

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 102

“They Showed Us the Way”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

At the beginning of 1915, the Western Front was a solid line of soldiers from Switzerland to the North Sea. Nothing like it had ever been seen before.

The war had already gone on longer than most had expected, and the casualties had already been worse than feared. And as appalling as 1914 had turned out to be, all signs pointed to more of the same in the new year.

British, French, and German commanders plotted and strategized, desperate for the breakthrough that would prevent the next twelve months from playing out as the same gruesome stalemate of the past five.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 102. They Showed Us the Way.

The casualty rates on the Western Front were indeed appalling. All these armies—French, British, Belgian, and German—had lost a third to a half of their pre-war active duty soldiers. Replacements were being drafted and sent to the front as fast as possible, but these were soldiers who had been too old or too young or too small or otherwise deemed unfit back in July, and inevitably, the quality of all the armies declined.

And the reputation of the British Army in particular had taken a beating. The British Army traditionally has been a small force, not huge and mighty like the Royal Navy, but equally elite. During the Napoleonic Wars, the British Army had been deployed shrewdly and successfully. Though much smaller than the French Army, it alone of the armies of Europe never lost a major battle, although it did win a few, most notably the Battle of Waterloo. The Army’s reputation took a hit during the Crimean War, especially in the aftermath of the famous “charge of the light brigade,” which was a huge cock-up, no matter what Lord Tennyson says about it. I wish he were *my* PR guy.

The Boer War hadn't gone so well at first either, although the British Army did prevail in the end. But the early days of the Great War, besides being tragic and bloody, were something of an embarrassment for the British. In the event of a German invasion of France, the British Expeditionary Force had been thought ready to parachute in and save the day. Not parachute literally, but you know what I mean. But when the war got real, the BEF got hammered, over and over, until it was bouncing around France like a pinball, taking heavy casualties every time, and Sir John French was of a mind to abandon his allies and head back to the safety of Blighty. In fairness, the BEF was usually up against Germans with superior numbers, but still, this was supposed to be a high quality outfit. And even if it may have been at first, by winter, the original fighting force had lost a third of its soldiers, killed, wounded, or captured, and the quality of their replacements was definitely lacking.

The British did not have conscription. This was a professional army. But a lot of those professionals were dead or wounded now, and they weren't so easy to replace. Territorial soldiers were being brought in, but they weren't of the same quality. Over a million British men had volunteered for service since the war broke out. They would become the backbone of the new army Lord Kitchener was putting together, but it would take some time to train and equip them.

But Britain also had her Empire to draw upon, although this process had been delayed for a while by the threat of German raiders. By October 1914, four Indian divisions had arrived in France to supplement the BEF. They were known as the India Corps, or sometimes the Indian Expeditionary Force, and they helped bolster the British lines during that critical first winter of the war.

It wasn't easy for these Indian Army units. Colonial units didn't get the modern equipment, so when they reached France, they were upgraded to modern rifles for the first time, and it took a while for the soldiers to get the hang of them. Indian units didn't come equipped with artillery, either, which is a key weapon in twentieth-century combat. The India Corps had to depend on artillery support from adjacent British units.

And winter was hard on the Indian soldiers, who were not accustomed to the European climate and lacked proper equipment for cold weather. Also, the officers of these units were career British soldiers, most of whom had lived in India for years and knew something of the language and culture of their troops. But as the fighting ground on and these officers were lost, their replacements were newer recruits direct from Britain who lacked this understanding of the soldiers under their command.

During this period of November to January, the BEF was at its low point. And the Germans had a pretty good idea that the British were close to the breaking point, hence Falkenhayn's desire to launch yet another offensive at the British. But as we've seen, the combination of Hindenburg's popularity, the crumbling position of Austria, and fears that Italy or Rumania might jump into

the war meant German soldiers and resources were diverted to the East, making another Western offensive impossible for now. It may have been that Falkenhayn was right, and one final attack on the British line at Christmas would have turned the tide in the West. But he never got a chance to prove it, and we'll never know now.

