

Before and after the Somme:

Providing Officers for the Armies of the British Empire

Gary Sheffield

Introduction

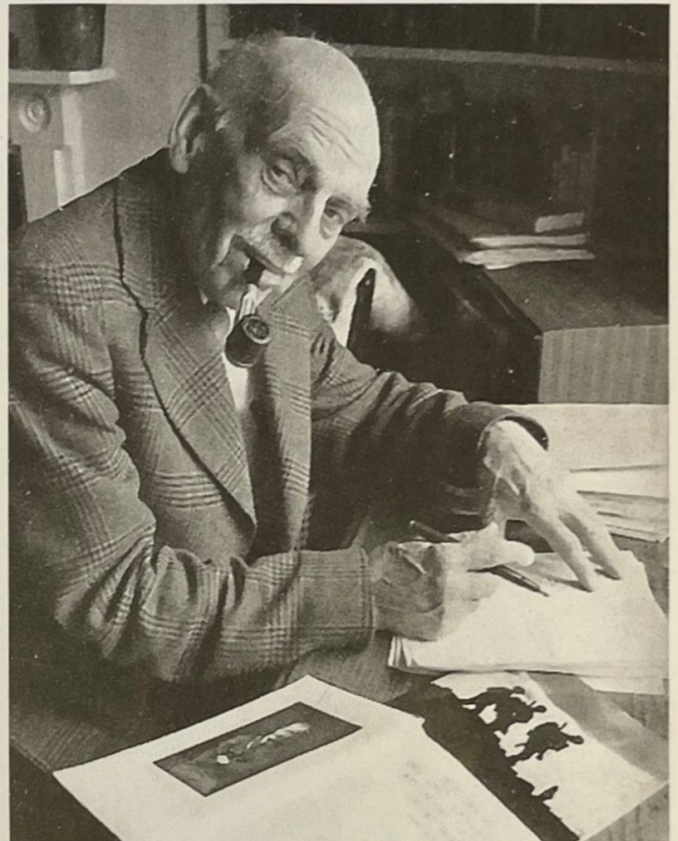
During the First World War, the armies of the British Empire underwent massive expansion.¹ The British Army responded pragmatically to the need to provide large numbers of additional officers for the greatly expanded land forces by broadening the social base from which officers were drawn. The same was true of the armies of the Dominions, and to some extent also the Indian Army. The Battle of the Somme (July–November 1916) was a turning point for regimental officers. Since the outbreak of the war, many newly commissioned officers had been drawn from broadly the same social background as their pre-war Regular predecessors: men who were educated at elite public (i.e. private, fee-paying) schools, which excluded the mass of the population.² Even before July 1916, the net had been cast more widely; but the heavy casualties in July to November 1916 accelerated this process. Officers bore a disproportionate share of the losses.³ Infantry officers were particularly vulnerable. For example, eleven officers of 10th South Wales Borderers became casualties in the fighting for Mametz Wood in July, two of whom were killed. Remarkably, in the view of the regimental historian ‘all things considered... [the battalion had not] suffered very heavily’.⁴ In just one day, 16 August 1916, 13th King’s Liverpool lost ten officers – six killed, four wounded – in an attack on Guillemont.⁵ Given the scale of the casualties among officers on the Somme, the need to provide officers for the BEF became even more urgent. This article examines the response of military authorities to the need to supply officers for the British, Australian, Canadian, Indian and New Zealand armies, laying particular stress on training.

Supplying officers for British and Dominion Armies

In the Great War, junior officers ‘across the empire’ were trained by ‘officers and NCOs who had themselves been formed from a British mould that had been decades in the making’, and who relied on British official publications.⁶ Often cadets from Britain and the Dominions trained in the same units, but the Dominions also had their own officers’ schools which had some local peculiarities. This commonality of selection and training produced a *de facto* Imperial officer corps, the products of which could be interchanged between national armies with very few problems of adjustment.

