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# FROM POLITICAL DISORDER TO DISASTER AND SIGNS OF ORDER, MESSINES, JUNE 1917

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Le désordre politique, économique et social de l'Europe des années 1870-1914 mena inexorablement à la catastrophe de la Grande Guerre et à l'imposition d'un nouveau type de discours, rigide et polarisé. Ici nous juxtaposons les événements et les attitudes d'avant-guerre et le nouvel ordre tel qu'il est illustré dans deux documents militaires britanniques. En outre, pour marquer le 90<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la bataille de Messines, nous présentons une sélection de noms de tranchées de ce secteur du front : ces symboles poignants d'un autre ordre, profond et immuable, enseveli sous le champ de bataille.

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## Introduction

It is common to think of peace and war respectively as times of order and disorder. In this paper, we shall briefly consider European politics and the military and naval situation in Britain during the years 1870-1914: a period of disorder in many dimensions. This will be followed by an analysis of two types of wartime military document. To juxtapose a political context with language data, is, of course, to compare two incomparable things: a true comparison would require an infinitely greater space than is available here. The documents we shall be looking at should thus be seen as illustrative of the linguistic control made necessary by the extreme conditions of total war, which, paradoxically, did away with the disorder which had characterised the preceding years of so-called peace. The particular moment we focus on is early summer 1917. This is partly because of the closeness of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Messines ridge (7 June 1917), a prelude to the disastrous allied offensive at Ypres, an engagement particularly meaningful in relation to the reasons Britain went to war. It is also because 1917, prior to the intervention of the United States, was a year when the British war effort, sustained at the cost of appalling casualties and severe food shortages at home, with merchant shipping losses at their peak, seemed practically exhausted. As preparations were being made for the hoped-for allied break-out from the Ypres salient—a catastrophe as terrible as, and in many ways worse than the Somme battle of the previous year—the British success at Messines sounded a note of optimism in a very dismal tune. Considered in a wider context, it, like so many other offensive actions, registered the ultimate failure of industrialised warfare to solve the problems of industrialised nations and to re-establish a lasting order in Europe.

### 1 Cause, context, order and disorder

In this first part of the study, we look at the events leading up to the 1914-1918 conflict, first on an international scale, then at home. In both contexts we find sincere attempts at creating and maintaining order within an overall situation which was spinning out of control.

#### *1.1 The European political context 1970-1914*

The search for the causes of a war can be misleadingly narrow, and there is no precise point at which the purely linear order of fatal events can be said to begin. Nor, of course, is it really possible to distinguish between events and context. This is why the immediate and well-documented causes of the 1914-1918 war need to be seen within the disorderly context of European politics in

the forty-four years following Germany's spectacular triumph over France in 1870, which established her as a great land force and a potential threat to Britain if ever she developed a navy of comparable stature. Subsequent developments showed that such was precisely Wilhelm's intention: the two offers of an alliance with Germany made in 1898 and the following year by J. Chamberlain, who was anxious to bring Britain out of her isolation, failed, mainly through Wilhelm II's refusal to restrict his cherished naval programme, which would have had no *raison d'être* in the event of an alliance with precisely the nation against whom it was directed.

Under Bismarck's influence, the British had occupied Egypt in 1882, thereby entering into a twenty-year feud with France, and a dependence on the goodwill of the newly formed Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. This feud was finally brought to an end by the signing of the *Entente Cordiale* in April 1904. Motivated, as far as Britain was concerned, by the naval threat from Germany, it was born also of France's growing distrust of her eastern ally, Russia, who was at that time suffering defeat at the hands of the Japanese, and was undergoing serious internal unrest. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hague Conference, which ran from 15 June to 18 October 1907, an Anglo-Russian Convention was signed, which, two years later crystallized into the Franco-Russo-British *Triple Entente*, constituting a restraining—if uneasy—counter-weight to the Germano-Italo-Austrian Triple Alliance. One of its unfortunate side-effects was Russia's renouncing of her maritime ambitions in the Persian Gulf and a renewed interest in the Dardanelles in her perennial quest for warm water seaports: hence her interest in the Christian Balkan states, and her opposition to any form of Turkish revival, and a sharpening of her rivalry with Austria-Hungary.

That Germany was planning for war no later than the summer of 1914 became evident from her 1913 increase in army effectives, brought about by the conscription of all fit but hitherto exempted men, from the widening of the Kiel canal (completed only six weeks before the outbreak of war), but above all from her *Wehrbetrag* of 1913, a gigantic levy of 1,000 million marks, quite out of proportion to what the country could withstand, despite her new industrial strength, notably in steel output. The Schlieffen plan, designed to eliminate France in a six-week lightning war, if launched in midsummer 1914, would catch France at a time when the reorganisation of her own conscription programme would leave her in a much weaker state than that in which she would have been twelve months later. These preparations, giving a semblance of politico-military order in Germany, must be seen against a background of her misapprehension of the following factors: 1) the rapidity with which Russia could mobilise and the very real risk of simultaneous war on two fronts; 2) the resources of France, who, though militarily less well-prepared than Germany, was not in the weak state she had been in 1870; 3) the reliability of Turkey and Austria-Hungary as organised allies; 4) the determination of Belgium to resist

invasion; 5) the capacity of the small but professional and well-equipped British army to slow down the German advance through northern France and Flanders.

It is within this context of errors of perception, of volatile and autocratic personalities, international mistrust and extreme rivalry that the events of April 1911 – July 1914 took on their particular and fatal significance. Quite apart from the social unrest found in all the industrialised states, it is worth pointing out that during the years 1882 – 1914 there had been seven political or royal assassinations, one attempted assassination, and one kidnapping, all involving European powers<sup>1</sup>. There had been major war scares in 1898, in 1905, in 1908, in 1911 and again in 1913. A form of European peace had been preserved at the cost of brutal repression, and outright massacres in the Balkans. This was the European disorder that '*une bonne guerre*' would, it was hoped by some, dispel.

### *1.3 Britain as a fighting force 1870-1914*

Inside Britain, the situation, though less extreme than abroad was far from relaxed. Speaking of the reign of Edward VII, R. Ensor (1936: 421) has the following words to say:

[...] Men think of the decade as one of calm and contentment, of pomp and luxury, of assured wealth and unchallenged order. Court splendours apart, it was none of those things. It was an era of growth and strain, of idealism and reaction, of swelling changes and of seething unrest. At home politics had never been so bitter; and abroad the clouds were massing for Armageddon.

We shall now look briefly at Britain's fighting potential 1870-1914. During these years, her army and navy underwent considerable reorganisation, though both suffered from a distinct and chronic lack of order at the highest levels of command.

