

Great Retreat

The Great Retreat (French: Grande Retraite), also known as the Retreat from Mons, is the name given to the long withdrawal to the River Marne in August and September 1914 by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the French Fifth Army, Allied forces on the Western Front in the First World War, after their defeat by the armies of the German Empire at the Battle of Charleroi (21 August) and the Battle of Mons (23 August). A counteroffensive by the Fifth Army, with some assistance from the BEF, at the First Battle of Guise (Battle of St. Quentin 29–30 August) failed to end the German advance, and the retreat continued to and beyond the Marne. From 5 to 12 September, the First Battle of the Marne ended the Allied retreat and forced the German armies to retire towards the Aisne River and to fight the First Battle of the Aisne (13–28 September). Reciprocal attempts to outflank the opposing armies to the north known as the Race to the Sea followed (17 September – 17 October).

Background

The Battle of the Frontiers is a general name for all of the operations of the French armies until the Battle of the Marne. A series of encounter battles began between the German, French and Belgian armies, on the German-French frontier and in southern Belgium on 4 August 1914. The Battle of Mulhouse (Battle of Alsace 7–10 August) was the first French offensive of World War I against Germany. The French captured Mulhouse until forced out by a German counter-attack on 11 August and fell back toward Belfort. The main French offensive, the Battle of Lorraine (14–25 August), began with the Battles of Morhange and Sarrebourg (14–20 August) advances by the First Army on Sarrebourg and the Second Army towards Morhange. Château Salins near Morhange was captured on 17 August and Sarrebourg the next day. The German 6th and 7th armies counter-attacked on 20 August, the Second Army was forced back from Morhange and the First Army was repulsed at Sarrebourg. The German armies crossed the border and advanced on Nancy but were stopped to the east of the city.

To the south the French retook Mulhouse on 19 August and then withdrew. On 24 August at the Battle of the Mortagne (14–25 August), a limited German offensive in the Vosges, the Germans managed a small advance, before a French counter-attack retook the ground. By 20 August a German counter-offensive in Lorraine had begun and the German 4th and 5th Armies advanced through the Ardennes on 19 August towards Neufchâteau. An offensive by French Third and Fourth armies through the Ardennes began on 20 August, in support of the French invasion of Lorraine. The opposing armies met in thick fog and the French mistook the German troops for screening forces. On 22 August the Battle of the Ardennes (21–28 August) began with French attacks, which were costly to both sides and forced the French into a disorderly retreat late on 23 August. The Third Army recoiled towards Verdun, pursued by the 5th Army and the Fourth Army retreated to Sedan and Stenay. Mulhouse was recaptured again by German forces and the Battle of the Meuse 26–28 August), caused a temporary halt of the German advance.

Liège was occupied by the Germans on 7 August, the first units of the BEF landed in France and French troops crossed the German frontier. On 12 August, the Battle of Haelen was fought by German and Belgian cavalry and infantry and was a Belgian defensive success. The BEF completed its move of four divisions and a cavalry division to France on 16 August, as the last Belgian fort of the Position fortifiée de Liège surrendered. The Belgian government withdrew from Brussels on 18 August and the German army attacked the Belgian field army at the Battle of the Gete. Next day the Belgian army began to retire towards Antwerp, which left the route to Namur open; Longwy and Namur were besieged on 20 August. Further west, the Fifth Army had concentrated on the Sambre by 20 August, facing north either side of Charleroi and east towards the Belgian fortress of Namur. On the left, the Cavalry Corps (General André Sordet) linked with the BEF at Mons.

