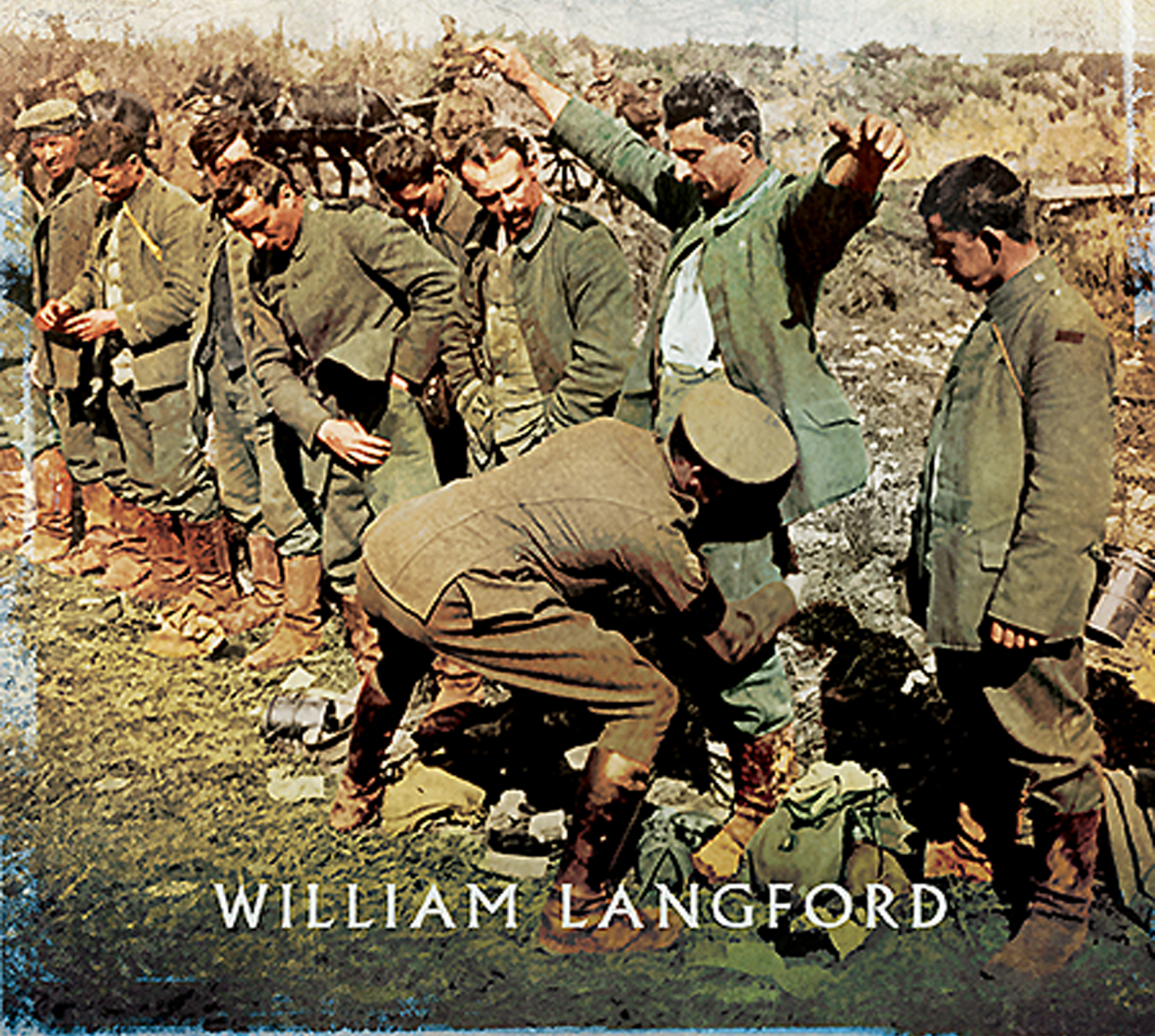


# SOMME INTELLIGENCE

FOURTH ARMY HQ 1916



WILLIAM LANGFORD

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**Fourth Army HQ 1916**

Prisoner Interrogations and Captured Documents

William Langford



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# Introduction

**T**he very first recorded intelligence gathering brief in history is available to us in some detail. The 3,500-year-old record contains the following instructions to agents selected to carry out a dangerous fact-finding mission:

*Go north from here into the southern part of the land... then into the hill country. Find out what kind of country it is, how many people live there, and how strong they are. Find out whether the land is good or bad and whether the people live in open towns or in fortified cities. Find out whether the soil is fertile and whether the land is wooded.*

The commander of the army about to invade needed detailed information, even ordering the spies to bring back samples of produce. See Numbers Chapter 13, verses 18, 19, 20 of the Bible.