The situation was much more straightforward for the French. Morale was easier to maintain in the much larger French Army; all you had to do was point out to the soldiers that fact that important parts of their home country were under occupation by a hated enemy that intended to subdue her. The French have just one enemy, Germany, and one goal, to expel them from French soil.

General Joffre was still in command, and his steely resolve still inspired confidence. He'd drawn criticism during the French retreat at the beginning of the war, but the victory at the Marne had silenced his critics for the time being.

The economic strain of modern warfare was becoming apparent. Like the other combatants, the western Allies struggled to provide adequate munitions to their fighting forces. The French Army needed 50,000 rounds of ammunition for its artillery guns every day; but French factories could only produce 11,000 per day. It was even harder for the British. Some British artillery guns were restricted to four shells per day, which counts as nothing in the early twentieth century. Getting small arms ammunition to the front was just as critical. One train not getting to its destination in time could mean a unit having to give up its position and fall back.

But the ever-optimistic Joffre remained confident that 1915 would be the year that a French offensive would break the Germans at last. The portion of the front Joffre had in mind was the German position along the Aisne, the place they fell back to after the Battle of the Marne. Here was the deepest penetration of German forces into France, where the bend in the German line pointed to Paris like an arrowhead. The German position at the tip of the salient was a good one, along a ridge and behind a river, but there lay open ground on both sides, and Joffre believed that coordinated French offensives on the flanks of this salient could force a German withdrawal that would be the first step toward expelling them from France.

It wasn't a bad idea, and it's pretty much how things are going to work out in 1918. But this is 1915. The French Army wasn't ready for this scale of offensive, and the winter weather didn't help. The French hammered at these German positions on and off as weather permitted from December 1914 to March 1915 with nothing to show for it except hundreds of thousands more casualties.

As a dominion within the British Empire, Canada also went to war against Germany in August 1914, but she had only a very small standing army of a few thousand soldiers, so recruitment and training of more was the first priority. The quickest to volunteer were British-born Canadians, who accounted for more than half of the first wave of recruits. The 1st Canadian Division was

formed on the outbreak of the war, and it arrived in Britain in October. They spent the winter training on Salisbury Plain, and took up positions on the Western Front in February 1915.

By March, and with the assistance of these Indian and Canadian units, the British Army was firmly entrenched into a position astride the French-Belgian border, between the Belgian Army's position along the coast and the French Army to the south. With the Army now properly organized, and both spring and new recruits on the way, the British Army was ready to contemplate its first offensive action of the war, in the hope of recapturing some lost French territory, and perhaps recapturing a bit of the British Army's reputation as well.

The BEF commander, General Sir John French, selected the target of the offensive himself: the small German-occupied French village of Neuve Chappelle. Neuve Chappelle was just behind the German trenches, and farther behind still was a ridge line. If the village and the ridge line could be captured, it would endanger a larger portion of the German line and possibly even force a German withdrawal from the French industrial city of Lille.

But by March 1915, when the British began the Battle of Neuve Chappelle, the Germans were already thoroughly dug in.

[music: "Jimbo's Lullaby"]

You can't talk about the Great War without talking about the trenches, which may be the most distinctive aspect of this war, especially on the Western Front.

Armies digging themselves earthworks to shelter in or behind is nothing new in the history of warfare. The Roman Army were masters of this kind of work. But as infantry weapons became more powerful, as it became possible for a soldier to fire a rifle faster, more accurately, and over a longer range, as machine guns were introduced, it became possible for one soldier to hold off many. But you had to protect that one soldier well.

The combatants in the American Civil War were relying heavily on earthworks by the latter half of that conflict. We saw entrenched positions proving very difficult to take without incurring heavy casualties in the Boxer Uprising, the Anglo-Boer War, and the Russo-Japanese War, among other conflicts.

