

## ***Sir Douglas Haig's final Despatch Part 1***

### ***The final Despatch Part 1 of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander in Chief of the British Armies in France and Flanders. details of the final days of battle, the armistice and the advance into Germany.***

*Haig commanded the British Armies in France and Flanders from the dark days of late 1915 to ultimate victory in 1918 and occupation of the bridgeheads over the Rhine in 1919.*

*General Head Quarters, British Armies in France, 21st March, 1919*

*Sir, I have the honour to submit the following final Despatch in which is described the advance of the British Forces into Germany and the occupation of the bridgehead East of the Rhine at Cologne. I include in this Despatch a brief review of the chief features of military interest which stand out among the operations of the British Armies on the Western front during the time I have been in command of them. I take this last opportunity also to refer by name to some few of the many able and gallant officers who have assisted me in my task, and to thank them personally.*

*PART I. THE ADVANCE INTO GERMANY. (11th Nov., 1918-31st Dec., 1918.) Arrangements for the Advance.*

*At 11.00 on the 11th November, 1918, at which hour and date the armistice granted to Germany by the Allies took effect, the British front extended over a distance of about 60 miles from the neighbourhood of Montbliart, East of Avesnes, to just North of Grammont. This front from South to North was held by troops of the Fourth, Third, First, Fifth and Second British Armies, all of whom were in hot pursuit of the enemy at the moment when the armistice came into operation.*

*The provisions of the armistice had settled in general terms the course to be followed subsequently by the belligerent groups of Armies. To co-ordinate the action of the Allied Armies, instructions of a more detailed character were issued by Marshal Foch to all concerned, and these formed the basis of the orders given by me during the period covered by this Despatch.*

*Troops were at once directed not to advance East of the line reached by them at the time when hostilities ceased, and certain parties of Germans taken prisoner after that hour were returned to the enemy. Outposts were established along this line both for the sake of military security and in order to prevent all possibility of fraternisation. Behind these outposts the remainder of our forces were grouped and concentrated. It was arranged that the forward movement of the different Allied Armies should be carried out by certain definite stages, through separate zones of action. The zone allotted to the British Armies extended from the front then held by us in an easterly direction as far as the German frontier, whence it continued in a North-easterly direction to the Cologne Bridgehead. The boundaries of this zone and the stages of the advance are shown on the attached map.\**

*In order to permit the enemy to withdraw his troops from the area immediately in front of us, our positions were maintained unchanged until the morning of the 17th November. Thereafter, to avoid all possibility of collision between the opposing forces, the movement of troops towards the frontier was regulated so as to preserve a safety zone of 10 kilometres in depth between our advanced detachments and the enemy's rearguards. The general advance into Germany was directed to begin on the 1st December. On the 12th December, French, American and British forces would cross the Rhine at Mayence [Mainz], Coblenz [Koblenz] and Cologne [Koeln], and commence the occupation of bridgeheads having a radius of 30 kilometres from the crossings at those towns. By that date, the enemy was bound by the terms of the armistice to have withdrawn his military forces a distance of 10 kilometres from the right bank of the Rhine and from the perimeter of the Rhine bridgeheads.*

*Re-adjustment of the British Forces.*

*As we progressed eastwards, the front held by the British Armies, already short, would automatically be decreased.*

*On the other hand, the maintenance of supply across and beyond the battle areas presented difficulties which would grow rapidly as our communications lengthened. These two considerations made it both feasible and necessary to effect a redistribution of troops, so that the extent of the forces advancing into Germany should be no more than was absolutely necessary to meet military requirements.*

*I decided that the opening stages of our advance should be carried out by the Second and Fourth Armies, under command of the two senior Army Commanders General Plumer and General Rawlinson, and that each Army should consist of four Corps each of four divisions. To ensure rapidity of movement and to facilitate supply, the artillery and auxiliary arms and services accompanying these Armies were cut down to a minimum, and all surplus units then attached to them were transferred to the First, Third and Fifth Armies. Arrangements were made for reorganising these last mentioned Armies and for withdrawing them to areas farther West.*

