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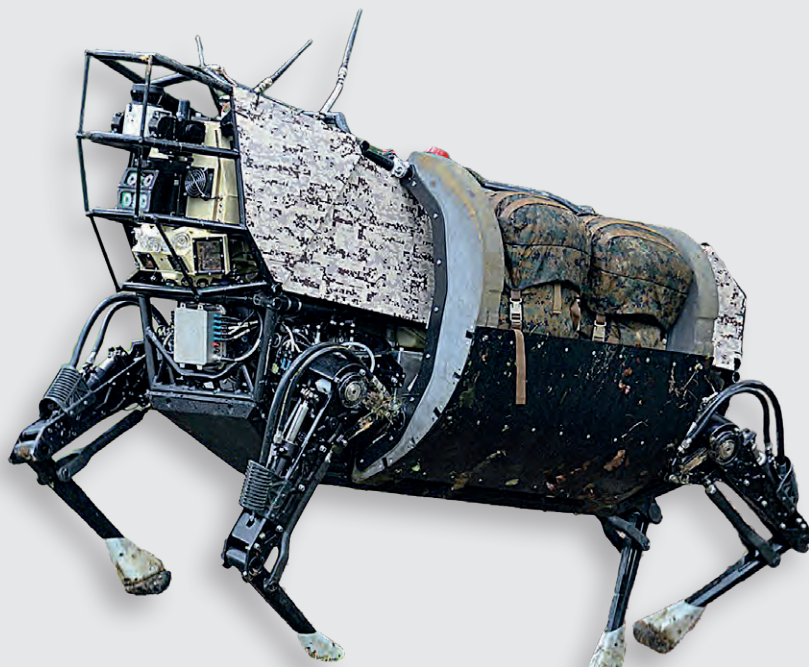
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PIERO CIMBOLLI SPAGNESI



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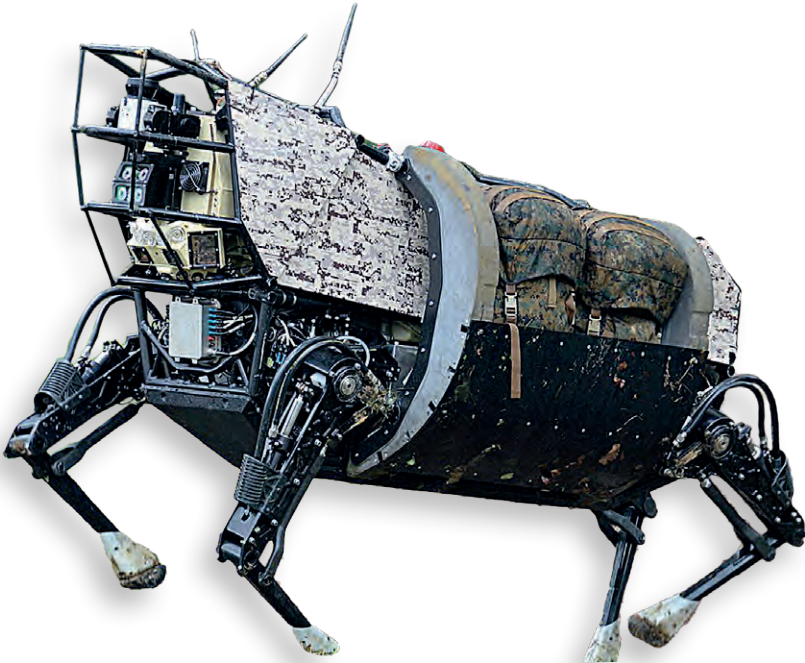
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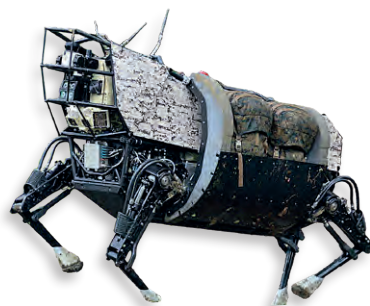
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Legged Squad Support System robot prototype, 2021, DARPA image.
Tactical Technology Office, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency,
U.S. Department of Defense, 2012 (wikipedia commons)

The Battle of the Lys

The Uncovered History

By JESSE PYLES

ABSTRACT. The prevailing narrative of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps, at the 9 April 1918 Battle of the Lys, was first told by British Field Marshal, Douglas Haig. He asserted that of 20,000 Portuguese—14,000 to 15,000 of which were combat troops holding a seven-mile-long front, in a fog that limited vision to a few yards, and while under the most concentrated bombardment of the war—13,000 or more, left their trenches and dugouts, discarded their weapons, and ran, before German infantry attacked. In their entirety, British combat records, along with other contemporaneously written primary sources, contradict Haig's account. The British official history, published by J.E. Edmonds in 1937—at best, loosely based upon British combat records—enhances and embellishes Haig's version.

KEYWORDS. BATTLE OF THE LYS, BATALHA DO LYS, LA LYS, DOUGLAS HAIG, HENRY HORNE, R.C.B. HAKING, OFFICIAL HISTORY, CORPO EXPEDICIONÁRIO PORTUGUÊS,

The prevailing Anglophone narrative of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps, *o Corpo Expedicionário Português* (CEP), at the 9 April 1918 Battle of the Lys, was first told by British Field Marshal, Douglas Haig, several days before British and Portuguese combat units that served on the battlefield wrote after-action reports.¹ Haig asserted that of 20,000 Portuguese—14,000 to 15,000 of which were combat troops holding a seven-mile-long front, in a fog that limited vision to a few yards, and while under the most concentrated bombardment of the war—13,000 or more, as if in unison, left their trenches and dugouts, discarded their weapons, and ran, before German infantry attacked.² Haig's

1 Two of Haig's senior subordinates, First Army commander, General Henry Horne, and XI Corps commander, Lieutenant-General R.C.B. Haking, helped him establish this narrative.

2 The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), C. P. 223, 4:15 p.m. 9th April, 1918, WO 256/29; TNA, CAB 23/6/0010, War Cabinet, 388, April 10, 1918, 11:30 a.m.; Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, Documents and Sound Section, the Private Papers of Captain R C G Dartford MC, 17 April 1918. [hereafter *Dartford Papers*] My sincerest thanks to the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum for allowing access to this collection. I made every reasonable effort to secure copyright authorization for the Dartford collection but re-

account gained credence quickly, but he had lied.

Many authors—contemporaneous and modern, British and Portuguese—have written military, political, and social essays on the CEP, based upon Haig's version. Many, for example, have elaborated on his claim: "the Portuguese troops with their Portuguese officers are useless for this class of fighting," and cited other sources that align loosely with his narrative.³ Such writings tend to obscure the fact that Haig explicitly alleged the Portuguese ran, creating a gap in the British First Army's front. He asserted that German infantry entered this gap and attacked the British divisions on both sides of it in the flanks, thus explaining First Army's tactical defeat.

In their entirety, British combat records, along with other contemporaneous primary sources, contradict Haig's account. These records reveal that the 2nd Portuguese Division held its front as long or longer than the British divisions held their fronts, and that it was destroyed on the battlefield, facing the enemy. Portuguese combat records and other primary sources, align closely with these British records. Haig's narrative exemplifies tainted "versions of history that... help to create and perpetuate prejudices and suspicions."⁴

Methodology and Sources

This article offers a combat history of the first several hours of the Battle of the Lys, based on contemporaneous evidence from archival and other primary sources. Specifically, it builds upon British combat records to reconstruct the pivotal events of the battle, and then offers an account of Portuguese resistance. Its objective is to establish the factual events of the battle, without reference to subsequent Anglophone and Lusophone interpretations or embellishments of Haig's version. Historiographies of the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance; British Imperial History, from which martial race theory sprang; war and society perspectives; war remembrance; and specific to Portugal, pre- and post-Salazarian sociopolitical and sociocultural readings, explain how and why accounts of the CEP conflict

ceived no reply.

