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VIRGLIO ILARI



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Douglas Haig's Reports about the Battle of the Lys: A Critical Analysis

by JESSE PYLES

ABSTRACT. Field Marshal Douglas Haig, commanding officer of the British Expeditionary Force, first told the prevailing Anglophone narrative about the 2nd Portuguese Division at the Battle of the Lys. In 1937, the British official historian, J.E. Edmonds, published his account of the battle, which validated and amplified Haig's contentions. Generations of military authors have since uncritically cited both tales as real history. All these primary and secondary sources—which have minimal basis in facts—blame the Portuguese for the tactical defeat of the British First Army. This article offers critical analysis of the fallacies upon which Haig based his reports. Specifically, it compares his reports about the battle with British combat records, other primary sources, contributed by soldiers who served on the battlefield, forward of divisional headquarters, and secondary sources grounded in corroborated English, Portuguese, German, and French primary sources.

KEYWORDS. DOUGLAS HAIG, HENRY HORNE, R.C.B. HAKING, BATTLE OF THE LYS, BATALHA DO LYS, CORPO EXPEDICIONÁRIO PORTUGUÊS, A 2^a DIVISÃO PORTUGUESA.

Introduction

Field Marshal Douglas Haig, commanding officer of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), first told the prevailing Anglophone narrative about the 2nd Portuguese Division at the Battle of the Lys.¹ Fought on 9 April 1918—approximately twelve to eighteen miles west-southwest of Lille, France—this battle was the initial action of the German Operation *Georgette*, the second major attack of the *Kaiserschlacht*, known in English as the Spring Offensive. In 1937, the British official historian, J.E. Edmonds, published his account of the battle, which validated and amplified Haig's contentions.² Generations of military au-

1 Jesse Pyles, "The Battle of the Lys: The Uncovered History," *Nuova Antologia Militare* 12, no. 3 (2022): 97-124.

2 J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1918*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: The Battery Press, Inc., 1995), 156-192. For critiques of Edmonds's approaches and methods see: 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

thors have since uncritically cited both tales as real history. All these primary and secondary sources—which have minimal basis in facts—blame the Portuguese for the tactical defeat of the British First Army.³

This article offers critical analysis of the fallacies that anchor Haig’s version. Specifically, it compares his reports about the battle with British combat records and other primary sources, contributed by soldiers who served on the battlefield, forward of divisional headquarters. It also compares derisive conjecture about the Portuguese found in some British records against uncontested facts about the battle, notably, the fog, the timing, intensity, and duration of the German bombardment, the beginning of German assault troop infiltrations, and the main attack.

Context

This article builds upon two published studies about the Battle of the Lys. One, “The Battle of the Lys: The Uncovered History,” offers detailed analysis of the battle, as conveyed in British and Portuguese combat records, other primary sources, and secondary sources grounded in corroborated English, Portuguese, German, and French primary sources.⁴ The other, “The Battle of the Lys: Understanding How and Why its History is Distorted,” explores British military and cultural themes that bolstered the credibility of Haig’s tale.⁵

In contrast, the present article provides an in-depth examination of Haig’s reports.⁶ Why deconstruct Haig’s allegations about the battle, to fundamentally describe what did not happen? Precisely because they remain widely received as common knowledge and are frequently retold by military authors. Indeed, Anglo-phone narratives about the battle—and specifically about the Portuguese—appear to flow from outlooks that hold: A British soldier wrote it. Why question it?

(2004): 773; Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), xxxii; 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), 258-259.

3 Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War: 1914-1918* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 111-112; William Philpott, *War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2015), 314; Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 2012), 281.

4 Pyles, “The Battle of the Lys: The Uncovered History,” 97-124.

5 Jesse Pyles, “The Battle of the Lys: Understanding How and Why its History is Distorted,” *Journal of Anglo-Portuguese Studies* 31 (2022): 269-297.

6 Pyles, “The Battle of the Lys: Understanding How and Why its History is Distorted,” 279.

Uncontested Facts

British combat records bear out that heavy fog restricted visibility in the extreme, throughout the morning. Specifically, many reports describe the impossibility of seeing German infantry beyond ten to twenty yards, until after 1400 hours. German forces had overrun the 2nd Portuguese and 40th British Divisions' Forward Zones—and pinned the 55th British Division against the north bank of the La Bassée Canal—by this time. More to the point, very few British soldiers were within twenty yards of the 2nd Division's sector that morning, yet accounts that allege fleeing Portuguese typically claim visibility beyond one hundred yards. How did British soldiers—who could not see German attackers beyond twenty yards in their own sectors—see allied Portuguese running, or their positions abandoned, at much further distances?

The bombardment—the most concentrated in the history of war to that day—began at 0415 and lasted until 0815, across the entire axis of advance, some ten to eleven miles. It was followed immediately afterwards by a precisely executed creeping barrage, designed to protect advancing infantry and block defenders from reinforcing forward positions. German gunners targeted the 2nd Portuguese and the 40th Division's right brigade in much heavier concentration than the 40th's left brigade and the 55th Division's entire front.

Assault troop infiltrations began as soon as the bombardment ended. They breached the 40th and 2nd Divisions' outpost lines before 0830 hours. The main attack began at 0845, when at least three divisions attacked the 40th Division's right brigade, eight or nine divisions attacked the 2nd, and only one attacked the 55th. British combat records, in their entirety, align with these times, except for when offering speculations about the Portuguese.