#### *1.3.1 The Army*

In the years following the Franco-Prussian war, the secretary of state for war, Edward Cardwell, was able to push through a number of much-needed reforms, including the abolition of the system of purchasing of commissions, the repatriation of some 20,000 men from the colonies, and, most importantly, the territorialization of all infantry regiments. This in the teeth of resistance from the

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<sup>1</sup> 1882: Lord Frederick Cavendish, newly appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland and Thomas Henry Burke, Permanent Under-Secretary murdered in Phoenix Park, Dublin by the Irish National 'Invincibles'; 1886: Bulgarian sovereign Prince Alexander kidnapped by Russian agents and forced to abdicate; 1897: two German missionaries murdered in Shantung Province, China; 1901: attempt on the life of Edward, Prince of Wales in Belgium; 1903: King Alex of Serbia assassinated by Russian partisans in Belgrade; 1914: Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serb irredentist.

highly conservative commander-in-chief, the Duke of Cambridge, who ruled autocratically without a general staff, and held the army at a disadvantage compared with those of most European states.

With regard to the army's performance in the South African War, R. Ensor (*op. cit.*: 347) makes the interesting observation:

[...] the officers who were successful under Kitchener were nearly all cavalry officers; and by men of this type—normally its least intellectual type—the British army came to have its highest posts filled predominantly down to the European war. Having slowly learned its way into *veldt* tactics, it was too long haunted by them afterwards.

Thus, it may be noted that while Germany went to war in 1914 all too reminiscent of her successes in 1870, and insufficiently alive to the risks she was running, the British army's high command, starting with Sir Douglas Haig, himself a former cavalry officer, who had served in South Africa, was equally ill-advised in its willingness to squander so many thousands of infantrymen's lives attempting impossible breakthroughs, intended to recreate the conditions of the South African campaigns. Thus, in the early part of the war, the high command on both sides was not so much in a state of disorder as fixed in an order that failed to take into account the fact that warfare had become an industrial process like any other. Despite this serious weakness, which was to reveal itself only with the onset of trench warfare on a stabilized front, Haldane's Reserve Forces Act of 1907 had modernised the army sufficiently to enable it to play an important role in the war of 1914-1918. Aided by the two-year-old Committee of Imperial Defence, this very able and persuasive Secretary for War, who had studied at Göttingen University, gave it its much-needed General Staff, created the Officers' Training Corps in public and secondary schools, from which so many of the *cadres* of Kitchener's volunteer armies came, and, most importantly, he had created an Expeditionary Force of six infantry and two cavalry divisions, while combining the traditional yeomanry and volunteers into the new Territorial Force. In all, Britain was able to mobilise in August 1914 a total of twenty divisions, of which six were regular<sup>2</sup>, plus a cavalry division of regulars.

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<sup>2</sup> This represented a force of c. 110,000 professional soldiers ready to be sent to France and Belgium as the B.E.F. In the event, only four divisions were initially sent, soon followed by another two, Haldane and Sir John French, both in favour of sending all six divisions, having been defeated at the War Council of 3 August by Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener. In contrast to Britain's land force, Germany was able to field c. 4,000,000 men, mostly trained conscripts. France had at its disposal a comparable conscript army of 3,878,000 men, while Russia was able to mobilise 5,963,000 men. Austria-Hungary's army had a maximum war strength of 4,320,000. The courage of the Belgian decision to refuse the violation of her neutrality by Germany is evident from the size of her army, which, even on a war footing, did not exceed 350,000 men. (figures taken from Nash's War Manual, London: Eveleigh Nash, 1914: 173-195)

The modernisation of the army is a story of order being created from disorder: as international politics of the period gradually dissolved into disorder, the British army, by a series of jumps—not easily negotiated—was transformed from a state of antiquated incompetence to one of professionalism and readiness by the summer of 1914.

### 1.3.2 The Navy

The basic problem facing the rival navies during the period in question was, rather than a simple question of numerical strength, one of unprecedented rapid technological progress: wave after wave of improvements in gunnery, range-finding, armour and speed repeatedly turned existing ships into death-traps within a few years of their being built. This new order—or disorder—meant that any power capable of building up-to-date ships rapidly could thereby constitute a serious challenge to Britain's long-established supremacy: tradition was giving way to innovation.

It was during the short-lived but highly productive 1904-5 partnership of Sir John Fisher as First Sea Lord and the Earl Cawdor as First Lord of the Admiralty, that two decisive changes were made. The first was the reorganisation of the fleet, involving the scrapping of many obsolete ships and a recall of many others into home waters, the three new fleets being 1) the Mediterranean Fleet, based on Malta, 2) the Atlantic Fleet, based at Gibraltar, and thus capable of facing both ways, and 3) the Channel Fleet (later called the Grand Fleet, and later still the Home Fleet), based in British ports. The second change was the laying down of the battleship *Dreadnought*<sup>3</sup> and the battle-cruiser *Invincible*<sup>4</sup> both prototypes of the ships that were to see Britain through the war of 1914-1918. The *Dreadnought*, built amid great secrecy and at top speed, was the first of a squadron of ten or even fourteen to be completed before Germany, the new rival, would have the time to catch up. The naval race with Germany was openly acknowledged, and Britain, thanks to the foresight of Fisher and Cawdor, appeared to have a good lead. Although Cawdor did establish the Navy War Council in October 1905, the navy, like the army, continued to lack a general staff, and as such remained all too dependent on the qualities of the man at the top.

Fleet limitation discussions between Germany and Britain lasting from July 1910 to May 1911 came to nothing. The following year, a Naval War Staff was finally created. In March 1913, and again the following October, as a conciliatory move, Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, proposed his

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<sup>3</sup> The *Dreadnought*, 17,900 tons, mounted ten 12-inch guns and twenty-seven 12-pounder guns. Having survived the war, she was sold in 1921. (J.J. Colledge, *op. cit.*: 112)

<sup>4</sup> The *Invincible*, 17,250 tons, mounted eight 12-inch guns and sixteen 4-inch guns. Despite her name, she was sunk at Jutland, 31 May 1916. (J.J. Colledge, *op. cit.*: 181)

“Naval Holiday” to Germany, whereby the building of warships on both sides planned for the next twelve months should be cancelled. Germany refused, and the prospect of *der Tag*, a day of reckoning between the two naval powers loomed closer. Against this background, it was decided to make Scapa Flow<sup>5</sup> and Cromarty defensible naval bases. However, by the time war came, neither of these, nor Rosyth were truly safe, hence the Grand Fleet’s being obliged to spend the first months of the war constantly at sea for want of a safe harbour. The magnitude of this omission seems scarcely credible, and is a clear indication of a fundamental disorder, despite its lavish shipbuilding programme, in the management of the navy’s budget. Notwithstanding this, and the severe setback caused by Campbell-Bannerman’s interruption of the Cawdor-Fisher programme in 1906, Britain was able to go to war with an extremely powerful navy, based in home waters. She had the lead in all-big-gun ships. However—and this was to be her weakness—Germany had more aircraft available for naval reconnaissance and she was further advanced in crucial matters of submarine construction, mine-laying, and gunnery. R. Ensor (*op. cit.*: 524) puts Germany’s technological lead down to her long-standing general staff—an ordering body the Royal Navy had lacked for too long.

