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Marco Z. Dracopoli  
*Gettysburg College*  
Class of 2014

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# A New Officer for a New Army: The Leadership of Major Hugh J.C. Peirs in the Great War

## **Abstract**

World War One brought dramatic changes to the officer corps of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fighting on the Western Front. The heavy casualties sustained meant that mass mobilization at home had to take place in order to replace combat losses. As a result, the previously small, but professional British army was forced to transition into a large citizen-soldier army. This new force required not just new officers, but an entirely new leadership model. The formation and exercise of this new style of leadership is examined through the letters of Major John Hugh Chevalier Peirs, executive officer and later commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment who served on the Western Front from 1915-1918. Major Peirs' letters highlight the emergence of this new breed of leadership within Kitchener's New Army and make clear why its emergence was so important to the overall morale and success of the BEF.

## **Keywords**

World War One, First World War, WWI, Britain, British Expeditionary Force, Officers, Leadership, Army, Great War

**A New Officer for a New Army:  
The Leadership of Major Hugh J.C. Peirs in the Great War  
By Marco Dracopoli**

Gary Sheffield opens his book, *Leadership in the Trenches*, “an army, like any other human society, is an organism, whose well-being depends on the interplay of human relationships.”<sup>1</sup> In war, the relationship between officers and enlisted men is integral to the morale of an army. This is certainly true in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in World War I (WWI), as officers not only maintained their traditional roles as combat leaders, but also took on supplementary roles as guardians of their men’s physical and psychological well-being. This dual nature of a combat commander and father figure is aptly displayed in the letters and correspondence of Major John Hugh Chevalier Peirs who served on the Western Front from 1915-1918 as executive officer and later commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment. As a combat officer who fought in the trenches, Major Peirs’ letters not only share many enlisted men’s concerns, but also document some of his efforts to improve the lives of those under his command. Major Peirs’ letters both provide a unique insight into the experiences of a WWI battalion commander as well as highlight the emergence and importance of a new breed of leadership within Kitchener’s New Army.

Leadership was crucial to the successful operation of any military force throughout history, yet it was especially so in WWI. Massive armies coupled with modern weaponry and the beginning of combined arms operations meant that officers exerted an unusually large influence on the outcome of battles.<sup>2</sup> According to Sheffield, “The leader has two main functions. First he helps to create and sustain unit cohesion. . . . Second, the leader has to mould the cohesive group so that their goals are congruent with those of the greater organization, the army; in short, he has to lead the group in battle.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, officers were expected to create units that not only worked well together and possessed *esprit de corps*, but also could be utilized and led in combat to achieve the strategic aims of the overall campaign. In order to fulfill both of these tasks the pre-WWI British army relied primarily on instilling discipline within the ranks.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Sheffield. *Leadership in the Trenches Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 2000), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout much of the war, combined arms operations consisted primarily of infantry supported by artillery, though tanks would eventually be incorporated as well.

<sup>3</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 42-43.

While discipline often has the stigma of referring to punishment, it also includes such tasks as close-order drills, marching, and promotion of attention to detail through routine inspections. Sheffield writes, “Discipline cannot, of course, be measured purely by punishments. . . . Discipline was intended to promote unit cohesion and military efficiency by producing obedient men who took a pride in developing soldierly skills, and who did not give way to fear in battle.”<sup>4</sup> That discipline was of such importance in the pre-WWI Regular army makes sense given the fact that the enlisted ranks were comprised largely of uneducated and unskilled workers who were unfamiliar with army discipline. Discipline therefore provided a foundation of basic soldiering skills to enlisted men and conditioned them to take and follow orders. However, whereas strict discipline was utilized within the pre-WWI Regular army, the citizen-soldier make-up of Kitchener’s Army meant that the application of discipline would need to be reexamined as utilizing it in the same manner could have counterproductive effects.