Illogical Contentions

Haig's reports crumble under critical analysis. There are two main reasons for this. One is illogical contentions. For example, he asserted that German infantry attacked the 2nd Division while German gunners continued firing the most concentrated bombardment in all of warfare to that day. He also alleged that the Portuguese, holding a seven-mile-long front, collapsed and ran, as if in unison, before the main attack began. The other entails speculation conveyed as fact. For example, Haig wrote in his diary on 9 April: "the Portuguese troops with their

Portuguese officers are useless for this class of fighting.”⁷ This remark conveys two dubious claims. One, that Portuguese soldiers were inferior to British soldiers. Two, that a British division—bombarded to tatters for four hours, then attacked by a force that outnumbered it by eight-to-one—would have performed better. Indeed, Haig’s remark turns particularly subjective here because he asserted that the Portuguese collapsed and ran. He, however, would have known that British divisions holding the front lines during the German attack of 21 March, Operation *Michael*, had been overrun quickly. Therefore, applying Haig’s standard for the Portuguese to British troops of the Third and Fifth Armies defending at *Michael*, and to British troops defending the Lys sector, impartial evaluation would find them equally useless.

Haig based his initial report—while the battle was ongoing, and no one knew what was happening, e.g., “No one could see what was going on”—on conjectures offered by XI Corps.⁸ Lieutenant-General R.C.B. Haking, XI Corps commander, could “write a very specious report,” and he did so about the Battle of the Lys.⁹ Haig appears to have based his post-battle report on a combination of Haking’s pre- and post-battle allegations, and the most speculative postulations offered by the British Mission to the Portuguese Corps. Charles Arthur Ker, the British Mission commanding officer, had previously authored many derisive reports about the Portuguese, based upon subjective data.¹⁰ Haig also construed the 55th Division’s experience as typical across the battlefield. The 2nd and 40th Divisions, however, encountered very different combat conditions than the 55th. Specifically, British combat records establish that the 55th experienced a much lighter bombardment, described as “desultory” and “slight,” and only one division attacked its front.¹¹

7 National Library of Scotland (NLS), Papers of Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, OM, KT, GCB, GCVO, 1st Earl Haig; No. 97 – Haig’s diary of the Great War, parts 7-12, 1916-19, 9 April 1918. My sincere thanks to the National Library of Scotland, and the Earl Haig, for granting permission to reproduce excerpts of Douglas Haig’s manuscript diary.

8 Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, Documents and Sound Section, the Private Papers of General Lord Horne of Stirkoke GCB KCMG, Letter to Lady Horne, 9 April 1918. My thanks to the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum for allowing access to this collection, and to Madame Jean de Roany for graciously granting copyright authorization.

9 Simon Robbins, ed., *The First World War Letters of General Lord Horne* (Stroud: The History Press for the Army Records Society, 2009), 28-29.

10 Pyles, “The Battle of the Lys: Understanding How and Why its History is Distorted,” 281-282.

11 The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), 55th (West Lancashire) Division.



Sir William Orpen, RA, portrait of Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, KT, GCB, GCVO, KCIE, Commander-in-Chief, France, from Dec. 15th 1915. Painted at General Headquarters, May 30th 1917,

Foundational Documents

At 0600 hours, XI Corps sent the following message to First Army:

Morning report. Heavy bombardment on Corps front started 4.5 a.m.. Chiefly on [Battery] positions, [Headquarters], and roads. Slight on GIVENCHY Section but heavier on FESTUBERT and Portuguese front. Gas on back areas. Communications with 2nd Portuguese [Division] cut.¹²

Analysis: The bombardment began at 0415, not 0430. The 55th and 2nd Divisions held XI Corps' front. The 55th held about 4,000 yards of high ground, whereas the 2nd, on the 55th's left (north), held some 13,000 yards of flat ground in the valley. Givenchy was the approximate center point of the 55th Division's defenses, and very near the front lines, whereas Festubert was near the junction of 55th and 2nd Divisions, several hundred yards behind the front. German gunners assigned to shell the 55th Division's front aimed primarily at battery positions, headquarters, and roads. Against the 2nd Division, however, German gunners took its entire front and back areas under intensely concentrated fire, with high explosive and gas shells, for four hours. This message—which aligns with 55th Division records—confirms that the bombardment against the Portuguese front was heavier. Also noteworthy: the bombardment quickly cut communications with the 2nd Division.

At 1040 hours, on 9 April 1918, Haig's General Headquarters (GHQ) sent the following cipher to London:

Operations. Hostile bombardment commenced this morning on front from La BASSEE to FLEURBAIX reported followed by a hostile attack in the neighbourhood of FAUQUISSART and la CORDONNERIE Farm. Details regarding attack are not yet available, but the enemy's shelling is reported to be less heavy. The weather is misty.¹³

Analysis: This cipher alleges that only the Portuguese front was attacked and penetrated, at an undisclosed time, before 1040 hours. Fauquissart was on the left (north) side of the 2nd Division's sector—about a half mile south of its junction with the 40th Division—and la Cordonnerie Farm appears to have been nearby. However, British combat records and other primary sources establish

Narrative of Operations. 9th April, 1918 to 17th April, 1918. Action at Divisional Headquarters. WO 95/2905; TNA, XI Corps War Diary, WO 95/883.

12 TNA, XI Corps, G.D. 304, WO 95/883.

13 TNA, Operations Special Priority. Cipher. C.P. 222 10.40 a.m., 9th April, 1918, WO 256/29.

that British officers had no knowledge of battlefield events around Fauquissart by 1040 hours on 9 April.

