but it is still surprising to find them bemused when they record him following its guidance. It was 'somewhat odd', they say, that he asked his divisional commanders for their views on how the battle for Neuve Chappelle should be fought, before he prepared detailed plans to coordinate them.¹⁵ He was, of course, following *FSR*, which directed that it was divisions which fought the battle in response to 'brief' orders on intent from above. 'Bite and hold' was not the only contentious issue. Rawlinson was in the process of evolving his thinking to understand that the division was at too low a level at which to plan major offensives in this new type of warfare; and that he needed to coordinate their schemes of attack. This is operational tactical planning in evolution.

Becket, Bowman and Connelly also discuss the 'bite and hold' debate. Sir William Robertson became Chief of the Imperial General Staff in December 1915. Robertson,

¹⁴ Rodney Atwood, *General Lord Rawlinson: from Tragedy to Triumph*, (London, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018), pp.117-118.

¹⁵ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914 – 1918*, ([1992] Barnsley, Pen and Sword, 2004), p.79.

they say, ‘was always a supporter of what might be termed the ‘step by step’ approach in terms of operational strategy on the Western Front, in which short infantry advances would be supported by a weight of artillery fire-power in achieving limited objectives.’ ‘Like Robertson, both Sir Henry Rawlinson and John DuCane had been early advocates’, they say, and ‘if applied consistently between 1915 and 1917, such an approach would have been far more effective and far less costly than Haig’s obsession with a strategic breakthrough.’¹⁶ Following *FSR*, they are saying, was a realistic alternative to the attritional tactics which many historians regard as the key tactic which won the War for the Allies. But by saying that Rawlinson, and others, were ‘early advocates’ of the concept, they miss the point. This was documented British army tactical doctrine and had been since 1909. They were not advocating a new concept; they were stating what almost every regular army officer regarded as the correct way to fight an offensive campaign in the circumstances they were facing.

Harris and Marble also write clearly on the differences in operational strategy championed by Haig and his Chief of the Imperial General Staff, William Robertson from 1915 into 1916, with Haig wanting ‘to break the enemy’s line in a continuous violent push’, while the latter advocated step-by-step all arms cooperation and fire-power. But they then say that it was Haig, not Robertson, who ‘was the slave of pre-war military ideas.’¹⁷ This insistence that Haig was the conventional doctrinaire in all tactical matters is a recurring theme. After all, many believe that ‘*FSR* reflected Douglas Haig’s

¹⁶ Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The British Army in the First World War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.187.

¹⁷ Harris and Marble, *The ‘Step-by-Step’ Approach*, pp.28&31.

views on warfare'.¹⁸ In another publication, Harris describes the 'serious problems of command and control' experienced by Haig's corps during 1914, ignoring Smith-Dorrien and II Corps; but, because he believes that Haig had 'had responsibility' for *FSR*, cites these problems as a generic failing of the whole British army in that year.¹⁹

Harris is not alone in assuming that Haig observed established doctrine. Philpott attempts to trace progression in operational tactics on the Western Front. He concludes that 'it needs to be recognised that by 1918 the British army was not just much better at what it did, but that it was doing something entirely different - if not from July 1916, then certainly from August 1914.'²⁰ This summary of operational development can be challenged at every point. The British army of 1914 followed *FSR*; and the tactics of the best units of that army, on the first day of the Somme, and during the last Hundred Days of 1918, were largely compliant with it. But adapt the quote as applying to Haig's tactical thinking, and it makes a bit more sense. Because Haig and *FSR* are in no way synonymous.

This discussion has largely confined itself to offensive tactics. But *FSR* doctrine is also specific on how defence should be conducted in battle. It states that there should be close liaison between outposts, front line infantry, tactical reserves, and their support, (trench mortars, machine guns and artillery, even air support, by 1918), with

¹⁸ Andy Simpson, *British Corps Command on the Western Front*, in Sheffield and Todman (eds) *Command and Control*, p.99.

¹⁹ Harris, J. P., *The British Army and its Approach to Continental Warfare, 1905-1914*, Dennis and Gray (ed), *1911, Preliminary Moves, 2011 Army Historical Conference*, (Australia, Big Sky Publishing, 2011), pp.299-300.