So it would be throughout time, whenever men formed into armed camps and warred against each other, accurate information concerning the other's circumstances would become necessary. In instances where one of the belligerents failed to gather sufficient intelligence about the enemy, or where gathered reports were ignored or down-played, the ordinary foot soldier has paid the price. For example, Saturday 1 July 1916, proved to be the most catastrophic day in the history of the British Army, with over 19,000 men killed and around 35,500 wounded. Added to these were the missing and those taken prisoner, making the mind-numbing total of 57,470 as an estimate. The optimistic attitude of the British generals, the planners of that disaster, caused them to be selective in their assessments of the accumulating intelligence arriving on their desks in the lead up to the offensive. They were well aware that the type of German positions they were assaulting had very deep underground shelters where the defenders were safe against the week-long preparatory bombardment. Further, despite the shelling, there were reports that German barbed wire entanglements still remained unbroken on most sections of the 15-mile-long front. That intelligence was either disregarded or played down. German deserters, and prisoners taken in trench raids, complained to their interrogators of terrible conditions the Germans troops were experiencing because of the shelling. British Fourth Army HQ, tasked with mounting the Somme offensive, would certainly have been encouraged by this sort of report; discounting the known tendency of the rank and file of all nations to be bitter complainers and prone to woefully exaggerating their lot in life. Also, and understandably, some warriors who fall into enemy hands are more than ready to tell their captors what they believe their questioners would prefer to hear.

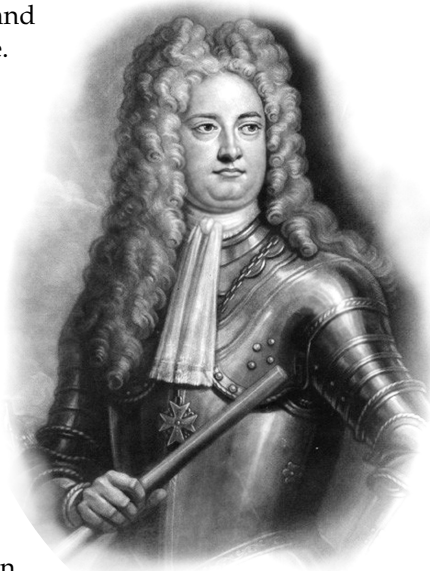
The last time British forces lost men out-rivalling the figure of those killed in one day in the Battle of the Somme, was during the Wars of the Roses. Following the Battle of Towton, in Yorkshire in 1461, the heralds counted, in round figures, 28,000 dead after nine hours fighting. This of course was a civil war when rival kings

fought for the throne of England. Civil wars have a notorious reputation for being especially brutal as those, once neighbours, exact revenge for perceived past grievances and grasp an opportunity to re-open old feuds. Further, it is difficult to know who is the enemy in these circumstances, as even members of the same family could harbour opposing views. Betrayal and 'turning the coat' during the fighting in the fifteenth century was commonplace. There can be no question that spies and agents were active gathering intelligence during the Wars of the Roses, but the medieval chronicles do not directly refer to this. However, events during that conflict indicate that clandestine activity was rife. For example, during the Battle of Northampton in 1460, the right wing of the Lancastrian line of defenders under the command of Lord Grey, suddenly laid down their weapons and helped the attacking Yorkists through the barrier of stakes. That betrayal caused the Yorkists to be victorious; the defection having been arranged beforehand through agents. This led to the capture of Lancastrian King Henry VI.