Prelude

Battle of Charleroi, 21 August

By 20 August, the Fifth Army had begun to concentrate on a 40 km (25 mi) front along the Sambre, centred on Charleroi and extending east to the Belgian fortress of Namur. On the left flank, the Sordet Cavalry Corps linked the Fifth Army to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at Mons. General Joseph Joffre ordered Lanrezac to attack across the Sambre but this attack was forestalled by the German 2nd Army on the morning

of 21 August, which crossed the Sambre, establishing two bridgeheads which the French, lacking artillery, were unable to reduce. Bülow attacked again on 22 August with three corps against the entire Fifth Army front. Fighting continued on 23 August, when the French centre around Charleroi began to fall back. The German 3rd Army crossed the Meuse and launched an attack against the French right flank, held by I Corps (General Louis Franchet d'Esperey). The French stopped the German advance and delivered a counter-attack. The Fifth Army was confronted by the German 3rd and 2nd armies from the east and the north. Before the Fifth Army could attack over the Sambre the 2nd Army attacked at the Battle of Charleroi and at Namur on 21 August. The 3rd Army crossed the Meuse and attacked the French right flank and on 23 August, the Fifth Army began a retirement southward to avoid encirclement.

Battle of Mons, 23 August

The Battle of Mons was a subsidiary action of the Battle of the Frontiers, the BEF attempted to hold the line of the Mons–Condé Canal against the advancing German 1st Army. During 23 August the Germans concentrated on the British at the salient formed by a loop in the canal. At 9:00 a.m., the Germans attempted to cross four bridges over the canal at the salient. By the afternoon the British position in the salient had become untenable; to the east, units of the German IX Corps had begun to cross the canal, threatening the British right flank. At 3:00 p.m. the 3rd Division was ordered to retire from the salient, to positions a short distance to the south of Mons. A retreat was ordered towards evening by the 5th Division to conform and by nightfall II Corps had established a new defensive line, running through the villages of Montrœul, Boussu, Wasmes, Paturages and Frameries. The Germans had built pontoon bridges over the canal and were approaching the British positions in great strength. By nightfall on 24 August, the British had retreated to defensive lines on the Valenciennes–Maubeuge road. Outnumbered by the 1st Army and with the French Fifth Army also falling back, the BEF continue to retire. The I Corps retreated to Landrecies and II Corps to Le Cateau. The British suffered 1,642 casualties, the Germans 2,000.

Retreat, 24 August – 1 September

Battle of Le Cateau

On the evening of 25 August, British II Corps commander General Horace Smith-Dorrien, ordered his corps to stand and fight to deliver a stopping blow to the Germans. The Allies set up defensive positions near the town; as I Corps had not arrived, Smith-Dorrien's right flank was unprotected. On the morning of the 26 August, the Germans attacked with two infantry and three cavalry divisions against a British force comprising three infantry divisions, an infantry brigade and a cavalry division. Of the 40,000 Entente troops fighting at Le Cateau, 5,212 men were killed or wounded and c. 2,600 troops were captured and thirty-eight British guns were lost. The Germans lost 2,900 men killed, wounded or missing. The Germans achieved an important victory, effectively routing II Corps and inflicting nearly three times as many casualties as they themselves suffered. As the British retreat continued south towards Paris, there were a number of small but vigorous holding actions by various units of the British rearguard.

Rearguard Affair of Le Grand Fayt

The German 2nd Army commander General Karl von Bülow had ordered a rapid pursuit after the battles of 21–24 August against the French Fifth Army and the BEF. The 1st and 2nd armies were sent to the south-west to gain the left flank of the Allied line. The X Reserve Corps encountered "especially obstinate" resistance at Marbaix and Le Grand-Fayt. On the morning of 26 August 1914, the 2nd Connaught Rangers (2nd Division) under Lieutenant-Colonel A.W. Abercrombie were covering the retreat of the British 5th Infantry Brigade from Petit Landrecies. Unknown to Abercrombie, by late morning the retreat had already taken place but the orders had not received by the Connaught Rangers.

Hearing the sound of rifle fire coming from near-by Marbaix, Abercrombie set off with two platoons of infantry towards the gunfire only to come under heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. Abercrombie then ordered his force to retire on Le Grand Fayt, which locals had told him was clear of Germans, only to discover that Le Grand Fayt had been abandoned. Abercrombie and his men then came under heavy fire from Germans concealed in the village and the order was given to retreat through the surrounding fields. Despite the heavy German fire and the difficulty of communication in the close terrain, the retreat was carried out in an orderly fashion, although six officers and 280 men were reported as still missing on 29 August, including Abercrombie. By the evening the X Reserve Corps was still near Marbaix and Avesnes. The pursuit by the 2nd Army was

ordered to continue on 27 August through Landrecies and Trélon, with the X Reserve Corps advancing towards Wassigny.