A message sent by XI Corps to First Army, timed at 1100 hours, conveys an important fact and how little British officers knew about combat action on the 2nd Division's front:

British Mission [to] Portuguese Division reports timed 10 a.m. enemy attacking NEUVE CHAPELLE. No definite information.¹⁴

Analysis: The main infantry assault, at 0845 hours, aligns with officers of the British Mission receiving minimal information about combat around the 2nd Division's center at 1000. The second sentence, however, does not align with the negative conjecture about the Portuguese that Haig's GHQ sent to London at 1040. Furthermore, more than a week after the battle—after debriefing wounded Portuguese officers and other ranks of the left brigade, the 4th (specifically the 8th Battalion), who stated that they had held the front until about 0900 hours—British officers, it seems, still wanted to blame them.¹⁵ On 18 April, for example, Ker ordered Captain R.C.G. Dartford, a Portuguese speaking officer who served in the British Mission, as senior liaison to the 4th Brigade, “to write a confidential report...giving personal opinion on action of Portuguese troops on 9th inst[ant].”¹⁶ Ker, himself, submitted a speculative report on 22 April, in which he wrote of “circumstantial evidence” and “opinion.”¹⁷

The author has not seen a message sent from a British combat unit to Haig's GHQ that alleges an infantry attack against Fauquissart. Speculation about such an attack, however, is examined in the analysis that follows excerpts of Haig's post-battle report, below. Regardless of source, the assertion was conjecture, offered days before British officers knew what had happened.

14 TNA, XI Corps, G.D. 313, WO 95/883.

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

16 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 received no reply. Dartford wrote of advancing to 4th Brigade headquarters when the bombardment began and of spending a few hours under anti-gas blankets there, while trying not to be asphyxiated. His firsthand knowledge of battlefield events was mostly limited to that experience. See, IWM, *Dartford Papers*, 9 April 1918.

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

At 1615, GHQ sent this cipher to London:

Enemy attacked this morning on approximate front GIVENCHY – FLEURBAIX and has entered the Portuguese defenses between these points. GIVENCHY is reported to be holding out well. British troops hold the line. . . . Portuguese artillery are reported to be retiring through this [British] line.

Weather very thick and aeroplane reconnaissance impossible.¹⁸

Analysis: The implicit blame, sent at 1040 hours, became direct blame by 1615. What had happened that morning? One division, the 4th Ersatz, a *Stellungs-division*, attacked the 55th.¹⁹ That division intentionally pinned the 55th against the north bank of the La Bassée Canal, to protect the Sixth Army's left flank, as it advanced northwest, toward Hazebrouck and Bailleul.²⁰ At least three divisions attacked the 40th Division's right front brigade, the 119th. That attack overran the 40th Division's main line (FLEURBAIX), by about 0930 hours, and overran the 120th Brigade, in reserve, by 1100 hours.²¹ At least eight divisions, attacking in waves, overran the 2nd Division's main line by 0930 hours.

The minutes of a War Cabinet meeting, held in London at 1130 hours on 10 April, contain this excerpt:

The Director of Military Operations stated that the attack made by the Germans on the previous day had, in light of further information, turned out to be more important than had been at first thought, and that they had attacked with probably 8 divisions, and certainly with 5 which had actually been identified. The Portuguese put up a fight at the beginning, and then collapsed, with the result that a dangerous salient had been created between Armentières and La Bassée. It was certain that a number of guns had been lost, and that both Portuguese and British prisoners had been taken. At one time the enemy reached Givenchy, but had been driven out by our counter-attack, in which we took 750 prisoners. On the whole, the flanks had held well, and our line of defence was now the River Lys.²²

18 TNA, Operations Special Priority. Cipher. C.P. 223, 4:15 p.m. 9th April, 1918, WO 256/29.

19 John F. Williams, *Modernity, the Media, and the Military: The Creation of National Mythologies on the Western Front 1914-1918* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 187. Williams claimed that two divisions attacked the 55th, but that division's combat records name only the 4th Ersatz Division as its opponent.

20 David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 39; David T. Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 85.

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

22 TNA, War Cabinet, 388, April 10, 1918, 11:30 a.m., CAB 23/6/0010.

Analysis: Before 9 April, Haig believed that any attack against the Lys sector would be a feint, intended to divert British forces away from Arras-Vimy, where he expected the next major attack.²³ His fixation on Arras-Vimy helps explain why the ciphers GHQ sent to London alleged that the Portuguese had collapsed. The War Cabinet apparently believed Haig's report—that the attack had breached only the 2nd Division's front—which allowed German forces to attack the 40th and 55th Divisions in the flanks, resulting in British losses.

The penultimate sentence of this excerpt conveys a suspect portrayal of the battle. Specifically, the 4th Ersatz had attacked the 55th Division, and intentionally folded its left (north) brigade, the 165th, against the north bank of the La Bassée Canal. An XI Corps report reveals this sequence of events: "Enemy broke through N. of Givenchy."²⁴ Thus, on a day in which tens of thousands of British, Portuguese, and German soldiers engaged in combat, and many thousands of British and Portuguese troops were taken prisoner, retaking Givenchy, and capturing 750 German soldiers, bears little, if any, significance. Additionally, per the last sentence, the British flanks had not held. The 55th had been successfully hemmed in and the 40th had been overrun. Haig's account, however, gained credence quickly.

Haig wrote the following entry in his diary for 9 April:

Glass falling. Rain fell during night. Day dull and foggy.

After an intense bombardment from the La Bassée Canal northwards to the neighbourhood of Armentières, enemy attacked the Portuguese and British divisions holding this front. The enemy's strength is estimated at eight divisions. Thick mist made observation impossible.

Our flanks at Givenchy in S[outh] and Fleurbaix in N[orth] held firm, though at one time enemy had occupied Givenchy as far as the church. The 55th Div[ision] retook the whole village in fine style.

As previously arranged, British Div[isions] in Reserve move up on each side and rear of the Portuguese.

By nightfall our troops were forced back to the line of the Canal de la Lawe and Lys River, near Bac St. Maur. Our flanks at Givenchy and Fleurbaix still report to be holding out.²⁵

23 Jim Beach, *Haig's Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army, 1916-18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 292-295; 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), 242-243.