By the beginning of the Great War, entrenchment was part of the doctrine of all the major powers. A typical trench was literally a straight line excavation, four to five feet deep and equally wide. The goal here is for a soldier to be able to stand in the bottom of the trench and fire his rifle just over the surface of the ground. But soldiers who shoot in that way still expose their heads and arms to enemy fire, so the next logical step is to build parapets above ground level along the front edge of the trench. Often these were built by stacking bags of the soil that had been dug out of the trench. Small openings in this parapet would allow a soldier to fire his rifle with a minimum of risk. Soon parapets of soil were also being constructed along the back edge

of the trench as well. This was done to protect the soldiers from shrapnel thrown by enemy artillery shells that land behind them.

And that was a trench, according to military doctrine on the eve of the Great War. Soldiers in these kinds of trenches typically stood about two paces apart, which allowed for dense rifle fire against anyone foolish enough to attempt a frontal assault on their position. This was entrenchment as was used by the Boers at Magersfontein or the Russians at Port Arthur or the Italians in Libya.

The Germans began entrenching as the winter of 1914 set in, intending to hold their ground until the weather turned favorable for an offensive in the spring. But as we've seen, the demands of the Eastern Front forced the German command to de-emphasize the Western Front, and these "temporary" trenches became permanent features of the battlefield.

German tactical doctrine favored defense from inside a trench. This wasn't planned; it was just a lucky coincidence for the Germans. German doctrine emphasized weapons such as heavy artillery, howitzers, machine guns, and grenades, all of which complemented trench defenses, making it easy for smaller numbers of entrenched German soldiers to hold off much larger numbers of enemies.

As the German strategic focus shifted to the East, German trenches in the West became more elaborate. Wherever possible, ingenuity and engineering were employed to enable ever fewer soldiers to defend ever wider stretches of the front, so as to enable command to send more soldiers to face the Russians.

Both sides discovered early on that these densely packed straight-line trenches were extremely vulnerable to artillery fire. Pack soldiers close together and it makes it possible to hit more of them with one shell. And if the shell actually lands in the trench itself, the earthworks channel the force of the explosion right down the line of soldiers. If enemy soldiers manage to jump into the trench, they have a clear field of fire into the defenders.

And so trenches got zigzaggy, either back and forth diagonally, or squared off in a shape reminiscent of the battlements atop a crenellated wall. "Crenellated" is my favorite word by the way, but it's really hard to work into everyday conversation. So I make it a point to use it whenever possible.

The armies on the Western Front also quickly discovered the need to dig communication trenches that allowed soldiers and supplies to move forward into the front-line trenches without being exposed to enemy fire. And as trenches evolved from temporary firing positions into long-term living arrangements, it became standard practice to build reinforced bunkers where soldiers could retreat during an artillery bombardment, and second and third lines of trenches behind the front trench. Eventually, only a small fraction of the front-line soldiers actually stood in the front

trench, and they were observers. The other soldiers stayed in trenches farther behind, ready to reinforce a front-trench position when needed.

It was pretty easy to reinforce a front-line trench from behind, thanks to those communication trenches already in place. So that meant, even if a frontal assault were successful, even if your soldiers captured the enemy's front-line trench, the enemy will have little trouble moving up fresh troops from the rear to counterattack the now tired, frightened and low on ammunition soldiers attempting to hold what they have just taken. So not only is it hard to capture a trench, it's hard to hold onto one even after you have it.

I should also mention no-man's land, the space in between the front trenches of opposing armies. It bore this name for a very good reason, as anyone caught in it had a life expectancy measured in seconds. Since the only way the enemy could approach your entrenched position was over no-man's land, soldiers were in the habit of shooting anything that moved in that space. Sometimes soldiers did venture into no-man's land, mostly after dark, to string up barbed wire, which of course makes an infantry charge across no-man's land that much harder.

Constant artillery fire had a way of clearing no-man's land of trees and bushes, or any vegetation at all, really, giving soldiers a clearer field of fire. Because trenches kept a soldier's line of sight close to the ground, any kind of elevation, even a little rolling hill that in peacetime would hardly be worth noticing could take on great strategic significance. To be just a few meters higher than your enemy could be worth a lot.