Rearguard Affair of Étreux

Bülow had ordered the X Reserve Corps to continue its advance to the south-west, after the encounter at Le Grand-Fayt. The 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers, had been ordered to hold its ground at all costs, in their first action in France. Less than a battalion strength, just three companies of the 2nd Battalion of the Munsters supported by a couple of field guns engaged the German attackers. The Munsters fell back to an orchard near Étreux and as night fell on the evening of 27 August, found themselves surrounded; having exhausted their ammunition, they surrendered. In the action at Étreux, only four officers and 240 other ranks of the 2nd Munsters survived but the Battalion prevented German pursuit of the BEF I Corps, gaining valuable time for the BEF to escape. They were outnumbered at odds of over 6:1 and when finally defeated, the survivors were congratulated by the Germans. The X Reserve Corps had continued its advance towards Wassigny and Étreux on 27 August, where the 19th Reserve Division reported that it had "scattered a British battalion".

Affair of Cerizy

During the morning the 5th Cavalry Brigade moved to the west bank of the Oise about 2 mi (3.2 km) east of Cerizy (Moÿ-de-l'Aisne). Around noon German cavalry appeared on the road from St. Quentin and were engaged by a party of cavalry with a machine-gun 0.5 mi (0.80 km) east of Cerizy supported by a section of Royal Horse Artillery. The party of cavalry was forced back but German attempts to enter La Guinguette Farm were repulsed. In the afternoon, two German cavalry squadrons advanced; the Germans dismounted and then their horses bolted, followed by the riders. The British immediately pursued around the eastern flank and met mounted cavalry near Moy; the 12th Royal Lancers forced the Germans to dismount with rifle fire and stampeded their horses. A squadron of mounted lancers got within 50 yd (46 m), charged and inflicted 70–80 casualties with swords and lances for a loss of five killed. The British gathered c. 30 wounded and estimated that the total German loss was 300 casualties. The Germans had expected to meet a weak infantry detachment and attacked with three dismounted squadrons, intending to charge with three more. The Germans eventually managed to disengage and withdraw behind a hill north of the woods; during the evening the British retired to the south.

Affair of Néry

In a dense fog on 1 September, the British 1st Cavalry Brigade prepared to leave their bivouac and were surprised and attacked by the 4th Cavalry Division shortly after dawn. Both sides fought dismounted; the British artillery was mostly put out of action in the first few minutes but a gun of L Battery, Royal Horse Artillery kept up a steady fire for 2½ hours, against a battery of twelve German field guns. British reinforcements arrived at around 8:00 a.m., when the German cavalry had nearly overrun some of the British artillery. Three British cavalry regiments assembled at the east end of Néry and stopped the German attack with machine-gun fire, after dismounted German cavalry had got within 500 yd (460 m) and at 6:00 a.m. two squadrons of the 5th Dragoon Guards charged the German right flank. The 4th Cavalry Brigade arrived with an infantry battalion and began to envelop the northern flank of the 4th Cavalry Division, which was caught out when a delivery of ammunition was delayed just as it ran short. The Germans tried to remove the twelve field guns but lost many men to machine-gun fire and left eight guns behind. The 11th Hussars pursued the Germans for 1 mi (1.6 km) and took 78 prisoners. At 9:00 a.m., General Otto von Garnier heard reports that Crépy and Béthisy were occupied and broke off the engagement, to rally east of Néry; the 4th Cavalry Division then moved south via Rocquemont to Rozières.