24 TNA, XI Corps, G.D. 313, WO 95/883.

25 NLS, No. 97 – Haig's diary of the Great War, parts 7-12, 1916-19, 9 April 1918.

Analysis: Notice how closely the two ciphers that GHQ sent to London, and the minutes from the War Cabinet meeting, align with Haig's diary entry. Also notice his conflicting remarks, "enemy attacked the Portuguese and British divisions holding this front," and "our flanks...held firm," repeated in the final sentence. The former remark acknowledges that the British divisions were attacked frontally. The latter remarks, however, imply that the British fronts were not breached, which was untrue, or that both divisions had held their fronts, also untrue.

Haig's comparison of the battlefield experiences of the two British divisions—the 55th holding high ground, attacked in a one-to-one strength ratio, and pushed back, and the 40th, on flat ground, attacked, roughly, in an eight-to-one strength ratio and overrun quickly—has led to skewed readings by military authors. His remark about British divisions advancing to the sides and rear of the 2nd Division has also led to misinterpretations. All British divisions had reserves behind them. When German armies attacked the Third and Fifth British Armies' fronts on 21 March 1918, *Michael*, many reserve divisions were rapidly engaged, in the positions they had held when the bombardment began. Haig's remark, however, suggests that British commanders had made special plans to defend the 2nd Division's front, expecting that if attacked in strength, the Portuguese would collapse. British combat records reveal the fallacy of Haig's claim. No British division moved up on either side of the 2nd. Rather, the 50th and 51st Divisions—one in XI Corps reserve and one in XV Corps reserve—were largely engaged in the positions they held when the bombardment began.

On 17 April, Captain Dartford pondered a British report about the battle:

27 enemy divisions were concentrated in Lille on the 9th – all come from the south in 48 hours. The attack was probably meant to be a minor one at first, but on account of the success it met with the fog & the C.E.P. retreat, they developed it the following day. A German officer described the geese [Portuguese] as running away like scalded cats! As for ammunition, there were shells to the number of 16,000 per gun in readiness & over 5 million rounds of S.A.A. in forward areas, Portuguese front on the morning of the 9th.²⁶

Analysis: Dartford received this exculpatory justification for the tactical defeat of the First Army no later than eight days after the battle. It asserts that German commanders originally intended the attack—allegedly executed by three or four

26 IWM, *Dartford Papers*, 17 April 1918.

Francis Dodd (1874-1949), portrait of General Sir Henry Horne, KCB, in uniform and peaked cap, sitting on a chair with his arms folded. This image was created and released by the Imperial War Museum on the [IWM Non Commercial Licence](#) Photographs taken, or artworks created, by a member of the forces during their active service duties are covered by Crown Copyright provisions. Faithful reproductions may be reused under that licence, which is considered expired 50 years after their creation. Wikimedia Commons.



divisions—to be diversionary, but they chose to exploit their success after the Portuguese allegedly ran, by diverting forces from Arras-Vimy. Specifically, the excerpt “all come from the south in 48 hours,” connotes that ten or eleven of the fourteen Sixth Army divisions that executed the attack, and thirteen more, along with all their heavy weaponry, came from Arras-Vimy—some eighteen straight line miles, and twenty-five or more rail miles away, and deployed operationally—in just two days. The first and last sentences of the report, however, contradict the second sentence, as 27 divisions and 16,000 shells per gun, of which there were 1,686 and almost half were heavy or super heavy—along with Fourth Germany Army’s 8 divisions and 524 guns—are not indicative of a minor attack.²⁷ The third sentence, which compares Portuguese soldiers to burned felines, has no basis in truth.

²⁷ Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, 184-185, 188.

Haig's Public Report

Haig's allegation, that most Portuguese ran from the battlefield, before German infantry attacked in force, gained credence within the British government and the BEF quickly. In Autumn 1918, the British government released to the public a report written by Haig, dated July 1918, that blamed the Portuguese for First Army's tactical defeat. The report was printed by many presses and remains widely available. To the present day, Anglophone narratives of this battle align closely with this report, although not with British combat records, which had been written by this time. Specifically, Brevet Major G.C. de Glover, the senior British liaison officer serving with 2nd Division Headquarters during the battle, and Charles Arthur Ker, the British Mission commander, wrote reports that acknowledged the Portuguese had held their front until after 0800 hours.²⁸ Relevant excerpts of the report follow, in the order that Haig wrote them, denoted by Roman numerals. Critical analysis follows afterwards:

- i. The possibility of a German attack north of the La Bassée Canal, for which certain preparations appeared to have been carried out, had been brought to my notice prior to March 21st. Indications that preparations for a hostile attack in this sector were nearing completion had been observed in the first days of April, but its extent and force could not be accurately gauged.
- ii. On the other hand, a break through on our centre, about Vimy, would mean the realisation of the enemy's plan which had been foiled by our defence at Arras on March 28th—namely, the capture of Amiens and the separation of the bulk of the British Armies from the French and from those British forces acting under the direction of the latter.
- iii. At the end of March, however, the northern front was rapidly drying up under the influence of the exceptionally rainless spring, and, in view of the indications referred to, the possibility of an early attack in this sector became a matter for immediate consideration. Arrangements for the relief of the Portuguese Division, which had been continuously in the line for a long period and needed rest, were therefore undertaken during the first week of April, and were to have been completed by the morning of April 10th.
- iv. The persistence of unseasonably fine weather and the rapid drying up of the low-lying ground in the Lys Valley enabled the enemy to anticipate the relief of the 2nd Portuguese Division.
- v. At about 7 A.M. on April 9, in thick fog which again made observation