3 TNA, Douglas Haig, typescript diary, 9 April 1918, WO 256/29.

4 Robert Tombs, "Two Great Peoples," in *Britain and France in Two World Wars, Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.

with archival evidence. All these topics fall outside the scope of this combat-record-centered study.

There are three distinct English-language accounts of the 2nd Portuguese Division at the Battle of the Lys. Douglas Haig, along with subordinates, General Henry Horne, commanding officer of First Army, and Lieutenant-General R.C.B. Haking, commanding officer of XI Corps, told the first. Their version conveys ample conjecture, misdirection, and myth, but has no basis in British combat records, written by men who served on the battlefield.

The second account was written by British liaison officers who had served with the Portuguese on the battlefield. These officers concluded that the 2nd Portuguese Division held its front until approximately 0900 hours, or later, before being overrun. Moreover, their accounts align closely with British combat records, which reveal that their own fronts had been overrun by the same times. These accounts also align with Portuguese primary sources. I have not seen an English-language narrative of the battle based upon these sources. This article is.

The third account—published in 1937 by the British official historian, J.E. Edmonds—endorses and exaggerates Haig’s version.⁵ Edmonds appears to have based his narrative on accounts authored by XI Corps Commander, Haking, who could “write a very specious report,” and other speculative commentary, most of which is refuted by British combat records.⁶ This account is, at best, loosely based upon British combat records. Indeed, Edmonds used British combat records selectively, lifting from them the most speculative and derogatory remarks about the Portuguese, to enhance his misleading, “dense and impenetrable” tale.⁷ Thus, Edmonds created a blatantly fictitious narrative that cemented Haig’s lie as official history.⁸ Unfortunately, Anglophone authors have uncritically cited

5 J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1918*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, Inc., 1995), 156-192.

6 Simon Robbins, *British Generalship during the Great War: The Military Career of Sir Henry Horne (1861-1929)* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 28-29.

7 Timothy Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front, and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2009), 238-239; See also, Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser’s Battle* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 10-11, 332-334.

8 Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “Myth and Memory: Sir Douglas Haig and the Imposition of Allied Unified Command in March 1918,” *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 3 (2004): 810; Travers, *The Killing Ground*, 239; David French, ““Official but not History?”: Sir James Ed-

Haig's and Edmonds's fallacious narratives.⁹

An Overview

On 4 April 1917, elements of the CEP entered the frontline trenches in the Lys River basin, approximately fifteen miles west-southwest of Lille. By November 1917, the 1st and 2nd Portuguese Divisions held 16,000 yards of Horne's First Army front, about nine percent of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) total front at the time.¹⁰ The officers and men of the CEP withstood frequent high explosive and gas bombardments, repelled countless patrols, defended against many trench raids, and raided the German lines. The Corps sustained and inflicted heavy casualties, while yielding few prisoners, fulfilling the duties traditionally required of soldiers.¹¹

In spring 1918, the German army launched the Kaiser's Battle (*die Kaiserschlacht*), its largest offensive on the Western Front since 1914. On 21 March 1918, Operation *Michael* fell against the Third and Fifth British Armies. At 0445 hours, German gunners began a five-hour-long bombardment, the heaviest in the history of warfare to that day. Assault troops and regular infantry then attacked, protected by a creeping barrage and cloaked in fog. They approached the British lines while the defenders were under cover, and once the creeping barrage lifted, rapidly closed the remaining distance to the trenches—typically fifty yards or less—firing machineguns and hurling hand grenades at stunned defenders who had little time to react. The Third Army fell back in disarray; Fifth Army was routed, and by 25 March, “had ceased to exist.”¹² For more than two weeks thereafter, three German armies made large gains toward the vital British railhead at Amiens,

monds and the Official History of the Great War,” *The RUSI Journal* 131, no. 1 (1986): 59.

9 J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 455.

10 TNA, General Henry Horne to GHQ, First Army, No. GS 942, 21 December 1917, WO 158/190.

11 Nuno Severiano Teixeira, “A Fome e a Saudade: Os Prisioneiros Portugueses na Grande Guerra,” *Penélope*, no. 8 (1992): 102-103.

12 Brian Bond and Simon Robbins, eds., *Staff Officer: The Diaries of Walter Guinness (First Lord Moyne) 1914-1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), 197; Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 303.

France, pressing the BEF to near strategic defeat.¹³

Then, on 9 April 1918, with the BEF “reeling” from *Michael*, General der Infanterie Ferdinand von Quast began Operation *Georgette*, deploying his Sixth Army against two corps of General Sir Henry Horne’s First Army.¹⁴ Fourteen divisions attacked three divisions. From south to north, Sixth Army attacked Lieutenant-General R.C.B. Haking’s (XI Corps) 55th West Lancashire and 2nd Portuguese Divisions, and Major-General John du Cane’s (XV Corps) 40th Division.¹⁵ *Georgette* opened at 0415 hours with the second



Generals Tamagnini, Haking and Gomes da Costa in 1918. From *História de Portugal*, Vol VIII, edição de Quidnovi. (wikipedia commons)

heaviest, but most concentrated, bombardment of the war at that time. It lasted for four hours, and quickly severed almost all communications. Beginning at 0815 hours, German assault troops began infiltrating First Army’s front, and at 0845, twelve or thirteen divisions, including nine assault divisions, attacked the 2nd and 40th Divisions through a dense fog.¹⁶ British and Portuguese defenders could on-

13 Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916–1918* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 9. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “A French Victory, 1918,” in *1918 Year of Victory, The End of the Great War and the Shaping of History*, ed. Ashley Ekins (Auckland: Exisle Publishing, 2010), 91.

14 John F. Williams, *Modernity, the Media, and the Military: The Creation of National Mythologies on the Western Front 1914–1918* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 174.

15 General Hugh Sandham Jeudwine commanded the 55th, General Gomes da Costa commanded the 2nd, and General John Ponsonby commanded the 40th.

16 TNA, General Gomes da Costa, WO 158/75; David T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 184–185;

ly fight small unit actions before being overrun. By midday, Sixth Army had captured the Forward Zone along its axis of advance, and by nightfall had penetrated about five miles into First Army's front.

The Fog and Bombardment

Heavy fog draped the Lys plain until after midday, by which time the battle had been decided in Sixth Army's favor. Many combat records mention the fog, noting that visibility did not exceed a few yards until after noon. Thus, claims of good vision of the Portuguese, or their positions, beyond a few yards are implausible.

Sixth Army brought 1,686 guns to bear, 47 percent of which were classed as heavy and super-heavy, 29 belonging to the latter category. Against a ten-mile front, German gunners "fired a total of 1.4 million shells."¹⁷ At *Michael*, against a fifty-mile front, 3.2 million shells were fired from 6,608 guns, but only 39 percent were heavy or super-heavy, with 65 belonging to the latter category.¹⁸ At *Georgette*, German forces had about one quarter of the guns than at *Michael*—but against a front one-fifth its length—and nearly half were of heavy or greater caliber. In sum, shells fell twice as densely than at *Michael*, and in heavier caliber.¹⁹

The 55th West Lancashire Division

The 55th Division guarded the north bank of the La Bassée Canal, which was not a German objective for *Georgette*. The rested, full-strength division held about 4,000 yards of high ground. The 55th was spared the intensity of the bombardment that the 2nd Portuguese and 40th Divisions endured.²⁰ The West Lancashire men fared even better in terms of defending against the infantry attack, opposing pri-

Williams, *Modernity, the Media, and the Military*, 174, 182.

17 Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, 184-186.

18 Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, 52-53; Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, 184-186.

19 David T. Zabecki, *Steel Wind: Colonel Georg Bruchmüller and the Birth of Modern Artillery* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 79.