In a letter to his father on November, 5, 1915, Major Peirs wrote of his commanding officer that “he is a very strict disciplinarian & I am afraid will be rather too much so, as the old sort of discipline is to my mind not required by the new Army, or anyhow not by our men. They have got enough to put up with without bothering them with small details.”<sup>5</sup> Historian J.G. Fuller corroborates Major Peirs’ view of discipline within the New Army writing, “the effect of the British army’s faith in spit and polish was greatly to antagonize the ordinary infantryman: ‘it never failed to annoy the rank and file who believed it made no contribution to winning the war and was designed only to rile them.’”<sup>6</sup> It is in Fuller’s statement that one can find a better understanding for the resentment of enlisted men against unnecessary discipline within Kitchener’s Army. Whereas the Regulars accepted discipline both as a punishment and means to further soldiering skill and bearing, New Army soldiers enlisted to fight in and win the war. Tasks that failed to explicitly pursue this aim were viewed poorly and seriously undermined enlisted personnel’s confidence in the leadership ability of the officer who ordered said task. Major Peirs notes just such an event in a letter to his father writing, “They sent me back yesterday to our base to be reviewed by [King] George & [Prince] Edward. . . . It was an infernal nuisance as I had to leave here at 5.30 & walk 3 miles to a horse, ride 7 miles... and back

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, November 5, 1915, private collection.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 48-49.

again.”<sup>7</sup> Major Peirs’ was further upset after learning that prior to the King’s arrival for the inspection, “They had a battalion out in the morning & cleaned up the roads & sanded the streets much to our disgust, as the battalion in question happened to be building our huts & he had much better have been going on with them & incidentally [King George V] would have had a better insight into things if he had seen the road before the mud was removed.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, while Major Peirs clearly dealt with officers too focused on discipline and “spit and shine” perfection, other officers “attempted to balance the need to instill discipline with the necessity to recognize that recruits of 1914 were often of a very different stamp to those of prewar days” and “recognized the need to create a more enlightened, ‘auxiliary’ style of discipline than that of the Regular army.”<sup>9</sup>

While the utilization of discipline was one aspect of leadership, which could either harm or hurt an officer’s reputation among his men, another was an officer’s role in maintaining and or improving unit morale. Within the BEF notes Fuller, “great efforts were devoted to seeing that the men’s comforts were looked after and recreations provided behind the lines.”<sup>10</sup> Major Peirs in a letter to his sister, Cecily, on November 3, 1915 recalls the opening of a “brigade institute” (a recreation center in modern parlance) writing, “I hear our new Institute opens tonight with a concert.”<sup>11</sup> In a letter to his father written on November 11, Major Peirs provides further description of the “Institute” writing, “I had a look round our Brigade Institute today, & it is beginning to go very well. They have started a coffee bar there, & they’ve got a piano, so really there is very little more the men can want.” Major Peirs continues rather sardonically, “They are also thinking of starting a Divisional Band, but I can hardly imagine that it will be much of a success. . . . Possibly however they meant to torture the Huns with it.”<sup>12</sup>

The importance of establishing areas in the rear in which soldiers could relax and recuperate was twofold. First, boredom was a chronic problem for soldiers along the Western Front. Even Major Peirs as an officer was unable to truly escape from it writing, “I have heard it said that life out here consists of long periods of absolute boredom with short intervals of

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<sup>7</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, October 28, 1915, private collection.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Cecily, October 28, 1915, private collection.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, November 11, 1915, private collection.

paralyzing terror, & I am beginning with the first condition now.”<sup>13</sup> Activities in the rear—including but not limited to recreational “institutes,” organized sports, or leave to visit home or cities in the rear—went a long way to reducing boredom and stress for soldiers of all ranks. Secondly, the British learned far more quickly than either the Germans or French that “few men could undergo the strain of front-line service indefinitely.”<sup>14</sup> Lord Moran who served as a Royal Medical Officer in the 1/R. Fusiliers postulated that, “a man has only a limited ‘bank’ of courage or ‘willpower’ and when in war it is used up, he is finished.”<sup>15</sup> As such by providing facilities for soldiers to psychologically recover in-between deployments in the trenches, men could refill this “bank” of courage and better stand up to the stresses of combat.