²⁰ William Philpott, 'Beyond the "Learning Curve": The British Army's Military Transformation in the First World War' (*RUSI Analysis* 10 November 2009), pp.2&3.

documented awareness of projected lines of retirement for each line of defence if that should become necessary. Horace Smith-Dorrien explicitly used this concept of defensive outposts, designed to give way under pressure, to great effect at Mons in 1914.²¹ Interestingly, the principle is emphasised in *Notes from the Front*, a handbook produced, in late 1914, to spread awareness of lessons learned in the first few months of the war.²²

Of course, the interpretation of these general principles had to change from year to year as the range and capabilities of artillery increased, and air observation impinged on freedom of movement, but they remained fundamental to good practice under the doctrine that was *FSR*. By early 1918, the concept of ‘defence in depth’, in a manner compliant with *FSR*, was accepted, even by GHQ, to be radically superior to attempting to hold a front line in full strength, as in an attritional battle. As Travers points out, in his detailed description of the defence preparations of Gough’s Fifth Army prior to the ‘Michael Offensive’ of March 1918, the decision of some units to fortify only their front line, with all their machine guns committed forward, was a disaster on the day of attack.²³ He does somewhat miss the point by suggesting that ‘defence in depth’ was a policy the British army borrowed from the Germans, but he is explicit in allocating the blame for not ensuring that the policy was implemented on Hubert Gough, the one Army Commander who refused to follow *FSR* at any stage of his tenure. Sheffield describes Gough’s command style on the Somme, and seems mystified as to why he should have

²¹ TNA WO 95/630, II Corps Staff, a plan of battle agreed with GHQ, 23 August 1914, p.75.

²² *Notes from the Front*, Collated by the General Staff 1914, (War office, London 1914), p.2.

²³ Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won, Factors that led to Victory in World War One*, (Pen and Sword, [1992] (2005) p.53-65.

been so unpopular as he describes breach after breach of *FSR*. His micromanagement ‘made it difficult for his subordinates to command troops in the field’; and he did not understand ‘the importance of artillery, relying instead on infantry’ to highlight but two of them.²⁴ In fairness, in the same book, Simpson says that ‘*FSR* provided a sound basis for action’, when he describes the Earl of Cavan, one of the ‘outstanding corps commanders’ on the Somme, remonstrating with Gough when he tried, urged on by Haig, to alter his projected plan of attack in a way which breached *FSR*.²⁵ But Simpson and Barr are the only two of the eight authors writing in this book on command on the Western Front who even mention *FSR* in discussing active warfare. The others seem unaware that ‘the regular officers of 1914 had had many years of experience of command and took the information contained in Field Service Regulations for granted. They carried out procedures almost instinctively,’ albeit, thus contributing to a ‘dearth of official evidence’ of their thought processes, ‘in the early months of the war.’²⁶

These six are not alone. Both Robbins and Travers have, despite the above, managed to write at length on the ‘culture and ethos’ of the British army in 1914, without once referring to *FSR*.²⁷ *FSR* was not only a command handbook for the British army, but a tactical one as well. It is quite an achievement, but Griffiths manages to write a whole

²⁴ Gary Sheffield, Gough’s Command Style, in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds) *Command and Control*, pp.83-90.

²⁵ Andy Simpson, British Corps Command on the Western Front, in Sheffield and Todman (eds) *Command and Control*, p.105.

²⁶ Niall Barr, Command in the Transition from Mobile to Static Warfare, August 1914 to March 1915, in Sheffield and Todman (eds) *Command and Control*, pp.14-15.

²⁷ Robbins, *British Generalship*, pp.1-17; Tim Travers, The Hidden Army: Structural Problems in the British Officer Corps, 1900-1918, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Jul., 1982), pp. 523-544.

book on British tactics on the Western Front without any significant reference to it.²⁸ Palazzo, in another influential, and otherwise thoughtful, book, dismisses *FSR* as a factor in his first chapter, and does not mention them again.²⁹

Yet even a truly amateur comparison of the first day of the Battle for Messines Ridge (Plumer) with Gough's first day of Passchendaele, is instructive.³⁰ In the first, *FSR* is broadly adhered to; in the second, it is clearly not. The book cited, being the story of two artillery officers on the Western Front, does not specifically mention *FSR*, but it does describe Colin Hutchison's, my grand-father's, adherence to them, his contentment with Plumer's tactics, and his horror at Gough's. It is no coincidence that Simpson is an author who tries to give *FSR* some prominence. He studies the artillery, arguably the most significant arm in that war, and an understanding of *FSR* is a basic necessity. Marble, in considering the place of the artillery in the British army writes in great detail on, again arguably, the pivotal command structure debate of the war, that of the artillery. 'Bureaucratic infighting dogged every change – proposed or realised, in the artillery chain of command and it must be said that this was a complete waste of effort,' he concludes.³¹ But he does not emphasise that removing field artillery command from the divisions was a direct attack on *FSR*; and that this was not simple bureaucratic infighting, but an acrimonious doctrinal debate, which, with feelings running very high on both sides, obscured clear tactical thinking.