20 TNA, WO 95/2905. The war diaries and after-action reports written by the 55th Division and its subordinate units describe the shelling as mostly light—much of it gas—and only as "heavy" for brief durations on limited areas. The 164th Brigade in particular, holding the division's right front, away from the attack, experienced only a "slight shelling." TNA, XI Corps War Diary, WO 95/883.

marily the 4th Ersatz Division, possibly supported by elements of the 43rd Reserve Division, both of which were static divisions, or *Stellungsdivisionen*.²¹ German commanders used such divisions, typically comprised of middle-aged men, in defensive roles. The 4th Ersatz hemmed in the 55th Division's left and pushed it against the canal. The attackers took heavy losses but gave the 'West Lancs' all they could handle. This attack was a holding action, to protect Sixth Army's left flank, as it advanced northwest, toward Hazebrouck.

A few 55th Division combat records note communiqués regarding the Portuguese from the 2nd Division and XI Corps. No report alleges attacks against the division's left flank before the main attack began. In fact, most reports scarcely mention the Portuguese until approximately 1000 hours, about an hour after the attack overran both divisions' fronts. In their entirety, these reports establish that the division had no direct knowledge of how the battle unfolded on the 2nd Division's front, which is noteworthy given that both divisions belonged to Haking's XI Corps, within the same communication system.

The 40th Division – Background, Battle, and Controversies

The 40th Division held 6,000 to 7,000 yards of flat frontage on the 2nd Division's left. The division had been mauled during *Michael*, was relieved at the end of March, and redeployed to the Lys sector. It received replacements in route but remained below authorized strength upon entering the line.

Three divisions—the 10th Ersatz and 32nd, followed by the 11th—attacked the 40th Division's right front brigade, the 119th, which deployed two battalions, the 18th Welsh and 13th East Surrey, to the outpost and main lines.²² And, the attack against the 40th and 2nd Divisions' fronts were executed concurrently, with assault troop infiltrations beginning at approximately 0820 hours, and the main attack at 0845. The 40th Division's left front, held by the 121st Brigade, was not attacked frontally, but from the flank, after the 119th Brigade's left battalion was overrun.²³

21 TNA, WO 95/883. This document collection contains a map titled, "Reproduction of Captured Map Illustrating the Attack of the 4th Ersatz Div., on the 9th April, 1918," which reveals that the 4th Ersatz attacked most or all of the 55th Division's front. Moreover, close reading of the 55th Division's battle records reveals that the 4th Ersatz is the only German division named. Williams, *Modernity, the Media, and the Military*, 187.

22 TNA, WO 153/69.

23 TNA, 121st Brigade, War Diary, WO 95/2614.

When reporting negatively on the Portuguese, a few 40th Division officers claimed visibility at distances of at least 100 yards—in some cases, before dawn—but cited the fog as the reason why their own units were overrun. No official report names the British soldiers who possessed such keen vision of their Portuguese allies at extended distances but such poor vision of their German enemies nearby. Instead, variations of the phrase, “the Portuguese (positions or soldiers) *were seen to be* (abandoned or running)” appear frequently. Similarly, when reporting on the Portuguese, 40th Division officers neglected the ongoing bombardment, which lasted until 0815, and creeping barrage, which began immediately thereafter. Both would have obscured the vision of anyone who emerged from cover.

The 119th Brigade

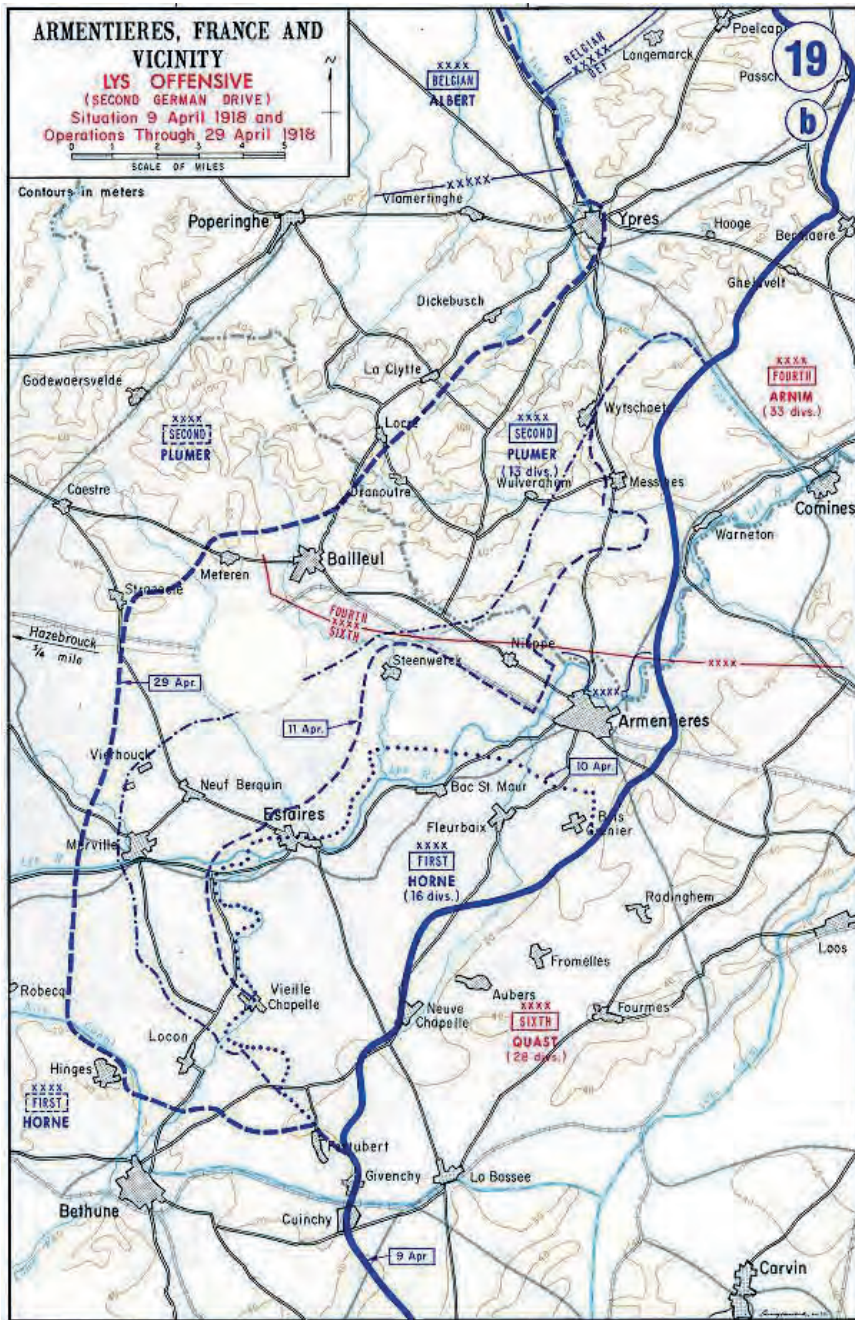
The 18th Battalion Welsh Regiment held the 119th Brigade’s right front. The battalion’s handwritten after-action report is dated 16 April 1918, and signed by its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel W. E. Brown. It reads: “at 5:55 am a message was received from O[fficer] C[ommanding] right flank [company] that the enemy were coming over on the Portuguese front in large numbers.” Could 18th Battalion soldiers have had clear vision, over extended distances, before dawn, in a fog, during the bombardment? Brown continued:

at 6:00 am the enemy broke through between our left post and the first post of the battalion on our left in large numbers. Spread along the front line towards our right and advanced on our support line. The units in the front line [the main line] were apparently cut off, as the garrison did not fall back on to the support line.

Thus, Brown blamed the Portuguese battalion on his right and the British battalion on his left for his battalion’s destruction. This passage also discloses that Brown did not have firsthand knowledge of the attack against his battalion’s front, as the men holding it did not return.

