Introduction

On 7 August 1918 the President of the French Republic raised General Ferdinand Foch to the dignity of Marshal of France. Foch had reached the pinnacle of his military career. Less than five months earlier, on 26 March 1918, he had been chosen by unanimous consent of the British and French military and political leaders to be Generalissimo of the Allied armies on the Western Front. To undertake the terrible responsibility thrust on him Foch would be required to draw on all he had learned as a soldier in the prewar period and to reflect on his performance as a commander since August 1914. This book is a study of Foch's command in the positions that he occupied during the war; its aim is to examine how Foch's ideas evolved as he moved along the path that led to the supreme command. As Foch himself wrote: one does what one can to apply what one knows.

Foch was an artillery officer who had never commanded troops in battle before the war. Neither did he become commander-in-chief of the French army. However, he commanded a corps, an army and an army group between 1914 and 1916. He fought defensive battles – most famously before Ypres at the end of 1914 – and offensive battles – two in Artois in 1915 and the following year on the Somme. He commanded a desk from May 1917 until March 1918 as chief of the army general staff, before becoming supreme Allied commander for the final months leading to victory. He presented the terms that the Germans had to sign on 11 November 1918, and his fight to obtain the Rhine frontier was a dominant element during the peace treaty talks. Even the desk-job was important, for 1917 was a critical year as Russia left the war and the United States joined. Foch's experience in the War Ministry gives us an insight both into logistic problems and the difficulties of coordinating strategy and logistics with allies. His 1918 experience is unique in that the role of supreme Allied commander was new and had to be defined and refined as events unfolded.

A detailed analysis of Foch's wartime career as he moved toward the supreme command illuminates some of the important yet neglected

questions that remain about the First World War. He began the war as a corps commander and commanded an army during the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. These intermediate ranks of command have been neglected as subjects of study in favour of, on the one hand, high command and strategy or, on the other, the experience of the individual soldier on the battlefield. This gap in the historiography is being corrected to some extent for the intermediate levels of command in the British army, but not for French generals. Apart from Pedroncini's study of General Pétain, and Gras' study of General de Castelnau, little has been published in French that utilises the immense resources of the archives of the Service historique de la défense in the Château de Vincennes to illuminate the careers of the hundreds of French generals who exercised command at army or corps level. Foch's early progress through these levels to army group command sheds light on this neglected area, and reveals how great or how circumscribed a role a corps or army commander might play in planning battles. An examination of his two years at the operational level of army group commander should answer the question of how much credit an army group commander deserves for what subordinate units achieve or, more frequently, how much blame he deserves for failure.

The nature of command in a coalition war and the significance of national sensibilities are important elements in Foch's diplomatic role as army group commander, coordinating French, British and Belgian armies; these aspects of the First World War are also frequently neglected. The eventual victory was, after all, a victory for coalition rather than for the British army alone, as Haig occasionally implies. The Franco-British facet of the coalition victory was perhaps at its most significant for the Western Front, but in addition Foch had to work with King Albert and the Belgian army; by 1918 he also had to deal with General Pershing and the American Expeditionary Forces, and with Generals Cadorna and Diaz, and the Italian army. His interactions with those national commanders reveal much about the operation of a coalition in a modern, industrial war. How well did Foch, who had studied German along with his contemporaries at the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, cope with the demands of collaborating with foreigners? Did his performance improve with time? Did he discover the most effective methods for coordinating action with allies, given that he spoke no English? Of all the First World War generals, Foch was the only one who negotiated regularly with Allied colleagues, and so his early experience with the British and Belgians and his 1918 experience with the Americans and the Italians provide an excellent perspective on coalition warfare.

The next stage in Foch's career, after being removed from command of his army group in December 1916, provides a very different insight into a

modern war. As chief of the army general staff in 1917, Foch had to advise and persuade French war ministers, and Allied politicians. He was involved in the arrangements for the introduction of the American Expeditionary Forces to the Western Front, and in the enormous industrial effort that France made in order to arm and equip itself and those new armies for the combined-arms battles of the year of victory. Then, as supreme commander in 1918, his tasks involved much political infighting alongside dealing with the enemy. Indeed, the relationship between Foch and France's last wartime Premier and War Minister, Georges Clemenceau, is a fascinating story of how difficult it is to manage civil–military relations both in wartime and in making the subsequent peace. If Foch deserved any credit for the victory, did this entitle him any role in the peace negotiations? J. C. King's two books have long been the standard reference work on the politicians and generals in France, but both were written before the archives were opened.[1] This book therefore takes the marvellous opportunity to use the archival record to revise conclusions reached decades ago. Foch's involvement with politics right from 1914 is one of the surprises in the pages that follow.