#### *The Advance to the German Frontier.*

*At 05.00 on the morning of the 17th November the 2nd Cavalry Division covering the front of the Fourth Army, and the 1st and 3rd Cavalry Divisions covering the front of the Second Army crossed the line reached on the 11th November and commenced the march to the German Frontier. The leading infantry divisions moved forward on the following day. The advance was carried out under active service conditions, cavalry leading and all military precautions being taken. Among all arms, the general bearing, smartness and march discipline of the troops were of a high order, reflecting credit on the Army and the nation. All traces of the desperate fighting and forced marches of the previous months had been removed, and men, horses, guns and vehicles appeared as though turned out for parade. Throughout the advance, despite long distances covered under difficult conditions, indifferent billets and the absence of the usual opportunities for bathing or renewing clothes, the same general standard of excellence was maintained in a remarkable degree.*

*The first troops to complete the portion of our advance which lay through Belgium were patrols of the 2nd Cavalry Division, who arrived on the German frontier in the neighbourhood of Beho on the night of the 28/29th November. Next day the frontier was reached by the 1st Cavalry Division along the whole front of our advance. The infantry, who had been marching steadily in rear of the cavalry, closed up behind them in readiness for the advance into Germany. During this part of our march the various stages above referred to were strictly observed, except that in front of our general advance detachments of cavalry had been sent forward to keep order in Charleroi and Namur in response to requests received from the local authorities. Everywhere our troops were received with the utmost enthusiasm by the population of the liberated districts. In every town and village streets were festooned with flags and spanned by triumphal arches bearing messages of welcome. Men, women and children thronged to meet our troops and exchange greetings in French and English. Nor was their gratitude confined to demonstrations such as these. Wherever our men were billeted during their advance everything possible was done for their comfort. In many cases refreshment was pressed upon them without payment and on all sides despite the shortage of food from which the occupied districts of Belgium had long suffered; the generosity of the civil population found means to supplement the rations of our troops.*

*During this period large numbers of released prisoners of war, French and British, came through our lines and were passed back to collecting stations. The enemy seems to have liberated the majority of the Allied prisoners west of the Rhine without making any provision for their feeding and conveyance. The result was that much unnecessary suffering was caused to these unfortunate individuals, while a not inconsiderable additional burden was placed upon our own transport and supplies.*

#### *Supply Difficulties.*

*Throughout the whole of the advance, and especially in the stage which followed the crossing of the German frontier, very great, but unavoidable, difficulties were encountered in connection with supply. At the time of the armistice railheads were on the general line Le Cateau, Valenciennes, Lille, Courtrai, and for many miles in front of them bridges had been broken and track torn up or destroyed by mines. Even after the cessation of hostilities delay action mines, which the enemy had laid in the course of his retreat without preserving exact record of their*

location, went up from time to time, causing serious interruption to traffic. The clearing of these mines was a work of considerable risk, and the fact that comparatively so few mines exploded after trains had begun to run is entirely due to the great courage and skill with which officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the Tunnelling Companies performed the difficult and dangerous task of detecting them and rendering them harmless. The work of reconstruction, therefore, was most arduous, continuing day and night. The speed with which it was completed reflects great credit upon all ranks of the British Railway Companies and the Canadian Railway Troops Corps, as well as on the Railway Construction Engineers who controlled their work. Credit is due also to the personnel of the Railway Operating Division, who were called upon to keep traffic open with scarcely any of the ordinary traffic facilities.

Though roads had been pushed farther ahead, the same general conditions applied to them, while the extraordinary amount of traffic which it was necessary to direct along them made maintenance very difficult. Up to the night of the 25/26th November, on which date the railway was carried across the gap between Valenciennes and Mons, the Corps of the Second Army were still based on the railheads west of the River Scheldt, and supplies had to be brought forward by double and treble echelons of lorries. At the close of this period divisions were being fed by means of narrow one-way roads at distances of from 80 to 100 miles from their railheads. This imposed a great strain on the personnel of the Motor Transport Units and Mobile Repair Shops, who were compelled to work long hours under very trying and, anxious conditions. I am glad to express my deep appreciation of the devoted service rendered by all ranks.