Brown added that sometime before 0700 hours: “the support line garrison put up a good defense, 40 dead Germans being counted in front of N° 12 LG Post and 30 in front of a post on the right.”²⁴ The support line was located approximately

24 TNA, 18th Battalion Welsh Regiment, Narrative of Events 9th April to 14th April 1918, Appendix A, WO 95/2607.



Map showing German Lys Offensive April 1918. United States Military Academy (public domain, wikimedia commons)

1,000 yards behind the outpost line, several hundred yards behind the main line, and several hundred yards forward of Brown's position. He would not have seen this action. No other 40th Division combat record includes a body count. Moreover, Brown reported this skirmish occurred before 0700, which was before dawn, while shells were falling in heavy concentration across the battlefield, and more than an hour before assault troops began infiltrating his battalion's front. Brown did not provide casualty figures for his battalion, noting only that, two officers, including himself, and twenty other ranks "survived."²⁵ The 40th Division's war diary includes casualty figures for the 18th Welsh Battalion: 1 officer, 18 other ranks killed; 12 officers, 187 other ranks wounded; 15 officers, 306 other ranks missing.²⁶

No other 40th Division combat record contends that the infantry attack began at or close to 0600 hours, including the 13th East Surrey Battalion, whose front Brown claimed had been breached by that time. Moreover, neither the 119th Brigade, nor the 40th Division, ordered reserves forward to support the 18th Battalion until after 0830 hours, which coincides with the timing of the main attack. Brown's is the only 40th Division account written by a field rank officer who commanded men holding the front lines, but he had no firsthand knowledge of the incidents he reported. Indeed, no other 40th Division report corroborates Brown's account. Instead, all other reports contradict it.

The 13th Battalion East Surrey Regiment held the 18th Battalion's left. The battalion's war diary states: "the battalion immediately 'stood to' but the enemy broke through the Portuguese on our right flank and the battalion was surrounded."²⁷ The 18th Welsh held the 13th Battalion's right, not the Portuguese.²⁸ The war diary lists 18 officers and 437 other ranks missing, against 1 officer, 7 other ranks killed, and 1 officer, 80 other ranks wounded.²⁹ The 40th Division's war diary aligns closely with these figures, showing 18 officers and 428 other ranks missing, 1 officer, 7 other ranks killed, and no officers, 56 other ranks wounded.³⁰

The 119th Brigade's war diary contradicts Brown's contentions and discloses

25 Ibid.

26 TNA, 40th Division War Diary, Appendix 9, 23 April 1918, WO 95/2593.

27 TNA, War Diary, 13th Battalion East Surrey Regiment, WO 95/2606.

28 The 13th East Surrey Battalion's right was about a mile from the Portuguese left.

29 TNA, War Diary, 13th Battalion East Surrey Regiment, WO 95/2606.

30 TNA, 40th Division War Diary, WO 95/2593. The bombardment inflicted most of the casualties.

the sequence of events along the 18th and 13th Battalions' fronts:

About 8:30...the enemy taking advantage of the fog attacked on the left of our right battalion – 18th Welsh – after a hard struggle a part of the enemy managed to get a footing in Post 'C', in about the centre of the right battalion front. This was about 8:50 am....The battalion on the left – 13th East Surrey – reported their line intact and no infantry actions...up to 9:20 am.³¹

This first mention of enemy contact in the brigade's war diary establishes that the 18th Battalion was attacked frontally at approximately 0830 hours.

The 21st Middlesex Battalion was the 119th Brigade's reserve that morning, and its war diary confirms the brigade's chronology: "At about 9.30 am a message was received that the enemy had penetrated our front system of trenches. At about 10.15 am...2 companies of the Battalion were ordered up to reinforce Machine Gun Line. At the same hour it was found that the enemy had broken through the Portuguese Front."³² This entry establishes that the 40th Division knew little about the attack on the Portuguese front before 0900 hours, after the main line along both division's fronts had been overrun. The 40th Division's war diary provided casualty figures for this battalion: 6 officers, 25 other ranks killed; 12 officers, 107 other ranks wounded; 10 officers, 233 other ranks missing.³³

Minor details regarding the 119th Brigade's battle remain obscure, but the crucial events are clear enough. No attack developed against the 40th or 2nd Divisions' fronts until about 0830 hours, when strong attacks went in against the 18th Battalion, north of its junction with the Portuguese. Assault troops forced an opening and turned north and south to flank the 13th East Surrey Battalion and the 8th Portuguese Battalion, respectively. In sum, the attack overran the 13th and 18th Battalions before either could mount noteworthy resistance.

The 120th Brigade – The Quick Destruction of the 40th Division's Reserve

The 14th Highland Light Infantry Battalion (H.L.I.) was subordinate to the 120th Brigade, the 40th Division's reserve that morning. The battalion received orders to counterattack at about 0900 hours. A 1006 hours entry in the battalion's war diary reads: "Note: - From this time onwards nothing further has been heard

31 TNA, War Diary, 119th Brigade, 9 April 1918, WO 95/2605.

32 TNA, War Diary, 21st Battalion, 9 April 1918, WO 95/2606.

33 TNA, 40th Division War Diary, Appendix 9, 23 April 1918, WO 95/2593.

of the three [companies] who went forward to occupy the front line.”³⁴

The 120th Brigade’s after-action report confirms that shortly after its battalions advanced: “the movements of the forward companies of the 10/11th and 14th H.L.I. became very obscure,” and, “by 10.40 a.m....no information had been received from the forward companies.” By the evening of 11 April, the 10/11th H.L.I. had suffered 1 officer and four men killed, 5 officers and 58 men wounded, and 8 officers and 341 men missing. The 14th H.L.I. lost 23 men killed, 3 officers, and 128 men wounded, and 11 officers and 317 men missing. By 1100 hours on 9 April, the brigade’s rifle strength “only numbered about 400.”

The 120th Brigade’s report attempts to explain its destruction by blaming the Portuguese:

The greatest difficulty was experienced in distinguishing in the mist between the Portuguese withdrawing and the enemy advancing, and after parties of Portuguese had, on two or three occasions, been mistaken for the enemy, men began to withhold fire, and there appears little doubt that the enemy in several cases dribbled small parties with machine guns round the right flank of the companies by mingling them with the Portuguese as they withdrew.³⁵

This, however, is the conjecture of staff officers who were not with these battalions when they advanced. Battalion and brigade headquarters did not receive communications from these companies once they moved forward, and they did not return to British lines. Furthermore, there is no evidence that any element of the reserve brigade could see Portuguese positions through the fog and the creeping barrage, much less that it contacted them. Given the timing of the attack and the brigade’s numbers in missing, it can be concluded that these battalions were caught up in the attack shortly after they advanced.

The 40th Division’s Account

The 40th Division’s war diary—also written by officers who were not in the trenches when the bombardment began and who had no contact with the men who were—evidently attempts to synthesize the reports of its subordinate units. In so doing, it lists times that do not appear in any of its subordinate units’ battle re-

34 TNA, War Diary, 14th Battalion Highland Light Infantry, 9 April 1918, WO 95/2612.

35 TNA, 120th Infantry Brigade, Report on Operations from 9:4:18 to 12:4:18, WO 95/2610.

cords. The report reads as if the officers who wrote it split the difference between the time that Brown alleged the attack began, before 0600, and the 0830, or later, times that all other units noted. The report also cites the fog as the main reason why the division was unable to resist the attack. It does, however, claim clear vision of the Portuguese. At 0730: "The [men manning the] M.G's near CHARRED POST saw the enemy moving rapidly over the Portuguese area."³⁶ Elements of the 18th Welsh Battalion's support company were manning Charred Post, which was located a few hundred yards north of the Portuguese sector and a few hundred yards west of the frontline. Thus, this remark offers another example of negative commentary on the Portuguese claiming clear sight of them, or their positions, through the fog, several hundred yards away, and ignores that the bombardment lasted until 0815 hours. The remark also raises questions as to how British soldiers at Charred Post conveyed such information to higher headquarters with almost all communications down. Lastly, the remark alleges fleeing Portuguese from the same positions that Brown claimed they had completely vacated more than an hour and a half earlier. In fact, the 40th Division's after-action report refutes Brown's claim that the Portuguese fled before 0600 hours: "About 6 a.m. a Portuguese officer belonging to the left company in the line reported to our right battalion that his company had not been attacked."³⁷ The division's war diary, and that of XV Corps, also note this linkup, and put the time at 0630 hours.³⁸

The 2nd Portuguese Division

On 6 April, the 1st Portuguese Division was withdrawn from the line, most of its battalions having spent ten to twelve consecutive months at the front. The 2nd Division, whose battalions had spent an average of six months at the front, assumed responsibility for the entire Portuguese sector, some 13,000 yards.³⁹ The 2nd Division, comprised of the 4th, 5th, and 6th infantry brigades, fielded approximately 9,000 rifles, more than 4,000 below authorized strength.⁴⁰ General da

36 TNA, 40th Division War Diary, WO 95/2593.

37 TNA, 40th Division, Report on the Battle of Armentières from 4.15 a.m. to 12 Noon, 9th April, 1918, So Far As It Affected the 40th Division Right and Reserve Brigades, WO 95/922.