Rearguard Action of Crépy-en-Valois

Air reconnaissance on the fronts of the VII Corps and X Reserve Corps on 31 August reported that the British were retreating south of the Aisne towards Crépy-en-Valois. The five Jägerbattalions of the II Cavalry Corps were sent towards Crépy on 1 September and encountered the 13th Brigade of the 5th Division, which began to retire at 10:00 a.m. A German attack began from Béthancourt, about 4 mi (6.4 km) from Crépy and mainly met the West Kent on the left flank. The 119th Battery of the XXVII Brigade RFA was about 100 yd (91 m) from the British line and fired 150 shells in five minutes, when the Germans had approached within 1,400 yd (1,300 m). By noon the British had fallen back and German cavalry patrols probed forward without infantry. On the right flank, the 2nd Duke of Wellingtons at a crossroads near Raperie, were able to withdraw, under cover

of the other two batteries of the XXVII Brigade.[23] The 1st Army had attempted to trap British rear guards at Crépy and Villers-Cotterêts (Villers) but they had slipped away. Air reconnaissance revealed that British columns were moving south from the area south-west of Villers, south of Crépy and from Creil.

Rearguard Actions of Villers-Cotterêts

On 31 August, German air reconnaissance saw British columns marching towards Villers and the 1st Army headquarters assumed that troops in the Oise valley were British and those retreating towards Soissons were French. Kluck concluded that it would be impossible to trap the British but a pursuit towards Soissons might catch up with the French. The II Cavalry Corps was ordered to advance southwards, as it was assumed that the British had reached Villers. During the afternoon another air reconnaissance reported that many troops were seen at the village and that some might be captured. Kluck ordered the 1st Army to advance southwards with unlimited objectives. The 6th Division of the III Corps, crossed the Aisne at Vic on 1 September and engaged the 3rd Cavalry Brigade at Taillefontaine, about 5 mi (8.0 km) north-west of Villers and drove it slowly back towards the village.

At 10:00 a.m. the 4th Guards Brigade was attacked by a mixed force of cavalry, infantry and artillery, which was repulsed until another attack at 10:45 a.m. and got round the western flank and advanced on an open area from Rond de la Reine to Croix de Belle Vue and filtered through gaps in the line of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, who fell back slowly, with the 2nd Grenadier Guards on the right. By 2:00 p.m. the British had retreated to the northern fringe of the village during hand-to-hand fighting. The British retreat began again at 6:00 p.m. and Villers was captured late in the night, after the British had retired to the south and south-west. By the end of the day the 1st Army headquarters had abandoned hope of cornering large British forces south of Verberie, Crépy-en-Valois and Villers.

Battle of St. Quentin

Main article: Battle of St. Quentin

Joffre ordered a counter-attack by the Fifth Army on 29 August, at St. Quentin but a copy of the orders fell into German hands, which gave Bülow time to prepare. The attacks against the town by the XVIII Corps were a costly failure but the X and III corps on the right flank got forward and forced the Germans near Guise to fall back. The French attacked again during the morning of 30 August but the attacks were uncoordinated and repulsed; the Germans counter-attacked before noon. German infantry made slow progress through the Oise marshes amidst extensive artillery bombardments by both sides. By early afternoon, aircraft reconnaissance reports showed that the French had begun to withdraw and Bülow ordered a pursuit by small infantry parties with field artillery, while the main force paused to rest, due to exhaustion and to concern that the fortress of La Fère obstructed a general advance and should be masked, while the 1st Army enveloped the French from the west and then attacked on 1 September. The 2nd Army pursuit took only four guns, 16 machine-guns and c. 1,700 prisoners. On 31 August the Fifth Army continued the retreat to the Marne.

Aftermath

Advance to the Aisne, 6 September – 1 October

Battle of the Marne

Joffre used the railways which had transported French troops to the German frontier, to move troops back from Lorraine and Alsace, forming a new Sixth Army under General Michel-Joseph Maunoury, with nine divisions and two cavalry divisions. By 10 September, twenty divisions and three cavalry divisions had been moved west from the German border to the French centre and left and the balance of force between the German 1st–3rd armies and the Third, Fourth, Ninth, Fifth armies, the BEF and Sixth Army had changed to 44:56 divisions. Late on 4 September Joffre ordered the Sixth Army to attack eastwards over the Ourcq towards Château Thierry as the BEF advanced towards Montmirail and the Fifth Army attacked northwards, with its right flank protected by the Ninth Army along the St. Gond marshes. The French First–Fourth armies to the east were to resist the attacks of the German 5th–7th armies between Verdun and Toul and repulse an enveloping attack on the defences south of Nancy from the north. The 6th and 7th armies were reinforced by heavy artillery from Metz and attacked again on 4 September along the Moselle.