It was that English king's grandson, Henry VIII, who later defined the role of an appointed chief 'reconnoiter' of the army – the 'Scoutmaster'. The position of Scoutmaster came more to the fore in the English Civil War (1642 to 1651) when both sides fielded an overseer of agents. Enemy troop movements were observed along with the numbers being employed; discipline, logistics, equipment and morale were also noted and reported on. Spies for Oliver Cromwell, under the oversight of the Scoutmaster, were installed in the homes of known Royalists, in the streets and markets and even in the Royalist court when in exile. After the restoration the Scoutmaster designation was changed to that of Quarter Master General.

At the beginning of the next century an English army under the command of the Duke of Marlborough employed the services of Quarter Master General, William Cadogan. This was against the French in the Wars of the Spanish Succession (1702 to 1713). During the campaign in Europe the Quarter Master General moved ahead of the army and recruited guides to aid with intelligence gathering. Agents were ensconced within the French court and supplied crucial information on the movements and intentions of the French army.

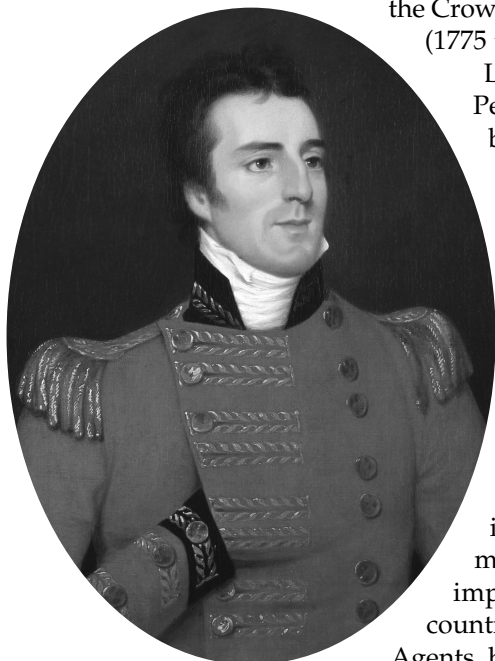
Later in the eighteenth century European nations became embroiled in, what would be termed, the Seven Years War (1756 to 1763). British General Wolf, in his planning to capture Quebec from the French, personally undertook the intelligence work, interrogating deserters,



*William Cadogan, 1st Earl Cadogan  
1675 – 1726.*

questioning his scouts (known as 'Rangers'), interpreting intercepted messages and even conducting his own reconnaissance.

Subsequent British failures on the American continent could be attributed, to some degree, to poor intelligence work and resulted in the loss to the Crown of those colonies – War of American Independence (1775 to 1783).



*Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington  
1769–1852.*

Learning lessons from defeat, the British Army in the Peninsular War (1808 to 1814), shaped-up and the beginnings of military intelligence as is understood in the present day took place. When British general Sir John Moore advanced on Salamanca then withdrew to Corunna, informing him all the while was a locally recruited Peninsula Corps of Guides. Under Arthur Wellesley (later to become the Duke of Wellington) that organization was formally established in 1809. The Corps of Guides began with a complement of six officers and thirty-eight operatives. Numbers increased as French deserters were recruited and Portuguese officers added. The work undertaken was that of interpreting, tactical questioning, reconnaissance, making maps and sketches of terrain and, most importantly, shadowing enemy movements and counting his forces (usually done at river crossings).

Agents belonging to the Corps of Guides operated deep within enemy occupied territory. One British officer, Captain Scovell, was successful in decoding intercepted French despatches.

Following the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo there was a decline in the art of intelligence gathering. By that time the Corps of Guides had been disbanded it having been deemed purely a Peninsular requirement for the British Army at that time. Not until the war in the Crimea in 1854 was there a conflict demanding the employment of an intelligence service of the merit of the Corps of Guides.

When Lord Raglan, Commander of the British Army, landed in the Crimea to fight the Russians he was to employ a civilian intelligence gatherer by the name of Calvert. However, his services ended abruptly when the man died of cholera in 1855. Poor administration of the British Army in the Crimea and faulty logistical support is now legendary; inadequate intelligence gleaning was a part of the overall malaise. By the end of that conflict brought about by the capture of Sebastopol in 1856, Britain's reputation among the European nations had suffered a severe blow.

Up to the end of that century the wars engaged in by the British Army were, in the main, against natives armed with edged weapons. At the outset of the Zulu War, 1879, intelligence was left to a civilian who had produced a detailed manual which contained warnings of what the British would be coming up against. The British, under the command of Lord Chelmsford, treated the intelligence with contempt and suffered a defeat at Isandlwana, following which Chelmsford usefully employed scouts from the Natal Volunteers.