38 TNA, XV Corps, War Diary, WO 95/922; TNA 40th Division War Diary, 9 April 1918, WO 95/2593.

39 TNA, General Gomes da Costa, WO 158/75.

40 Ibid. Portuguese brigades were authorized four battalions of approximately 1,100 men.

Costa wrote that the 2nd, “was a division entirely in forward posts.”⁴¹

Most 2nd Division accounts convey common experiences. The length of the Division’s front—more than twice the length of the average First Army division’s front, and on the flattest ground, and the destructive bombardment—allowed German infantry freedom of movement. Portuguese soldiers, like their British counterparts, usually had a few seconds to react from the time the creeping barrage lifted off their positions until German troops attacked from the front or flank. Most actions were brief, some fierce, but invariably resulted in the position being overrun.

The Battle for the Right and Center

Colonel Augusto Martins’s 5th Brigade held the Portuguese right, with the 10th and 17th Battalions forward, on the right and left, respectively.⁴² The 10th Battalion posted its 1st and 3rd companies to the outpost line. At approximately 0830 hours, a column of assault troops attacked the outpost line and: “penetrated on the right flank, [1st Company] separating English from Portuguese and enveloping 3rd company, 10th Battalion.”⁴³ After “a short...resistance,” both companies were “encircled.” Once the outpost line was penetrated, on both sides of the divisional junction: “numerous soldiers in the front line, English and Portuguese intermingled, began to retreat...harassed by the enemy.” The attack overran the outpost line by 0900 hours in 10th Battalion’s sector: “and waves of...[German] infantry began to assault the [main] line,” as German gunners adjusted the creeping barrage, to bar reinforcements from moving up.⁴⁴

On the left, the 3rd Company, 17th Battalion, resisted and was overwhelmed. Once the attack breached the main line, the 17th Battalion’s command post “tried in vain to resist with the available machineguns,” and was overcome.⁴⁵ The widely dispersed 4th Battalion, in support, was overtaken, less than 150 troops managed to retreat. The 13th Battalion, in reserve, remained in La Couture and mount-

41 General Gomes da Costa, *O Corpo de Exército Português na Grande Guerra: a Batalha do Lys* (Porto: Renascença Portuguesa, 1920), 35-36.

42 Major Vasco de Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão Portuguesa na Batalha do Lys: 9 de Abril de 1918* (Lisbon: Lusitânia, 1924), 209.

43 *Ibid.*, 220.

44 *Ibid.*, 221.

45 *Ibid.*, 222.



Portuguese troops loading a Stokes Mortar on the Western front, late in WWI, from *The Great War*, Vol. 11 p. 451, ed. by H W Wilson, 1918. Public domain, wikipedia commons

ed determined resistance.⁴⁶

Captain Mena, a 2nd Division staff officer, advanced to 5th Brigade Headquarters during the bombardment to gather information. When he proposed to return, Lieutenant Colonel Lopes, the brigade's second in command, asked him to "stay until the bombardment diminished." When Mena insisted, Lopes asked him to: "tell our General that we are here, as he ordered."⁴⁷ There they remained, and were taken prisoner.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 226.

Colonel Alves Pedrosa commanded the 6th Brigade in the center. The 1st and 2nd Battalions deployed two companies to the outpost line and two in the main line. At about 0830 hours, Second Lieutenant Mamede, 3rd Company, 1st Battalion, in the outpost line: “found himself enveloped by numerous enemy forces which surging from the rear, covered by the fog...infiltrated the line capturing him along with the rest of the garrison.” Shortly after Mamede’s capture, his company commander was taken prisoner in the main line by troops advancing from the rear, through the fog.⁴⁸ As the attackers advanced, Major Barros Rodrigues, 1st Battalion commander, knowing his battalion was destroyed: “gathered his officers and after having heard their opinions, resolved to retreat.”⁴⁹

Second Battalion headquarters met a worse fate. “Around 1100 or 1130 the enemy [creeping] barrage, which advanced relentlessly, bore down upon...the house, in which the command post was installed, burying everything,” men included. Behind the command post, a strong point with four light machineguns came under direct fire and was destroyed. The battalion commander and two junior officers from headquarters retreated.⁵⁰ Six days after the attack, the 2nd Battalion mustered approximately 70 men.⁵¹

The 6th Brigade had the 11th Battalion in support, commanded by Major Manuel Dias, who posted his 1st and 2nd Companies in and near the main line. These companies met their fates with the 1st and 2nd Battalions. Only a few stragglers retreated. Dias ordered 2nd Lieutenant Carryngton, 3rd Company, to hold the St. Vaast and Euston posts.⁵² Carryngton detached one platoon to Euston post and prepared to resist with two platoons at St. Vaast. His position came under direct fire from the creeping barrage: “destroying shelters, killing and wounding many soldiers, and burying the greater part of [heavy weapons] and munitions, including three light machineguns.” The company could not offer noteworthy resistance once the attackers reached its position, around 1030 hours. Carryngton was taken prisoner, along with Second Lieutenant Oliveira of 21st Battalion, and most of the sur-

48 Arquivo Histórico Militar (AHM), Lisbon: 1st Division, 35th Section, Box 142, Report of the 3rd Company, 1st Battalion.

49 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 242.

50 Ibid., 246.

51 TNA, General Gomes da Costa; WO 158/75; Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 243.

52 Some Portuguese officers had English or German surnames because of the longstanding interactions of the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance.

living men.⁵³ The bombardment and creeping barrage wreaked havoc on the 11th Battalion's headquarters positions as well. Posts and strong points were obliterated. In all, 320 11th Battalion men returned to allied lines.⁵⁴

The brigade commander ordered the 5th Battalion to reinforce the front. First Company came under heavy artillery fire in route, suffering 40 casualties, including its commanding officer. The 2nd Company moved forward with about 30 men, as a dugout holding about a platoon and a half of the company's complement took a direct hit from a heavy caliber shell, killing, wounding, or trapping all occupants.⁵⁵

At 6th Brigade Headquarters: "without any available reserves, it was ... impracticable to think about resisting." Captain Rosckrow, a British liaison officer, urged Colonel Pedrosa to abandon the position and retire: "given that resistance was impossible and the sacrifice futile." Pedrosa declared: "he would not retreat without orders, that now being old he did not mind dying, those who wished to and could, might leave. He would stay until the end." Only Rosckrow, one administrative officer, and the brigade veterinarian retired, the rest remained at their post and were taken prisoner.⁵⁶

The 4th Brigade's Battle for the Left Flank

Accounts of the 4th Brigade's battle are comprehensive. No source disputes that the men of 4th Brigade fought best and sustained the highest number of casualties. The brigade was comprised entirely of men from the Province of Minho, a rugged geographical region in northwest Portugal. Some sources suggest that the brigade had a higher *esprit de corps* than the others because of this regional homogeneity. The "Brigada do Minho" had spent the longest time at the front of the three brigades in the line—about seven months—and its men, Minhotos, had become experienced in trench warfare tactics. Given the replacement-laden brigades of the 40th Division, the 4th Brigade fielded the most battle-tested battalions on the left side of the allied line that morning. These data bear directly upon fac-

53 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 245.