To sum up: when Britain entered the war, she was in as good a state of military and naval readiness as she could have been. While her naval preparations over the preceding twenty-five years had accorded with the logic of her perennial dependence for survival on her supremacy at sea, it was in the regrouping and modernisation of her army that real innovation had been achieved.

## 2 Britain at war: signs of order

The placing of nations on a war footing can only be brought about by the imposition of the strictest possible order in all matters and in all domains relating to the prosecution of the war. Individual whims and aspirations are—not without resentment and resistance—subordinated to a simple, collective aim: that of victory. Accordingly, from the late summer of 1914, uniformity and singleness of purpose dominated the visual, material, and perhaps most importantly of all, the linguistic conditioning of the population. Once enlisted for active service, men came under harsh military law, according to which no fewer than twenty types of charge had death as their maximum punishment (*Field Service Pocket Book. 1914*: 216-223). This does not amount to saying that the whole nature of British society changed, but it does mean that, mainly through language, a determined effort was made to preclude dissent, irregularity and any form of disorder likely to weaken the war effort.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of the Navy’s use of Scapa Flow, see M. Brown & P. Meehan (1968).



At the level of international relations, the prevailing disorder and mischief of the preceding years was frozen—at last—into a simple and clear tableau of alliance and hostility. Once again, this does not mean that suddenly all conflict between allies disappeared, and that no form of communication or compromise with the enemy was possible (on this question, see T. Ashworth (1980), and *Field Service Pocket Book. 1914*: 226-234), and *Nash's War Manual*: 323-326). However, it does mean that all attempts possible were made, again through the medium of language, to maintain as unambiguous as possible a distinction between the representations of enmity and those of alliance.

In this section, we will consider two different manifestations of the semiotic management of conflict on the Western Front, the first cartographic-toponymic, and the second textual.

### *2.1 A trench map and trench names, Messines 1917*

Following the halt of the German advance on the Marne in early September 1914 and the subsequent withdrawal of her First, Second and Seventh Armies to the north of the Aisne, the failed allied attacks of 12-28 September, and the race to the North Sea resulted in a stable, entrenched front that was to move very little until the German breakthrough in the spring of 1918. Trenches were not new in military history, having played a prominent part in the Crimea, in the American Civil War, and more recently in the Balkan Wars. In the autumn of 1914, the rudimentary trenches, whose initial function was to link rifle pits and strong-points, were improved and elaborated so as to provide practically continuous parallel lines of resistance stretching from the Swiss border to the Belgian coast. The necessity for huge concentrations of troops, who needed to be fed, supplied, accommodated, rested, maintained in a permanent state of battle-readiness, and shuffled in and out of the forward positions, resulted in the construction on both sides of no-man's-land, of vast systems of installations: strong-points, dugouts, gun pits, camps and supply dumps, headquarters, command posts and casualty clearing stations, all linked by intricate networks of tracks, light railways, tunnels and, above all, trenches. The Western Front is estimated to have consisted of some 10,000 miles of allied and German trenches (Chasseaud 2006: 18). This enormous figure is calculated from the many millions of trench maps (French: *plans directeurs*; German: *Stellungskarten*) produced during the war. Clearly, this militarised landscape underwent a profound transformation, the traditional order of agriculture, industry and habitation, road and rail links being either modified, obliterated or submerged. This new order, the maintenance of which was vital to each side, was precisely the target of the artillery of the opponent, whose objective, apart from killing the enemy and destroying his guns and installations, was to cut his supply routes and throw his management of the front into *disorder*. Thus, there

emerged a battlefield that appeared stable and coherent and ordered on paper, but which was much less so on the ground. During battles such as those of Verdun, the Somme and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ypres, the whole trench system gradually dissolved into mud under the combined effects of the weather and constant bombardment, so that the struggle to maintain some form of order became desperate for both sides.

As an example of the terrain of the Western Front, we look at the Wyttschaete-Messines sector, in commemoration of the battle which took place there 90 years ago, on 7 June 1917 (see Appendix 1).

The 1:10,000 trench map, of which Appendix 1 contains three extracts, is that of the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the south-west section of sheet 28, Ordnance Survey, April 1917. The fact that it is marked: SECRET. Number 1389 NOT TO BE TAKEN BEYOND BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS. is due to its showing the trace and names of British trenches, which, for security reasons, were not shown in detail on maps produced for use in forward positions, the front line on these being roughly indicated by a pecked line, printed in blue. As can be seen from the key, German trenches are shown as crenellated lines, printed in red, to distinguish them from British trenches, which are generally, if not systematically, shown as continuous lines, printed in blue<sup>6</sup>. The plan of the German front line system, consisting of a fire trench, situated 200 to 500 yards to the east of the British front line, a support trench approximately 100 yards to the rear, and a reserve trench, approximately 100 yards further back, is repeated in the second line system, some 500 yards to the rear, directly in front of Messines, and again by a third line system approximately 1,000 yards further to the east. Within each system, fire, support and reserve trenches are linked by perpendicular or oblique communication trenches (the latter known as *switches*), designed for movement, but also designed for use as fire trenches, whose purpose was to contain any enemy breakthrough. Though the German system is shown more clearly on this map than the British one, this quadrilateral organisation was typical of the Western Front. It is reminiscent of the warp and weft of a woven fabric, which, as chance would have it, was the earliest meaning of the Latin noun *ōrdō, ōrdinis*<sup>7</sup>.

From a toponymic point of view, a number of general as well as particular features can be observed. Among the general features are the following:

- 1) British front line fire-trenches are divided into 100 yard sections, each of which has a letter corresponding to the letter referring to the capital zone letter (here: N, O T, U) followed by a number corresponding to one of the

<sup>6</sup> This colour code was reversed in mid-1918, bringing it into line with French practice.

<sup>7</sup> A. Ernout & A. Meillet, (2001: 467) say the following: *ōrdō, ōrdinis* : [...] d'abord « ordre [des fils dans la trame] », cf. *seriēs* ; et, dans la langue commune, « rang, rangée » (sens abstrait et concret [...]). A pris ensuite dans diverses langues techniques des acceptions spéciales, [...] dans la langue militaire, « poste, rang, ordre de bataille [...] ». See also G. Bourquin (this volume).

thirty or thirty-six 1,000 yard squares into which the lettered zone was divided. The number is followed by a full stop and another single figure. For example, the reference N.36.4 shown on the map can be localised unambiguously within the 36<sup>th</sup> square (i.e. the extreme south-east corner) of N zone. It will predictably be situated between N.36.3 to the right (when facing the enemy) and N.36.5 to the left. Such precision reduces the possibility of errors of spelling or confusion, and also makes a clear distinction in orders and despatches between this type of trench and others, as we shall see.