Finally, Foch's actions in the months between March and November 1918 illustrate what a supreme Allied commander actually does. The conditions of his appointment and the constraints under which he worked were very different from those that governed General Dwight D. Eisenhower a generation later. Most historians dismiss the First World War version of supreme command as of little value and Foch's role in the victory as minimal. This book will counter that view. Indeed, more generally, the question of the manner of the Entente's victory on the Western Front has been a strangely neglected topic. Many histories of the war in 1918 concentrate on the stunning German gains made during the five spring offensives, thereby surprising the reader with the final Allied military victory. Admiration for German technical efficiency and innovation is also often joined to the judgement that Allied military leaders were incompetent, with the occasional corollary that the wisdom of the New World was required to bring the conflict to an end. Yet it was the German plenipotentiaries who asked for terms, and it was Foch who drew up the military clauses of the armistice presented in the railway wagon at Rethondes in the forest near Compiègne. How far did his earlier command positions prepare him for the final victory? His command is an important element in the victory, but his role in the peace treaty negotiations was highly contested.

[1] King, *Generals and Politicians* (1951), and *Foch versus Clemenceau* (1960).

Running through all the stages of Foch's wartime career is a further question: how important are staff and liaison work for victory in an industrialised war? Great captains cannot be great all alone. With politicians and allies always at their heels, they require the administrative services of a general staff, and they need smooth liaison with the allies. Foch had the same chief of staff, General Maxime Weygand, right from the early weeks of the war until its end, except for a brief period when Weygand was France's permanent military representative in the Supreme War Council – and even there, he continued to act as his chief's mouthpiece. Weygand's devotion to Foch has bequeathed a mass of documentary evidence and an important memoir.[2] Moreover, in a coalition consisting of armies speaking different languages (as in the multi-lingual *kaiserlich und königlich* enemy army), the need to provide a trusted method of communication through translation, not of words but of the meaning behind the words, was acute. Since Foch acted in an international context for most of the war, the evidence of liaison officers provides further insights into the exercise of command. We are particularly fortunate in that the archives contain well-informed, articulate and perceptive accounts by his liaison officers of their dealings with Foch. They give particularly valuable insights into Foch's 'learning experience'.

So an examination of the evolution of Foch's thinking and actions between 1914, when he commanded only a corps, and 1919, when the peace treaty was signed and he became commander of the Allied occupation forces, illuminates many neglected questions: the contribution of unified command to the Allied victory; the resolution of national conflicts within an international coalition; the intricacies of civil–military relations and the importance to be accorded to the administrative post of chief of the army general staff; the role of a commander's general staff; and the mechanism of command at corps and army level. As he learned how to play effectively all his various roles, Foch's war experience gives us an insight into the lessons that enabled him to undertake successfully the task of supreme commander.

These questions have been neglected because most of the writing in English about Foch is based on biographies and on Foch's own postwar memoirs, hence limited by its sources. This book is not a biography, except insofar as the war became Foch's life, and so there is no discussion of his prewar career or of his postwar battles about France's future defence policy. Several good general biographies have already been published, the most recent in French, and the standard English-language one by

[2] Weygand, *Idéal vécu* (1953).

B. H. Liddell Hart.[3] Neither do I attempt to link Foch's prewar writings, the two volumes of his lectures at the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, published in 1903 and 1904, to events between 1914 and 1918. If the prewar writings are opaque, the posthumous memoirs are uninformative. The two volumes of his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la guerre de 1914–1918* were published in 1931, two years after Foch's death, and he did not complete them (they deal only with 1914 and 1918). Although Foch's hand is discernible on every page because each may be compared to the drafts that have been conserved, yet the tone of a general staff account remains. The drafts were prepared by his staff officer Commandant de Mierry in the same format as the French official history, namely a text with hundreds of documents as annexes. French historian and veteran Pierre Renouvin pointed out in his review of the volumes how disappointingly little of the man appeared in the pages. He lamented their report format, and claimed that the memoirs would not inspire the general public; nor would they please historians who 'seek above all the quality of the witness'.[4] The reader will find, therefore, very few references to them in these pages. Writing so soon after Foch's death, Liddell Hart was forced to use Foch's postwar utterances collected by his staff and journalists. These are frequently bombastic or self-serving; they are not to be preferred to contemporary documents, which reveal not only his attractive personality, but also the devotion he inspired in his staff.

Instead of relying on Foch's postwar account or on biographies in order to examine Foch's various commands and what he learned from the experience, this book relies heavily on archival research, using collections that in some cases have only recently become available (Madame la maréchale's informative diary, for example). I have used contemporary documents (letters, the notebooks, official documents) and contemporary comments from informed observers. There is much Foch material in the French army archives in Vincennes, the Archives nationales in Paris, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. I have also used the valuable records of Foch's various liaison officers. Probably the same qualities that make for a good liaison officer mean that the records they leave are particularly useful. In sum, the sources for an in-depth study of this important First World War military commander are not lacking.