Providing facilities for soldiers to rest and recover was just one of many ways that officers could attempt to improve the morale of the men under their command. Another such method was used from 1914-1916 when it became “extremely common for officers to use their own money to buy gifts for their men.”<sup>16</sup> Major Peirs clearly partook in this tradition having written to Cecily, “I also had time to go round to the Field Force Canteen which has just opened a branch . . . it may be useful for getting things for the men.”<sup>17</sup> In another letter Major Peirs asks his father if he wouldn’t mind ordering and shipping several footballs for the men to enjoy after they get off the line.<sup>18</sup> What is most amazing about this is not so much the generosity of the officers towards their men—which contradicts most WWI British officer stereotypes—but the change that had come over the British officer corps. In *Death’s Men*, historian Denis Winter notes that in the Regular army prior to WWI, “NCOs trained and managed the men. Only when they were fit to respond to the word of command were they put in front of the officer, whose duty it was to regard them with total lack of friendliness or apparent interest.” Winter recounts how another Regular officer declared, “I have seen officers talking to men as equals. I won’t have that. In future, such men will be reduced to the ranks.”<sup>19</sup> While most officers, Regulars or those within Kitchener’s Army likely viewed themselves as superior to enlisted men, the very fact that that such vitriol subsided suggests a fundamental shift in the officer-enlisted man

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 140.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Cecily, November 3, 1915, private collection.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, November 15, 1915, private collection.

<sup>19</sup> Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), 65.

relationship, one that come about as a consequence of the massively expanded officer corps and eventual attrition of many of the pre-war Regular officers.

The ability to improve unit morale was a crucial skill of good leaders as it not only improved the lives of enlisted soldiers, but also improved combat effectiveness of the unit as well. Troops with high morale were willing to fight longer and harder against greater odds than troops that were exhausted physically and mentally. However, soldiers' morale was not the only factor in determining a unit's combat capability. An officer's ability to not only lead but also exude an aura of calm in an otherwise chaotic environment was crucial to maximizing a unit's potential. Alexander Watson, in his book *Enduring the Great War*, demonstrates the importance and perhaps even necessity of strong leadership on combat effectiveness by citing a German intelligence report from a raid on the I/Royal Irish Rifles: "3 Platoon, lacking leadership was quickly overwhelmed and surrendered, the soldiers in 1 Platoon, inspired by [Lieutenant] Hill, fought almost to the last man: 'the majority had to be shot down or bayoneted.'"<sup>20</sup> Like Lieutenant Hill, Major Peirs also inspired his troops during battle. After the Battle of Loos in late September, 1915, Private Lintott of the 8<sup>th</sup> Queens described his experience in the Battle of Loos to the *Surrey Advertiser* in which he told of how Major Peirs supposedly led the attack: "Our Major (Major Peirs) was magnificent. He led us in with a cigarette in his mouth, his walking [stick] in one hand and his revolver in the other. He is a jolly good fellow and brave too."<sup>21</sup> However, whereas Private Lintott recalled a rather positive and perhaps romanticized image from the battle, Major Peirs was far more somber in his recollection writing in a letter to his father: "We have had a most awful doing, & are reduced by half. . . . We went into action on Sunday with 20 officers & 10 came out. . . . The Brigade is reduced to about 1500."<sup>22</sup> In another letter written to his Mother on October 30, 1915, Major Peirs describes the advance.

Just after leaving the trenches we came under machine gun fire though the shells were coming over pretty thickly, & about 800 yards down the shells ceased to worry but then we caught it from a Battery of machine guns in a village on our flank which was intended to have been cleared. We got through this & eventually reached the wire in front of the German trenches, but they couldn't get through this so we had to get back. The Brigade suffered very heavily.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 232.

<sup>21</sup> Excerpt from "Our Major was Magnificent." *Surrey Advertiser*, October 9, 1915, private collection.

<sup>22</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, September 28, 1915, private collection.

<sup>23</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Mother, October 30, 1915, private collection.

While the Battle of Loos was a defeat for the BEF, the difference in what Private Lintott recollected about the battle and what Major Peirs remembered illustrates the impact a single officer displaying calmness and bravery in the face of enemy opposition can have on those under his command, or at least it would if not for one detail. While Private Lintott told the *Surrey Advertiser* that it was Major Peirs he saw with a cigarette in his mouth calmly leading the assault, Major Peirs insisted that it wasn't him. In a letter written to his mother on October 13, 1915, Major Peirs wrote, "As I told you the whole thing was flummery. If I get hold of Private Lintott I'll wring his miserable neck."<sup>24</sup> In another letter written on October 17 to his father, Major Peirs again shares a similar sentiment writing, "I am still worried about that letter of the idiot Lintott, & the worst is that I have got to live up to it!"<sup>25</sup> While this discrepancy certainly highlights the perils relying on first person accounts of chaotic events such as battles, it does not necessarily disprove psychologist S. J. Rachman's statement that "effective, calm leaders [make] important contributions to the control of fear."<sup>26</sup> Whether or not it was Major Peirs that Private Lintott observed is irrelevant. What is important is that Lintott observed an officer who was calm, in command, and leading the assault. That officer had such an impact on Lintott that he did not mention being scared, or even that the battle ultimately resulted in defeat. Instead he recalled the steely-eyed officer under whose leadership he and others went to battle.

