

Grand Campaign – De Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT188: 23 – 27 October 1916 (6 October)

General Situation

As many historians have recounted, Haig was the model of a modern general in his time. He wholeheartedly embraced wireless technology though he relied on others and was never a “ham” with the technical details. In late 1916, he had been persuaded to insist GHQ go “paperless” and all orders and reports would be communicated (suitably encrypted) by radio within the higher echelons of command which would be sufficiently static for this network to operate effectively.

The acid test of Haig’s new communication system was to be in the next major attack in France that had been due to take place on 23 October after the conclusion of the heavy British bombardments of a days’ duration. That night, Haig sat down in his new nerve centre. All around him were steel boxes, diodes, transmitters, flashing lights, earpieces, mouthpieces, and several very pleasing red buttons. The equipment filled the Grand Ballroom of a very large Château. If this worked, Haig would be able to talk to five Army commanders simultaneously and, if he didn’t like what they were saying, he could bring in a dozen Corps Commanders and their principal Artillery Officers. At dawn, a Squadron Leader would be airborne with another apparatus with which enemy movements could be reported to the Commander-in-Chief as they happened.

Haig drew happy breaths of self-satisfaction. Hindenburg had nothing like this and if Ludendorff only knew he wouldn’t be able to contain his jealousy. Even the Tsar of all the Russias was not so well equipped. Haig thought he was so “cutting edge” that he had to invent the phrase “cutting edge” to capture his feeling.

Haig had to issue a code word to confirm that the attack should begin at 0800. Having spent an hour or two admiring the meticulous plans, caressing the switches, levers and buttons, and then telling most of his staff that they were not needed and might as well go to bed, Haig dialled the frequency on which Allenby should be waiting for the word. He hopefully listened at the earpiece and heard a confusion of noise that suggested Allenby might have just dropped a tray of his best china. “Allenby, is that you?” barked Haig. There was no reply. “Allenby, come in damn you. Turn your ruddy radio on!” “Operation Pasha is Go...Confirm Operation Pasha is Go.”

After a few minutes shouting through the static, Haig decided he better try General Plumer instead. The main attack was a combined operation of the British 2nd and 3rd Armies. However, Plumer was no more answering the call than Allenby. Haig could only hear some electrical whirring where Plumer should be.

Haig got his intelligence chief, Chateris, out of bed and told him what was happening. From Chateris he learned that neither Plumer nor Allenby had been heard from for two days. They had been told to report exclusively through the wireless system. “Well, have they reported?” demanded Haig. Chateris could only reply that he had been in bed and all communication would be through the equipment in the Ballroom. Exasperated, Haig suggested that they telephone the Army Commanders. Chateris said that the telephone connections had been deliberately cut in order to encourage full reliance on the wireless.

Another hour passed as Haig and Chateris tried to get their grand wireless to work by pulling and pushing it in random ways, finally bashing it, hoping that by surprising it in this fashion the uncooperative technology might be tricked into working. As they did so, they started arguing like an old married couple and blamed each other for not understanding what they had bought into. Eventually Haig bullied out of Chateris the telephone number of the REME Officer who had installed the equipment some weeks previously. He was, of course, nowhere to be found at headquarters.

Since the headquarters' telephones were out of action, Haig had to be driven to the local Hôtel de Ville. The Maire had to be woken up and his telephone commandeered.

The number was called and the Field Marshal asked to speak to 2nd Lieutenant Harvey-Patel. While waiting, Haig complained to Chateris that all the wireless chaps were grammar school boys and he remembered this one had never dressed or shaved properly. After yet more long minutes, a voice answered and asked what the problem was?

Haig started to explain, "Look I am Field Marshal Haig, the wireless equipment you gave us doesn't work, and I need you to explain how it can be fixed...We have a battle starting in three hours and it is bloody urgent."

"I am sorry, Mr Haig but Lieutenant Harvey-Patel has been posted overseas. He is no longer here."

"What, of course he is overseas. He is in France isn't he? Where is he?"

"Wait a minute sir, I may be able to transfer you. Don't put your phone down there may be a wait. Can I have your number in case this line is broken?"

Haig said he didn't know the number as he wasn't at his usual desk. The person at the other end of the line distinctly sighed and was heard to say to an invisible other, "He doesn't know his own number."

Twenty five minutes later Haig was still holding the line and the French Maire came up to the Field Marshal and asked him if he realised how much the call would cost? General Haig, not ordinarily a violent man, simply punched the interrupting Frenchman in the face and instantly knocked him out cold.