At the beginning of the First World War, officer training was often *ad hoc* and chaotic. Kitchener’s appeal for suitable men to take temporary commissions resulted in a deluge of men coming forward. Vast numbers were commissioned directly into their regiments and corps. Some held an OTC certificate, some did not, but all needed to be trained. Much training was done at unit level, often by NCOs, with an emphasis on drill, ensuring that junior officers went through a similar programme as the Other Ranks. Llewelyn Woodward wryly recorded that he had a two-month pre-commissioning course at Oxford University OTC where ‘I learned a great deal. Much I learned... in three minutes, from the sergeant-major on parade when in a moment of forgetfulness, I dropped my rifle’. Woodward’s experience was particularly frustrating. After being commissioned, he was sent back to Oxford, and then White City in London where, he said, he did the

same ‘elementary drill’ for a total of five months. Only when he was able to take riding lessons with the Household Cavalry, in preparation for transfer to the Royal Artillery, did he find post-OTC training to be fulfilling.⁷



H E L Mellersh, aged 70 (Wiki).

Short courses were introduced to try to address the need to train the vast number of new officers, H E L Mellersh’s early military career gives an indication of one of the routes taken in training a new officer. In August 1914, Mellersh was a pupil at Berkhamsted, a public school. Already a member of the school OTC, he took it ‘more seriously’ once war had been declared. In May 1915 Mellersh joined the Inns of Court, where he had a month’s training before he was commissioned into the East Lancashire Regiment, being posted to the 3rd Special Reserve Battalion. But before he arrived there, Mellersh first went to a four week ‘Young Officer’s Course’ held at Oxford University.⁸ Such courses had been established at various universities to give newly-appointed officers a smattering of training, which covered drill, musketry, administration, military law and the like.⁹ Charles Lander, who attended a course in Cambridge in March 1915, described it as ‘the most intensive training of my whole army life’.¹⁰

Training courses also taught the social side of officership. Mellersh, newly arrived at Worcester College Oxford, had to wear his freshly purchased Sam Browne belt for the first time, a ‘complicated affair... I got it all wrong, I got idiotically tied up with it, like Charlie Chaplin with a deck chair’. Later, at his

Special Reserve battalion of the East Lancashires, Mellersh was disgruntled at having to do drill under the command of an NCO, but he also learned the rituals of a Mess night:

... outside played the regimental band. On the table, between shining and immaculate glass fingerbowls, rested a long row of the first and second battalion's silver centre-pieces, elaborate affairs, gifts of retiring colonels, showing anything from a hunting scene to a bayonet-infested and cannon-scarred battlefield. (As for the dinner), I was impressed – which, as a new subaltern, I was no doubt meant to be.¹¹

Similar short courses were held at the Army Staff College, Camberley. W P ('Billie') Nevill of 8th East Surreys was sent there in late 1914. He recorded long days packed with drill 'we've had an hour's right, left and about turning, under a staff sergeant so our feet are warm' – physical training, route marches, lectures on matters such as sanitation, military organisation, tactics and military topography, and training in musketry. At various stages the young officers were given responsibility for their fellow students.¹² Exercises in forcing a quart of training into a pint pot these courses might have been, but they had value. 'Most of us picked up a great deal of knowledge at Camberley', wrote an officer who was on the same course as Nevill, 'and I shudder to think where we would have been without the course'.¹³



Captain W P ('Billie') Nevill (Wiki).

On the other side of the world the Royal Military College of Australia hosted hastily arranged 'schools of instruction' for infantry and light horse officers in August 1914.¹⁴ From 1915 to 1917, Duntroon held a series of schools 'to train junior officers for the AIF, to "try out" officers of the Australian Military Forces who are applicants for AIF commissions'.¹⁵ The social background of Australian officers was not as different from that of the British army as one might have thought.¹⁶ Sydney Rowell, a Duntroon graduate who rose to be head of the Australian Army, gave the instructor's perspective. He was posted to the Officers' Training School at Duntroon in June 1916 after being invalided home from Gallipoli. 'The pressure was constant', he recorded, 'as class followed class with only a short break between'. Rowell, with some understatement, described his task as 'interesting but testing':

We had to decide as best we could whether these men would make platoon commanders... A wrong assessment might either produce an officer unfitted to command troops in battle or deny a worthwhile non-commissioned officer his chance of commissioned rank. One had to get a close knowledge of sixty men in a very short time... to learn each individual's background and all the little things that made him function... Some should never have been selected, while others failed to make the grade at the school. Those commissioned acquitted themselves in the field pretty well, and some were outstanding.¹⁷

Rowell was no mere theorist. As an officer of the 3rd Light Horse, serving dismounted on Gallipoli, Rowell had commanded men in the front line, and thus he knew the vital importance of having the right junior officers in place.¹⁸ It could literally mean the difference between life and death.