Trenches protect you from bullets flying at you across the ground, but there's still those artillery shells exploding over your head and raining shrapnel down onto you. The early months of the war saw tremendous numbers of head injuries. Hence the introduction of modern helmets.

These first appeared in 1915, and it was the French who first introduced them. Prior to that, soldiers generally wore cloth caps, or maybe leather helmets, if they were lucky. The signature Prussian, and later German, helmet before the Great War was the *Pickelhaube*. The *Pickelhaube* was made of hardened leather and it was glossy black with a shiny metal spike on top, and as I said, it was a Prussian innovation, although many other militaries copied it in some form. High-ranking officers and cavalry sometimes had polished metal *Pickelhauben*, but the metal was decorative, not protective.

The new French helmet, known as the Adrian helmet, was made of steel, with a ridge at the top and a bill in the front. It's a little bit reminiscent of a fire fighter's helmet. The French Army began issuing Adrian helmets to its own soldiers in 1915, and armies of most other Allied countries, including Russia, Italy, Belgium, and Serbia soon adopted it. But the British Army found the Adrian helmet unsatisfactory, so they went ahead and designed their own, the Brodie helmet, which began to be issued to British soldiers in mid-1915.

The Brodie helmet is shallower, with a fairly wide brim that goes all the way around the head. It may look a little strange at first, but the design makes perfect sense once you remember that it's meant primarily to protect the soldier from shrapnel coming down from above. In particular, that brim offers an extra measure of protection for the face and neck.

As for the Germans, they were learning that the *Pickelhaube* was inadequate for modern warfare. The leather offered little in the way of protection, and with the allied blockade starting to bite, leather was in short supply anyway. And that shiny spike on the top only made it that much easier for enemy sharpshooters to find you. The Germans studied the problem, even evaluated captured enemy helmets, and in 1916 began issuing the *Stahlhelm*. *Stahlhelm* is just German for "steel helmet," which is what it was. It was deeper than the Brodie helmet and rounder than the Adrian helmet. It had a brim in front, and in the back it extended lower than other helmets of the time, in order to protect the back of the skull and the neck. The Austrians would also adopt the *Stahlhelm*.

These three helmets, the Adrian, the Brodie, and the *Stahlhelm* would quickly become distinctive; a way to recognize the nationality of a soldier, even in silhouette, and the helmets themselves would remain in use within their respective militaries for decades to come. The Germans would retain the *Pickelhaube* for ceremonial purposes until the end of the war, and Allied propaganda would exploit it as a symbol of German barbarism.

I might come back to the topic of the development of trench warfare in future episodes, but we're pretty much caught up to the state of the art as of 1915, so I'll stop here for now. I'll just add the observation that the British sector of the Western Front at this time was between the French and the small Belgian Army on the coast. The Belgians had relied on flooding the dikes on the Yser River to create barriers to stop the Germans, as we saw in episode 92. The small size of the Belgian Army meant it wasn't going to be going onto the offensive anytime soon, and the wet lowlands made the Belgian portion of the front unattractive to the Germans, so this portion of the front will remain relatively quiet. Farther south, though, the British positions are in the coastal lowlands where the water table is often above trench depth, meaning the British trenches in particular are going to be muddy and prone to filling up with water, and the ground is flat, making it a tempting site for a German offensive.

[music: "Jimbo's Lullaby"]

In the early weeks of the war, all the way back in the summer of 1914—remember those innocent days of the summer of 1914?—it was clear to anyone paying attention that frontal assaults on an enemy in this era of rapid-fire rifles, machine guns, and heavy artillery were not merely doomed to fail, but tantamount to suicide. Therefore, a flanking maneuver is called for. But in 1915, when the Germans are dug in all the way from Switzerland to the North Sea, a flanking maneuver is flat-out impossible. So what to do, then? Well, in this combat environment, your next best option is to attack the enemy at one of their salients.