Finally, there was a click at the end of the line, "Harvey-Patel" a voice spoke. "What is it? We are closed until after tiffin?"

Haig exploded at the unfortunate Lieutenant. It was too damned late for tea time and Harvey-Patel's time would also be up unless he came up with some answers pretty damned quick because he, Haig, needed his wireless facility up and running within the hour.

"OK", said Harvey-Patel cautiously. There was an odd delay to his voice and he sounded as if he was half a world away. "Let me see if I can work out the problem." After a few more moments, "Is the power switched on?"

"Of course the power is on. Do you think I am a moron? It is lit up like a bleeding Christmas tree."

“OK good....don't worry sir, we will sort it....Can you see a switch marked “Sending”. It is on the side of the big green box with a microphone.”

Haig had to admit he was not actually with the equipment, but in the Maire.

“Can you remember whether that switch was up or down?”

“No.”

“It should be up? All the others on that bank of switches should be down except that for the connection you are making. Do you know whether the receiver is on FM or VHF?”

“I think so...I don't know damn you. There are 30 or 40 switches. Am I supposed to know what they are all doing?”

“What if you go back to your Château and you ring me back on this number?”

“No our other telephones are out of order....Just tell me what to do damn it!”

“We are very busy here at the moment and it seems all the headquarters are having similar problems. It would help if you could tell me what is name of the model of the equipment you are using.”

“What do you mean? It is unique isn't it? It's something like the “Infinite World Telecommunicator”, I am not sure. You must remember. It took your men two days just to unload it from the mule train. Look, I will have you reduced to the ranks if you don't start talking sense.”

“I am sorry sir, but I am no longer in the Army. We are key industry personnel you see, radio communications. I still work on contract to the War Office, sometimes. You are a valued customer and we will...”

“Customer...what....what....how many Supreme Commanders do you have as customers? We are wasting time. It's nearly dawn....”

“I am sorry sir, but I may need to arrange to have an engineer visit. Can you be in sometime between 0800 and 1300 hours next Tuesday?”

“What on earth do you effing mean, next Tuesday? Didn't I tell you we need your damn stuff to work today, not next week? I will have you and your entire unit court martialled on a capital charge if you are not at GHQ within the hour. Do you know how much His Majesty the King shelled out to pay for your soddin' state of the art technology?”

“I am sorry sir, I told you we are not Army anymore. I was actually in the Indian Army by the way. We are a corporation domiciled in Ireland and I am currently setting up a telephone office here in India with Mr Marconi. It would take me more than an hour to get to France. It took 8 days to fly here with our company air service. Threats are not going to solve anything and I will have to report this to my supervisor. Did you say someone else paid for the equipment...is that Mr King? Are you the account holder? Can I speak to the account holder?”

“God help me, how many times do I have to spell this out? I am Field Marshal Haig. Haig, you must know. It’s the same as the whiskey.”

“I am afraid I will not be able to arrange a visit unless I have the reference code with your order. I am sorry sir, but we get this all the time. You see, I cannot know if you really are General Haig. Most people say they are when they get impatient. Then we turn up to some godforsaken trench and there is just a Captain who is trying to tune in to some musical show.”

In the face of this brazen insubordination, Haig’s face began to turn puce and Chateris was convinced (as his memoirs say) that Haig was seconds away from apoplexy. Fortunately, at this moment they were both distracted by the death scream of an aircraft which spiralled from the air and crashed in the garden of the Hôtel de Ville as they both watched dumbfounded out of the French Windows.¹ They forgot the cursed telephone call and were amazed to see the pilot emerge from the cloud of dust completely unharmed and, with certain insouciance, twisting his moustache while he knocked to gain entrance.

Regarding the officers present as if they were ordinary householders, the British Flying Officer apologised for the mess he had made and asked whether he might have a bit of breakfast. Explaining the crash, he observed that his “kite” was a good one, but that “some stupid arse” had ordered him up with a heavy payload, a new-fangled radio thingy, which had destabilised the aircraft and put him into an uncontrolled dive on his first turn.

At this, Haig had to give up and he calmed down a bit and even enjoyed breakfast with the airman. This was skilfully cooked by the French Maire who, thankfully, had no memory of falling down and bumping his head. Chateris was sent back to GHQ and told to find two of General Melchett’s best pigeons (Haig insisted one of them had to be Speckled Jim²) and have them sent to Allenby and Plumer with orders to delay the offensive for two days so that the chain of command could have some time to sort out its communications problems.