54 *Ibid.*, 247.

55 AHM, 1st Division, 35th Section, Box 144, No. 180, Godinho.

56 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 256-257.

tual events of the battle, as 4th Brigade held the 2nd Division's left, adjacent to the 18th Welsh Battalion. Moreover, the chronology specified in the brigade's reports parallels that of the 119th and 120th Brigades.

Lieutenant Colonel Eugénio Carlos Mardel Ferreira was the acting commander of the brigade. The 20th Battalion held the brigade's right and deployed three companies to the outpost line: the 2nd on the right, the 4th in the center, and the 1st on the left. The first shells fired against the 2nd Company's command post struck their mark. A heavy shell hit the communications shelter, apparently killing all occupants and another destroyed an adjacent dugout, inflicting many casualties. By 0515 hours, the 1st Company's command post dugouts: "were nothing more than heaps of upturned earth."⁵⁷ Captain Montenegro Carneiro, the 20th Battalion commander, ordered his forward companies to withdraw to the main line if they could. A portion of the 2nd Company, and most of the 4th Company retired to that position by 0530 hours. The 1st Company, along with elements of the 2nd, made its stand in the outpost line. When the attacks came in, these men resisted with Lewis gun and rifle fire. Once the outpost line was penetrated, some retreated to the main line. Second Lieutenant Rangel, 3rd Platoon, 2nd Company, withdrew to the main line with twelve men under the covering fire of the unit's only operational machinegun, served by two unnamed soldiers.⁵⁸ These intrepid men continued firing until they were killed.⁵⁹

Some 20th Battalion men holding the main line fired in the direction of the attack, though they could not see their targets. At 0900 hours, German gunners shifted their fire west of the main line, and almost immediately assault troops, firing light machineguns, turned the battalion's left flank. Most of the men were captured, along with elements of 4th Company, 29th Battalion, which had advanced under the bombardment to support the 20th. Second Lieutenant José Pereira, 4th Company commander, "found death" here, as he led the resistance.⁶⁰ Third platoon, 2nd Company, held its ground firing at the Germans they could see or hear moving toward them. Around 0900 hours the creeping barrage cut the platoon to ribbons; it lost 26 of 38 men.⁶¹ Captain Carneiro, knowing that his battalion had

57 Ibid., 281.

58 This is another example of a Portuguese officer with an English or German surname.

59 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 282, 286.

60 Ibid., 287.

61 AHM, 1st Division, 35th Section, Box 144, No. 180, Godinho.



Portuguese troops wearing gas masks entering a gas trench as part of training during World War I. Foto John Warwick Brooke (1886-1929), National Library of Scotland, public domain, wikimedia commons

been destroyed, remained at his post. His staff “unanimously” chose to share his fate. He dispatched a final message to 4th Brigade HQ, which he closed with: “I await orders.” Carneiro was taken prisoner at approximately 0930 hours.⁶²

The 8th Battalion held the 4th Brigade’s left, on the 40th Division’s right. It also deployed three companies in the front line. The 1st on the right, the 4th in the center, and the 3rd on the left.⁶³ Most of the 1st Company, and part of the 4th, retired to the main line. Third Company, along with elements of the 4th, made its stand in the front line, and until 0830 hours, this portion of the outpost line was not attacked.⁶⁴

Shortly after 0900 hours, a 2nd Company platoon, holding the extreme left of the main line, met a German column that had penetrated the 119th Brigade’s sector and turned south to flank the 8th Battalion. This platoon engaged the attackers “in a fierce fight” until it was forced to withdraw due to a lack of ammunition and un-

62 Carvalho, *A 2.^a Divisão*, 290.

63 *Ibid.*, 291.

64 *Ibid.*, 293.

der the weight of the German advance.⁶⁵ This action occurred in the position that Brown claimed the Portuguese had abandoned more than three hours earlier. At least 53 8th Battalion soldiers were killed in action, and many more were wounded, in the battle for the left flank, the highest recorded number of fatal casualties of any British or Portuguese battalion on the battlefield that morning.⁶⁶

Most units belonging to the 29th Battalion, in support, and the 3rd Battalion, in reserve, advanced to support the two forward battalions and were caught in the bombardment or creeping barrage and destroyed.⁶⁷ First Company, 29th Battalion, advanced once the bombardment ended, was caught in the open by the creeping barrage, and lost many men including its commander.⁶⁸ Most of the troops who were able to reach their assigned positions, engaged the attackers and became casualties or prisoners. By 0930 hours, the 4th Brigade—minus the 3rd and 4th Companies of the 3rd Battalion—had been destroyed.⁶⁹ Some of these men occupied a strongpoint known as “Red House” under the command of Major Xavier da Costa, commanding officer of the 29th Battalion, where they fought tenaciously until being overrun sometime after 1030 hours. Those who could retreated; da Costa, wounded two or three times in the fighting, was taken prisoner. His second in command, A. Silva Matos, was killed in action.⁷⁰ Lieutenant Colonel Ferreira was severely wounded and knocked unconscious when a large shell struck the building he occupied. When he regained consciousness, German medics were tending to him.⁷¹

During the battle, 2nd Division Headquarters received several time stamped messages from the 119th Brigade. These records confirm that the 18th Battalion had been overrun by 0850 hours, which exposed the 8th Battalion’s flank. Nevertheless, the 8th held its front until approximately 0915 hours.⁷²

65 Ibid., 295.

66 Eugénio Mardel, *A “Brigada do Minho” na Flandres o 9 de abril [de 1918]; Subsídios para a História da 4.a Brigada do C.E.P.* (Lisbon: Serviços Gráficos do Exército, 1923), 111.

67 Captain Dartford reported seeing a reserve brigade unit, “in good order,” which had advanced from a position in the rear, prepared to engage the enemy. TNA, Major G.C. de Glover, 12 April 1918, WO 95/5488.

68 AHM, 1st Division, 35th Section, Box 144, No. 180, Godinho.

69 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 297-304.

70 Ibid., 305-311.

71 Ibid., 320.

72 AHM, 1st Division, 35th Section, Box 144, No. 112; Mardel, *Brigada do Minho*, 152.



Portuguese officers at Bayonet training, World War I. National Library of Scotland, public domain, wikimedia commons

To Hold or Retreat

So far as can be determined, all six brigade commanders of the 40th and 55th Divisions, along with most of their battalion commanders, retreated. Conversely, the three Portuguese brigade commanders in the Forward Zone, along with most of their battalion commanders held.⁷³ They became prisoners; several were wounded.⁷⁴

Was it coincidence that so many Portuguese officers decided to hold? The evidence indicates otherwise. On 6 and 7 April—after assuming tactical command of the 2nd Division—Lieutenant-General Haking met with 2nd Division commander, General Gomes da Costa, and his brigade commanders, and, “impressed upon all of them that they had to stand and fight on one line, what they called the “B”

⁷³ TNA, General da Costa, WO 158/75.

⁷⁴ General Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu e Silva in Isabel Pestana Marques, *Das Trincheiras com Saudade: A Vida Quotidiana dos Militares Portugueses na Primeira Guerra Mundial* (Lisbon: A Esfera dos Livros, 2008), 376-377.

[main] line.”⁷⁵ Portuguese sources record these meetings, and note that Haking’s order was “the division has to die in the “B” line.”⁷⁶ Their decisions to hold suggest that Portuguese officers took the order seriously, choosing to retain their honor by refusing to leave the battlefield, even after they knew resistance was pointless. Consider, for example, the stance of artillery officer, 2nd Lieutenant Carlos Olavo—after his men had fired all his battery’s ammunition—sometime after 1100 hours, he gathered and told them: “We will die here, but I will not retire without an order. I do not know what is happening around us and my duty is to hold my post until the end.” Olavo’s men replied, “We will stay with our commanding officer.”⁷⁷ Captain Montenegro Carneiro, 20th Battalion commander, knowing his battalion was destroyed, also remained at his headquarters.⁷⁸ Recall also the stance of 6th Brigade commander, Colonel Alves Pedrosa, who: “would not retreat without orders.”⁷⁹ The actions of these men—which represent the junior, middle, and senior officer ranks who served forward of division headquarters and had time to retreat—typify the 2nd Division’s officer corps overall.