28 Pyles, "The Battle of the Lys: The Uncovered History," 120.

impossible, the enemy appears to have attacked the left brigade of the 2nd Portuguese Division in strength and to have broken into their trenches. A few minutes afterwards the area of attack spread south and north. Shortly after 7 A.M. the right brigade of the 40th Division reported that an attack had developed on their front and was being held, but that machine gunners near their right-hand post could see the enemy moving rapidly through the sector to the south of them.

vi. Communication with the Divisions in line was difficult, but during the morning the situation cleared up, and it became apparent that a serious attack was in progress on the front of the 55th Division, under Command of Major-General H. S. Jeudwine, C.B., and of the 2nd Portuguese and 40th Divisions, from the La Bassee Canal to Bois Grenier....The 1st King Edward's Horse and the 11th Cyclist Battalion had been sent forward at once...

vii. Between 8 A.M. and 9 A.M. the enemy succeeded in occupying the forward posts of the right battalion of the 40th Division and attacked northwards.... Later in the morning the 40th Division was pushed back by pressure on its front and flank to a position facing south between Bois Grenier, Fleurbaix, and Sailly-sur-la Lys, its right brigade in particular having lost heavily.

viii. South of the Portuguese sector, the 55th Division was heavily attacked on its whole front, and by 10-30 a.m. its left Brigade had been forced back from its outpost line. The main line of resistance was intact, and a defensive flank was formed facing north...

ix. Throughout the remainder of the day the 55th Division maintained its positions against all assaults and by successful counter-attacks captured over 750 prisoners. The success of this most gallant defence, the importance of which it would be hard to over-estimate, was due in great measure to the courage and determination displayed by our advanced posts. These held out with the utmost resolution though surrounded, pinning to the ground those parties of the enemy who had penetrated our defences, and preventing them from developing their attack.

x. To the north of the positions held by the 55th Division, the weight and impetus of the German attack overwhelmed the Portuguese troops, and the enemy's progress was so rapid that the arrangements for manning the rear defences of this sector with British troops could scarcely be completed in time.

xi. The 1st King Edward's Horse and the 11th Cyclist Battalion, indeed, occupied Lacouture, Vieille Chapelle, and Huit Maisons, and by their splendid defence of those places enabled troops of the 51st and 50th Divisions to come into action east of the Lawe River between Le Touret and Estaires.... After heavy fighting the right of the 40th Division was forced back upon

the Lys, and early in the afternoon withdrew across the river at Bac St. Maur.²⁹

Excerpt i analysis: German commanders accelerated preparations for the attack against the Lys front during February, not April. On the 24th, the British Mission's war diary entry reads: "Abnormal movement noticed in German lines opposite 1st Portuguese Division." On the 25th: "Considerable movement noticed in enemy lines." On the 27th: "Enemy has been registering on O.P's [outposts or observation posts] in 2nd Division area for some days."³⁰ A 14 March entry reads: "Indications point to a desire on the part of the enemy to impress us with his intention to attack on the whole front shortly."³¹

Captain Dartford wrote about the increase in artillery preparations. On 15 March: "I am simply hating these days – A worse shelling than ever today – the house next door down."³² Three days later, Dartford and his companions experienced a near miss by a heavy caliber shell:

We all had a narrow escape today when [the Germans] put some very heavy shells this end of Laventie. Long & I were just escaping from the mission when one landed in the cemetery 40 yards from us...No one was damaged but the hole made is colossal – probably a 21 c.m. shell. Taylor has just found out it is an 11 inch armour-piercing shell apparently used for road destruction.³³

On 6 April, Dartford concluded that an attack was imminent:

Everything points to our getting an attack here soon. Roads being mended, abnormal movement, prisoners say guns & [ammunition] are being brought up, & yesterday & today aeroplanes flying low & spitting M.Gs [machinegun fire] at the trenches.³⁴

The senior Portuguese commander, General Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu e Silva, also wrote about the escalation:

29 Despatch from Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, K.T., G.C.B., G.C.V.O., Describing the Retreat in March. General Headquarters, July 20, 1918. (Published October 22.) *The Annual Register: A Review of Public Events at Home and Abroad for the Year 1918* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919), 131-134.

30 TNA, British Mission War Diary, February 1918, WO 95/5488.

31 Ibid., 14 March 1918.

32 IWM, *Dartford Papers*, 15 March 1918.

33 Ibid., 18 March 1918.

34 Ibid., 6 April 1918.

The first warning, that the Germans were planning an attack, was provided on 21 February by 2 prisoners, that stated 30 new batteries had recently arrived in their division's sector, and at the beginning of the month, they had seen pass through their erstwhile location, large quantities of artillery, a portion of which was of Austrian manufacture.... Since the warning of 21 February, enemy artillery action increased markedly, announcing the arrival of new equipment, heavy and light, occupying new positions from where [German gunners] sought to range their fire against headquarters, command posts, battery emplacements and road junctions.³⁵

General Tamagnini addressed his concerns with First Army but was rebuffed:

The British command assessed that a major attack would not come against the front held by the Portuguese troops owing to the absence of strategic conditions from which [the German command, OHL] could achieve spectacular results and inflict strong blows on morale.³⁶

Tamagnini's remark aligns with the written opinions of Haig and First Army commander, Henry Horne, examined below. The opinions of these great men, however, do not align with facts. Hazebrouck, France, the main railhead and supply depot for the British First and Second Armies—which German commanders intentionally targeted for *Georgette*—represented, in fact, a strategic objective.

French officials also appear to have expected a major attack on the Lys front. Dartford observed:

Civilians are being evacuated at 2,000 a week from all this area. A concentration camp for them at Caloune & a rendezvous camp near Estaires. It will be great getting the civilians away. The French authorities have refused to sanction it in the past. It's marvelous the way the people cling to their homes. The hag in our place won't move till the gendarmes take her."³⁷

British, Portuguese, and French officers and officials knew that an attack on the Lys loomed.

