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‘A Slashing Man of Action’

THE LIFE OF LIEUTENANT-GENERAL
SIR AYLMER HUNTER-WESTON MP

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Introduction

The one thing that a General thinks about all the time is sparing his men's lives – never does a General attack unless he thinks by so doing he will in the end save [lives]; that is what our job is, we are very careful on the question of loss of life and the human suffering which must occur. Actually speaking if an attack is well thought out, even if you lose life you will probably save life in the end, because you keep the other people apprehensive and they will not be able to concentrate on you and attack you with overwhelming force.¹

The comments made by Sir Aylmer Gould Hunter-Weston at the Dardanelles Commission in February 1917 came from a soldier who has since earned a reputation as one of the most brutal, callous and incompetent commanders of the Great War. His case is one that powerfully illustrates the manner in which that destructive conflict has become embedded in the popular memory. There is no doubt that for some contemporaries, he was a 'butcher', a jovial 'mountebank', who was perhaps even 'not quite sane'.² However, this colourful testimony has often been uncritically absorbed into the historical record, so that even the latest revisionist treatments that seek to provide a more nuanced account of the tactical transformation of

- 1 Hunter-Weston, 'Evidence to Dardanelles Commission', 12 February 1917, Hamilton Papers, 8/2/50, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London, (LHCMA).
- 2 Notable accounts in published memoirs include: Charles Carrington, *Soldier from the Wars Returning* (London: Hutchinson, 1965), 104; Captain J. C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew, 1914–19* (London: Abacus, 1994), 50–5, 408, 412, 432–3; Eric Harrison, *Gunners, Game and Gardens: An Autobiography* (London: Leo Cooper, 1978), 50–1; Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz ... and Beyond* (Oxford: Casement, 2010).

the British Army present him as a bullying eccentric; a convenient counterpoint to the 'learning curve' displayed by more successful commanders.³

The intention of this biography is to provide a more rounded portrait of the soldier and the man. Four main themes are explored in order to capture the complexities of a commander who began the Great War as one of the British Army's rising stars: command in context, personality and performance, the political soldier, reputation and memory. Taking each in turn, the obvious starting point is to trace the 'making' of Hunter-Weston as a commander, examining his upbringing, training, early military service and his years as a peacetime staff officer. Once the cultural and environmental influences that shaped his development are taken into account, he emerges less as a pantomime villain and more as a transitional figure, overwhelmed by a war that confounded his expectations. The creation of a mass army boosted many careers, but Hunter-Weston experienced the fastest promotion of any 1914 infantry brigade commander, advancing from substantive Colonel to temporary Lieutenant-General by May 1915. In practice, this meant exchanging a 1,000-yard trench sector in Flanders for the command of a large and complex combined-arms formation on the Helles front at Gallipoli. Described by Sir Ian Hamilton as 'a slashing man of action; an acute theorist', he set out to be a modern soldier, believing that war could only be won by the application of military science.⁴ Yet, while he was fascinated by the potential of technology in warfare, he also believed that all new inventions would find their place in the military machine, modifying but not undermining 'well-established principles'.⁵ He was far

3 See, for example, Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914–18: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), 14, 32; Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front, 1914–18* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006), 198–9. For an unusually sympathetic and perceptive short treatment, see Elizabeth Balmer, 'General Hunter-Weston's Appreciation of the Dardanelles Situation', *Stand To!* 79, (April 2007), 5–8.

4 Sir Ian S. M. Hamilton, *Gallipoli Diary*, vol. 1 (London: E. Arnold, 1920), 3.

5 Aylmer Hunter-Weston (HW) to Grace Hunter-Weston (GHW), 7 October 1914, Hunter-Weston, Private War Diary, Vol. IX, 4 Aug. 1914–15 Feb. 1915, Add. MS 48363, British Library [HW Private War Diary, 48363, BL].

from alone in this traditional reasoning, but while other senior commanders struggled to grasp the tactical implications of the firepower revolution, few were as persistent as Hunter-Weston in continuing to expound the 'all costs' logic of offensive warfare with such brutal clarity. In fact, it his own bombastic talkativeness contributed significantly to earning him the 'butcher' epithet, while obscuring the extent to which he was capable of adaptation and innovation.