- 2) Support and reserve trenches, in less danger of being overrun and thus less in need of very precise identification usually have dithematic names, consisting of a specific (first element), which can be almost anything from local names to names of planets, seasons, or colours, from personal names to place names, from regimental names to bird, animal or insect names. Grammatically, these can be nouns, adjectives, verbs or adverbs<sup>8</sup>, and are followed by the generic (second element) *Trench*.
- 3) Communication trenches usually also consist of a dithematic name, consisting of a specific followed by a generic. The generics used for communication trenches are typically those of peacetime urban development, such as *Avenue; Lane; Road; Street; Walk; Way*, the generic *Trench* being reserved for fire trenches.
- 4) German trenches, though on occasion retaining their German name, if known from captured maps, and on condition that it is pronounceable and memorable, are frequently given names in the languages of the Allies<sup>9</sup>. This practice can be seen as a piece of toponymic imperialism, but it also had the more immediate function of appearing to tame the enemy side of no-man's-land and creating easy-to-memorise objectives for attacking troops. The choice of names is not arbitrary. Firstly German-fire trenches are given the generics *Trench, Support* and *Reserve*, while communication trenches have the same generics as their British counterparts, thus creating a linguistic mirror-image of the British side of the front. Secondly, by varying the generic, the specific of the trenches in a particular area can be repeated, while the initial letter of all the specifics of trenches in the same 1000 yard square on the map can begin with the same initial letter.

Among the particular features observed, are the following:

- 1) The British front line fire trenches, in the T.6. are indicated alphanumerically : T.6.1.; T.6.2.; T.6.3.; T.6.4.; T.6.5; T.6.6. The initial

<sup>8</sup> For a non-exhaustive but fairly complete typology see P. Chasseaud & H. Daniels (2007: 329-333).

<sup>9</sup> Among the German names in use along the Wyttschaete-Messines ridge were: *Granatenhof* 'shell farm'; *Schützenhof* 'gun farm'; *Bayern-Riegel* 'Bavaria Switch'. German names given to British trenches included *Zick-Zack Weg* 'Zig-Zag Lane' and *Eck-Weg* 'Corner Lane'. (Chasseaud 2006: 190)

letter changes to <U> as the line is prolonged south-east, south of *Ontario Farm* into square U.

- 2) In square U we find British names *Hanbury Support North* and *South* between *Boyle's Farm*, *Big Bull Cottage* to the north, and *Stinking Farm* and *Gooseberry Farm* to the south.
- 3) Among the communication trenches we find, in square T.6.: *Day Street*; *Spring Walk*; *Mobbs Street*; *Stone Street*; *Calgary Avenue West* and the intriguing *Medicine Hat Trail*.
- 4) The German fire-trenches of square N.36 are called *Nutmeg Trench*, *Support* and *Reserve*, connected by *Nutmeg Avenue* and *Nutmeg Lane*. Moving south east into square U.1 the names change to *Ugly Trench*, *Ugly Support* and *Ugly Reserve*, linked by *Ugly Switch*.
- 5) The names *Ontario Farm* (U.1.) and *Calgary Avenue* (T.6.) are reminders of the Canadian occupation of this sector of the front in late 1915 and early 1916, while *Blighty Bridge* (T.12.) and *North Midland Farm* and *South Midland Farm* and *Bristol Castle* (T.6.) are clearly British names, probably a legacy of the occupation of the sector by the Staffordshire Brigade April-June 1915.

Other names, some graphic, some whimsical, some sinister, in use during 1917 in the Wytshaete-Messines-Ploegsteert sector include:

#### Allied

*Agnes Street*; *Alderson Avenue*; *Annscroft Avenue*; *Autumn Trench*; *Blighty Hall*; *Chinese Trench*, *Cornwall Avenue*; *Currie Avenue*; *Day Street*; *Dead Cow Farm*; *Durham Road*; *Fort Lindsay*; *Fort Osborne*; *Fort Pinkie*; *Gas Trench*; *Hanbury Support*; *Irish Farm*; *Look Slippy Lane*; *Marine Terrace*; *Mud Lane*; *Old Kent Road*; *The Only Way*; *Pall Mall*; *Piccadilly*; *Quebec Avenue*; *Queen Victoria Street*; *R.E. Farm*; *Rum Lane*; *Seaforth Avenue*; *Shell Farm*; *Spring Street*; *Spy Farm*; *Suicide Road*; *Ulster Road*; *Via Gellia*

#### German

*Immovable Trench*<sup>10</sup>; *Impudence Trench*; *Jam Trench*; *Nail Row*; *Nail Street*; *Name Drive*; *Name Support*; *Nancy Switch*; *Nancy Trench*; *Narrow Lane*; *Narrow Reserve*; *Oaf Street*; *Oaf Row*; *Object Trench*; *Owl Trench*; *Oxygen Trench*; *Uhlan Avenue*; *Ulcer Sap*; *Ulna Beak*; *Unbearable Trench*; *Unbent Trench*; *Undated Trench*; *Ungodly Trench*; *Zareeba Trench*

Some of these trenches were very probably known, though under their German names, to A. Hitler, who served in the Bayern Wald sector on Messines ridge.

<sup>10</sup> *Immovable Trench*: ironically named, as one which was destined to be blown out of existence on 7 June.

This brief glimpse of trench construction, mapping and naming illustrates the need for four basic kinds of order in an extremely unpleasant, distressing and hostile environment:

- 1) a sense of control and calm, produced by linguistic regularity and predictability
- 2) a sense of power, deriving from the very act of printing friendly as well as hostile ground with familiar names
- 3) a sense of timelessness and detachment, achieved through cultural, often poetic references, through evocations of beauty and harmony and through use of whimsy and irony
- 4) reminders of home and better days past—and hopefully—to come

## 2.2 *Order through discourse*

The 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division, originally called the Royal Naval Division (in which Rupert Brooke served as a Sub-lieutenant), was formed in England in September 1914 from the 30,000 men on the Reserves of the Royal Navy for whom no place could be found on any warship. The Division took part in many engagements, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres.

