

## GAMELIN AT WORK

(By Captain Cyril Falls, in "War Pictorial")

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GENERALISSIMO GAMELIN  
"... A quiet, unemotional soldier"

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rarely understood but which they used with profound and startling effect. These estaminets were the meeting place of our soldiers billeted in that particular area or town. Their nearest counterpart is the English inn or the New Zealand Working Men's Club. One or two of the larger estaminets possessed jangling pianos, and if a New Zealander could play, however indifferently, he was sure of free beer for himself and his friends so long as he dragged melody from the instrument. I still picture some of those evenings behind the line — the pianist working overtime, crowds singing choruses and Marie Louise filling the glasses as she yelled above the din "*Bon! Très bon les Néo Zélandais.*" During the summer rest periods we had the long evenings in which to wander about the countryside or visit neighbouring villages, for the twilight lasts for hours in Northern France.

### Memories

Those gallant French peasants we came to know so well have much to remember. Thousands of miles of their green and patterned country were ravaged, yet they never lost heart. Villages and towns were reduced to rubble, where not a living thing moved among the ruins; forests, of which the French are so proud, were thrashed and torn by shell-fire until only splintered stumps remained. That applied not to one area, but almost from the North Sea coast to the mountains of Lorraine, eating out in a great arc from the Belgian-German border to within striking distance of Paris. Those who have never looked upon that once-verdant landscape, tortured and pitted into a wilderness of shell craters for mile after depressing mile, can never realise the destruction of four years of war. I remember one journey when I rejoined my battalion near Bapaume, during the final advance when the Germans were retreating. The railway line had been hastily repaired, and our carriages jolted along an unsteady track. On either side, as far as the eye could see, a grey landscape, devoid of all living things, resembled something from a nightmare. Broken beams jutting from mounds of bricks and rubbish marked former farm-houses like dismal tombstones; horses could pick their way without difficulty over the ruins which were once picturesque villages; no trees remained to mark the roads or to throw pools of shade over farmyard or meadow. Only a wilderness of torn earth — the gaping shell holes almost touching each other. Night fell, and still that grim and horrible landscape ran on and on, like a crazy region pictured by a distorted mind. Far ahead of us the guns flashed like lights on a telephone exchange board and star shells left trailing coloured meteors in the night to show that the awful work was going on, night and day.

Yet to-day, after years of labour, the French peasant has turned that nightmare land into another garden of small farms. Only the old concrete pillboxes remain as memorials of 1914-18.

THE picture which the man-in-the-street paints in his imagination of the French Generalissimo is truer than are most imaginary portraits. He sees a quiet, unemotional soldier, short but fit and sturdy, beginning to show signs of age, but active in body as he is lively in mind, studying his maps and giving his instructions in calm, quiet tones.

Men used to murmur behind their hands that Gamelin, a young and comparatively junior Staff Officer, dominated Joffre. That was nonsense. The mind of Joffre was uncreative, unimaginative, even lazy, if you will. He initiated little, but generally chose what he considered the best of several alternatives placed before him. Yet you might as well have tried to dominate a mountain, indeed an inactive volcano which occasionally became active and then spouted red-hot lava. For all his slowness and ponderousness Joffre was a personality, and at moments of emergency an inspiring figure. No man born of woman could hope to play Ludendorff to his Hindenburg, and Gamelin certainly never tried.

### To Restrain His Chief

Yet the fact remains that Gamelin enjoyed the closest confidence and even the personal friendship of Joffre. In the darkest days of 1914 he was constantly beside the Commander-in-Chief. The two vital decisions which led to the victory of the Marne were taken by Joffre on the suggestion of Gamelin, and his was the hand that drafted the two vital orders which put those decisions into force.

After the fall of Joffre, at the end of 1916, his successor, Nivelle, tossed aside his plans and methods. All that had gone before was too slow; now the German armies were to be destroyed and their remnants hunted out of France in one terrific offensive on a scale and of a violence as yet undreamt of. Nivelle chose as his Army Group Commander, his principal instrument, a certain General Micheler, and as Chief of the Staff he allotted to him Colonel Gamelin. Gamelin now had to deal with a type as different from Joffre as would well be imagined. Micheler's very tall and almost incredibly thin figure and bony æsthetic head — "more like a monk than a soldier," he appeared to Haig — framed an acute and vigorous but nervous and highly strung spirit. He was on his guard against his new assistant, Gamelin, and suspicious of being "managed." Almost immediately, however, his guard dropped and his suspicions were allayed.