The degree and usefulness of training received by a new officer depended much on luck and individual circumstances. Some rankers from Britain and the dominions were simply given battlefield commissions. In November 1914 in Flanders, the Artists' Rifles was plundered for officers, with men being commissioned in the field and immediately posted to Regular units with officer's insignia on a private's uniform. The Artists' also ran crash courses for potential officers on the Western Front.¹⁹ Many middle and upper-class volunteers in the TF and Kitchener's Army also received commissions. Some junior officers had at least some experience, however brief, of active service in the ranks before being commissioned. Others, commissioned in the UK, and posted to New Army units, did not go overseas until the autumn of 1915 or even later. By contrast, Vernon Bartlett enlisted in a university and public schools battalion in August 1914, was commissioned, and arrived in France on 5 March 1915, where he joined the Regular 1st Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment. As Bartlett later commented, his qualifications for becoming an officer amounted to the fact that 'I was a "gentleman" and had reached the exalted rank of Lance-Corporal in the school Officers (sic) Training Corps'.²⁰



Vernon Bartlett in 1932 (Wiki).

Unsurprisingly, this almost anarchic process of selecting and training officers produced mixed results. Various formations and units in France set up schools to train newly arrived officers. 47th (London) Division was one.²¹ Some AIF veterans were unimpressed by the quality of reinforcement officers arriving from Australia.²² When the AIF was doubled in size in 1916, at least one battalion took the opportunity to offload officers of dubious value onto its duplicate unit.²³ One can imagine that it was not alone in doing this. During 1915 the system was rationalised, and in February 1916 the 'Officer Cadet Battalion' system was introduced, along with the stipulation that, with a few exceptions, potential officers had first to have seen service as a ranker (in practice, as an NCO).²⁴ Under the old system it was a complex process to get rid of 'duds' once commissioned. Cadets at OCB could be 'RTU'd' – Returned to Unit – if they did not make the grade.²⁵

Even after the introduction of the OCB (eventually there were 54 of them²⁶), this was not the only method by which men were commissioned and trained.²⁷ As late as September 1918 it was possible to receive a commission in the field. In October 1917 a 'Cadet Class' at Zeitoun in Egypt was running short commissioning courses, while also in 1917 New Zealand rankers could be commissioned after a six-week course at Sling camp on Salisbury Plain.²⁸ However, passing out of an OCB was by far the most common route to a commission, and the OCB system ensured that potential officers had a uniform experience and mostly rigorous, high-quality training. Allan Adair commented on the difference between the old, haphazard approach, and the new system. He went straight from Harrow to the Grenadier Guards in April 1916, 'one of the last to be commissioned on the strength of my school Officer Training Corps experience, or rather lack of it'. Others who joined the Guards a little later 'attended a four months (sic) course in the Officers' Cadet Battalion at Bushey where the work was strenuous and enjoyed by few'.²⁹

Writing in early 1918, Captain R P P Rowe succinctly summarised a major problem facing the army. On the Western Front 'for all practical purposes the platoon is the unit of battle, and its commander the most important man in the field'. But casualties amongst junior officers were 'disproportionately high'. Moreover, warfare had become more complex, making more demands of subalterns at a time when traditional sources of officers had dried up. The result was that 'while officers must be largely drawn from a less highly educated class, those officers must possess a greater knowledge than their predecessors, and the capacity to grasp quickly and thoroughly the tactical values of any local situation'. Rowe argued that the solution to the conundrum, the Officer Cadet Battalion system, was 'a remarkable achievement'.

The ranks of the 'civilian army' included 'vast numbers of young men who have already proved their value in every sphere of intelligent work', on and off the battlefield. 'Consequently, there is a large amount of material representative of brains, character and adaptability. From this wide field of choice, it has not been difficult to pick men fitted to lead, and they have been picked with judgement, and in large numbers'. With combat veteran officers and NCOs as instructors,

[t]he result is that the work of the officer cadet battalions, the mill which grinds out efforts in an unending flow, has been an unqualified success. The methods employed have been steadily improved, and the standard of efficiency produced has consistently risen... The British Army has never... been better officered.³⁰

Captain Rowe was not a disinterested witness. He was an insider, a member of MI7, a branch of the Directorate of Military Intelligence concerned with propaganda.³¹ His piece appeared in early 1918, when it was clear that the BEF soon faced a major German offensive, and it was obviously intended to reassure the public about the decisive battle to come. However, he was correct about the vital role played by the platoon commander, the British Army's success in remaking its officer corps, and the significance of the OCB system.