The document under study here, reproduced in Appendix 2 is a selection of six sections taken from a forty-page booklet *63<sup>rd</sup> (R.N.) Division Trench Standing Orders* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) 1917, London: HMSO, which provides guidelines of routine procedure for officers at the front. The standing orders it contains may be considered as representative of those issued to infantry officers serving in the trenches at Messines in June 1917. The booklet is divided into 48 sections arranged into six parts: PART I. TAKING OVER AND HANDING OVER TRENCHES; PART II. TRENCH ROUTINE; PART III. WORK ON TRENCHES; PART IV. ACTION IN CASE OF ATTACK; PART V. PRECAUTIONS AGAINST GAS; PART VI. COMMUNICATIONS. The sections we look at here all belong to PART II. TRENCH ROUTINE. They are 7.—TIME-TABLE; 8.—STANDING TO ARMS; 9.—DISCIPLINE; 26.—RUM ISSUE; 27.—SALVAGE; 28.—SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS.

### 2.2.1 *Form*

Each section of the booklet is composed of a series of numbered orders, frequently consisting of single or coordinated sentences having the approximate structure: NP +Aux (+Adv) +V (+ NP) (+ Adv), for ex ample:

8.1. *Troops will always stand to arms one hour before daylight [...]*

9.1. *Men must be properly dressed at all times [...]*

27.3. *Nothing should ever be left lying about in the trenches [...]*

The choice of auxiliary is interesting in that it gives the particular tone of each order. The frequency of *will* (36 occurrences in the sample) to denote permanent obligation/predictability is very noticeable. The much less frequent *must* (11 occurrences) is generally used in orders referring to individual behaviour, for example:

9.2. *All men must shave daily [...]*

28.1. *Every officer and man must know [...]*

Elsewhere, *must* is used in orders of capital importance, for example:

9.6. *There must be as little talking as possible at night in the front line trenches [...]*

27.3. *The fire step must be always be kept clear.*

The difference is nicely illustrated in

27.1. *All rifles, ammunition (including fired cases), equipment, tools, trench stores, &c., found lying about must invariably be collected and returned to battalion headquarters, whence they will be forwarded to the Brigade salvage dump.*

where *must* concerns an imperative addressing the men in the trenches, whereas *will* is a more generalised prediction of what is supposed to happen. Usage is, however, not wholly consistent. Compare

28.2. *Officers in the trenches will not carry on them any papers, orders, or documents which would give information of value to the enemy if captured.*

28.3. *Maps or sketches showing our dispositions, defences, &c. must on no account be taken beyond battalion headquarters.*

Given that both sides had excellent trench maps by this stage in the war, the capture of orders, particularly prior to an operation, would a priori be more serious than the capture of maps.

*Should* occurs only four times in the sample. It functions as a subjunctive in

7.1. [...] *that no work should be done at night which can possibly be done by day.*

28.8. [...] *that, should they find themselves in the hands of the enemy, [...]*<sup>11</sup>

while it appears to have the force of a moral or general recommendation rather than that of a precise order in

27.3. *Nothing should ever be left lying about in the trenches, contrasting with a following imperative: which must be kept scrupulously clean.*

28.7. [...] *If map squares are referred to the number of the sheet should be given.[...]*

As might be expected, *may* is unusual, occurring only once, where no strict order is given:

26.1. (iv) *Any surplus of rum may be kept by the company commander [...]*

<sup>11</sup> Enemy forces are consistently referred to both in official and familiar exchanges and documents in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular.

### 2.2.2 Semantics

On the semantic/referential plane, we are struck by the clarity and the brevity of the orders, the scarcity of technical terminology, and the absence of metaphor and metonymy. Obviously, the function of orders is to produce desired results, to discourage inactivity and to preclude *disorder*. In the case of trench routine, these orders concern everyday matters of tidiness, correction and logistics. We will take the sections of the sample one by one, commenting on any interesting points.

#### 7.—TIME-TABLE

This order lays down the plan for the day (night-time is not pre-structured in this way). The vital activities of morning and evening stand-to and rifle inspection alternate with lighter ones, the most heartening of which must surely be *4.0 to 4.30 p.m. Teas*.

#### 8.—STANDING TO ARMS

These most warlike orders are of the utmost importance, they are designed to preclude the possibility of surprise attack at dawn and dusk: the two periods in the day when vigilance tends to be at its lowest.

#### 9.—DISCIPLINE

Orders concerning smartness, cleanliness, shaving, saluting and standing to attention seem to be at variance with most images we have of trench warfare. The maintenance of this kind of protocol was designed to bolster morale. There are stories of front-line soldiers being punished for untidy or 'unsoldierly' appearance. Order N° 6 is the only one in this selection to contain its own justification, reference being made to the danger of enemy listening patrols.

#### 26.—RUM ISSUE

Any risk of drunkenness on duty is avoided by the precise procedure to be followed. Strangely, the quantity given to each man, officially  $\frac{1}{4}$  pint, is not mentioned here<sup>12</sup>. There is a human touch in the reference to '*special occasions*'.

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<sup>12</sup> Rum was delivered to the trenches in one-gallon earthenware jars marked *S.R.D.* (*Service Rum Diluted*). Dilution discouraged men from saving up several days' ration in preparation for a grand, but dangerous 'binge'. For this slang term, cf. *Bingo* 'brandy' and *The Bing Boys* 'a wildly popular musical comedy of 1916-17 featuring the song 'Another little drink wouldn't do us any harm'.', see J. Brophy & E. Partridge (1965: 84)

## 27.—SALVAGE

As in 9. above and order N° 28.11 these three orders conjure up a text-book image of the trenches as being spotlessly clean and tidy in sharp contrast with the filthy, stinking vermin-infested places invariably reported by eye-witnesses. Recycling was certainly a priority, however, the quantities of war material dug up on recent Western Front archaeological sites suggests a rather less green picture of what actually occurred.

## 28.—SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS

Order N° 1. is essentially toponymic and topographic. Every officer *and every man* must know local trench names, and how to find his way around the area, when detailed to do so.

Order N° 4. emphasizes the absolute necessity of sustaining continuous rifle fire in case of attack.

Order N° 5. is more practical than heroic, in that one well-attested enemy trick was to shout '*Retire!*' during a British attack or raid.

Order N° 6. is intended to keep up the offensive spirit. It is, however, either utopian or a case of playing lip service to regulations, since, as was well known, certain sectors of the front were 'quiet' or 'cushy', where, in tacit collaboration with the enemy, the 'live and let live' principle was observed. For a thorough description of this phenomenon, see T. Ashworth (1980).

Order N° 8. contains a rare instance of euphemism *should they find themselves in the hands of the enemy*. This device sidesteps direct evocation of notions of capture, surrender or desertion, unmentionable with reference to British troops, except in regulations concerning courts-martial.