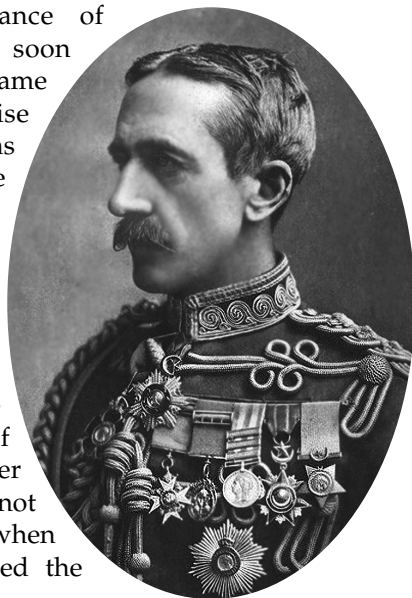


*Horatio Herbert Kitchener, 1st Earl Kitchener 1850-1916.*

Three years later, with the Egyptian expedition in view, useful information gathering was done by a young Kitchener and a Major Tulloch supposedly engaged on a shooting trip. When the campaign in the Sudan began small intelligence staffs reconnoitered, interrogated captives and controlled agents. Because of his involvement in the earlier intelligence gathering, Kitchener, when he became Commander-in-Chief, made sure that an efficient service was put in place. This proved its worth and employed disinformation to mislead the Khalifa before the Battle of Omdurman in 1898.

For the Boer War in South Africa in 1899 failure to have the correct information available caused disaster in the opening stages. The Commander-in-Chief, Sir George White, had no inkling of the importance of intelligence gathering and was soon besieged at Ladysmith. Out to assist came General Redvers Buller, likewise

without the benefit of an intelligence service and was promptly defeated at the Battle of Colenso. Incredibly, the most detailed work on the South African situation existed and was available to the commanders. Major General Sir John Ardagh and his Intelligence Division back in London had, in a published report, identified the possible enemy in that region of Africa and flagged up the purchase of up-to-date Mauser rifles from Germany by the Boer states. The handbook produced by Ardagh's department gave the number of machine guns, artillery, the amount of munitions and the number of men available to the Boer leaders. It was military incompetence of the highest order not to have consulted this, and taken it into planning strategy when hostilities erupted. The ordinary British soldier suffered the consequences at such battles that took place on the Spion Kop.



*Major General Sir John Charles Ardagh 1840-1907.*

When Lord Roberts took over, after the removal of Buller following the Colenso disaster, he arrived in South Africa with his own Head of Intelligence, Colonel George Henderson, who formed the Field Intelligence Department FID, developed the operation until it numbered 132 officers and over 2,000 white soldiers plus native scouts. Knowledge of Boer strengths, morale, likely courses of action, weapons and equipment greatly aided British military headquarters. When hostilities ended Henderson firmed up the intelligence operation by writing a manual *Field Intelligence, Its Principles and Practices* and recommended the forming of an Intelligence Corps. In the light of his experience gained in the field he was able to include in his manual the type of character looked for in intelligence officers:

*The successful intelligence officer must be cool, courageous, and adroit, patient and imperturbable, discreet and trustworthy. He must understand the handling of troops and have a knowledge of the art of war. He must be able to win the confidence of his general, and to inspire confidence in his subordinates. He must have resolution to continue unceasingly his search for information, even in the most disheartening circumstances and after repeated failures.*

*He must have endurance to submit silently to criticism, much of which may be based on ignorance or jealousy. And he must be able to deal with men, to approach his source of information with tact and skill, whether such source be a patriotic gentleman or an abandoned traitor.*

*Field Intelligence* by Lieutenant Colonel David Henderson. Page 1



Lieutenant Colonel David Henderson  
1862-1921.