On 5 September the Sixth Army advanced eastwards from Paris against the German IV Reserve Corps, which had moved into the area that morning. The French were stopped short of high ground north of Meaux.

Overnight the IV Reserve Corps withdrew to a better position 10 km (6.2 mi) east and French air reconnaissance observed German forces moving north to face the Sixth Army. General Alexander von Kluck the 1st Army commander, ordered the II Corps to move back to the north bank of the Marne, which began a redeployment of all four 1st Army corps to the north bank by 8 September. The swift move to the north bank prevented the Sixth Army from crossing the Ourcq but created a gap between the 1st and 2nd Armies. The BEF advanced from 6–8 September, crossed the Petit Morin and captured bridges over the Marne and established a bridgehead 8 km (5.0 mi) deep. The Fifth Army also advanced into the gap and by 8 September crossed the Petit Morin, which forced Bülow to withdraw the right flank of the 2nd Army. Next day the Fifth Army re-crossed the Marne and the German 1st and 2nd armies began to retire as the French Ninth, Fourth and Third armies fought defensive battles against the 3rd Army which was forced to retreat with the 1st and 2nd armies on 9 September.

BEF casualties, 1914

- August 14,409
- September 15,189

Further east the Third Army was forced back to the west of Verdun as German attacks were made on the Meuse Heights to the south-east but managed to maintain contact with Verdun and the Fourth Army to the west. German attacks against the Second Army south of Verdun from 5 September almost forced the French to retreat but on 8 September the crisis eased. By 10 September the German armies west of Verdun were retreating towards the Aisne and the Franco-British were following-up, collecting stragglers and equipment. On 12 September, Joffre ordered an outflanking move to the west and an attack northwards by the Third Army to cut off the German retreat. The pursuit was too slow; on 14 September the German armies had dug in north of the Aisne and the Allies met trench lines rather than rear guards. Frontal attacks by the Ninth, Fifth and Sixth armies were repulsed on 15–16 September, which led Joffre to begin the transfer of the Second Army west to the left flank of the Sixth Army, the first phase of the operations to outflank the German armies, which from 17 September to 17–19 October moved the opposing armies through Picardy and Flanders to the North Sea coast.

First Battle of the Aisne

On 10 September Joffre ordered the French armies and the BEF to exploit the victory of the Marne and for four days the armies on the left flank advanced against German rearguards. On 11 and 12 September, Joffre ordered outflanking manoeuvres by the armies on the left flank but the advance was too slow to catch the Germans, who ended their withdrawal on 14 September. The Germans had reached high ground on the north bank of the Aisne and begun to dig in, which limited the French advance from 15–16 September to a few local gains. French troops had begun to move westwards on 2 September, using the undamaged railways behind the French front, which were able to move a corps to the left flank in 5–6 days. On 17 September, the French Sixth Army attacked from Soissons to Noyon, at the westernmost point of the French flank, with the XIII and IV corps, supported by the 61st and 62nd divisions of the 6th Group of Reserve Divisions, after which the fighting moved north to Lassigny and the French dug in around Nampcel.

The French Second Army completed a move from the east end of the French line and took over command of the left-hand corps of the Sixth Army, as indications appeared that German troops were also being moved from the eastern flank. The German IX Reserve Corps had arrived from Belgium and on 16 September joined the 1st Army for an attack to the south-west with the IV Corps and the 4th and 7th Cavalry divisions, against the attempted French envelopment. The attack was cancelled and the corps was ordered to withdraw behind the right flank of the 1st Army. The 2nd and 9th Cavalry divisions were dispatched as reinforcements next day but before the retirement began, the French attack reached Carlepont and Noyon, before being contained on 18 September. The German armies attacked from Verdun westwards to Rheims and the Aisne on 20 September, cut the main railway from Verdun to Paris and created the St Mihiel salient, south of the Verdun fortress zone. The main German effort remained on the western flank, which was revealed to the French by intercepted wireless messages. By 28 September, the Aisne front had stabilised; the BEF began to withdraw on the night of 1/2 October, the first troops arriving in the Abbeville area on 8/9 October. The BEF prepared to begin operations in Flanders and to join with British forces which had been in Belgium since August.