Order N° 10. confirms toponymic observations made in 2.1 above. One thing not mentioned here is the tendency of wooden trench name-boards and sign-posts to disappear, particularly during cold weather. (Chasseaud, 2006: 103)

This brief look at the printed orders of the 63<sup>rd</sup> (R.N.) Division cannot provide us with an accurate picture of what trench-life was actually like. Even eye-witness reports<sup>13</sup> and film footage fail on that count<sup>14</sup>. Its interest lies in the very necessary attempt, through unemotional and highly formalised discourse, produced and printed, let it be remembered, in London, by people who may never have actually visited the front, to impose order on a highly volatile situation, which threatened at any moment to dissolve into anarchy and madness.

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<sup>13</sup> Eye-witness accounts form a significant part of all L. Macdonald's books covering the history of the Great War. A publication of a rather different kind, in that the eye-witness accounts are entirely uncensored and accordingly particularly harrowing, is that of T. Cunningham (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Extensive film coverage of the 1914-1918 war is provided in the BBC's 1964 twenty-six 40-minute episode documentary *The Great War*, now released on DVD in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum.



### 3 Ordering memory: one account of the Battle of Messines

The Battle of the Wytshaete-Messines ridge was, and continues to be acclaimed as one of the great allied victories of the First World War. It was significant in being the essential first phase of Haig's 1917 offensive, the ultimate aim of which was the 'clearing of the Belgian coast', the recapture of Lille and the opening of the road to Brussels and Antwerp. It was thus intimately tied up with the reason Britain had gone to war in 1914: to ensure that no hostile European force should threaten her security and her naval supremacy by occupying the Belgian ports. Thus victory here would have a symbolic as well as a strategic value.

The particular feature for which the battle will always be remembered was the digging of over five miles of tunnels under the German lines and the laying of twenty-four mines containing over 1,000,000 lb of ammonal. Following a gigantic seventeen-day preliminary bombardment<sup>15</sup>, at 3.10 a.m. on 7 June, nineteen mines were simultaneously detonated, producing the greatest explosion the world had witnessed hitherto<sup>16</sup>. Further bombardment followed, prior to the advance of the infantry, supported by forty tanks. The attack, which proceeded 'with clockwork regularity', ended in a victory costing, at a conservative estimate, some 16,000 allied casualties for twenty-four square miles of territory gained. M. Marix Evans (2005: 14) quotes General Sir Herbert Plumer's chief of staff Major General Sir Charles Harington as describing allied losses as 'only about one tenth of what we had expected and feared'. Shocking as the figure is to today's reader, the ensuing 'hollow victory' of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres, which cost half a million British, French and German casualties, of which the B.E.F. suffered 310,000, between July and November 1917, does put the losses of 7 June into a different perspective, however.

#### Concluding remarks

We have endeavoured in this paper to show how a disorderly and undisciplined peace led to a war in which the attempts at semiotic and linguistic control, deadly serious though they were at the time, today appear in some places trivial and pathetic and in others cynical and outrageous in retrospect of the enormous human tragedy of which they were a part. The meticulous survey and topographical work, just like the imaginative and often whimsical trench-naming and the detailed routine orders of which we have had a glimpse did, however, play a part, sometimes tangible, sometimes not, in preventing a very

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<sup>15</sup> J. Hammerton (c. 1936) describes the preliminary bombardment as having started on 21 May, while M. Marix Evans (*op. cit.*: 13) has the starting date as 26 May.

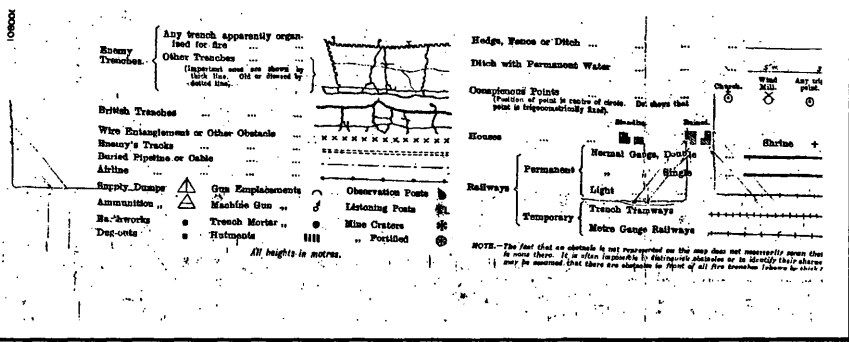
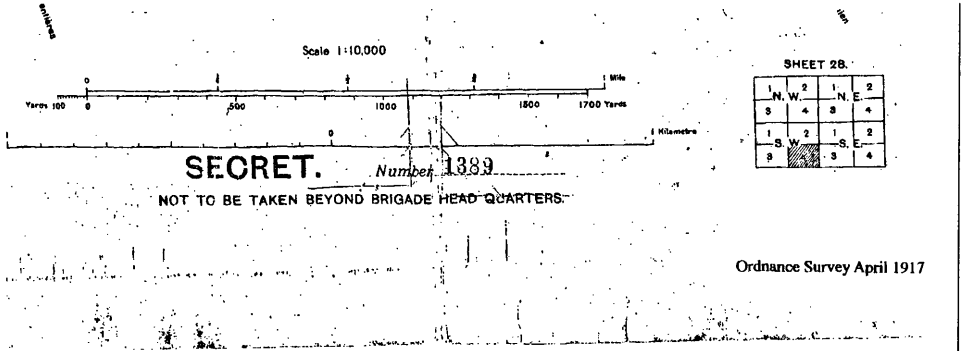
<sup>16</sup> One remaining mine, which failed to detonate, is known to be still in position at *The Birdcage*, east of Ploegsteert Wood.

probably intended Austro-German military domination of Europe, which, once imposed, would have been extremely costly to dislodge: not one that could have been moved by 1,000,000 lb of ammonal.