The bombardment—which buried many men—and that First Army did not hold the battlefield at day’s end, have made Portuguese casualty figures difficult to establish.⁸⁰ Estimates of killed in action range from 300 to nearly 1,000, and more than 300 died in captivity.⁸¹ German forces also took between 6,800 and 7,700 prisoners.⁸² The disparity in fatalities and prisoners suggests that higher estimates of killed in action may be accurate. The numbers of wounded are equally problematic, but simple deductions point to between 2,000 and 2,500, possibly 3,000.⁸³ Total casualties thus range between 8,500 and 9,500, nearly half the divi-

75 TNA, Haking, WO 158/75.

76 Luís Manuel Alves de Fraga, *Do Intervencionismo ao Sidonismo: Os Dois Segmentos da Política de Guerra na 1.a República: 1916-1918* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2010), 396.

77 Carlos Olavo, *Jornal d’um “Prisioneiro de Guerra” na Alemanha, (1918)* (Lisbon: Guimarães & Ca., 1919), 17.

78 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 290.

79 *Ibid.*, 256-257.

80 Middlebrook, *Kaiser’s Battle*, 311-322.

81 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão*, 410.

82 Luís Manuel Alves de Fraga, *Guerra & Marginalidade: O Comportamento das Tropas Portuguesas em França, 1917-1918* (Lisbon: Prefácio, 2003), 121; Teixeira, “A Fome e a Saudade,” 103.

83 Carvalho, *A 2.ª Divisão Portuguesa*, 410.



CEP prisoners of war after the Battle of the Lys. Scherl Bilderdienst, Berlin Weltkrieg 1918. Die englischen Hilfsvölker. Gefangene Portugiesen in einem Lager hinter der Front [im Westen]. 4493-18 Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-S30568 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

sion's strength. The 4th, 5th and 6th Infantry Brigades alone suffered more than 5,700 casualties of the 9,000 troops that began the battle. In sum, three-fourths of the troops who held the outpost, main, and support lines—the Forward Zone—when the bombardment began, were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner on the battlefield. General Gomes da Costa concluded his battle report with these words: “The 2nd Division could not win, but it fought on the whole with gallantry and left nearly half its strength on the field of battle. It should not be thought ill of.”⁸⁴

British Liaison Officer Reports

Brevet Major G.C. de Glover was the senior liaison officer to the 2nd Division Headquarters, and he was there throughout the morning. His report, dated 12 April 1918, contains much hearsay and loosely interpreted oral reports, and he

⁸⁴ TNA, General Gomes da Costa, WO 158/75.

wrote it without consulting Portuguese officers who had fought in the battle. Still, de Glover concluded that the Portuguese held the main line until 0900 hours, based on the statements of three subordinate liaison officers who had reported this information to him:

No reports were received as to [the] capture of the front line [the outpost line], but from the reports of Captain Dartford with 4th Bde. H.Q. [the Portuguese Left], Lt. Burns with 10th Inf. in Fme. Du Bois I. [the Portuguese right], and Lt. Dyer in Neuve Chapelle II. [the Portuguese center], it is clear that the “B” line [main line] was taken about 9 a.m.

He continued, at 0945 hours: “information about the enemy attack was received at Divisional H.Q. . . . There seems to be small doubt that the “B” [main] Line was taken along most of the front by 9 a.m.” He continued: “Lieut. Symington, who was with 1st [Portuguese Artillery] Group H.Q., states that he thinks all batteries of this group did well, fired all their ammunition, and damaged their guns before leaving.” And, at approximately 1100 hours:

a message by telephone was received from Lieut. Bryers, who was at [5th Brigade Headquarters holding the Portuguese right front] . . . that O.C. (officer commanding), 10th Inf., who had been holding the line Fme. Du Bois I., had come in with 50 men. . . . He also stated that situation in front was obscure, but that it was known the enemy was advancing.⁸⁵

Major de Glover’s report provides substantial evidence that the 2nd Division was destroyed in action, on the battlefield.

Brigadier-General Ker was at his headquarters, six to seven miles behind the front, when the bombardment began, and the available evidence suggests that he retreated before 0900 hours.⁸⁶ Ker addressed reports that the 8th Battalion’s (4th Brigade’s) left flank was turned when the 18th Welsh Battalion was overrun:

Wounded Portuguese Officers and men state that the enemy broke through the right battalion of the 40th Division (the 18th Welsh) between 8 a.m., and 9 a.m., and pressing forward surprised the H.Q., 8th Portuguese Battalion at Hyde Park, before the 8th Portuguese Battalion had lost the “B” line. They admit however that the 20th Battalion in Fauquissart I. had already lost the “B” line in their sub-sector.⁸⁷

Ker accurately described the sequence of events, which is confirmed by

85 TNA, Major G.C. de Glover, 12 April 1918, WO 95/5488.

86 IWM, *Dartford Papers*, 9 April 1918.

87 TNA, Brigadier-General Ker, 22 April 1918, WO 95/5488.

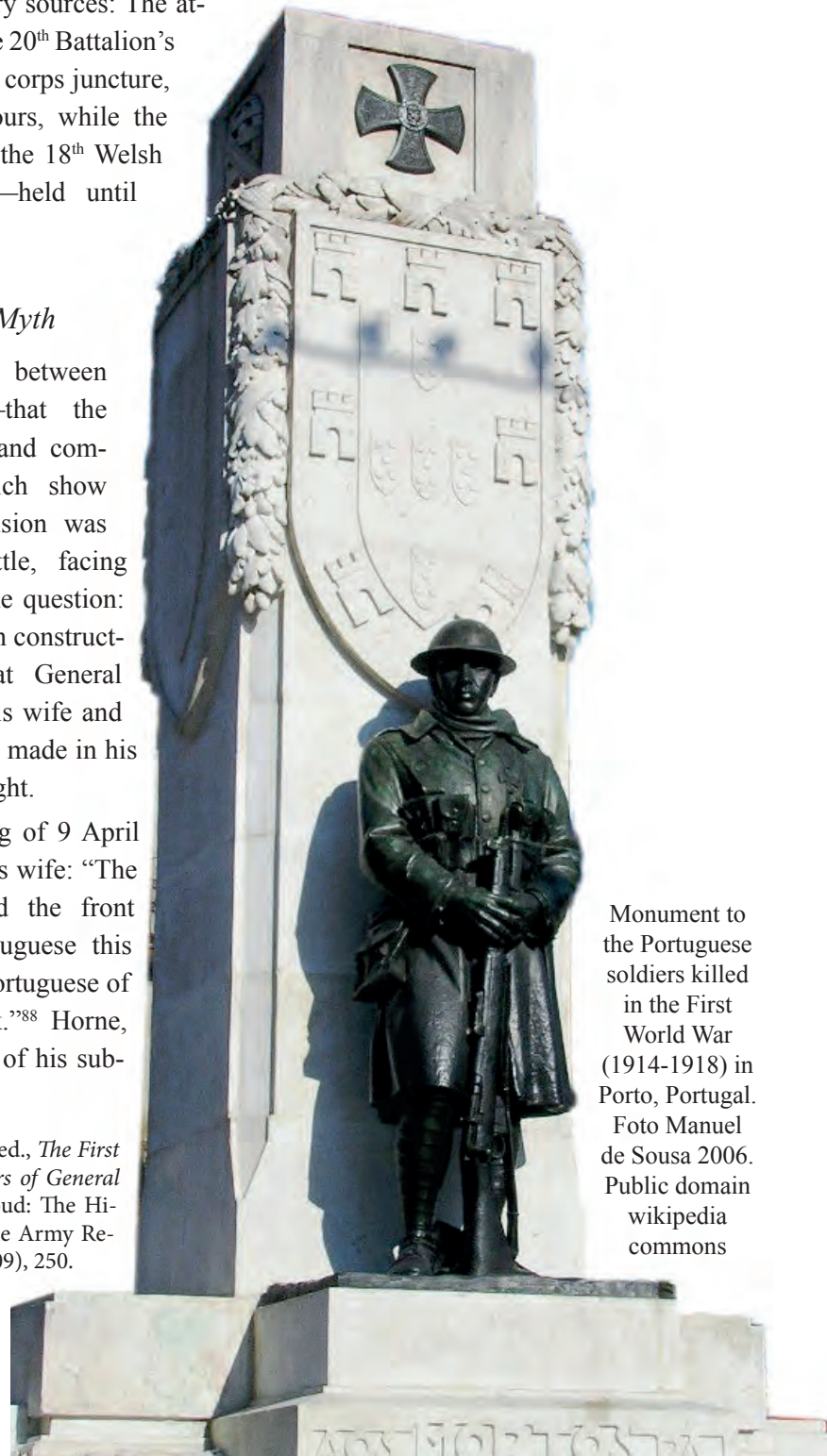
Portuguese primary sources: The attack penetrated the 20th Battalion's front, south of the corps juncture, at about 0900 hours, while the 8th Battalion—on the 18th Welsh Battalion's right—held until about 0915.