Men from the Dominions trained alongside British cadets at OCBs. They stood out by virtue of their uniforms – slouch hats for the Australians, lemon squeezers for the New Zealanders – and by little distinctive things such as attendance at the Anzac Day service held in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, on the third anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, which was attended by General Sir William Robertson.³² Otherwise, Dominion and British cadets went through the same process. To take a snapshot of New Zealand potential officers in July 1918, at No 4 OCB, located at Oxford, there were eight from the Auckland Regiment, a similar number from the Wellington Regiment and nine from the New Zealand Rifle Brigade. A further 31 Kiwi cadets were at No 6 OCB, also held at Oxford University, while at Cambridge, No 2 OCB included another twelve New Zealanders. If the inexperience of the students was the hallmark of early officer training courses, the same could not be said of No 4 OCB in mid-1918. All but one of the New Zealanders were at least acting NCOs, and their numbers included a Regimental Sergeant Major, some Company Sergeant Majors and Company Quartermaster Sergeants.³³

In bringing a wealth of combat experience to OCBs, this group of New Zealanders was representative of officer cadets as a whole. A group of cadets from No 10 OCB attended a screening of the Battle of the Somme film in September 1916 at a cinema in Glasgow. Most of them had been on active service; conceivably some took part in the events portrayed on the silver screen.³⁴ Such cadets could be highly experienced without being very old. While training at No 1 OCB at Membrand Hall near Plymouth, J F Bagshaw discovered that he had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (which ranked below only the Victoria Cross) as a lance corporal in the 15th Royal Warwicks (2nd Birmingham Pals) on the Western Front. Bagshaw was 19 years old. As he was awarded the DCM for handling his Lewis gun section 'at all times with the greatest initiative and resource', Bagshaw was prime officer material. He repaid the faith placed in him by being commissioned into the Devons and was awarded the Military Cross.³⁵

Undoubtedly some soldiers went off to officer training units just to escape from the front line, but the evidence suggests that the vast majority of cadets were diligent, hard-working and enthusiastic. They were known to complain about inefficient instructors and to heckle poor lecturers.³⁶ Cadets had a formidable range of subjects to cover, with an emphasis on 'leadership, initiative, self-confidence... drill and discipline... maps, the King's regulations and military law' and a range of tactical issues, from platoon organisation to patrols and co-operation with artillery.³⁷ Although the OCB course was longer than some earlier training programmes, it was still intense. One cadet at No 4 OCB in 1916 described a day which started with reveille at 06:15 and continued until 21:30.³⁸

One of the primary purposes of officer training was to move men from the mindset of a lower middle-class or working-class NCO to that of a member of the officer class, to lift, as one contemporary commentator wrote, thinking 'to a different plane of vision'.³⁹ An NCO instructor at No 4 OCB at Oxford put it more bluntly:

'You've got to learn to walk out as if the bloody street belonged to you'.⁴⁰ Training at ancient seats of learning and country houses undoubtedly helped this process along. Harold Wedd, from Goulburn, New South Wales, trained at an OCB in Cambridge:

Before you enter its courts that old-world-studious atmosphere envelopes you, and one gradually begins to realise that he is in the heart of one of the greatest seats of learning in the world; but you are not allowed to forget the war, as the khaki is on every hand... What a change for me, Trinity College, Cambridge, from the hellish and bloody Somme!⁴¹

Cyril Holland, from Maryborough, Victoria, wrote in similar terms from Balliol College, Oxford:

It seems hard to realise that we are in the historic college. How many famous men, I wonder, sat in this room? The living conditions are splendid, just such as the students used to enjoy. How strange it seemed to sit down to dinner – after being accustomed for so long to dining amid the grime of the trenches – to snowy cloths and glistening silver, and waiters.⁴²

