



J.E.B. Seely (1868-1947)

"The only way to get ammunition to the forward batteries was to carry it up in panniers slung on the horses. Often these poor beasts, who were led forward in long strings with three shells on each side of them, would sink deep into the mud. Sometimes, in spite of all their struggles, they could not extricate themselves and died where they fell."

Despite being the Secretary of State of War in the two years preceding World War One, John Edward Bernard Seely spent almost the entirety of the war on the front line. Known to his soldiers as General Jack he became best known for leading his horse Warrior into a huge cavalry charge at Moreuil Wood.

In the lead up to war, the focus for the British Government and Ministers were matters closer to home. The issue of Irish Home rule dominated affairs and a bill to legislate on the issue was due to be enacted in 1914. Seely, as Secretary of State for War, was associated with the idea of using military action against Ulster volunteers who were threatening to rebel against it. In what became known as the Curragh Incident, Seely was forced to resign along with the professional head of the army, Sir John French.

Seely did not dwell on his demotion and the incident gave him the chance to join the army and see front line action. By early 1915, he had somewhat controversially been promoted to Brigadier-General of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. The Earl of Crawford serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps, wrote in his war diary,

“Were it not for political squeeze, neither Churchill, nor Seely, Colonel Ward, Hamar Greenwood and lots of others, would have never have received their high promotion on military merits alone.”¹

He was to command what was described as an “assorted bunch of ranchers, clerks, expats, Mounties and Native Americans” and served the entirety of the war with his horse, Warrior, which became the subject of a later memoir.

Seely’s first action came at the 1st Battle of Ypres. He went on to describe the significance of the battle in preventing German troops’ access to the Channel ports. The horrors of trench warfare quickly became evident, with troops who “fought for weeks on end in blood, and mud, and misery.”²

Seely’s cavalry unit were incredibly vulnerable to enemy fire and often had to be held in reserve. In the Battle of the Somme, his troops had practised and planned manoeuvres of attack but could see no feasible way through German lines. They were eventually forced to retreat after assembling twelve hundreds behind the front line. Seely described the conditions of intense bombardment:

“a shell dropped in the middle of us and killed one of the orderlies’ horses just behind me.” They also had to be alert to machine gun fire from above, as German planes attempted to capitalise on this new form of warfare.

Seely and his troops were deployed in the Battle of Cambrai (1917) to support the first large-scale use of tanks in WW1. Whilst this strategy of mechanised mobile units was to be the template for future wars, it was still largely ineffective and prone to mishap. Seely’s cavalry unit were ordered to proceed behind the tanks as they moved into battle. However, disaster struck as they crossed a canal. The bridge collapsed, unable to support the weight of the tanks. Seely and his horse Warrior were lucky to escape but the fighting was largely restricted to a “few little attacks on foot; the bridging of the canal for artillery and cavalry was impossible owing to close-range rifle-fire.”³

It was not all misfortune: his brigade were involved in successful battles most notably the advance on the Hindenburg Line in 1917 helping to capture Equancourt Village and Guyencourt.

¹ Both Jack Ward and Hamar Greenwood were serving MPs on the front.

² Warrior, General Jack Seely, Racing Post Books, p.74

³ Warrior, General Jack Seely, Racing Post Books, p.116

Seely was most famous for leading a huge counter-attack on German forces at Moreuil Wood, on the banks of the river Avre in France (30 March 1918). The Germans had launched a huge offensive, progressing almost 45 kilometres into Allied positions. Seely and his troops were tasked with protecting the village of Moreuil and re-seizing control of the wood close by.

The battle involved cavalry units attacking the German forces from different directions in order to stretch enemy positions. It quickly became a series of separate engagements with troops being forced to dismount because of machine-gun fire. Many troops had no alternative but to charge with fixed bayonets and engaged in hand to hand fighting in an attempt to take German positions. The troops were supported by artillery fire and raids by the Royal Flying Corps in order to try and weaken enemy lines.

“Neither side would surrender. Again and again these brave Bavarians and Saxons too, and men from every part of Germany, surrounded and wounded, would continue to fire, but, on either side, not one man would hold up his hands and surrender. One determined Bavarian, with a sword thrust right through his neck, raised his rifle just level with Warrior’s near shoulder, and had a last shot before he died.”⁴

It was not until August 1918 with the help of French troops that Moreuil Wood was finally taken from the Germans. The battle was to prove decisive in halting the wider German offensive and a key turning point for a war very much in the balance.

Seely finally returned to England suffering the effects of poison gas. He was mentioned five times in dispatches for his efforts during World War One.

Seely’s life of politics and military service were very much interwoven. He was still on active service fighting in the Boer War⁵ when he was first elected as a Conservative MP for the Isle of Wight in 1900. He served in the seat until 1906 and was then elected as a Liberal MP in the Abercromby division of Liverpool (1906-1910) and then the Ilkeston division of Derbyshire (1910-22). He was re-elected as a Liberal MP for the Isle of Wight in 1923 but was defeated the following year. He became Lord Mottistone in 1933 following his appointment to the House of Lords.

⁴ Warrior, General Jack Seely, Racing Post Books, p.131

⁵ Seely won a Distinguished Service Order during the war