Officer–Man Relations: the Officer’s Perspective

At the beginning of the war the Regular British Other Rank was generally portrayed in the Press as a brave, dogged, tough, phlegmatic, soldierly working man in uniform who enjoyed an excellent relationship with his paternal officer. In the space of two days in September 1914 The Times printed an anecdote about a soldier who was less concerned about being wounded than the loss of his pipe, and quoted a sergeant’s opinion that one of his officers had ‘died one of the grandest deaths a British officer could wish for’.

A subheading of 12 September 1914 read ‘Mutual Compliments of Officers and Men’. The following article quoted an artillery officer as saying that ‘Our men and horses [!] are wonderful’ and cited a sapper’s opinion that ‘the officers are grand. They do everything they can for our comfort … I cannot speak highly enough of them’. Conversely, the soldier–officer relationship in the German army was portrayed as being based on fear: ‘machine-like’ German soldiers were bullied in camp and driven into battle at gunpoint. Sometimes the contrast between the two armies was made explicit, on other occasions it was left unspoken. Similar views on British and German officer–man relations can be found in British magazines and books of the time.

Broadly similar images of officer–man relationships appeared in print throughout the war years, even though the social composition of the army underwent significant change in this period. Did officer–man relations in the British army of 1914–18 bear any resemblance to Fleet Street’s version?

In November 1916 Rawlinson wrote that officers had to ‘know and gain the confidence of their men’; this was ‘the root of British discipline and leadership’. The relationship began when the officer met his men for the first time. According to one authority, anyone can be
appointed to a position of command, but an individual can only become a true leader when his subordinates ratify that appointment in their hearts and minds. Bernard Montgomery, commissioned into the R. Warwicks in 1908, believed that

The first thing a young officer must do when he joins the Army is to fight a battle, and that battle is for the hearts of his men. If he wins that battle and subsequent similar ones, his men will follow him anywhere; if he loses it, he will never do any real good.

Many of Montgomery’s brother officers agreed with these sentiments. Most subalterns of the Great War were well aware of the importance of this first meeting. Alan Thomas, commissioned into RWK in 1915, was assailed by doubts before arriving at his battalion, fearing that he would not be ‘up to it’, and would be unable to win the respect of his men.

Officers came to know whether or not they had been accepted by their men in a variety of ways. One officer of the 2/Wilts discovered that his men approved of him through censoring their letters on active service. A Jewish officer of 4/N. Staffs became aware of his batman’s approval when the latter took pains to cook bully beef instead of bacon, while G.H. Cole (1/20 Londons) ‘realised my acceptance’ when he heard a spectator call him by a (fairly respectful) nick-name while Cole was playing football. Sometimes, of course, officers earned disparaging nicknames from their men, such as ‘Ragtime’, the contemporary adjective for absurdity or inefficiency.

Officers who joined units while in training had a distinct advantage over those who joined a battalion on active service, particularly on the Western Front. A ranker officer who joined 2/Camerons in 1916 lamented that it took time get to know undemonstrative ‘Jocks’ but ‘Almost before you have time to get to know their names some change is made, or you lose half of them in action.’ By comparison, Alan Thomas, who joined a reserve battalion in England, was able to spend weeks ‘learning the strength and weakness’ of each man in his platoon.

Officers who knew and understood their men made the most effective leaders. Bill Slim, commissioned in 1914, ‘had the inestimable merit of never having forgotten the “smell of a soldier’s feet”’. One officer wrote that subalterns should ‘know personally’ every man under his command: ‘what he is good for, what he was in civil life, if he is married, etc. – and let the man know that you take an interest in