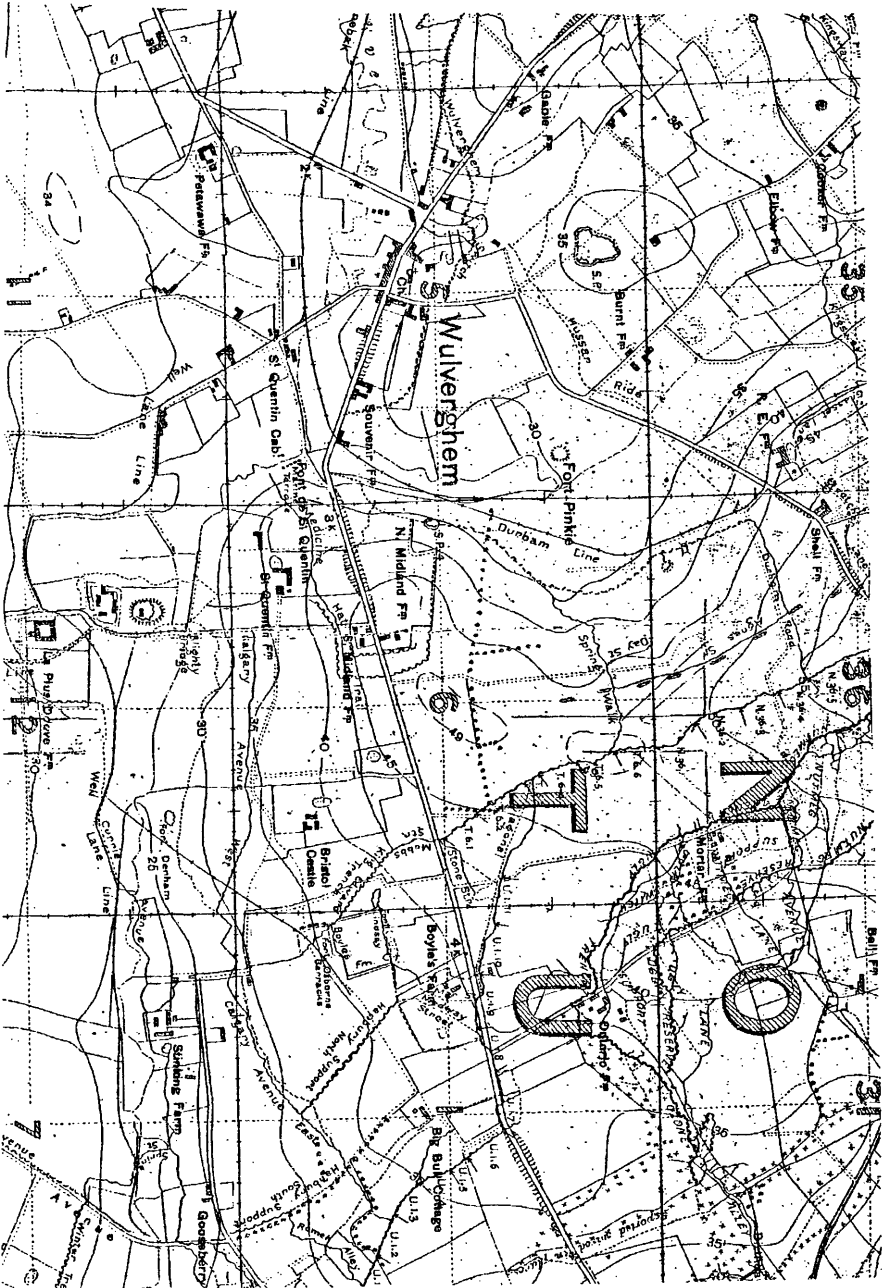
An operation such as the Battle of the Wytschaete-Messines ridge may be seen as a military success. It was the perfectly ordered first phase of a failed allied attempt at initiating movement amid a war of positions. The subsequent dismal disorder of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres was as much to do with exceptionally bad weather as it was to do with inflexibility on the part of Douglas Haig. On the Western Front, the four principal attempts at upsetting the order of static trench warfare, viz. the allied offensives on the Somme and at Ypres, the German offensive at Verdun, and that of spring 1918 all ended in disaster. However, without the apparent madness of these suicidal forays, so enormously costly in material and human lives, it is still difficult to see how the Great War—Europe's answer to the accumulated problems of the previous 45 years—could ever have come to an end.

APPENDICES

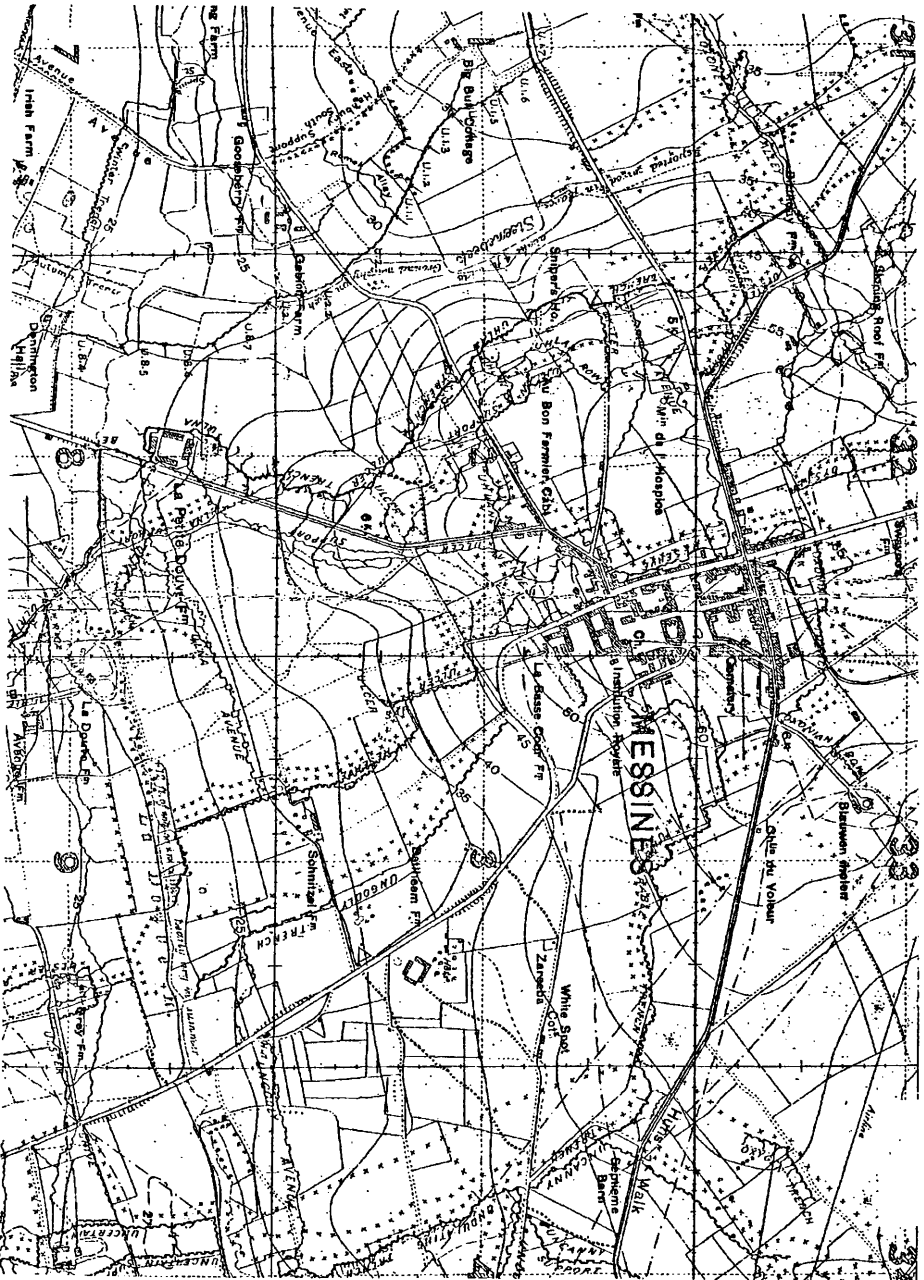
APPENDIX 1: Extracts from Trench Map 1389, April 1917  
(From the collection of Dr Peter Chasseaud)



Appendix 1a: Trench map 1:10,000 trench map, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the south-west section of sheet 28, Ordnance Survey, April 1917. Number 1389: key.