As a corps commander, Foch led France's national day military parade on 14 July 1914 in Nancy, the capital of what remained to France of

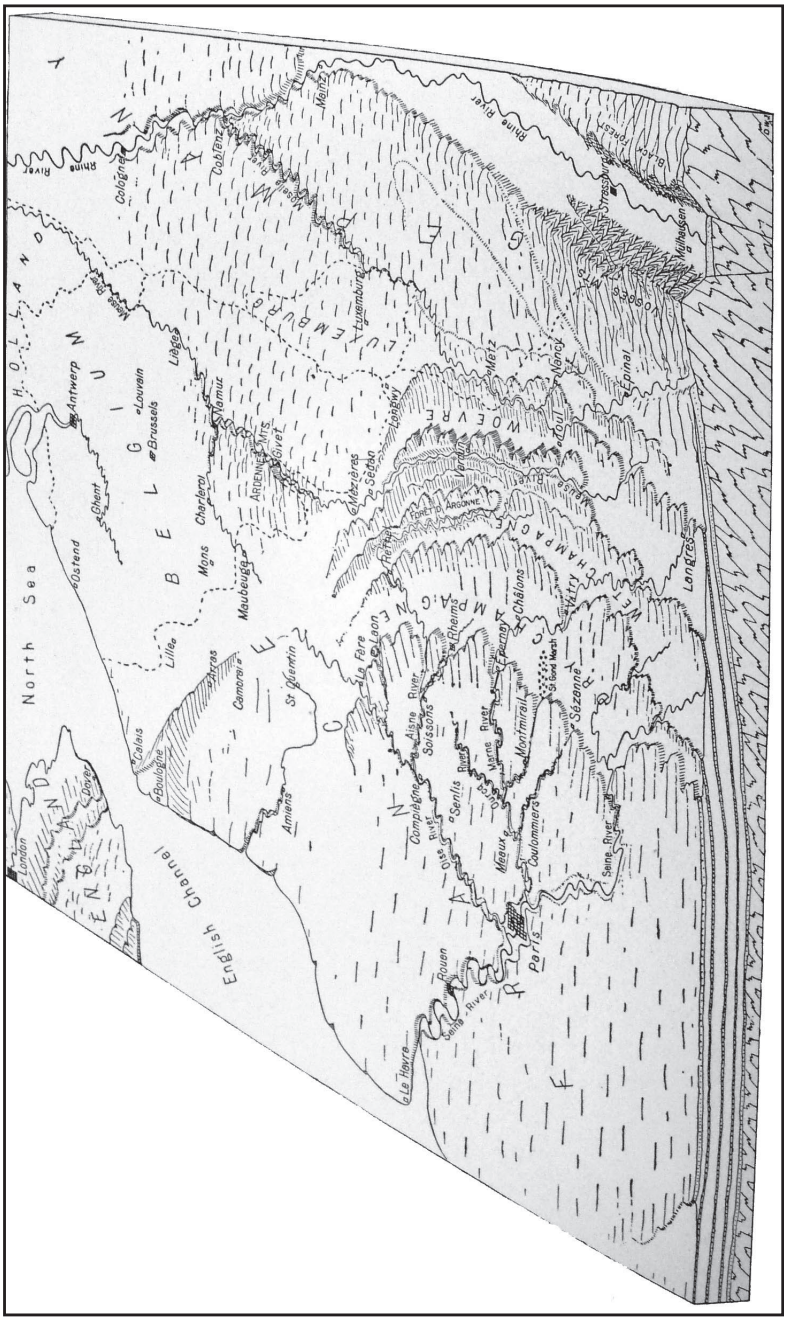
[3] Notin, *Foch* (2008); Autin, *Foch ou le triomphe de la volonté* (1987); Liddell Hart, *Foch: The Man of Orleans* (1931). Less well known but better are Falls, *Foch* (1939), and Hunter's study for the Canadian army. Full publication details are in the Bibliography.
[4] Renouvin, Review, 303.

Lorraine. As Marshal Foch, and supreme Allied commander, he led the 14 July victory parade in 1919 in Paris. The variety of positions that he held in between those two parades permits an insight into the workings of command. The following analysis of his achievements in those roles – the lessons learned, the mistakes made in the fire of war – all build a picture of the forging of a general. This hard-won education helps us to understand how the difficult task of mastering the First World War battlefield was completed, and how victory was won in 1918 – and also to appreciate the tangled relations of civilian and military powers, not only in France but also among Allied generals and politicians. Foch was central in all these matters.