The Crux of the Myth

Differences between Haig's version—that the Portuguese ran—and combat records, which show that the 2nd Division was destroyed in battle, facing the enemy, beg the question: How was the myth constructed? A letter that General Horne wrote to his wife and an entry that Haig made in his diary provide insight.

On the evening of 9 April Horne wrote to his wife: "The Germans attacked the front held by the Portuguese this morning....The Portuguese of course went back."⁸⁸ Horne, however, nor any of his sub-

88 Simon Robbins, ed., *The First World War Letters of General Lord Horne* (Stroud: The History Press for the Army Records Society, 2009), 250.



Monument to the Portuguese soldiers killed in the First World War (1914-1918) in Porto, Portugal. Foto Manuel de Sousa 2006. Public domain wikipedia commons

ordinates, knew what had happened until many days later. Moreover, all British officers who had been on the battlefield, and had firsthand knowledge of the Portuguese (recall that 18th Welsh Battalion commander, Brown, did not) reported that they had done their duty.⁸⁹

What of Haig's diary entry? An 11 April entry in the typescript diary reads: "Apparently this attack had no great strength behind it, and if the Portuguese had not bolted, the result of the fighting would have been a severe check for the enemy."⁹⁰ The original diary, however, reads only: "Apparently this attack had no great strength behind it."⁹¹ This edited entry constitutes the smoking gun of Haig's scapegoating the 2nd Division to justify First Army's tactical defeat.

Conclusion

How did Haig's conjectures and lies quickly coalesce into an account of Portuguese cowardice that resulted in the tactical defeat of a British army? He and other senior officers sought to explain consecutive tactical defeats inflicted by German forces. *Michael* had shattered the Third and Fifth Armies' defenses, bewildered British military and political leadership, and jolted the British public. With flagging morale in the army and at home, Haig and several senior subordinates sought to allay their discomfiture and rationalize their shame. For *Michael*, they could only blame themselves. For *Georgette*, they scapegoated the Portuguese, and few have questioned whether their allegations were true.

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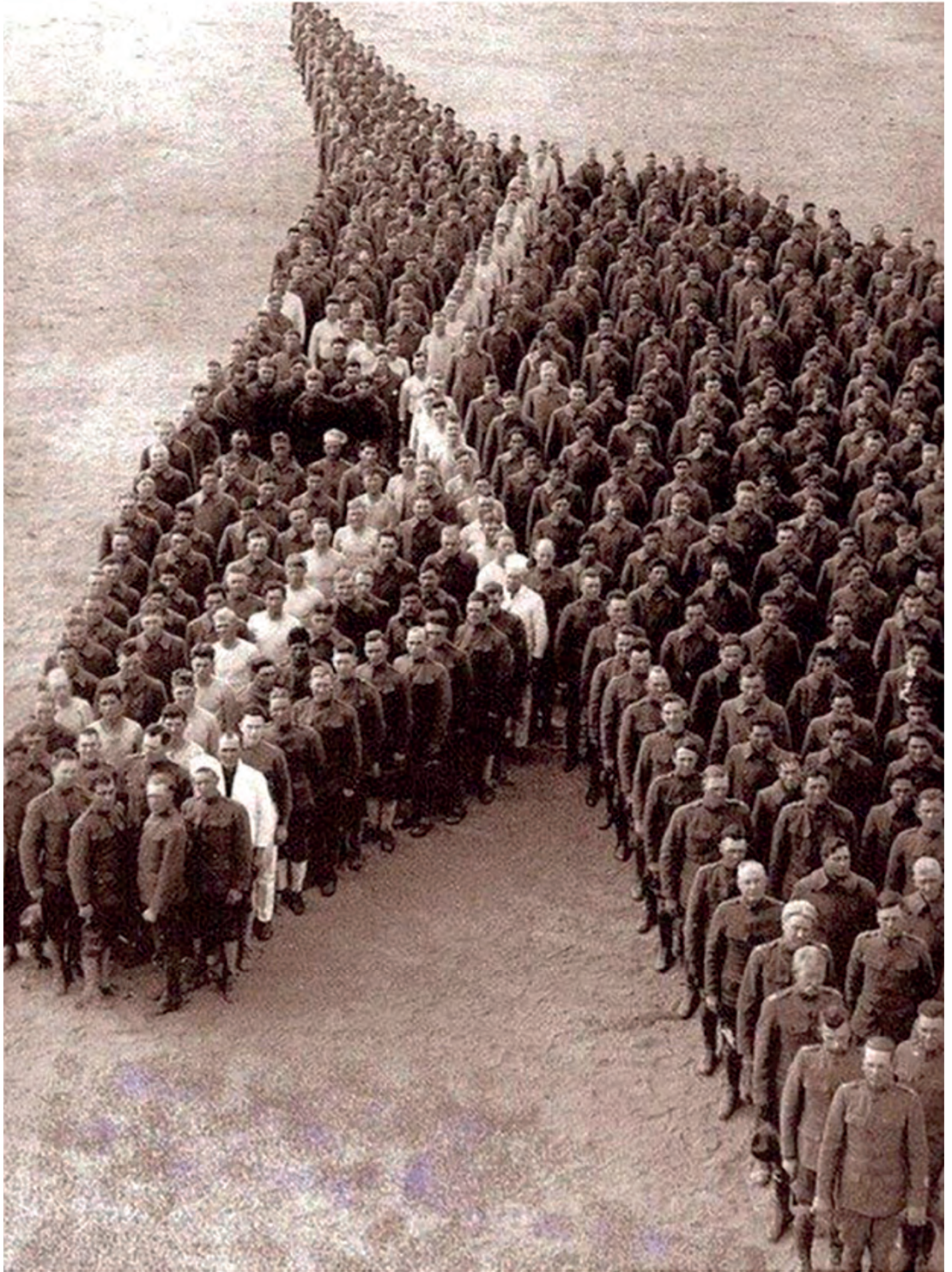
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Dr. Augusto de Vasconcelos (Portuguese Minister) with Portuguese Military Attaché Major Casquero and British Officers inspecting a BL 6-inch 26cwt howitzer, Roffey Camp, Horsham, 15th August 1918. © Imperial War Museum, free for non-commercial



650 Officers and Enlisted Men of Auxiliary Remount Depot N° 326 Camp Cody, N. M., In a Symbolic Head Pose of "The Devil", Saddle Horse ridden by Maj. Frank Brewer, remount commander / Photo by Almeron Newman, *Rear 115 N. Gold Ave., Deming, N.M.*.(1919)
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