

Be realistic about what our armed forces can do

Twice in the twentieth century government and Parliament sent the professional but small British army onto the continent to fight against German militarism and expansion. In 1914 around 100,000 men were sent as the British Expeditionary Force. They fought bravely at Mons, on the Marne and later at Ypres. They retreated a long way but helped the French slow and turn the rapid German advance, stopping them capturing Paris. Most of that force was killed and by year end the UK was embarked on recruiting a far mightier citizens army capable of measuring up to the scale of Germany's forces.

In 1939 a larger expeditionary force was sent, expanding to around 400,000. This army with our French allies was heavily outnumbered and outgunned by German forces. It had to be rescued from the beaches at Dunkirk, whilst the German forces went on to conquer France. Around 60,000 of the force did not return in the rescue.

On both occasions the UK had been aware of the threat for some time. On both occasions the UK sent an army that was far too small, and inappropriately equipped to stand up to the forces ranged against it. The original British army of 1914 did not have the equipment needed to fight a trench based war, with insufficient machine guns, grenades and artillery. The army of 1939 was better equipped, but lost most of it in the retreat that resulted from the far stronger forces ranged against it.

In 1914 the army command had not thought through tactics in the machine age. As the war got bogged down towards the end of 1914, more thinking was needed over how you defended men in trenches, and how you could mount an attack at such well defended positions. The answer was not clear until the invention of the tank sought to inject some mobility and pace into the static battlefield. Several years were spent whilst at war experimenting with mining, with more intense artillery bombardments on trench lines and in seeking an alternative front in the Dardenelles. Gas also found its cruel way into the repertoire of torture at the front. Most of this failed to produce a breakthrough, and was pursued in battle in ways which allowed far too many casualties for no good purpose.

It is difficult not to be angry to read of the many times armies of men were asked to undertake a frontal assault of a kind which had failed many times before, only to fail again. Wellington sought to conserve his troops and keep them out of danger as much as possible, knowing replacements were hard to come by. In 1914-18 there was a wanton approach to the loss of life, brought on by the huge numbers of volunteers followed by conscription and by a stubborn refusal to see that killing so many was not advancing the cause of victory.

So what can we learn from this for today? Our current army is not large enough to fight a major war against a substantial hostile power. We need the

NATO alliance and the engagement of the USA to help keep our peace. The army has been used to fighting asymmetric wars against terrorist groups in splintered countries and neighbourhoods. In some of these Middle Eastern conflicts our force committed has been small, and has not always had the equipment it needed. Were we to be drawn into a wider war we would need time to expand our military numbers and to produce many more vehicles and weapons.

There is a need for more thought over what kind of weapons we might need and what we might face at a time of rapid technological change. Our professional army would become the core of an expanded army were need to arise, which we trust it does not. We need above all to ensure that home defence is strong, which as always depends on our ability at sea and in the air to control approaches to our coast. We also need to ensure that we can sustain our weapons and maintain military production on these islands if our supplies from abroad are disrupted as they were in both major wars of the twentieth century. Our island position makes it so much easier militarily to defend ourselves. It also requires plenty of sea power to ensure supply from abroad, and plenty of flexibility to produce more of what we need at home.