Appendix 1b: Trench map 1:10,000 trench map, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the south-west section of sheet 28. Ordnance Survey, April 1917. Number 1389: extract 1 (west).



Appendix 1c: Trench map 1: 10,000 trench map, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the south-west section of sheet 28. Ordnance Survey, April 1917. Number 1389: extract 2 (east).

APPENDIX 2: Extracts from 63rd (R.N.) Division, Trench Standing Orders (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1917, London: HMSO (reproduced by kind permission of the naval and Military Press)

63rd (R.N.) DIVISION

**TRENCH STANDING  
ORDERS.**

(2nd Edition)



LONDON:

PRINTED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE  
By HARRISON AND SONS, 45-47, St. Martin's Lane, W.C.,  
PRINTERS IN ORDINARY TO HIS MAJESTY.

1917.

11

**7.—TIME-TABLE.**

1. The normal routine of duties will be in accordance with the time-table given below. The actual hours will be at the discretion of brigade commanders according to the season of the year:—

One hour before dawn	Stand-to.
Before breakfast	Patrol issue.
4.30 a.m.	Stand-to.
5.30 a.m.	Breakfast.
6.0 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.	Work.
12.30 to 1.30 p.m.	Dinner.
1.30 to 4.0 p.m.	Rest.
4.0 to 4.30 p.m.	Tea.
4.30 to 7.0 p.m.	Clean-up.
One hour before dark	Stand-to.
	Right work.

It is an essential principle that no work should be done at night which can possibly be done by day.

**8.—STANDING TO ARMS.**

1. Troops will always stand to arms one hour before daylight and one hour before dark. They will remain under arms at morning "Stand to," until the enemy's lines are visible and at evening "Stand to" until darkness sets in.

2. During "stand-to" platoon commanders will inspect the arms, ammunition, and equipment of their men, and verify that every man is wearing a foot respirator and a F.H. helmet. Ammunition will be made up to 150 rounds per man.

**9.—DISCIPLINE.**

1. Men must be properly dressed at all times, and as smart and clean as circumstances will allow.

2. All men must arrive daily, before the hour for the daily jump, shaving their faces.

3. Discipline as regards walking, standing, attention, etc., will be kept up to the highest standard.

4. No man will leave the trenches without permission from an officer.

5. All parties moving within the trench area will be correctly marshalled by an officer or N.C.O.

6. There must be as little talking as possible at night in the front line trenches, and the enemy is in the habit of recording all listening posts and conversations. This is especially important during a night.

(a 10464)

15

1. If rain is issued in the trenches, the following rules will be observed:—

- (i) Rain will never be issued to the men on an empty stomach.
- (ii) The supply will be kept by the company commander.
- (iii) or special commander (to be the possession of an officer, who will see that it is consumed only by the men to whom it has been issued.
- (iv) Any surplus of an issue of rain may be kept by the company commander or the officer in a trench for issue on special occasions at the discretion of the commanding officer.

#### 26.—RIFLE ISSUE.

1. All rifles, ammunition (including fired cases), equipment, tools, trench stores, &c., found lying about must invariably be collected and returned to battalion headquarters, where they will be forwarded to the Brigade stores. The Brigade analysis or finally sent to the Brigade stores as necessaries for issue or to the S.A. empty cases, and chargers. Officers will be hung up for waste paper and rubbish, and the responsible will be labelled accordingly. These bags or boxes will be disposed daily under battalion arrangements.

2. Nothing should ever be left lying about in the trenches, which may be of any consequence to the enemy. The fire shop must always be kept clear. Dirty trenches invariably denote lack of discipline in the unit concerned.

#### 27.—SALVAGE.

#### 28.—SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS.

1. Every officer and man must know:—

- The names of all posts and trenches in his vicinity.
- The position of his company and battalion headquarters, and the shortest way to them.
- The position of the supply line and reserve line.
- The position of the bar and post.

2. Officers in the trenches will not carry on them any papers, orders, or documents which would give information of value to the enemy if captured.

3. Maps or sketches showing our dispositions, defences, &c., must on no account be taken beyond battalion headquarters.

4. No man will ever leave his firing position to attend to wounded. No man will ever leave his trench unless he is accompanied by the first-aid post or by the stretcher.

5. The word "Retire" is never to be used.

6. The enemy must never know what it is to have a quiet day, but must continually be kept with his nerves on stretch. Every man must be kept on his feet, and every man must be kept on his toes to the enemy and to improve and strengthen men day to cease loss of energy.

7. On the approach of any of the enemy's aircraft three whistles will be blown on a whistle. This is the signal for all ranks to sleep perfectly still.

Two blasts on the whistle will indicate that the aircraft has moved away.

Enemy aircraft will not be fired on without the order of an officer or N.C.O. who will satisfy himself that the aircraft is hostile.

If a Zeppelin is sighted a priority message will be sent notifying where the Zeppelin was seen, the direction in which it was moving, and the time of day when it was first seen and by whom. If map squares are referred to the number of the square will be given.

Neither anonymous nor siphons will be fired upon by night, unless they unmistakably reveal their whereabouts by opening fire, or by being clearly recognizable as hostile in the light of a searchlight.

8. All ranks will be warned that, should they find themselves in the hands of the enemy, it is only necessary for them to give their true number and name. No other information whatever will be given.

9. All possible assistance when asked for must be given to R.E. and miners working in the section held by a Brigade.

10. Sign posts will always be placed at all trench junctions, and at frequent intervals in all communication avenues.

Trenches will be divided into sections, each with a name, e.g., "F. 1," "F. 2," &c.; the numbers running from right to left. A number of men will be placed at each end of each section, giving the name of the section, and the name of the man placed at each end. The right to sit in each section, and a small board a fixed ground in designation, e.g., "F. 2, Bay 1," "F. 2, Bay 2," &c. Notice boards will also be placed over all stores of ammunition, grenades, &c.

11. A constabulary party of one N.C.O. and six men will be trench detailed to each main communication trench. They may collect refuse, all material dropped by carrying parties, replace broken trench boards, keep all drains open, &c., and generally be responsible for the upkeep of the trench.

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