



## Sir Cuthbert Headlam (1876-1964)

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*“The anniversary – the 100<sup>th</sup> of Waterloo... and here is the British Army still fighting in the Low Countries- how curious it seems and what a reflection upon the progress of the world. This settling of differences between nations by seeing which of them can kill the most men is too senseless and yet the wisdom of man apparently can devise no other way of settling disputes.” 18 June 1915*

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Cuthbert Headlam was as a Clerk in the House of Lords and later entered politics, elected MP for the seat of Barnard Castle, County Durham. He initially served in the Territorial Force of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry, a regiment he had been involved in since 1910. From 1915-18 he worked in various staff capacities in France, including as a General Staff officer and in the intelligence division as a counter-espionage officer. He also had two younger brothers in the army who served on the front. Headlam's detailed military diaries offer a unique perspective on how he felt volunteer troops were treated in comparison to the army regulars.

As a Clerk in the Lords, Headlam was well placed to witness the events leading up to war. He was quicker than others to grasp the significance of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and predicted 'There may, I imagine, be grave political consequences.'<sup>1</sup> He was present in the Commons gallery to watch the Foreign Secretary outline the case for war and concluded, 'our cause is a good one and we have done the best to keep the peace...I suppose they [Germany] thought we were too preoccupied with Ireland to interfere in affairs abroad.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Service with the Bedfordshire Yeomanry**

As an existing volunteer for the Bedfordshire Yeomanry he initially served with the regiment on home duties. His early diary entries detail a persistence theme and his belief of a complete lack of leadership from the Officer classes. In fact as the war progresses it borders on fixation and anger, leading to a scathing attack on the military hierarchy. One of his first entries on the subject states:

*"The officers are probably the weak spot in these regiments. Fat, bulging necked senior men and mean little 'pince-nezed' subalterns. How different to the Yeomanry!"<sup>3</sup>*

After ten months training in England, Headlam was made a Captain and the regiment was deemed ready for the front. His regiment underwent further arms training in France with the introduction of the Medium Trench Mortar, nicknamed the 'Toffee Apple' or 'Plum Pudding' because of the resemblance to the bombs fired. The mortar was to prove of limited effectiveness, often posing more danger to those that fired it rather than the intended enemy.

On reaching the Western front, the landscape offered a brutal reminder of the conflict they were now involved in. As Headlam walked with troops along the Menin Road he observed:

'It is the dreariest spot I ever saw and what it must have been like in winter God only knows...The ground is everywhere cut with trenches and shell craters – the trees are pitted with shell marks and torn down and broken. On all sides are the litter and debris of an army.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Aide-de-camp**

In July 1915, Headlam took up the role of aide-de-camp to the Earl of Cavan, commander of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division. His move would have likely been aided by the fact that his sister in law had married Cavan in 1893. The conditions behind the front were certainly more civilised with Headlam noting an ample supply of food and drink. In September 1915 he was involved in the mobilisation of troops to attack German positions at Hill 70, east of Loos. However, losses on the British side were very high, with

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<sup>1</sup> 29 June 1914, p.49, The Military Papers of Lieutenant –Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1910-1942, Edited by Jim Beach (The History Press for the Army)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 4 August 1914, p.50

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 13 August 1914, p.54

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 24 June 1915, p.76

Headlam detailing on the 28 September a casualty rate of 40 officers and 1,200 men for that day alone. Headlam concluded that the numerous well placed German machine gun units and their use of more precise artillery placed British troops at an immediate disadvantage.<sup>5</sup>

In October 1915 the Division was visited by the Prince of Wales, who was said to be keen to see front line action. His request was turned down but he did join other army staff in a game of football. Headlam's criticism of the senior ranks of the army and government began in earnest during this period. He describes the current Cabinet as weak and as a 'poor lot - both collectively and individually.'<sup>67</sup> He also offered his views on Winston Churchill who he deemed 'without principle and entirely playing his own game.'<sup>8</sup> His own boss, the Earl of Cavan, was described as eating too much and exercising too little and that 'No other General would have allowed a man of my calibre to hangout for all these months.'<sup>9</sup>

In January 1916, Headlam moved to Second Army headquarters employed as a General Staff Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade (GSO3). His parting comment as he left the role of Aide-de Camp was:

*'Our Army system does not (as a general rule) take into account a man's merits or qualifications when it is a question of giving him a command.'*<sup>10</sup>

### **Counter-espionage work**

His role was to only to last a few months but again he was critical of the Major-General in charge, claiming he was in 'always in a mental state of excitement'. Headlam moved into intelligence, working in counter-espionage. His letters during this period become more guarded neither mentioning the exact nature of the work or any specific operational duties. He took to his new duties with zeal in order to transform what he described as a 'pitiable state of chaos and disorder' in the office.