²⁸ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, (London, New Haven, 1994).

²⁹ Albert Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front, The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp.11&17.

³⁰ David Hutchison, *The Young Gunner: The Royal Field Artillery in the Great War*, (Kibworth Beauchamp, Leicestershire, Troubador Press 2016), pp.309-314.

³¹ Marble, *The Infantry cannot do with a Gun less, the Place of the Artillery in the BEF*, pp.180-181.

Of course, many operational lessons needed to be learnt as the war progressed. The *FSR* handbooks were no more than basic primers, intended for the education of young subalterns, and the guidance of experienced officers. They were intended as the foundation upon which all subsequent tactical evolution should be based. Many writers have quite rightly pointed to the strains that were imposed on the British army by its exponential growth, its need to embrace new technologies in all aspects of its activities, and by the political imperatives which shaped strategy. Some of these rendered parts of *FSR* redundant, and this is a fascinating area of study. Travers addresses this subject directly. ‘What overt or covert system was used in decision making?’ in the British army of 1915 and 1916, he asks. But since he then chooses to ignore *FSR* completely, his conclusions are somewhat less than insightful.³²

Simkins, writing on Kitchener’s Army, points out that many officers, called up out of retirement, ‘found that they could not adapt to the changes wrought ...since the introduction of’ *FSR*.³³ Fair comment, and again a fertile area for study. But why then change the subject and never mention this very important point again? It is not only historians that recognise that *FSR* had flaws. Robertson, who had embraced them in 1909, as Commandant of the Staff college,³⁴ wrote, in 1916, that ‘*Field Service Regulations* will require a tremendous amount of revising when we have finished with

³² Tim Travers, Learning and Decision-Making on the Western Front, 1915-1916: The British Example, *Canadian Journal of History*, Volume 18, Issue 1, Spring 2016, pp. 87-98.

³³ 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.

³⁴ Gary Sheffield, The makings of a Corps Commander: Lieutenant-General Sir Douglas Haig, Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide, Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*, (Solihull, Helion and Company, 2013), p.111.

the Boche.’ To put this letter in context, he was writing to Rawlinson, a principal pre-war author of them, as he well knew. He was not rejecting them in their entirety. He was saying that they were still relevant, but needed updating in the light of his experience, a sentiment with which Rawlinson would surely have agreed.³⁵

Jonathan Boff, in reviewing British operational tactics in 1918, avoids most, but not all, of the pitfalls in failing to put *FSR* further centre stage. ‘Dan Todman and Gary Sheffield have suggested that, by 1918, the British army was ‘a highly effective, battle-winning, all-arms force’, a view supported by Griffith, who suggests that ‘tactical success could normally be guaranteed to any commander who worked hard and methodically at coordinating all arms into his plan’.³⁶ In his book, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front*, he discusses ‘all arms cooperation’ in more detail, like Strachan, referring back to Henderson and *FSR*. ‘In theory, therefore, the British Army of 1914 was firmly alive to the value of a combined arms approach,’ he says. ‘The British army of 1918, at least as much as that of 1914, in theory exalted the combined arms concept.’³⁷ He goes on to describe in great detail how well-coordinated combined arms attacks maintained the momentum of the British advances in the last Hundred Days, pointing out that tactical planning was devolved down, sometimes as far as platoon level. He also notes that coordination of infantry with field artillery was considerably easier than that

³⁵ William Robertson, *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, December 1915–February 1918*, D.R. Woodward (ed) (London, 1989), pp. 72–73.

³⁶ Jonathan Boff, Combined Arms during the Hundred Days Campaign, August–November 1918, *War in History* 17(4) (2010), p.461.

³⁷ Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front : The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.125-126.

of infantry with tanks.³⁸ But he does not make the explicit link that the front line commanders were simply reverting to the fundamental precepts of *FSR*, which requires that ‘brief orders’ be issued to front line units ‘at a distance’ from their commanders; that detailed planning be devolved down to fighting units; and that brigades, and batteries, of field artillery, accept secondment to infantry command at a junior level. Boff even high-lights the fact that the Tank Corps sometimes saw themselves as an elite and independent force, not unlike the cavalry in 1914, an interesting aside. But, in his summary at the chapter end, despite pointing out the that ‘commands at brigade level and above were almost exclusively held by pre-war regulars’, he prefers to attribute their new found effectiveness to tactical innovation.