Haig and his GHQ knew of the artillery build up on the Lys. They, however, remained focused on Arras-Vimy.³⁸ Haig's diary entry of 6 April confirms his

35 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), 373.

36 *Ibid.*, 375.

37 IWM, *Dartford Papers*, 13 March 1918.

38 Beach, *Haig's Intelligence*, 292-293; Williams, *Modernity, the Media and the Military*, 175.

belief that the next large attack would come against that place:

Enemy intentions seem still to be the capture of the Vimy position, by turning it in the south of Arras as well as in the north (south of the La Bassée Canal). At the same time a surprise attack by 3 or 4 divisions against the Portuguese front is also to be expected.³⁹

Haig had ignored warning signs and held to his belief that an attack against the Lys front would be diversionary.⁴⁰

Excerpt ii analysis: Haig justified why he had discounted the likelihood of a major attack on the Lys, by overstating the significance of the German attack of 28 March, *Mars*, which had been a diversion, intended to draw off British and French divisions defending against *Michael*.⁴¹ He also omitted a crucial fact by writing of Amiens, not Hazebrouck—the German objective for *Georgette*—at least as important to First and Second Armies in the north as Amiens was to the Third and Fifth Armies in the south. Objective evidence pointed to the likelihood of a major attack against the Lys front, whereas Haig's belief that German armies would attack in force at Arras-Vimy amounted to a hunch.

Excerpt iii analysis: Before 9 April, neither Haig nor Horne seriously considered the prospect of a major attack against the Lys sector.⁴² On 8 April, Horne wrote of: “perhaps a small attack north of the [La Bassée] canal.”⁴³ Brigadier-General J.E.S. Brind, First Army's erstwhile intelligence officer, later wrote to J.E. Edmonds, confirming Haig's and Horne's opinions:

“Signs of impending attack,” There were very few, and these did not show that an attack was imminent, until the 8th, when an airman descending through the fog saw what appeared to be piles of road-metal along the side of road approaching the Portuguese front, and on I think the same day, we received an air photo, in which there were tiny white marks, which may have been planks, alongside the streams opposite the same front.⁴⁴

39 Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (eds) *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914 – 1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 398.

40 Beach, *Haig's Intelligence*, 292.

41 J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 459; Zabecki, *The German 1918 Offensives*, 155.

42 Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall*, 68-71; Timothy Travers, *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917-1918* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 91-92.

43 Robbins, *The First World War Letters of General Lord Horne*, 250.

44 TNA, Major-General J.E.S. Brind to J.E. Edmonds, 3 January 1932, CAB 45/122.



Ferreira da Costa, portrait of General Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu e Silva (1856-1924), 15 September 1917 Hemeroteca Digital - "*Portugal na Guerra : revista quinzenal ilustrada*" (N.º 3, 15 Set. 1917) (Wikimedia Commons)

By asserting that he and Horne had recognized the danger of an “early” or preemptive—although not a major attack—specifically targeting the 2nd Division, Haig inferred that a British division could have successfully defended against the German attack. This allegation is contradicted by the rapid destruction of British divisions holding the front lines during *Michael*, and of the 40th Division at *Georgette*.

In his post-battle report, Horne took the same stance as Haig. He wrote: “As the possibility of attack became patent, so it became advisable as regards defence to relieve the Portuguese entirely or to reduce the front held by them.”⁴⁵ Horne’s post-attack narrative does not correspond with his pre-attack directives. Upon relieving the 1st Portuguese Division, on 6 April—which had been planned since January—he ordered General Gomes da Costa, 2nd Division commander, to hold the entire Lys sector, about seven miles. Thus, before the battle, Horne did not ‘relieve the Portuguese entirely’ nor ‘reduce the front held by them.’ More to the point, Horne’s order does not align with the expectation of an imminent attack. Rather, it aligns with his written opinion of 8 April, that any attack against the Lys would be minor, a diversion.

Excerpt iv analysis: German commanders had planned to attack the Lys front since autumn 1917. They would have attacked there regardless of the divisions that held it, as they had at *Michael*. No evidence corroborates Haig’s contention that German commanders executed the attack before they had planned to, because they thought the 2nd Division was a softer target than any British division.

Excerpt v. analysis: The portion of the first sentence regarding the impossibility of observation, is true. Otherwise, at 0700 hours, German gunners continued shelling the 2nd Portuguese and the 40th Division’s right front with greater intensity than any artillery preparation in the history of warfare. When the bombardment ended, at 0815 hours, German gunners began a creeping barrage, which served three purposes. It protected attacking infantry, kept defenders under cover, and prevented reserves from advancing through it, to reinforce threatened positions. Furthermore, when assault troops attacked the 40th and 2nd Divisions fronts’, they breached and overran them rapidly, as had happened at *Michael*.

The second portion of the first sentence conveys overt and implicit speculation, which requires evaluation. The source of this conjecture appears in a 55th

45 TNA, General Horne, 14 June 1918, WO 158/75.

Division report:

6.22 a.m. XI Corps stated that rifle fire had been heard from the FERME DU BOIS and NEUVE CHAPELLE Sections and that FAUQUISSART was being raided.

The three named locations represent the 2nd Division's right, center, and left, respectively, across its seven-mile-long front. Who heard rifle fire, from several miles behind the front, through the relentless din of the most concentrated bombardment of warfare to that day? Moreover, would Portuguese soldiers under that steel rain have emerged from cover to fire in the direction of the German front?