Headlam's objectives included infiltrating Belgium collaborators and spies who were assisting the enemy. He also interrogated German POWs in the vicinity to see if any enemy operational information could be gleaned<sup>11</sup>. Headlam visited the front line during the Battle of the Somme, seeing first-hand the casualties and conditions. He was shocked at what he saw – 'the desolation and misery of it was very striking.'<sup>12</sup>

As with so many contemporaries, Headlam's prediction on the length of the war was way off the mark. In April 1916 he envisioned that the war would be over by Christmas 1916. However, his reasoning behind German defeat was certainly more accurate:

*'I don't believe that the war can be ended by fighting- Economic pressure in Germany and the failure of the German supply of men will end the war.'*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 30 September, 1915, p. 105

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 20 October, 1915, p. 108

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 25 November 1915, P.110

<sup>8</sup> Churchill at this time had chosen to leave the Cabinet following the disaster at Gallipoli and volunteered for front line service

<sup>9</sup> 17 December 1915, p.112, The Military Papers of Lieutenant –Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1910-1942, Edited by Jim Beach (The History Press for the Army)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 2 January 1916, p.114

<sup>11</sup> Approximately eight million men surrendered and were held in POW camps during the war

<sup>12</sup> 15/16 July, p. 130, The Military Papers of Lieutenant –Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1910-1942, Edited by Jim Beach (The History Press for the Army)

## **General Staff officer role**

In November 1916 Headlam moved to VIII corps headquarters where he became GSO2 Intelligence to Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston<sup>13</sup>. Headlam's criticism of Generals did not abate but he also observed a development more prominent during the conflict, that of the dual role of soldier and politician. Despite large numbers of MPs in the army of supporting the military campaign in Westminster, it was a unique position to be both scrutinising HM Government and serving on behalf of it as a soldier. Headlam was not an advocate of such a relationship, stating:

'He [Hunter-Weston] has been elected to the H of C and took his seat in the House a day or two ago. There is something rather ludicrous in a Lt General commanding a Corps in 'the greatest war the world has ever seen' being elected a Member of Parliament.'<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in February 1917, staff and soldiers were visited on the front line by three 'wretched looking objects – Members of the House of Commons'. Headlam thought it an outrage that they should be sent there at public expense, taking up boats and much needed petrol for military vehicles.

## ***The Battle of the Somme film***

Like millions of others, Headlam was to watch the screening of *The Battle of the Somme* film, produced by the Government and released in late 1916. The documentary, albeit ultimately designed as a piece of propaganda, depicted the preparations and initial attack at the Battle of the Somme. The film was watched in village halls, cinemas and public screenings by over half the adult population in the UK. Troops at the front saw it at concerts and entertainment halls.

Its popularity was unprecedented and the film was booked by two thousand cinemas in Britain. It was certainly well received, although many of its scenes had been staged and its propaganda value varied. Headlam shared the view of others, including leading figures in the clergy, that it showed too much 'the horrors of war' and 'too much of the wounded soldier.'<sup>15</sup> Irish Nationalists even screened it in Dublin as they saw it as great propaganda, highlighting the slaughter that the British had now been drawn into.

In the closing stages of the war, Headlam was promoted to the rank of Major and then in the summer of 1918 rose to become a GSO1 with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Even in spring of 1918 the war was very much in the balance, especially as Russia's withdrawal from the war had freed one million German soldiers fighting in the east.