Until roads and railways could be got through to the areas which the enemy had not damaged the progress of our troops was necessarily limited by our ability to supply them. Only by the greatest effort on the part of the departments concerned with reconstruction and supply, and at the expense of considerable hardship to the leading troops of the Fourth and Second Armies, and in particular the cavalry, could the programme of our advance be maintained. Troops were denied frequently and for long periods comforts which they had been accustomed to obtain even under battle conditions. Nothing beyond bare necessities could be got forward to them. Even these were at times short in some units, and on more than one occasion the only available supplies of food were the current day's issues carried on the man.

Many other causes conspired to render the problem of supply one of serious difficulty throughout our advance. At the date of the armistice the amount of available rolling stock had been no more than sufficient to meet the requirements of our Armies. The advance to the Rhine added over 200 miles to the distances to be covered, and greatly reduced the amount of rolling stock available by largely increasing the time required for each train to complete its journey.

The necessity for supplying the civil population of the territories through which the Allied Armies were advancing and the resumption of French civilian traffic put an additional strain upon our pooled resources. This strain was not met by rolling stock taken over from the enemy, which came in very slowly, and was much of it unfit for immediate service. In this connection it is not out of place to refer to the work done by the British Army in providing food and medical attendance for the civil population of the liberated districts through which we passed, a population which in France alone amounted to nearly 800,000 persons. This duty, though very willingly accepted by us, none the less made no small demands upon both rail and road transport. In France it entailed the supply and distribution of more than 5,000,000 rations during a period exceeding six weeks, until the French were able to complete their arrangements for relieving us of the task. The service we were able to render in the name of humanity has been most generously acknowledged by the French Authorities.

The fulfilment of our programme under such conditions would have been impossible without the exercise of great patience and wholehearted co-operation on the part of the troops. Nor was it less dependent upon the untiring energy and efficiency displayed by commanders and staffs in the methodical arrangement of the details of our advance and the concentration of our resources. I desire to place on record my appreciation of the careful forethought of the Staff and of the excellent conduct of all ranks under very trying conditions. It will readily be understood from the foregoing that had our advance been conducted against active opposition, even from a beaten and demoralised enemy, our progress must have been greatly delayed. The difficulties of supply would have

*been enormously increased in many ways, among which would have been the necessity of bringing forward large quantities of ammunition. Bridges, railways and roads would have been destroyed in front of us or blown up after we had passed, by delay action mines. Immense loss would have been caused to property of all descriptions and incalculable suffering inflicted upon the inhabitants of the invaded districts of Belgium, France and Luxembourg.*

#### *Further Re-adjustment of Troops.*

*Towards the close of the advance to the German frontier, a further re-adjustment was effected in the disposition of my troops. The sector allotted to the British Forces in the general scheme for the occupation of the Rhine Provinces was too narrow to admit of the employment of more than a single Army Command. I therefore directed that the German territory to be occupied by us should be held by General Plumer's Second Army, which for this purpose should be composed as follows:- The II Corps (9th, 29th and New Zealand Divisions); the VI Corps (Guards, 2nd and 3rd Divisions); the IX Corps (1st, 6th and 62nd Divisions); the Canadian Corps (1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions), and the 1st Cavalry Division. The various changes and transfers necessary to give effect to this arrangement involved the taking over by the Second Army of the whole of the British front of advance, and the gradual withdrawal of the troops of the Fourth Army to the area west of the frontier and about Namur.*

#### *The Advance into Germany.*

*On the morning of the 1st December, a date for ever memorable as witnessing the consummation of the hopes and efforts of 4 years of heroic fighting, the 1st Cavalry Division crossed the frontier between Belgium and Germany. On the same day the 2nd and 1st Canadian Divisions of the Canadian Corps and the 29th and 9th Divisions of the II Corps resumed their march towards the frontier. On this date, however, the supply situation became critical, trains due on the 30th November failing to arrive until the night of the 1st/2nd December. In consequence for two days the Army remained practically stationary, and it was not until the 4th December that progress was resumed. In this stage of our march the line of our advance traversed the northern portion of the Ardennes, and, particularly on the right in the Canadian Corps area, the country through which our troops were passing was of a most difficult character. Practicable roads were few, villages were far apart, and facilities for billeting very limited. Our way lay across a country of great hills rising to over 2,000 feet, covered by wide stretches of forest, and cut by deep and narrow valleys, along the steep sides of which the roads wound in countless sudden curves. Marches were long, while the surface of the roads which had already borne the traffic of the retreating German Armies suffered anew under the passage of our columns. Even under conditions approximating to those of peace, severe demands were made upon the spirit and endurance of the troops.*

