CHAPTER 2

The British Artillery in World War I

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Introduction

Even though the Royal Regiment of Artillery grew during WWI to be larger than the Royal Navy, and that artillery may have caused over half the battle casualties of the war, historians have paid relatively little attention to it.1 While the Royal Artillery was, in a number of ways, a good example of artillery in the war, there were some clear differences compared to other nations.

First, the British army was unique. While other European armies were structured for large wars close to home, the British had a garrison army scattered around the world and an Expeditionary Force that had to be able to deploy anywhere. There was also no expectation that the Expeditionary Force would turn into roughly 65 divisions in France; such a campaign might require a brigade, a division, a corps, or a larger force. Partly for this reason, but partly to economize on manpower, the British had no full-strength peacetime corps or army headquarters. Thus, there was no corps-level artillery, although there was a Siege Train of six batteries.2 Also, fitting with the need for flexible expedi-


2 The lack of peacetime corps headquarters probably delayed development of what a corps HQ should do. On the role of corps HQ, see A. Simpson, Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914–18 (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006).
tions, the divisional artillery was often decentralized, the field guns being ‘affiliated’ to the infantry brigades, while the divisional commander of the artillery was in charge of only the field howitzers and a single battery of heavy guns.3

British divisions also had a somewhat different organization than their continental counterparts. In the artillery, the most notable variance was a battery of 60-pounder long-range guns per division, a direct result of its Boer War experience. The field gun was an 18-pounder at 84mm, about 10% larger (and 20% heavier) than its counterparts. Shrapnel was the only shell provided, although the large shell had a relatively large bursting charge so that it had some high explosive effect. The 18-pounder was also a weapon system. Since the projectile was most effective with a flat trajectory and moderate range, the pole trail that limited the elevation (and reduced the weight behind the 6-horse team), was not a compromise.

Close battle was also emphasized, using direct fire up alongside the infantry.4 This was a strategy that had gone full circle since the Boer War — where such tactics had proved extremely costly and been abandoned — largely because QF guns with gunshields apparently provided protection against small-arms fire and from the French doctrine of aggressive support. However, while this strategy had been praised in the Journal of the Royal Artillery, judging from results in 1914, implementation was not universal.

The Western Front in 1914

Almost from the start of the fighting, pre-war ideas stressing mobility and direct fire for artillery were shattered. The battle of Le Cateau (26 August 1914) is a marvelous case study: two British divisions were engaged defending a ridge. One put its guns forward, among the infantry, and used direct fire; the other had its guns behind the ridge and used indirect fire.5 The guns in direct fire effectively engaged the Germans, but were themselves easily targeted, with the result that 27 (35%) were lost. None of the guns behind the ridge were lost.

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3 See S. Marble, *British Artillery on the Western Front*, chapter 2.
5 An extremely detailed account is A.F. Becke’s *The Royal Regiment of Artillery at Le Cateau* (reprinted by Naval & Military Press, 2006).