The military presence of students in university towns helped to recreate some of the atmosphere of pre-war Oxbridge. It was not unusual for units to hold concerts, but the venue of 6th OCB's event in June 1918 was definitely out of the ordinary: the Oxford Union Debating Hall hosted an evening of music, songs and comic monologues.⁴³

Key to the process of manufacturing officers and gentlemen from lower-class rankers was to teach them to behave in the approved manner. Thus, before dinner, a formal affair, cadets' dress was inspected by an officer of the Directing Staff (DS); DS would then sit with cadets at dinner, keeping an eye on their behaviour and manners. Cadets seem to have internalised this socialisation.⁴⁴

Cadets who failed the course risked letting down more than themselves. For local lads to make good in this way was a matter of pride for families, schools and wider communities. A J Stubbs passed out of his OCB at Pirbright fifth out of 128 cadets and was commissioned into the Royal West Kents. His parents were among many who proudly wrote to the local newspaper to advertise their son's achievements.⁴⁵ A newspaper in Bathurst, New South Wales, headed an article about a local lad attending No 4 OCB with the words 'IN OXFORD: BATHURST BOY AT COLLEGE'. This was based on a letter home from ex-corporal Alex Duprex of the AIF, now resident in New College. Readers of the paper could vicariously enjoy Duprex's Oxford lifestyle, which few, if any, could hope to emulate:

From the dome [of the Bodleian Library] a fine panoramic view of Oxford and the surrounding country can be obtained... For breakfast there was porridge, eggs and bacon, or sheep's kidneys, tea or cocoa. For lunch there was ham, celery, beef etc, and by paying twopence they could have a glass of beer or any other drink.⁴⁶

With such weight of expectation and pride on their shoulders, and the unpleasant prospect of failing the course and being sent back, as a ranker, to the trenches, as well as the opportunity to better themselves by holding the King's commission, it is scarcely surprising that many cadets whole-heartedly embraced the attitudes and behaviour expected of an officer. In military terms this was highly significant. Besides snobbery and the desire to

keep up standards, the army's insistence on gentlemanly behaviour was founded on the idea that effective officers needed to possess public school values.⁴⁷ By early 1916 the demand for genuine ex-public school boys to officer the huge armies of civilians had greatly outstripped the supply, a situation that was soon exacerbated by the heavy losses of officers on the Somme. Officer training units, especially OCBs, endeavoured to turn pigs' ears into silk purses, with a great deal of success. It was a pragmatic and largely successful response to a critical shortage.

At the core of training was leadership: not the NCOs' variety, of which most potential officers had personal knowledge, but that of 'an officer and a gentleman', the key to which was developing 'character'. This was a significant change from pre-war, when Gentleman Cadets at Sandhurst and Woolwich were not taught leadership because they were assumed to already know all about it. The Canadian Training School, which was situated at Bexhill in Sussex, provided, in effect, an OCB run for and by Canadians.⁴⁸ There, cadets were taught that an:

Officer [was] capable, a leader, [a] jealous guardian of his men, their interests and their lives. An example in upholding the honour of the King, Country, Corps and Regiment... A gentleman, whose word is his bond, whose conduct will stand the glare of daylight, placing honour above all else... Who is our judge? The men... How can we earn their respect? By remembering the term [officer and a gentleman] itself.⁴⁹

Nothing in this refers to social background or education. Rather, the message is that such virtues can be learned – or, more accurately, that the CTS can bring them out in cadets who, by virtue of being on the course, have already been assessed as possessing the potential to become officers, complete with gentlemanly attributes. What makes this teaching particularly significant is that the CTS was an expression of Canadian nationalism, albeit firmly in an imperial context. Under its dynamic and charismatic CO, Lieutenant-Colonel A C Critchley, the aim was to train 'Canadian officers so they might be fit... to uphold the glory and honour of Canada and the Canadian Corps'.⁵⁰



Lieutenant-Colonel A C Critchley (IWM).