#### *British Troops in Cologne.*

*On the 6th December, in response to a request previously made by the German authorities, and in order that the town might not be left without troops after the withdrawal of the enemy's military forces, the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division was sent forward, to Cologne. A detachment of armoured cars of the 17th (A.C.) Battalion, Tank Corps, escorted the General Officer Commanding 1st Cavalry Division into Cologne, and thereafter picketed the bridges, being the first British troops to cross the Rhine. A great concourse of people thronged the streets of the city to watch the arrival of our troops. Next day, the 28th Infantry Brigade of the 9th Division arrived at Cologne by rail, and on the 8th December the 1st Cavalry Division reached the Rhine on the whole British front, securing the crossings of the river. While during the following days our infantry continued their movement, on the 11th December the Military Governor, Lieut.-General Sir Charles Fergusson, arrived by train at Cologne. Accompanied by an escort of the 9th Lancers, he proceeded through crowded streets to the Hotel Monopol, where he took up the duties of his office. As the Military Governor reached the entrance to the hotel, the Union Jack was hoisted above the building and floated out for the first time over the roof-tops of the city.*

#### *The Occupation of the Cologne Bridgehead.*

*On the 12th December, the day fixed for that event, by the general scheme of advance, the 1st Cavalry Division crossed the Rhine and commenced the occupation of the Cologne Bridgehead, the perimeter of which they reached*

*on the following day. On the 13th December the 2nd and 1st Canadian Divisions and the 29th and 9th Divisions of the Canadian and II Corps passed across the Rhine at Cologne and Bonn respectively in four columns, each of the strength of a division. During the following three days they pushed forward to the bridgehead perimeter, gradually relieving the cavalry, and by the evening of the 16th December had completed the occupation of the bridgehead.*

*Before Christmas Day the troops of the Second Army had reached their final areas in the occupied territories of Germany. The military organisation of the bridgehead, so as to secure the crossing of the Rhine and render possible the rapid deployment of troops for action east of it, had been commenced, and was proceeded with steadily during the remainder of the year. In the course of this work, on the 28th December the perimeter of the bridgehead was slightly amended, so as to accord with the boundaries of the German Communal Districts and thus simplify the work of administration.*

#### *Conduct of the Troops.*

*In concluding this part of my Despatch, I desire to acknowledge with gratitude and pride the exemplary conduct of the troops, both throughout the different stages of their arduous advance and since its successful completion. Among all services and in all Armies, both those which took part in the advance and those which remained behind, the period following the armistice has indeed been one of no little difficulty. For those that went forward, the real hardships of the long marches, poor billets, and indifferent food constituted a strange contrast to ideas which had been formed of victory. For all, the sudden relaxation of the enduring tension of battle, and the natural desire of the great majority for an early return to civil life, could not but lead at times to a certain impatience with delays, and with the continuance, under conditions of apparent peace, of restrictions and routine duties gladly borne while the future of their country was at stake. Despite these disturbing factors, and the novelty of finding themselves masters in a conquered country, instances of misbehaviour have been remarkably few, and chiefly of a minor character. The inborn courtesy and good temper of the British soldier have guided them in their attitude towards the inhabitants of the Occupied districts. The spreading of a better understanding of the causes of the temporary shortage of supplies, of the difficulties of demobilisation and of the continued necessity for keeping a strong Army in the field, has generally dispelled any incipient feelings of discontent. The discipline, self-respect and strong sense of responsibility which carried our men through to victory, have in general been fully maintained amid changed conditions and new surroundings*