When the British attack began two days later, Haig had the final orders sent by courier in the old style. The “paperless” experiment was over for the moment.

The Western Front

The postponement of the British attack naturally allowed the Germans two extra days to prepare for the blow which Haig was preparing. Of course, the Germans did not know where exactly it would fall. The British main objective was Lens which was further north than the locus of most of the fighting during the summer. Haig hoped to catch the German 1st Army winding down for the autumn and directed Plumer and Allenby to cooperate and strike part of the enemy line between Bully –les-Mines and Vimy Ridge (5-3.1008).

Both the British 2nd and 3rd Armies committed six Divisions over three successive days between 25 – 27 October. The German defence depended chiefly on three first line Divisions which as usual were well entrenched and supported by smaller units including some Landwehr which were pressed into

¹ Chateris doesn’t actually say what type of windows they were. It is just an intelligent guess that they were French Windows.

² Speckled Jim was by common assent one of most distinguished animals ever to serve King and Country and whose life was tragically sacrificed not long afterwards in a notorious friendly fire incident.

third line service. The British bombardment had been mainly concentrated further south to mislead the defenders, but, before the first attack on 25 October, the artillery switched to targets on the front around Lens for a final burst of fire.



Figure 1: The British go over the top again, 25 - 27 October 1916.

First out of the British trenches was the 8th Division tasked by Allenby to take Vimy Ridge. The first assault companies were stalled by heavy enemy fire on the lower slopes. Next day, the IX Corps was committed by Allenby and this force, by successive attacks, inched up towards higher elevations reaching the 300 metre contour despite the vigorous resistance of the German 26th and 38th Divisions who took full advantage of their commanding positions. After three days, the British 3rd Army had got nearly half way to its objective but nothing further could be attempted until the artillery was repositioned.

Plumer's 2nd Army had more luck further north. In a limited operation, Plumer put a squeeze on the German 6th Division which held the front near Bully-les-Mines. Six British Divisions converged on a short front and were sent in to overwhelm a short section of the enemy line. That they succeeded was in part due to the German habit of not rotating units facing destruction. In this case there were some Bavarian Landwehr backing the front held by the 6th Division and these managed to seal the

front along a reserve line 1500 metres to the rear after the resistance of the regular troops collapsed after terrible casualties on 26 October. Plumer was unable to exploit this advance because his whole force had been committed to the early attacks and they also had casualties and needed reorganising. When Plumer tried to organise a further push towards Lens on 27 October, it took the whole day to establish what fresh forces were left and by that time it was too late to attempt anything.

Italian Front

Cadorna knew that the campaigning season was drawing to a close. However, he couldn't let it go. The only major active operation was the Italian 4th Army attack in the southern Dolomites. The units involved had all taken terrible losses and many had barely half their strength still on their feet. Cadorna insisted that there be no let up, pointing out that the Austro-Hungarian defenders were equally tired and their ranks had also been thinned during the incessant fighting.

The Italians objective was still to secure Kamauz (6-4.2317). This high mountain village was the first major settlement the Italians would reach after penetrating between the toothed peaks of the Dolomites. They were tantalisingly close to success, but the effort of crossing those peaks meant that there was too little energy left for taking this strongpoint. Two previous efforts had failed. The attack on 26 October was the last gasp Italian assault. The Austrian 55th Gebirge Brigade was spread out among the picturesque chalets which populated the prominent spur on which Kamauz was situated. Elements of the Italian 9th and 16th Divisions got into the village late in the day and they were not expelled until next morning when the 14th (Croat) Gebirge Brigade joined the Austrians in clearing out the insurgents. After this the Italian survivors pulled back to the mountain crests and considered when they might have another opportunity.

Eastern Front

The only major operation on the Eastern Front at this time was the evacuation of the remaining Russian and Romanian forces withdrawing from Bessarabia. The scene on the Dniester River in late October was chaotic as units crossed in improvised fashion taking advantage of everything that floated. It was perhaps fortunate that the Central Powers' Armies did not try and interfere with this last stage of the escape as a real panic might have set in. However, there was probably some wisdom in this as the Russo-Romanians on the river bank were cornered and as such might be dangerous to any pursuers.

The Germans and Austrians had endured enough heavy fighting and might be excused allowing their prey to go at this juncture. The retreat of the Allies in any event sealed a major Central Powers' victory. Romania had been overrun at limited cost. The Russian Army had been shown once more to be a paper tiger unable to keep up the success of Brusilov and unable to protect its ally. The Romanian Army may have been saved but for what?