The source of the assertion, XI Corps, raises many questions. Per the message that XI Corps sent to First Army, at 0600 hours, cited above, communications with the 2nd Division had already been cut, yet the entry is timed at 0622. Additionally, nearly all communication between the 2nd Division and its subordinate brigades and battalions was also cut.

The two greatest curiosities regarding this excerpt lie in the contention that the 2nd Division's left—about a half mile south of its junction with the 40th Division, the link between XI and XV Corps—was being raided before 0630 hours, and the precise phrase, 'XI Corps stated', as opposed to, for example, 'message was received from XI Corps'. Why allege that the Portuguese left brigade, furthest away from the 55th Division's positions, was being raided, yet only imply that the center and right brigades might be being raided, in all cases, about two hours before German infantry began attacking? Did XI Corps, specifically Haking, telephone 55th Division Headquarters directly and make this accusation?

Haking was unpopular with many senior British commanders.⁴⁶ He, however, was Haig's man, and fiercely loyal to him. These facts considered; it seems interesting that this allegation reached Haig before 1040 hours. Also noteworthy, no post-battle narrative, British or Portuguese, corroborates this entry.

The next entry in the same report reads:

At 6.55 a.m. a message was received from the British Mission 2nd Portuguese Division timed at 6.20 a.m. stating that there had been no S.O.S. from the NEUVE CHAPELLE Section. Apparently strong hostile raids on

46 Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), 57-58; Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman, and Mark Connolly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 50.

FAUQUISSART and FERME DU BOIS Sections.⁴⁷

British combat records establish that British Mission liaison officers had no more information about battlefield events than 2nd Division or XI Corps officers. Thus, this message conveys nothing of substance. It does, however, raise questions about why British liaison officers would send a message to the 55th Division—timed two minutes before XI Corps told the same division that German infantry was raiding the Portuguese left—which inferred that the Portuguese left and right brigades were being raided.

The second sentence of excerpt v does not align with British combat records. Specifically, no one—including German troops—could see anything. Haig's allegation about an attack that did not take place until after 0815, appears to constitute exculpatory inference.

The third sentence also conveys assertions unaligned with combat records. The right brigade of the 40th Division, the 119th, did not report an attack against its front until about 0830 hours. Its war diary reads:

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.⁴⁸

The 21st Middlesex Battalion was the 119th Brigade's reserve that morning. 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.⁴⁹

A 40th Division report, however, speculates that British soldiers in a position called Charred Post could see German troops moving rapidly across the Portuguese front at 0730 hours:

The [men manning the] M.G's near CHARRED POST saw the enemy moving rapidly over the Portuguese area but our own infantry posts held them up on our right front.⁵⁰

47 TNA, 55th (West Lancashire) Division. Narrative of Operations. 9th April, 1918 to 17th April, 1918. Action at Divisional Headquarters. WO 95/2905.

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

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

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

In sum, the 119th Brigade—which held the 40th Division's right Forward Zone—explicitly noted first contact with German infantry, against its front, not its flank, at about 0830 hours. The 40th Division, however, alleged that German infantry attacked an hour earlier, without providing corroborating evidence. More to the point, the Charred Post position was located a few hundred yards north of the 2nd Division's sector and several hundred yards behind the front line. Given that many British reports unequivocally convey that visibility did not exceed twenty yards until after 1400 hours, who saw German soldiers moving across the Portuguese front at such extended distances, while the bombardment was ongoing?

Excerpt vi analysis: Only one division attacked the 55th, which achieved its objective of pinning the 55th against the north bank of the La Bassée Canal by midday. German divisions, however, attacked the 2nd and the 40th Divisions in much greater strength, and overran both quickly. Haig's assertion that two battalions advanced immediately, does not align with British combat records, nor does his claim regarding what those units achieved. Both contentions are examined in the analysis of excerpt xi.

Excerpt vii analysis: The first portion of this excerpt conveys facts. The 119th Brigade's war diary lists first contact with the enemy by frontal attack, at approximately 0830 hours. The rest of the excerpt conveys speculation, ungrounded in British combat records. By 1100 hours, both the 119th and the 120th Brigades had been overrun. The 121st Brigade attempted to form a defensive flank, once the 119th Brigade was overrun. More to the point, Haig's assertion regarding the right brigade, the 119th, "having lost heavily," blames the Portuguese for British losses.

Excerpt viii analysis: Haig claim that the 55th Division was heavily attacked and that only its outpost line had been overrun by 1030 is refuted by that division's combat records. The second portion of the last sentence also conflicts with combat records. Moreover, the 4th Ersatz Division's folding of the 165th Brigade against the La Bassée Canal is quite different from the 55th purposely forming a defensive flank.

Excerpt ix analysis: Haig omitted that only one division attacked the 55th, which had the objective of protecting the German Sixth Army's left flank, as it advanced northwest, toward Hazebrouck. By pinning the 55th Division against the north bank of the La Bassée Canal, the 4th Ersatz had won. The irrelevance of the 55th taking 750 German prisoners has already been examined.

Excerpt x analysis: All British divisions holding the front line had other British divisions, in reserve, behind them. The divisions behind 2nd were the 50th and 51st. Small elements of both divisions might have moved laterally. Even smaller elements might have advanced insignificant distances eastward. British combat records, however, bear out that most elements of both divisions were engaged on the same south–north axis that they had held when the bombardment began. More to the point, by no later than the morning of 10 April, both divisions had been pushed back from those positions.

Excerpt xi analysis: The 1st King Edward's Horse and the 11th Cyclist Battalion fielded about 750 men, combined.⁵¹ The three locations that Haig listed they advanced to were within the 2nd Division's sector, about three miles behind the front line. What could those 750 men see in a fog that limited vision to twenty yards? What, exactly, did they achieve, spread thinly across seven miles, on the flat Lys plain, three miles behind the front line, against an attacking force of eight or nine divisions? What verifiable evidence exists that any element of that small force slowed the advance of tens of thousands of German troops, who were also protected by an effective creeping barrage? None.