Everyone knows the story of Nivelle's crash and of the troubles that followed, though not so many know of the bitter relations existing between Nivelle and Micheler, who warned the Commander-in-Chief time after time that his over-confidence would lead to disaster. Gamelin did his best to restrain Micheler and to keep the machine working, but it was a sorry business.

### Back to a Division

After it was all over one can imagine Gamelin saying to himself that he had seen enough of the Staff. He was given command of a first-class division, the 9th, which he led for the rest of the war. In March, 1918, in the course of the first great German offensive, this was one of the divisions rushed up to support Gough's Fifth Army, which had taken the heaviest blow. Arrangements were made that the French 9th Division should take over the remains of the artillery belonging to a tattered British division which it had just relieved. It was on that evening, the 24th, that I had the honour to meet the divisional commander for a few minutes.

I was ordered to accompany the brigade major of our artillery in order to arrange the handing over, I suppose because I spoke French better than he did. Darkness was falling as we reached the village where we had been told we should find the headquarters of the 9th Division, and we had some trouble in reaching the chateau.

There everybody was cool, and the young reddish-haired division commander, standing at a table and bending over his map, just as he is so often pictured to-day, was the coolest of them all. And yet the anxiety weighing upon him must have been heavy. Here he was with his division strung out on a front of six miles, with little ammunition for the artillery which had arrived only the day before, probably an inadequate supply even of small arms ammunition, certainly no barbed wire, and in front of him four complete German divisions, with parts of two others.

Moreover, he knew, as I did not know then, that the troops on his right had fallen back. He had, in fact, been compelled to launch a desperate local counter-attack in order to free himself from pressure, to give himself a moment's breathing space in which to withdraw his own line. Yet he found time to greet us with friendly courtesy, to give us a message of thanks to take to our divisional commander, to issue some detailed instructions for the British artillery he was taking over.

Then he was called to the telephone. Evidently there had been a further retirement. "They must not get the habit of falling back in the dark," I heard him say. "The Germans won't come across country before dawn. Machine guns on the roads —"

### Last to Leave

He dismissed us with a wave of his hand. As we drove away "five-nine" shells were crashing into the village and the rockets sent up by the German infantry to guide their artillery seemed perilously near. I was glad to go, and wondered how long his headquarters would stay. I have since read in a book by one of his Staff Officers: "The General, the Chief of the Staff, the Chief

of the 3rd Bureau, and the orderly officer, were the last to leave in order to maintain by their example the confidence of all."

I did not forget that evening; but, after all, General Gamelin's was the only one among many personalities who passed in a flash in those swift-moving days, and, as I was soon transported from the scene I knew nothing of his brilliant manoeuvre in retreat of the days that followed.

A few months later, however, I came, so to speak, upon his traces. I have not mentioned that he had left Joffre's side in 1916 and had commanded a brigade of Chasseurs Alpins in the 47th Division. In the days of victory I acted as liaison officer with that division and made friends with young de Pouydraguin, son of its former distinguished commander. From him and other veterans of 1916 I used to hear of Gamelin, "the best Colonel in the Army."

No need to linger over his later career, his great work with the French Mission in Brazil, ending in 1925, his even more outstanding work in Syria, his command of the XX Corps at Nancy, his appointment as Chief of the General Staff, and finally his extraordinary post as Chief of the National Defence with all the French forces at his disposal.

### Gamelin's Methods

I shall only recall words written by the Staff Officer already quoted which make clear his methods:

"When the first necessity is to act quickly, without previous concentration of large resources, then there must be decentralisation of command. The executives act directly according to circumstances, with the means placed entirely at their disposal. High authority intervenes at moments only, to co-ordinate or to reinforce."

"When, on the contrary all resources are to be employed for an operation already decided upon, then, centralisation of command. The General takes the affair into his own hand and regulates it down to the smallest detail."