### **Declaration of War by the British Empire, August 1914**

At General Headquarters there was a determination to avoid past unpreparedness in matters of military awareness of enemy plans and intentions. When elements of the British Expeditionary Force crossed the Channel aboard SS *Olympia*, 13 August 1914, members of the Intelligence Corps were aboard the same transport. In command of the new corps, appointed in September, was a Major Archibald Wavell who would later become Field Marshal Lord Wavell. Being a regular soldier he, like many of his fellow officers, struggled to come to terms with the largely

undisciplined forty or more intelligence officers under his charge. They had been recruited, encouraged to join, or volunteered to serve in the Intelligence Corps because they spoke either French or German and were capable of riding a horse and motorcycle. They were viewed as amateurs with little work to do and prejudice against them abounded. Within weeks Wavell managed to secure a posting to 9 Infantry Brigade and away from the disliked and frowned upon ad hoc intelligence unit.

However, at GHQ work a-plenty was found for the Intelligence Corps operatives, there was much to oversee and check out; intelligence officers were attached to cavalry units, also to the Royal Flying Corps, engaged in battlefield reconnaissance. They were soon embroiled in security, secret service work, censorship and even public relations, which was aimed at the civilian population (French and British) and British troops. As the Great War stretched out over the months and years the Corps took on prisoner interrogation, aerial photograph interpretation, censorship, document translation, propaganda and counter espionage.

It was under the leadership of Major Sir John Dunnington-Jefferson, who was appointed Commandant of the Intelligence Corps in December 1914, and who developed the arm until February 1916, that the corps' reputation became well established on the Western Front. For the period of the Battle of the Somme – and until the end of the war – Captain A. A. Fenn commanded the corps.

### **Recording information for use by GHQ Staff Officers**

For the Somme offensive, British Fourth Army headquarters was situated in a chateau at Querrieu on the Albert-Amiens road. In the build up months to Haig's Great Push a steady flow of intelligence was being compiled; captured German documents, intercepted messages, prisoners' letters, diaries and information gleaned from prisoner interviews were entered into foolscap-size ledgers where they could be perused by the planners.

The hand-written journal of intelligence reports upon which this work is formed was originally compiled by a former soldier of the 11th Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment, (Accrington Pals), Harry Platt of Burnley. In 1916 he was a sergeant working on intelligence duties at



*Harry Platt, December 1914.*

Fourth Army GHQ. He was later commissioned in the Royal Engineers. Harry also served in the Second World War in the Royal Artillery reaching the rank of Major. He was Mentioned in Despatches in both conflicts. Harry died in August 1951 aged 56.

In 2002 the handwritten journal was lodged with the Imperial War Museum at the instigation of historian William Turner, military historian and author of books on the Accrington Pals.

As the reader goes through these reports it would be helpful to keep in mind that members of the British staff at Querrieu chateau, including Generals Haig and Rawlinson, would have had their impressions coloured by the words you are reading and doubtless their optimism for a successful outcome to the Somme offensive greatly enhanced. They would have noted the effect the British bombardment was having; dominance of the Royal Flying Corps as its machines seemingly operated unmolested over the trenches; growing unrest in German cities as food shortages drove the populace to riot; and the relentless call-up to the colours of ever-younger youths as that nation's manhood bled in the great battles taking place.

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### General Headquarters Intelligence Staff in 1916

*Top: Captain E. W. Shepherd, Royal Engineers; Captain Stewart Menzies; Lieutenant Colonel Church; unidentified; Major Sir John Dunnington-Jefferson; Major J. H. M. Cornwall, Royal Artillery.*

*Seated: Lieutenant Colonel E. M. Jack, Royal Engineers; Lieutenant Colonel Walter Kirke, Royal Artillery; Brigadier General John Charteris, Royal Engineers; Lieutenant Colonel B. W. Bowdler, Royal Engineers; Lieutenant Colonel H. D. Goldsmith, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry.*

*Right: Major A. H. Hutton-Wilson (absent for the group photograph).*



## Chapter One

### An Der Somme

#### Examination of captured documents checked and passed to Fourth Army HQ

From the examination of captured German documents the following information has been obtained:

#### 6 October 1915

It was noted that during the battle of Loos that rifles that had been exposed to English poison gas clouds began to show signs of rust. Rifles must therefore be cleaned and oiled as soon as such a gas cloud has passed our trenches.

#### 12 October 1915

According to an announcement by the War Office the British War Office has again approved a new type of greatcoat for the English troops. This coat can be used, as the case may be, as a water-proof coat, a sleeping-bag, a ground-sheet, apron, or valise covering. In case such a greatcoat is found it is to be handed in to the Divisional Headquarters.