British combat records do not align with Haig's claim about the 50th and 51st Divisions. These records establish that most elements of both divisions were engaged in the positions that they held when the bombardment began. Finally, no objective correlation exists between the actions of the 750 men of the two specified battalions and the 50th and 51st Divisions.

British combat records establish that the 119th Brigade, which held the 40th Division's right, was attacked frontally, after 0830 hours. Both battalions that held the main line, the 18th Welsh and 13th East Surrey, were overrun by 0930 hours. The 21st Middlesex Battalion, in reserve, appears to have been overrun by 1030 hours. The 120th Brigade, in divisional reserve, appears to have been overrun by 1100 hours. Neither brigade engaged in heavy fighting.

The 121st Brigade, which held the division's left, was not attacked frontally, but in the flank, once the 119th was overrun. Elements of that brigade appear to have retreated across the Lys by about midday. There is no evidence that the 121st made a stand in combat.

51 TNA, No. K.E.H. 365/18, WO 95/883; Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 166.

Haig's Diary Entries

A remark on 9 April in Haig's typescript diary reads: "As previously arranged, British divisions in reserve moved up on each side and rear of the Portuguese. The latter retired, or, to be more exact, "ran away," through the British, taking their guns with them."⁵² As previously noted, the 50th and 51st Divisions were behind the Lys sector, but neither moved up to the sides and rear of the 2nd Division. Now compare the second sentence, as Haig handwrote it: "The later retired through the British, taking their guns with them."⁵³

An 11 April entry appears in the typescript diary that undermines what Haig and GHQ knew of the attack's scope and tactical success. "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."⁵⁴ Now compare the typescript version with the manuscript version: "Apparently this attack had no great strength behind it."⁵⁵ Neither the typescript nor handwritten versions of these entries convey facts.

Approximately 10,000 to 11,000 combat-oriented Portuguese troops held the Forward Zone when the bombardment began. About three quarters of these were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner on the battlefield. Another 4,000 to 5,000 combat-oriented soldiers held the Battle Zone. About 1,000 of these were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. The bombardment and creeping barrage also inflicted casualties on Portuguese service and support troops in rear areas. Total Portuguese casualties therefore range between 8,500 and 9,500.

The British army had a "ritualistic" tradition of identifying scapegoats for defeats.⁵⁶ Many British combat records about the Spring Offensive convey anxiety about open flanks or threatened positions, by blaming other units.⁵⁷ Some British

52 TNA, Douglas Haig, Typescript Diary, 11 April 1918, WO 256/29.

53 NLS, No. 97 – Haig's diary of the Great War, parts 7-12, 1916-19, 9 April 1918.

54 TNA, Douglas Haig, Typescript Diary, 11 April 1918, WO 256/29.

55 NLS, No. 97 – Haig's diary of the Great War, parts 7-12, 1916-19, 11 April 1918.

56 Travers, *Killing Ground*, 13-27.

57 Travers, *Killing Ground*, 232-234; Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 175; Brian Bond and Simon Robbins (eds), *Staff Officer: The Diaries of Walter Guinness (First Lord Moyne) 1914-1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), 189-197.

officers justified the destruction of their units, or their decisions to retreat, during the battle, by alleging that the Portuguese left their units with open flanks. Haig exemplified both trends by asserting the 2nd Division had left the 40th and 55th Divisions with open flanks. The Portuguese made convenient scapegoats for British soldiers of all ranks.

Speculation Construed as Fact

The 165th Brigade blamed the 2nd Division for being pushed against the La Bassée Canal:

“It was a very misty morning and very little could be seen. At 8 a.m. the Portuguese on our left evacuated the whole of their trenches without attempting to fight.”⁵⁸

The 55th held high ground, on the southern rise of the Lys Valley, which would have been more than twenty yards distant from 2nd Division positions. Assertions in the second sentence typify conjectures about the Portuguese construed as fact. Who saw Portuguese soldiers beyond twenty yards, retreating while under the most concentrated bombardment of the war? Should we believe that 10,000 to 11,000 Portuguese—holding a seven-mile-long and three-mile-deep Forward Zone—abandoned their trenches in unison?

General Beauvoir de Lisle, who assumed command of XV Corps after the Battle of the Lys, wrote a brief introduction of the Corps’ after-action reports, which includes this excerpt:

The weight of the enemy’s assault was thrown on the Portuguese Division and the right of XV Corps. He employed some 13 Divisions. He exploited his success on the Portuguese front by pushing Northwards through and east of LAVENTIE.⁵⁹

The factually correct first sentence reveals a key reason why the Lys battle has been misunderstood by military authors. The second sentence is mostly correct, as fourteen German divisions attacked in waves. The third sentence, however, does not align with British combat records.

Archival historians have an obligation to convey facts. In writing history,

58 TNA, 165th Brigade, Report on the Operations from April 9th. to April 15th. WO 95/2905.

59 TNA, Second Army, General Beauvoir De Lisle, XV Corps No. 608/13, 16th May, 1918, WO 95/922.

however, great men “have the most to hide and the most to lose.”⁶⁰ The prevailing Anglophone narrative of the Battle of the Lys has minimal basis in facts because Haig wrote it to justify the tactical defeat of the First Army.⁶¹ The 2nd Portuguese Division—which performed no worse than any British division defending the front lines during *Michael* or *Georgette*—does not deserve the ignominy that Haig, Horne, Haking, Ker, and other Britons heaped upon it.

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Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj in uniforme di capitano d'artiglieria

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