The Angel of Mons



The Angels of Mons is a story of the reputed appearance of a supernatural entity which protected the British Army from defeat by the invading forces of the German Empire at the beginning of World War I during the Battle of Mons in Belgium on 23 August 1914.

History

On 22–23 August 1914, the first major engagement of the British Expeditionary Force in the First World War occurred at the Battle of Mons. Advancing German forces were thrown back by heavily outnumbered British troops, who suffered heavy casualties and being outflanked, were forced into rapid retreat the next day. The retreat and the battle were rapidly perceived by the British public as being a key moment in the war.

On 29 September 1914 Welsh author Arthur Machen published a short story entitled "The Bowmen" in the London newspaper the Evening News, inspired by accounts that he had read of the fighting at Mons and an idea he had had soon after the battle.

Machen, who had already written a number of factual articles on the conflict for the paper, set his story at the time of the retreat from the Battle of Mons in August 1914. The story described phantom bowmen from the Battle of Agincourt summoned by a soldier calling on St. George, destroying a German host. Machen's story was not, however, labelled as fiction and the same edition of the Evening News ran a story by a different author under the heading "Our Short Story". Machen's story was written from a first-hand perspective and was a kind of false document, a technique Machen knew well. The unintended result was that Machen had a number of requests to provide evidence for his sources for the story soon after its publication, from readers who thought it was true, to which he responded that it was completely imaginary, as he had no desire to create a hoax.

A month or two later Machen received requests from the editors of parish magazines to reprint the story, which were granted. In the introduction to *The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War* (1915) Machen relates that an unnamed priest, the editor of one of these magazines, subsequently wrote to him asking if he would allow the story to be reprinted in pamphlet form, and if he would write a short preface giving sources for the story. Machen replied that they were welcome to reprint but he could not give any sources for the story since he had none. The priest replied that Machen must be mistaken, that the "facts" of the story must be true, and that Machen had just elaborated on a true account. As Machen later said:

It seemed that my light fiction had been accepted by the congregation of this particular church as the solidest of facts; and it was then that it began to dawn on me that if I had failed in the art of letters, I had succeeded, unwittingly, in the art of deceit. This happened, I should think, some time in April, and the snowball of rumour that was then set rolling has been rolling ever since, growing bigger and bigger, till it is now swollen to a monstrous size.

Around that time variations of the story began to appear, told as authentic histories, including an account that told how the corpses of German soldiers had been found on the battlefield with arrow wounds.

In "The Bowmen" Machen's soldier saw "a long line of shapes, with a shining about them." A Mr. A. P. Sinnett, writing in the *Occult Review*, stated that "those who could see said they saw 'a row of shining beings' between the two armies." This led Machen to suggest that the bowmen of his story had become the Angels of Mons. This last point was challenged by Harold Begbie in his book: *On the Side of the Angels: A Reply to Arthur Machen*, London 1915.

Angels

On 24 April 1915, an account was published in the *British Spiritualist* magazine telling of visions of a supernatural force that miraculously intervened to help the British at the decisive moment of the battle. This rapidly resulted in a flurry of similar accounts and the spread of wild rumours. Descriptions of this force varied from it being medieval longbow archers alongside St. George to a strange luminous cloud, though eventually the most popular version came to be angelic warriors. Similar tales of such battlefield visions occurred in medieval and ancient warfare. Atrocity reports like the Rape of Belgium and that of the Crucified Soldier paved the way for a belief that the Christian God would intervene directly against such an evil enemy. However, there are strong similarities between many of these accounts of visions and Machen's story published six months earlier.