Training Regular officers in wartime

Regular officers continued to be recruited and trained during the First World War. The Royal Military College of Australia was explicit that crammer courses for Temporary officers and the standard RMC course served very different purposes:

The object of the College is not to turn out reinforcement officers for AIF... but to equip graduates to take their place amongst the officers of the permanent forces, to guide and instruct the Australian Military Forces. That the value of war experience counterbalances deficiencies of earlier military education has been disproved by history.⁵¹

The RMC authorities believed that the future of Australia's land forces demanded officers with thorough, professional training. So keen were the Australian authorities to protect their investment that Regular officers who returned to Australia from overseas were not allowed to go back on active service, a rule which has been described as 'rigid and nonsensical'. John Northcott, who was to rise to high rank in the Second World War, served at Gallipoli for less than a day before he was badly wounded. Repatriated to Australia, Northcott stayed there for the rest of the war.⁵²

Canada took a similar, although less extreme, view. While some adjustments were made to the course at the Royal Military College, located at Kingston, Ontario, with early commissioning and the like, the RMC did not become an officer producing factory for the CEF. Indeed, the RMC's emphasis on academic education, rather than military training, grew more pronounced.⁵³ The British authorities eventually took a similar approach. At Sandhurst, the senior term was commissioned in August 1914, and the 18-month Regular commissioning course was reduced to just three months. The one-month courses for temporary officers ended in April 1916, and the Regular course was increased to ten months in 1917, and 12 in February 1918; in May 1918, it was announced that the old 18-month course would be restored in 1919.⁵⁴ On hearing this, one commentator indignantly drew attention to the fact that the War Office considered that less than a year's training, (in most cases, it was five months) was suitable for the officers of the army actually fighting the enemy.⁵⁵ But the production of officers from both Sandhurst (5,083) and Woolwich (1,928) was a drop in the manpower ocean, amounting to only 3 per cent of all the 'combatant commissions' during the First World War.⁵⁶ They were an investment in the future, looking to the time when the large civilian army was replaced by a small professional force.

Supplying officers for the Indian Army

The CO of the 2nd Leicesters, which had served alongside the 39th Garhwal Rifles during the First World War, wrote with sympathy and admiration that not many people,

Realise what a burden of responsibility fell on the shoulders of the twelve British officers of an Indian Battalion... a British Officer in an Indian Battalion was nearly always entirely on his own, with no one of his own race and kind to look to for the help and backing which means such a lot in a tight place. It must have been a terrible strain on that handful of white officers in an Indian unit.⁵⁷

This statement was rooted in a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a matter of policy, and in accordance with martial race theory, Indian officers were prevented from having the same responsibilities and status as British officers. The words 'his own race and kind' indicate why this policy was adopted. The result was to limit the

pool from which officers could be drawn, with damaging effects on the efficiency of Indian units in the First World War.

Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (VCOs) were a group of hierarchical leaders inserted between Indian Other Ranks and British officers. They lacked the authority of British officers – a VCO was subordinate, at least technically, to the most junior British 'one-pipper'.⁵⁸ In reality it was the VCOs, not the British officers, who had their finger on the pulse of the unit or subunit, and so they were in a very influential position. 'The VCOs and the Subedar-Major really ran the battalion', an ECO [Emergency Commissioned Officer – the Second World War equivalent of a temporary officer] remarked, and the same was true of 1914-18.⁵⁹ VCOs were also invaluable in overcoming the language barrier. As Bill Slim, an interwar Gurkha officer, observed, 'It is difficult to know what a man thinks unless you speak his own language'.⁶⁰ The challenge was particularly stiff for wartime officers, who had less time and leisure than their pre-1914 counterparts to acquire a degree of fluency in Indian languages.⁶¹ Tarak Barkawi comments that 'Indian soldiers were practised at pretending they understood what their British officers said to them'.⁶² In these circumstances, the VCO was more important than ever.

An official report of 1912 summarised the prevailing wisdom that battlefield leadership was to be 'mainly entrusted to British Officers'.⁶³ It demonstrated that the Great Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 continued to cast a long shadow. To train Indians to bear the same responsibilities as British officers 'in a mercenary army can hardly fail to be dangerous. It is safer... to give Indian officers too little rather than too much responsibility and higher training'. To admit that Indians could do the job of an officer just as effectively as a white man would be politically explosive, undermining one of the foundation stones of the British Raj – as the Second World War was to show.⁶⁴



Men from the 39th Garhwal Rifles, France, during the Great War (Wiki).



Cap badge of the 59th Scinde Rifles (Wiki).