Although this study examines the various command situations that Hunter-Weston faced, it is not exclusively concerned with his generalship. Some biographers have found their military subjects 'personally ... of no great interest', but it is impossible to understand Hunter-Weston's encounters with the modern battlefield without reference to character traits that were mirror images of the 'terse' and 'aloof' Douglas Haig.⁶ In an age when most generals were little more than 'brass hats' to their soldiers, he was unmistakably a personality. Cheeriness was an article of faith in the British army and he became one of its chief exponents, privately criticising King George V for his 'doleful face'.⁷ His commitment to the ideals of heroic personal leadership meant that he found glory where others saw only grind and suffering. He also benefited from a powerful physical presence. Reckoned to be the best-dressed officer on the Western Front, he was below average height with a remarkable hawk-like nose and glittering eyes, and possessed one of the finest moustaches in the senior ranks of the British army, a creation that became larger and more impressive with age.⁸ The considerable element of theatricality in his nature also meant that he was something of a showman, actively seeking out close contact with his troops. Not surprisingly, a whole cycle of stories were told about him, enough to form 'a volume like the Norse sagas, in which Hunter-Weston takes the place of the mythical heroes of old.'⁹ As his active military role

6 Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914–18* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 5.

7 HW to GHW, 8 August 1918: Hunter-Weston Private War Diary, Vol. XIII, 1 Jan.–11 Nov. 1918, Add. MS 48367, British Library [HW Private War Diary, 48367, BL].

8 *The Sketch*, 29 September 1929.

9 *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 17 May 1918.

diminished after the disastrous performance of his corps on the first day of the Somme, his idiosyncrasies assumed a life of their own, and the ‘Hunter-Bunter’ anecdotes subsequently multiplied.¹⁰

One of the main tasks in writing this biography has been to cut through the colourful mythology which has built up over the years in order to confront Hunter-Weston on his own terms. There is no shortage of primary material, as he was acutely concerned with the management of his public image. Despite his claims to be a ‘plain, blunt soldier’, he grasped the politicisation of the war effort with impressive dexterity. An astute networker, he was elected as an MP while still a Corps Commander, later reinventing himself as a populist politician once he had left the army. He was devoted to both careers and meticulously – almost obsessively – documented their progress in impeccably ordered volumes of newspaper clippings. He also preserved eight volumes of his official war diaries; typically, one of his priorities on returning from Gallipoli was to have his papers bound by a celebrated London firm. A further six volumes of his personal war diary were compiled retrospectively by his admiring and unflagging wife, Lady Grace Hunter-Weston. These include selections from the letters that he sent her almost daily during the war – a remarkable correspondence that sometimes included highly sensitive military information. In retirement, he began to revisit this material, as well as his other personal papers from his service in South Africa and his time as a staff officer, often vigorously annotating them.

While he also had a clear idea of how he wished to be remembered, his efforts to shape posterity were less effective than he intended. Hunter-Weston often emerges from his writings as vainglorious, self-congratulatory

10 He had originally been known as ‘The Count’ while at the School for Military Engineering at Chatham, a reference to his distinguished appearance, but he had become ‘Hunter-Bunter’ by the time he joined Staff College in 1897; the affectionate nickname was unconnected with the Billy Bunter character who first made his appearance in *The Magnet* in 1908. The resulting confusion led to Hunter-Weston being assigned a weight problem in one ‘comical’ history: Nigel Cawthorne, *The Beastly Battles of Old England: The Misguided Manoeuvres of the British at War* (London: Piatkus, 2013).

and insensitive, but at the same time he can also appear as intelligent, professional, brave and loyal. Well-schooled in the paternalism of the old army, he ardently sought the approval of his men, as well as his superiors, and was capable of spontaneous acts of kindness when faced with the troubles of individual soldiers.¹¹ Tragically, however, the wars of empire had poorly prepared his generation of commanders for the realities of high-pressure decision-making in which a single ill-judged order could have catastrophic consequences. Together they have gained popular notoriety as ‘bunglers’, but among this dubious company, Hunter-Weston stands out as the perfect caricature of a ‘Donkey’ general. Separating substance from recycled rumour and pejorative comment is not an easy task, but in tackling a figure who is so at odds with modern sensibilities, it seems wise to remember Bidwell and Graham’s injunction that we should treat all human subjects with ‘equal respect for their frailties, their handicaps and their achievements.’¹²

- 11 For example, when a Gunner named Casey got a lady in Newcastle pregnant, he left his post to marry her. When tried for desertion, he was convicted and given the lenient sentence of one year’s hard labour. Hunter-Weston later commuted the sentence and sent the new Mrs Casey a £2 cheque for her wedding present: HW to Mrs Casey, 17 December 1917. Hunter-Weston, *Private War Diary*, Vol. XII, 8th Army Corps, Ypres, Flêtre and Passchendaele. 1 Jan–31 Dec. 1917, Add MS 48366, British Library, [HW *Private War Diary*, 48366, BL].
- 12 Shelford Bidwell and Domenick Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904–45* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004), 64.