So this book analyses the stages of that journey from Nancy to Paris in order to answer some of the questions outlined above, and, along the way, to put the achievements of Marshal Ferdinand Foch into better perspective by studying what he did rather than accepting what others say that he preached. Foch is better known in the English-speaking world as one of the prewar authorities accused of educating a generation of generals who threw away more than a million French lives in senseless offensives. The following pages correct that perspective by examining what the teacher learned.

Part I

From theory to practice



Map 1 A block diagram of the Western Front showing the principal plateaux and plains, mountains and lowlands, cliff scarps and river trenches which influenced military operations
Note especially how the valley of the river Meuse, running between Sedan and Mézières with the Ardennes to the north, became the vital corridor for the Germans in supplying their armies in northern France and Belgium.

1 From the Ecole de Guerre to August 1914 in Lorraine

In 1914 the French national day, 14 July, was celebrated as usual with military parades, and in Nancy, the capital of the province of Lorraine, the élite XX Corps performed that duty. Nancy was the former capital of the Duchy of Lorraine and, following the amputation of a large portion of the province in 1871, the elegant town lay close to the new German border. In case of war XX Corps had the task of covering that sector of the frontier with Germany as the French army mobilised to meet the threat from across the Rhine. Since August 1913, the corps commander was General Ferdinand Foch. He had reached the highest rank in the army, divisional general, in 1911, and when he reached his sixty-third birthday on 2 October 1914 he would be just two years short of the retirement age for generals. He had no experience at all of commanding troops in battle. Indeed, he had little experience of command, since most of his prewar career had been spent in staff appointments or, most famously, as an instructor.

Between 1895 and 1901 he taught in the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre in Paris, later publishing the lectures that he gave there. Between 1908 and 1911 he was the school's commandant. There followed a succession of brief appointments which took him through several of France's military regions (Nice, Chaumont, Bourges) before he reached Nancy in 1913. Foch owed this succession of posts, rather than a comfortable pre-retirement billet, to General Joseph Joffre. Joffre had become chief of the army staff in 1911, a post which made him automatically the commander-in-chief of the French armies in time of war. Joffre had known Foch for a long time and appreciated his qualities.[1]

Joffre even had Foch's name on his short-list for the post of his deputy, but the War Minister, Adolphe Messimy, vetoed Foch's selection and General Noël de Curières de Castelnau was given the job instead. Joffre gave the head of his military cabinet and confidant, Colonel Maurice Gamelin (better known as the Second World War general), the task of

[1] Autin, *Foch*, 105.

explaining to Foch why he had not been chosen. Gamelin described how Foch waved away his explanations and went straight to what he saw as the heart of the question of how to foil the Schlieffen plan, which aimed to envelop the French army's left wing by an invasion of Belgium. Foch advised Gamelin to remember: thirty-five German corps on the coast.[2] As early as 1911 Foch was thinking about the uncertain future.

The intrusion of politics into military appointments would have come as no surprise to Foch. Leaving aside the Dreyfus affair (about which he was careful to express no opinions openly), Foch had suffered from political discrimination when he was removed from his teaching post at the Ecole de Guerre as a result of the purges of officers with overt religious affiliation (hence supposedly anti-republican sentiments), and he expected to suffer from it again in 1908 when it was a question of appointing its new commandant. However, Premier Georges Clemenceau showed, not for the last time, that he cared little for religious affiliation or presumed political opinions when it came to important and influential positions. To Foch's surprise, Clemenceau appointed him commandant of the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre.

As a result of that selection, Foch had the chance to make international contacts, especially with Britain, that proved highly useful when war came. He was keen to create closer ties with the British because he saw Russia's lack of readiness for war. Despite the long-standing military agreement with Russia and despite French loans for railway construction, that lack of readiness meant that French military planners could not count on Russian help if war came. Therefore Joffre sought to increase the effectiveness of the Russian alliance in his revision of the French war plan.[3] Foch was fortunate in his wish for closer relations with the British because his British counterpart, Henry Wilson, was very keen to visit France and its war college. Wilson first went to see Foch in December 1909, and he returned in January 1910; October 1910 (when he was invited to the wedding of Foch's daughter, Marie); in February 1911; in February, August and October 1912 (when he was invited to but did not attend the wedding of Foch's younger daughter Anne); three more visits in 1913 and again in May 1914. Foch went to Britain less frequently: in June 1910 and December 1912. He also went to Russia for the Russian army manoeuvres in 1910 and 1912.

There is no need to posit a deep, personal friendship between Wilson and Foch simply because of wedding invitations. They were congenial colleagues who found it easy to work together and, more importantly, had a common interest in strengthening the military ties between their two

[2] Reynaud, *Au cœur de la mêlée*, 912. [3] Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy*, 120, 208.