Some aspects of *FSR* were followed conscientiously throughout the war. A good example of *FSR* compliance in the British army during Haig’s tenure of command, is that of the 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.’³⁹ Many historians have drawn attention to the extraordinary strides that were made by the British army as the war progressed, in relation to reconnaissance of the enemy lines by air observation, sound ranging of enemy artillery and accurate mapping; and the impact that rapid collation and distribution of this information had on operational efficiency.

³⁸ Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front*, p.155.

³⁹ *Field Service Regulations, Part I, Operations, 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1912*, (London, General Staff War Office, 1912), p.112.

Some even go so far as to describe this as a revolution. It certainly contributed significantly to final victory, but the need for a structure to deal with reconnaissance information was an *FSR* requirement. Haig can be congratulated for presiding over the efficient development, from small beginnings, of what was, by the end of the war, a huge operation.⁴⁰ But there was nothing new in the concept of it.

It is not only in general works that consideration of *FSR* is relevant. Attention has already been drawn to the lack of discussion of the subject in the various biographies of leading generals. It is inevitable that attitudes to *FSR* significantly influenced personal relationships within the British army, even before the war started. It is reasonable to point out that tensions between officers often reflect fundamental differences in military ethos. An obvious example is the ‘feud’ between French and Smith-Dorrien, ‘the precise origins of which are difficult to determine’, but which probably ignited ‘as a result of Smith-Dorrien’s overhaul of cavalry training at Aldershot Command’, in 1908. Smith-Dorrien was a ‘puritanical’ advocate of *FSR*, and firmly overhauled the Aldershot Command when it came out in 1909, specifically recruiting Horne to reform the artillery in line with it.⁴¹ He was very firm in requiring adherence to it, even by French, in August 1914.⁴² Smith-Dorrien was never tactful, and if discomfited officers, in 1909 and thereafter, rallied to French, their former commander, who interpreted them in a more relaxed fashion, a doctrinal feud is nurtured. And, it is not unreasonable to suggest that

⁴⁰ See for instance; Vines, Anthony John, *The Heroic Manager: An Assessment of Sir Douglas Haig’s role as Military Manager on the Western Front*, (Doctoral thesis, Kings College, London, 2015)

⁴¹ Spencer Jones and Steven Corvi, “A Commander of Rare and unusual Coolness”: General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrine, Jones (ed), *Stemming the Tide*, p.157; Don Farr, *The Silent General, Horne of the First Army*, (Helion & Company, Solihull, 2007), p.38

⁴² Hutchison, *Mons, an Artillery Battle*, p.46.

Haig denigrated Wilson because they fundamentally disagreed on tactical doctrine. Both had thought very deeply on the subject, and on all the evidence, they had come to diametrically opposite conclusions in 1914. In neither of the above cases, would the protagonists have been likely to admit, in letters or diaries, that their differences were doctrinal. Nobody could afford to disavow *FSR*, or accuse a colleague of heresy. Much easier, to blame a man's intelligence, mannerisms or background. The relationship between Haig and French is the most interesting and enigmatic. French could, and probably should, have sacked Haig in 1914, for acting independently of GHQ in his dealings with the French army from 22 to 29 August, in direct defiance of a primary clause in *FSR*, which allocates strategic control of the army to the Commander-in-Chief, and to him alone.⁴³ In failing to do so, French vacillated on doctrine, arguably fatally weakening his hold on the army.

All of the above is something of a diversion. Any of the points briefly, and perhaps controversially, mooted in this chapter, can be developed and debated. But the intention of this chapter is merely to suggest that *FSR*, as the official doctrine of the British army for the entire war, should move centre stage when discussing the evolution of tactics and command structures on the Western Front. If that is to occur, then operational analysis at division, brigade and even battalion level becomes the bench-mark for what actually occurred. Bourne has suggested that, 'in future, there seems little doubt that Haig's reputation will be finally determined, not by studies of the man himself, but by

⁴³ TNA WO 95/588/1, I Corps Staff, Operation Order 7 and G122, 24 August 1914; TNA WO 95/588/4, I Corps Staff Report, 24-29 Aug 1914; *Field Service Regulations, Part II, Organisation and Administration, 1909, reprinted with amendments 1913*, (War Office, London, 1913), p.23.

detailed operational analyses at the army, corps, divisional, brigade and even battalion level'.⁴⁴ Anecdotal comment is irrelevant, he is saying, no matter how senior the general who uttered or wrote the words. Just as an example, in 1931, Hubert Gough published his memoir, entitled *The Fifth Army*, partly responding to criticism of his leadership on the Somme. He says, for instance, that 'no subordinate was ordered to attack before he was ready,' a common breach of *FSR*.⁴⁵ Elementary operational analysis by Sheffield discredits this statement. Small lies are easy to cast aside.