*British soldiers on a work detail wearing the cape the Germans wished to examine. It is referred to as a 'greatcoat' rather than 'cape' – perhaps something lost in translation.*





## 2 February 1916

At home in Germany they require empty bottles and tins. At the Front all troops and town authorities must deliver empty bottles to the canteen and empty tins to the collecting place in Bapaume.

They must report by 20 February 1916 how many bottles and tins they have collected between the days 15 February and 19 February.

Attention is again drawn to the directive that all parings from horses hoofs are to be collected and are to be handed in to the smith's stores in Bapaume. This has not been done by all troops yet.



*Bapaume was the main town behind the lines on the Somme. Chalked on the artillery shell is the date: 19 August 1916 – height of the Somme Battle. Shortage of raw materials in Germany is seen in the above call for empty bottles and tins. Even the parings of the hooves of horses are to be collected for the manufacture of glue.*

## Extract from a captured diary

### 27 February 1916

Snow thawing. Everybody in the trench is wet and ill of late. Supply has again become very bad. Only a good supply of marmalade. In the infantry two more men deserted and left behind a note 'We can't carry on on marmalade.' Truly a sign of a bad spirit that animates us.

### 29 February 1916

Heroism, which lives only on ideals and in the realms of thought, quickly fails for want of breath. Ten days in position and the food we get is a bit too much.

## Speech of His Majesty the Emperor and King

To the 3rd Guard Infantry Division in the Champagne, on their arrival from the Eastern Front.

### 20 April 1916

I greet the several units composing the 3rd Guard Infantry Division, in the Western Theatre of war. In the course of this campaign the 3rd Guard Division has, to my great satisfaction, hitherto performed splendid deeds, such as are in conformity with its composition and its origin. The heavy battles in the Carpathian mountains, the advance until the approach of winter, the combats in the positions held during the winter – all are inscribed on the long scroll in the glorious history of the several regiments. The *fusileers*, with the exception of a deputation near Brezezany, I have not seen since the spring of 1914, not since the days when you were at Döberitz. You have now displayed before the enemy, under all conditions, what you have learned to my satisfaction and joy, during the many years of peace. For this, as your one time commander, I express to you my appreciation. In accordance with my orders you have come from the East to the West, you the 'Cockchafers' of the Army to herald to the enemy the approach of a martial spring season.

The Lehr Infantry Regiment, I greet today for the first time in its present composition. It has evolved from the Battalion which is, so to speak,



Kaiser Wilhelm II.

the prototype of my entire Army, which from olden times has held the honour of guarding the King, his house and family, and is in daily contact with his person, which is the connecting link between the Guard of the Prussian Army as a whole. In conformity with its lofty military origin, the bearing of this regiment in battle has been blameless. My congratulations!

And you Kolbergers! We have already met once in the East. Now I have brought you over here. The heroism you have displayed shall never be forgotten. You have dictated law, writ in iron, unto the enemy, who will not soon forget the butt-end of your Pomeranian rifles. Siemikawce remains a glorious and honoured page in the annals of your Regiment, as also the battles of the Carpathians and on the Zwinin. They will always be linked with the history of my 'Cockchafers' Regiment.

The other units which belong to this division, the cavalry and artillery, especially the artillery, have in these strenuous fights given the infantry that assistance, which in this war I must expect for my infantry, without fail.

The entire division has thus been summoned by my orders to this front in splendid condition and with an excellent record of active service. It is now in the west to do its share in the great task, in the overwhelming of our enemies. The foe fights differently over here, defending his native soil foot by foot, which we must put to his credit. This is the resistance of despair. But it must be broken. He has prepared his own soup and now he must sup it, and I look to you to see to it. May the appearance of the 3rd Guard Infantry Division convey to the enemy what kind of soldiers are facing him, and may the good God who has stood by everyone of you in many an hour of trial lead you to victory. May he lead you to the peace we all desire. I count on your help.

Note: The Guard *Fusileer* Regiment is nicknamed the 'Cockchafers' (*Maikäfer*) after the May beetle.



*The Kaiser with officers on the Somme front 1916.*