Consigning Indian officers to the role of second-class military citizens might have seemed sound politics in terms of maintaining the security and future of Britain's Indian Empire, but it actively hindered the effectiveness of the Indian Army on the Western Front. Casualties among officers, both

British and Indian, were heavy. The 59th Scinde Rifles spent fifteen months in France in 1914-15. During this time 12 British officers were killed, and 15 wounded. Losses among the Indian officers of the Battalion amounted to five fatalities and 15 wounded.⁶⁵ Some actions took a particularly heavy toll of officers. On 2 November 1914, during the First Battle of Ypres, the 2/2nd Gurkhas had a desperate defensive fight against superior German forces. At the end of that day seven British officers had been killed, and another wounded, out of nine present with the battalion; while of the 13 'Goorkha' (sic) officers, seven became casualties (four fatalities).⁶⁶

British officers with the right linguistic skills, and who understood (or at least were thought to understand) Indian soldiers, were not easily replaced. So, British officers were drafted in from various places as an expedient. The 20th Deccan Horse acquired some yeomanry officers. They picked up a smattering of Hindustani, and so could 'make themselves understood and did their utmost to identify themselves with the regiment'.⁶⁷ Most Indian troops, save some cavalry units, left the Western Front towards the end of 1915. A process of reorganisation, expansion and reform followed, and the Indian Army proved to be highly effective on campaign and in battle in the Middle East in 1917-18.⁶⁸ This suggests that regimental officers, Indian and British, were actually pretty good at their jobs, despite the worries of some old India hands. One was Captain George Paterson, a Regular officer of the 34th Sikh Pioneers, who had a jaundiced view of temporary officers he encountered in 1918: 'no wonder the Natives think they are fit to have commissions when they see some of the specimens sent to be officers over them'. Paterson's language is revealing, not only of his disdain for some wartime British officers of the Indian Army, but of his fear that their lack of social polish undermined the racial hierarchy of the Indian Army.⁶⁹

Norman Collins, a middle-class ex-engineering apprentice from Hartlepool, was not the normal type of man who became an Indian Army officer. A wartime volunteer who in 1916 was commissioned from the ranks into 8th Seaforth Highlanders, in 1918 he heard that Regular commissions were available in the Indian Army. Collins applied, was successful and was commissioned into 4th Prince Albert Victor's Rajputs. On Christmas Day 1918 he embarked on a troopship heading east where he attended daily lectures given by Indian Army officers on 'the customs of various Indian castes and races', and briefings on the Indian Army. Collins started to learn Urdu, although as he admitted, 'most of the communications work carried out with the Indian officer [VCO] as a go-between... the British officer and the [Indian] ranks'. Collins saw active service on the North-West frontier of India. Norman Collins was probably typical of wartime Indian Army officers: a man looking for 'something entirely different', adventurous, and a combat veteran, who formed a good working relationship with his VCOs. Such men confounded the fears of the likes of Captain Paterson.⁷⁰

Conclusion

At the Battle of the Somme, the armies of the British Empire suffered unprecedentedly high casualties, which bore heavily on infantry officers. This exacerbated a trend which had been evident from the beginning of the war, whereby officers from traditional, public school backgrounds had been supplemented by men from much humbler social backgrounds. Many were combat veterans who had served in the ranks. The British and Dominion armies reacted pragmatically to the challenge, developing officer training schemes designed to teach leadership and social skills to Officer

Cadets, in line with contemporary thinking about the way an officer should think and behave. These officer factories must be accounted a success: their products proved on the whole to be highly effective on the battlefield. Simultaneously, the British and Dominion armies trained an elite of Regular officers who were to be the seed corn of the post-war professional armies.

In the case of India, white officers from outside the traditional social pool were commissioned into Indian regiments. However, the next step, of commissioning Indian officers and giving them equality with Europeans, proved one too far. Indianisation was carried out on a limited basis after the war, in the face of reactionary opposition (as J H P Verney, ADC to the Governor of Bombay 1919-21 remembered, 'none of us liked it at all. We saw it as the beginning of the end of the British Raj').⁷¹ In the Second World War, the officer corps of the Indian Army was extensively Indianised. This was of great benefit in military terms but did indeed contribute to undermining the Raj by debunking the idea that Indians could not be effective officers.⁷²

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