Now, I've used this word "salient" before, but it's time to take a close look at what it means. In military terms, a "salient" is a place where the front line extends outward. It's a bump or projection extending forward into enemy-held territory. If you're interested, the antonym of "salient" is "reentrant," that is, a concavity in your own line created by an enemy salient.

Now that we're stuck with a continuous front line in France and Belgium and flanking the enemy is impossible, these salients take on a special significance. That's because an enemy salient offers you an opportunity to line up a larger number of soldiers against the enemy soldiers holding that salient. Instead of the, say, 1:1 ratio you would get where the front line is perfectly straight, you might be able to manage 2:1 or even more where the enemy line is extended. So this is an opportunity to pour on a lot more firepower against the enemy soldiers than they can fire in return. And if you're thinking about sending your own soldiers "over the top," as they said in those days, and into a frontal assault against that enemy, a salient makes an ideal target because you can send soldiers at the enemy from multiple directions. The enemy won't be able to shoot at all of them at once, so some of them will be able to get in close. Or so you hope.

The Western Front is not a straight line, of course. The line wiggles back and forth in many places. The two great bends on the Western Front make the biggest salients. Remember that as a first approximation, the Western Front runs more or less north from Switzerland until it passes the French fortress at Verdun. There it turns west, creating a French salient there. Gee, you think the Germans have noticed that?

Anyway, from there the line runs west to the Aisne River, then north into Belgium near Ypres and on to the North Sea. There at the Aisne is a large German salient, and that's the place where Joffre attempted his winter offensive. So he had the right idea in principle, it's just that he lacked the resources to press a full offensive and it was the wrong season.

And that brings us back to the village of Neuve Chapelle. The Germans held the village, but the front line ran right around the western edge of the village, creating a little bump in the German line. The British don't even have the resources of the French, but Sir John French and Douglas Haig, commander of the British First Army are going to attempt the same thing Joffre was attempting, albeit on a much smaller scale. Attack the Neuve Chapelle salient and take back the village. Not that the village itself was all that important, but the British hoped to push on until they reached that ridge line behind the village. If they could take that, it would create an even more extended German salient around the French city of Lille, to the south. And if the British could set up artillery on that ridge and begin pounding at the now more vulnerable German defenses around Lille, there would be reason to hope that a combined British and French offensive might take Lille later in the year.

And so the Battle of Neuve Chapelle would be an experiment, done according to the classic description of the scientific method we all were taught in high school. British command would gather all its hard-won experience of modern combat gained over the past seven months and use

it to develop hypotheses about best practices for planning and executing an offensive against entrenched German units. These hypotheses would then be tested experimentally at Neuve Chapelle.

It began with the Royal Flying Corps, the air arm of the British military. RFC flyers conducted aerial reconnaissance, taking detailed photographs of the land where the offensive would take place. These photographs were used to create maps that were distributed to the soldiers ahead of the offensive. The maps depicted every road, every building, every cluster of trees, and every other significant fact about the terrain to be taken. The soldiers of the British First Army would have a level of information about the battlefield that previous generations of soldiers could only have dreamed of.

British artillery units husbanded their shells, and when the battle began, at 7:30 AM on March 10, 1915, it began with an intense artillery bombardment that lasted 35 minutes. Thirty-five minutes may not sound very long, but remember how quickly these guns can fire shells. How quickly? 100,000 shells in 35 minutes. That was one-sixth of the BEF's entire stockpile, and was equal in number to all the artillery shells fired during the entire two and a half years of the Anglo-Boer war.

The bombardment was carefully planned. The first ten minutes were spent destroying the German barbed wire in no-man's land. Then the full fury of the artillery rained down on the bewildered German defenders. These were simple trenches. There was no place for the Germans to hide.

British and Indian infantry began their assault at 8:05 AM. By 10:30, the village itself was in Allied hands. Casualties were heavy, especially in one sector where Indian troops inadvertently attacked a section of German trench outside the bombardment areas. But a two-and-a-half mile section of German front had been pushed back about a mile, eliminating the German salient.