On the 23 March 1918, Headlam noted that in the first two days of the Spring Offensive German troops had taken 25,000 prisoners and 400 guns.<sup>16</sup> However, ultimately a combination of fresh troops arriving from the USA, social unrest in Germany and technological changes with the mobilisation of hundreds of tanks proved decisive by the summer. In addition, the collapse of the

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<sup>13</sup> In October 1916 Hunter-Weston was given leave from the front and successfully stood as a Unionist candidate in the North Ayrshire by-election. He polled 7,000, easily beating his opponent a clergyman standing on a peace platform.

<sup>14</sup> 4 November 1916, p.146, *The Military Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1910-1942*, Edited by Jim Beach (The History Press for the Army)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 13 February 1917, p.158

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 23 March 1918, p.192

German campaign in the Balkans meant their military lost its main supplies of oil and food. Allied troops were plentifully resourced by American supplies.

Headlam's war service resulted in a Distinguished Service Order in 1918 and an OBE in 1919. He was demobilised from the front in January 1919 and returned to his post as a Clerk in the Lords. He continued his involvement in military affairs by becoming the editor of a new journal, *Military Quarter*. In 1924 he took the bold decision to resign his clerkship and enter politics as a Conservative candidate.

It was an interesting decision to take, especially in light of previous comments to his wife Beatrice:

*'Soldiers are never tired of abusing politicians – but, as I have often remarked both to you and them, I see little real difference between the methods of the two classes of individuals. The former are ruled by caucuses the latter by cliques. The aim of the individual is the same in both cases - To get on.'*<sup>17</sup>

### **Political Career**

Headlam was selected for the seat of Barnard castle in County Durham. He defeated the Labour candidate in the 1924 General Election with a majority of 313. The election was more notable for six women who lied about their age in order to vote.<sup>18</sup> They were to go public afterwards, making a political point to highlight the lack of parity and fairness in the voting ages for men and women.<sup>19</sup>

With the exception of two years, Headlam was to serve as the MP for Barnard Castle until 1935. He became the Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty in 1929 and then Parliamentary Secretary to Pensions (1931-32) and Transport (1932-34). However, the North-East had been particularly hard by the recession of the 1930s and the new climate was not favourable to his party or positioning. With the introduction of a Liberal candidate, the Conservative vote was diluted and Labour was to hold the seat from 1935 until it was abolished in 1950. Headlam became a Baronet in 1935 and continued to be a prominent figure in the local area, serving on Durham County Council (1931-39). He was also a leading figure in organising the Conservative Party in the North of England.

In 1938 he flirted with the idea of standing in the seat of Darlington. However, he was to return to the Commons in 1940 as result of the agreement between the main parties not to field rival candidates in by-elections during the Second World War. The existing Conservative MP for Newcastle North, Nicholas Grattan-Doyle, had resigned the seat, wishing to see his son inherit it. However, back room lobbying enabled Headlam to secure the official backing from Conservative Central Office. Headlam won the seat with ease beating Grant-Doyle's son Howard who now had to stand an independent.<sup>20</sup> He was to retain the seat until 1951 upon his retirement from politics.

In October 1919 like many soldiers, Headlam revisited the battlefields trying to come to terms with the horror and bloodshed he had witnessed. His views at the start of the war in that 'honour and also our own interests make it right to fight' had changed forever:

*'We went: Menin, Ypres, St Jean, Wieltje, Gravenstafel, Passchendale....It was an odd sensation to walk over all this ground without fear. One looked along the road to Westroosebeke and marvelled at how men lived in the old days. It is a*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 16 September 1916, p.137

<sup>18</sup> Article from the Northern Echo, The great Cockfield election rebellion of 1924, Jim McTaggart, 13 June 2015

<sup>19</sup> The Equal Franchise Act 1928 reduced the age at which women could vote from 30 to 21 in line with men.

<sup>20</sup> Headlam received 7,380 votes to Grattan-Doyle's 2,982

*ghastly reflection – how men must have suffered and died in this cursed piece of country – and how futile it all was.*<sup>21</sup>

Headlam died in 1964 and was buried at Landsdown Cemetery, Bath. He had no children of his own but was survived by his wife Beatrice and adopted son John Headlam.

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<sup>21</sup> 19 October, 1919, p.238, The Military Papers of Lieutenant –Colonel Sir Cuthbert Headlam, 1910-1942, Edited by Jim Beach