Figure 2: The final evacuation of the Russo-Romanian Army from Bessarabia, 23 - 27 October 1916.

The Balkans

The arrival of the Serbians at the siege of Cattaro had sealed the doom of the Austrian naval base. Morgen's Corps, which had been delegated to relieve the encircled town, had pulled back from some of their most advanced positions citing shortages of shells. It seemed only a matter of time before the garrison found a white flag.

The Near East

The advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force across Sinai and into Palestine had ensured the security of the Suez Canal, the windpipe of the Empire. The war of course stimulated a lot of traffic. In late, October 1916, Port Said could barely cope with the volume of men, equipment and supplies and its quays were frequently full to capacity. At the other end of the canal, the 12th Indian Division arrived at Suez on 26 – 27 October. This further reinforcement suggested the Allies were not finished with their efforts to breach the Jaffa-Jerusalem line at the earliest possible time.

There remained little action on the other Near Eastern fronts. It seemed as if distance, terrain and the resilience of their opponents had defeated all efforts to gain a decisive advantage in Iraq and the Caucasus through nearly a whole year.



Figure 3: The Suez Canal and the Sinai Pipeline, 23 - 27 October 1916.

DM Summary – October 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	19	5	-	2	12	8		12	58	1490	Good
Austria-Hungary	6	12	-	1	1	1		-	21	617	Economic Collapse
Ottoman	-	6	-	-	-	-		NA	6	103	Good
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	28	Good
Central Powers	25	23	-	3	13	9		12	85	2226	
France	12	5	-	-	-	-		-	17	826	Good
Great Britain	3	1	-	-	6	13		-	23	424	Good
Russia	-	4	-	-	4*	-		NA	8	862	Shaken *Kishinev lost
Italy	7	8	-	4	2	2		-	23	139	Good
Romania	15*	5	-	-	-	-		-	20	233	Good *Galatz lost
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-		NA	-	(105)	NA
Serbia	-	-	-	-	-	-		NA	-	(40)	NA
Entente	37	23	-	4	12	15		-	91	2461	

Player Notes

CP:

- *East: More withdrawals by both Romanian and Russian forces in the SE (I'll call it the Odessa Front). They are retreating faster than I can advance given ZOC constraints, so I need time to configure my forces for an assault and also ensure I have sufficient supply and artillery in place – a slow process.*
- *Balkans: The TE forces continue to fall back in the NW part of the front. I am very tempted to keep after them but, as stated in my previous report, to what end. I will build up a little more strength in the Balkans while he plays games of temptation. I don't believe Robert does anything without good reason and I'm trying to fathom his activities on this front.*
- *Caucasus: Nothing. While we may not have fought each other to a standstill, attacking at this stage will benefit me nothing but losses. I wish to avoid any more of these than necessary.*
- *Mesopotamia: Quiet; but summer has ended and I suspect a storm is coming.*
- *Palestine: Quiet.*
- *Italy: I will not be able to get sufficient supply and strength forward to relieve Cattaro. If I did, I suspect I will lose more men than the fort is itself worth, so I'm afraid the fort is on its own. Surely I would be able to get sea supply through to the beleaguered garrison? Anyway, it is a complete sideshow which I should never have been dragged into.*
- *West. A heavy counter artillery barrage last turn has depleted half a brigade's worth of artillery. This means a ferocious attack by infantry is imminent on this sector. Robert doesn't normally allow one time to fortify likely objectives under such circumstances, so I suspect the attack will be launched next turn.*

AP: *Our game has been held up for nearly two weeks by a combination of work and in my case an 8 day interruption in broadband service. My experience of that is part of what my "Haig apoplexy" introduction is to this AAR instalment. Some might also detect a trace of Spike Milligan in this.³ It is also based on my father's experience as a wireless/signals specialist in the British Army in 1940 – 45. The parts of his memoirs which had most feeling were those in which he battled non-technical officers who constantly misused or misunderstood their technical equipment. He was once threatened by the CO with a charge for having submerged a number of radio sets in water. He had to be rescued by an adjutant who knew he was cleaning them in fresh water after the equipment had been dropped in the sea during an exercise. In India, the signal sections were also mobbed by the local population both Colonial and Indian who saw the Army as a free radio repair service. So, you can see, I am on Harvey-Patel's side.*

³ Hitler – My Part in His Downfall (1971) is still one of the funniest war memoirs I have read, though the humour is no doubt very dated, English, and un-PC.