But that's when things started to go wrong. Sir John ordered a cavalry brigade into the breach, intending to exploit the opening by attacking the German rear. Instead, the intact German machine gun posts at the edges of the breach stopped the cavalry in their tracks. The British command lost the ability to communicate with their units. The advancing forces had strung telephone wires as they went, to maintain contact with their commanders, but once the German artillery began counterattacking, the lines were cut and runners attempting to deliver handwritten messages were cut down by those same machine guns. And the radios of the time were too large and heavy for soldiers to carry into combat.

The allied forces became disorganized and the Germans brought up reinforcements. On March 12, the German defenders, units of the German Sixth Army under the command of Crown Prince Rupprecht, began a counterattack.

The German counterattack failed, but only because the British laid down heavy artillery fire, further depleting their stocks. And so the British and Indian advance held, but it never reached the ridge that was the goal of the operation. The offensive had to be called off due to the shortage of artillery shells. The British suffered 7,000 casualties, the Indians about 4,000. German casualties are not known, but are believed to have been comparable.

Although the attack failed, it showed the way. The Battle of Neuve Chapelle provided valuable experience on attacking trenches. The German line had been thin, and had been surprised by the sudden artillery barrage and the quick assault afterward. The German line had been thin there because the Germans, like the French, had developed a low opinion of British troops by this point. People on both sides of the line were getting used to the idea that the British were only good for manning defensive entrenchments, freeing up the French to do the hard fighting. But here at Neuve Chapelle, the British had proved they could plan, organize, and execute an offensive independently, an offensive capable of taking a German position and holding it against counterattack.

Of course, the battle also demonstrated that problems remained to be solved. Quick surprise coordinated bombardments, good. Rapid assault good. Holding one's gains, possible. Maintaining communication and coordination even after an advance, yeah, we need to work on that one. Also, the aerial reconnaissance had been useful for mapping, but it hadn't been detailed enough to identify individual German machine gun posts, and those posts proved to be enough to slow down and stall the offensive.

The lesson Sir John French drew from the Battle of Neuve Chapelle was that he needed lots more artillery ammunition. Lack of artillery shells is going to become a political issue in Britain shortly, but that's a story for another episode. An unfortunate false lesson learned was that artillery bombardments needed to be longer. I say "unfortunate" because artillery bombardments signal your intentions, and if they're too long, they give the enemy time to send in reinforcements to that sector of the front, negating the element of surprise. I am sorry to say it will take the British Army two years to unlearn this false lesson.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and I'd like to thank Anthony and Thorston for their donations to the podcast, and thank you to Hugh for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to make a one-time donation, or become a patron, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or the Patreon buttons, and while you're there, leave a comment and let me know what you thought of today's episode. You can also help out the podcast by joining our Facebook page or following us on Twitter and liking, sharing, and retweeting, and all that good social media stuff. Or, if you're old fashioned, you might even try just recommending the podcast face-to-face with a friend or family member you think might enjoy it. It's all good.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to Africa and take a look at the German colony in Southwest Africa, the adjacent British dominion of South Africa, and the effect of the Great War on both of them. Can there be colonialism without bloodshed? That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. By the end of 1915, the decision would be taken to withdraw most Indian soldiers from the Western Front, on the sensible basis that it would be easier to supply and reinforce Indian units if they were kept closer to home. For the rest of the war, Indians would serve in the East African and Middle Eastern theatres, but only two Indian cavalry divisions would remain in France. Still, in the years 1914 and 1915, about 130,000 Indian soldiers served in France and Belgium, and about 9,000 of them died.

In 1927, a memorial was built outside Neuve Chapelle to honor the Indian soldiers killed in France during the Great War. Marshal Foch himself spoke at the dedication, and at one point in his speech, directing his remarks to the Indian representatives present, said, “[T]ell all India that we shall watch over their graves with the devotion due to all our dead. We shall cherish above all the memory of their example. They showed us the way; they made the first steps toward the final victory.”

[music: Closing Theme]