Yet large lies endure. Most, if not all modern, historians assert that Haig went to war in August 1914 with a mind-set that was compliant with *FSR*. This can be disproved relatively easily by operational analysis.⁴⁶ But consider again the oft-quoted letter of September 1918, when Haig, writing to Wilson, whom he knew well was a principal author of *FSR, Part I*: To 'a steady adherence to the principles of our Field Service Regulations, Part I, are our successes to be attributed,' he says. Haig was not, as many suggest, claiming credit for *FSR*. He was writing a courteous and generous note to a man he now recognised as a major architect of victory on the Western Front.

A final thought

'To the best of my knowledge, few people have used *FSR* as a tool of analysis for the BEF on the Western Front;' says Bourne.⁴⁷ Consider that statement. There is an easily

⁴⁴ Dr John Bourne, Haig and the Historians, Brian Bond & Nigel Cave (ed), *Haig, a Re-Appraisal 80 Years On*, (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2009), p.5.

⁴⁵ Sir Hubert Gough, *The Fifth Army*, (London,1931), p.133, as quoted in Sheffield, Gough's Command Style, in Sheffield and Todman (eds) *Command and Control on the Western Front*, p.72. See also Robbins, *British Generalship*, p.32.

⁴⁶ David Hutchison, *Mons, an Artillery Battle*.

⁴⁷ Dr John Bourne, Lecturer in Armed Forces and War Studies, University of Wolverhampton, personal communication, December 2019.

obtained official handbook, published in 1909, which describes, in detail, the desirable command structure and tactics of an Expeditionary Force at war. It had been agreed by the upper echelons of the British army, and not only had the command structure suggested in it been robustly implemented into the British army; but, also, at the same time, all training for war has been reformed to conform with the tactics it demands. Yet ‘few have used’ it in writing on those very subjects.

It is nothing short of astonishing that those who have studied the development of command structure and tactics on the Western Front ignore *FSR*. But it is in some ways understandable. As an archaic document, it is relatively inaccessible. The conventions of the day inhibited allusion to it in general correspondence, and indeed, in military reports, so there are few headline quotes. To repeat Barr’s assertion, ‘the regular officers of 1914 ... took the information contained in Field Service Regulations for granted. They carried out procedures almost instinctively,’ thus contributing to a ‘dearth of official evidence’ of their thinking.⁴⁸ Add to that, the difficulties of operational research; an entrenched belief that Haig ‘wrote’ the document; his ambivalence to it in 1914; and his championship of it in 1918; and one can understand why past historians have preferred to ignore the regulations as too painful a nettle to grasp.

But that is no longer an excuse. The doctrine that is *FSR* is not impossible to define; and operational analysis of battles is now much easier than it was, thanks to the availability of archive records. It does mean discarding some baggage. The doctrine of

⁴⁸ Niall Barr, *Command in the Transition from Mobile to Static Warfare, August 1914 to March 1915*, in Sheffield and Todman (eds) *Command and Control*, pp.14-15.

FSR can be regarded as adolescent in 1914, growing in maturity through the war. It was a universal doctrine, neither synonymous with the views of Haig, nor entirely with those of Wilson and Rawlinson, once its concepts were tested on the Western Front.

But it is undeniable that elements of the doctrine are relevant to every significant debate on the war on that Front; from the selection of Haig as Commander-in-Chief in late 1915, down to the fate of a single private sent forward into the hell that was Passchendaele in 1917. *FSR* should not be air-brushed out of history as a consequence of a failure of definition; or because its genesis, ethos or evolution are misunderstood. It was the doctrine that was imposed on the British army in 1909; it was the doctrine accepted by every regular infantry and artillery officer in 1914; it was the doctrine followed by the best units of the British army in 1918. It was the doctrine by which the First World War was won.

David Hutchison, December 2020.

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.