In May 1915 a full-blown controversy was erupting, with the angels being used as proof of the action of divine providence on the side of the Allies in sermons across Britain, and then spreading into newspaper reports published widely across the world. Machen, bemused by all this, attempted to end the rumours by republishing the story in August in book form, with a long preface stating the rumours were false and originated in his story. It became a best-seller, and resulted in a vast series of other publications claiming to provide evidence of the Angels' existence. Machen tried to set the record straight, but any attempt to lessen the impact of such an inspiring story was seen as bordering on treason by some. These new publications included popular songs and artists' renderings of the angels. There were more reports of angels and apparitions from the front including Joan of Arc.

Kevin McClure's study describes two types of accounts circulating: some more clearly based on Machen, others with different details. In a time of intense media interest all these reports allegedly confirming sightings of supernatural activity were second-hand and some of them were hoaxes created by soldiers who were not even at Mons. A careful investigation by the Society for Psychical Research in 1915 said of the first-hand testimony, "We have received none at all, and of testimony at second-hand we have none that would justify us in assuming the occurrence of any supernormal phenomenon". The SPR went on to say the stories relating to battlefield "visions" which circulated during the spring and summer of 1915, "prove on investigation to be founded on mere rumour, and cannot be traced to any authoritative source." Given that the Society for Psychical Research believed in the existence of supernatural forces, the conclusions of this report are highly significant.

The sudden spread of the rumours in the spring of 1915, six months after the events and Machen's story was published, is also puzzling. The stories published then often attribute their sources to anonymous British officers. The latest and most detailed examination of the Mons story by David Clarke suggests these men may have been part of a covert attempt by military intelligence to spread morale-boosting propaganda and disinformation. As it was a time of Allied problems with the Lusitania sinking, Zeppelin attacks and failure to achieve a breakthrough on the Western Front, the timing would make military sense. Some of the stories conveniently claimed that sources could not be revealed for security reasons.

The only real evidence of visions from actual named serving soldiers provided during the debate stated that they saw visions of phantom cavalymen, not angels or bowmen, and this occurred during the retreat rather than at the battle itself. Furthermore, these visions did not intervene to attack or deter German forces, a crucial element in Machen's story and in the later tales of angels. Since during the retreat many troops were exhausted and had not slept properly for days, such visions could be hallucinations.

According to the conclusion of the most detailed study of the event it seems that Machen's story provided the genesis for the vast majority of the tales. The stories themselves certainly boosted morale on the home front, as popular enthusiasm was dying down in 1915 and they demonstrate the usefulness of religion in wartime.

Post-war developments

After the war the story continued to be frequently repeated, but with little factual evidence to support it from eye-witnesses to the events at the Battle of Mons. The most substantial piece of corroboratory evidence that is known to exist comes from Brigadier-General John Charteris' memoir *At G.H.Q.* (published 1931), which implies that the story of an:

"Angel of the Lord, clad in white raiment bearing a flaming sword, appearing before the German forces at the Mons battle forbidding their advance",

was a popular rumour circulating in September 1914 among the troops of the British Army's II Corps who had fought in the battle. However, General Charteris wasn't serving with II Corps in 1914, and was commenting on it therefore from a second-hand perspective, and an examination of his original war correspondence and notes from which his book's text was drawn makes no contemporary mention of the story at that time, and it would appear likely that he retrospectively added it into the book's narrative when writing it post-war, acknowledging in the book's preface that he had 'amplified' the original source material in parts in such a way to supplement the text.

Machen was associated with the story for the rest of his life and grew sick of the connection, as he regarded "The Bowmen" as a poor piece of work. He made little money from the story then or later.

The sudden revival of interest in appearances of angels from the 1980's onwards, especially in the United States, not only among Christians, but those interested in the New Age, has caused uncritical accounts of the story of the angels who saved the British Army to be regularly published in books and magazines. Similarly, the story is also often used by sceptics as a good example of how believers in the supernatural can become convinced of fantastic things by slender evidence. References to the story can be found in novels and films like *FairyTale: A True Story* set during World War I. The Friends of Arthur Machen frequently publish articles on developments in the case.