While courage, the ability to inspire and improve morale, competence, and composure in battle were all crucial aspects of good leadership in the BEF, one final quality was looked for in the best officers: compassion. The ability for officers to understand what their men go through was crucial to understanding how best to serve their needs thus reducing stress and keeping the unit combat-effective for longer periods of time. A lecture given to future officers of the Artists' Rifles stated, "Your first job is to get to know your men, look after them, study their interests and show you are one of them, taking a share in their pleasures and interests as well as their work. If you do this you will find that when the time comes they will follow you to hell."<sup>27</sup> As such, many officers took a paternalistic attitude towards their men, standing up for them against unfair treatment, and seeking to ease in some small ways the burdens of war. Sheffield describes when

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<sup>24</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Mother, October 13, 1915, private collection.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, October 17, 1915, private collection.

<sup>26</sup> S. J. Rachman, *Fear and Courage* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1990), 50. Quoted in Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 58.



“on one occasion, the all-important rum ration failed to arrive at a TF unit. The battalion commander promptly handed over six bottles of whisky, which were ‘as precious as molten gold.’<sup>28</sup> Major Peirs also displayed a moment of compassion or at least understanding when following the breakdown and uncontrollable weeping of an 18-year old soldier whom Peirs suspected of being no more than 16 while on patrol in no man’s land, rather than report him for cowardice, sought an alternative writing in a letter to his father, “I may be able to evolve some other method of getting round the authorities. I find that Regular officers have no qualms in such cases.”<sup>29</sup> In what was arguably a significantly bolder act of compassion, during the German offensive in March 1918, now Lieutenant Colonel Peirs disobeyed direct orders to defend to the last an untenable position and withdrew stating after the war, “As I had still over 300 men left they would be of much better use in the line than in a German prison or dead, so I decided to disobey orders and retire.”<sup>30</sup> Despite falling back without orders, Lieutenant Colonel Peirs would be awarded the second bar to his D.S.O for the holding action at Le Verguier, which held up the German advance for several hours allowing British forces to begin to reconstitute the line farther in the rear.<sup>31</sup> But perhaps Peirs compassion is best summed up by his love of the 8<sup>th</sup> Queens and the men that served in it. After the battle of Loos, one of the few bright moments Peirs recalls is the performance of the soldiers under him. “The men were wonderful, & though caught in the flank by machine guns & later on by wire they went on as if on a field day.”<sup>32</sup> On March 21, 1918, when the 8<sup>th</sup> Queens came under heavy attack, Peirs was in the rear due to a septic foot “but, as soon as the unprecedentedly-ferocious barrage opened, no medical advice could keep him away from the Battalion he commanded.”<sup>33</sup> And finally in a letter written to his father from a hospital after being gassed, Peirs wondered what his battalion was up to writing, “I am rather wondering what the Battalion is doing. They can’t be far from the push mentioned in to-day’s papers, but whether they are in it I don’t know.”<sup>34</sup> Peirs’ pride in, love of, and concern

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<sup>28</sup> Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, July 2, 1918, private collection.

<sup>30</sup> "Lance Corporal John William Sayer VC 8th Bn The Queen's Royal (West Surrey) Regiment." The Queen's Royal Surrey Regimental Association, 2013. Last accessed April 17, 2014.  
<http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/vc/vc13.html>

<sup>31</sup> C.L.P, “Peirs of Le Verguier: Another Tribute to the Late Lieut.-Col H. J. C. Peirs,” newspaper excerpt, private collection.

<sup>32</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, October 28, 1915, private collection.

<sup>33</sup> C.L.P, “Peirs of Le Verguier Another Tribute to the Late Lieut.-Col H. J. C. Peirs,” newspaper excerpt, private collection.

<sup>34</sup> Hugh J. C. Peirs to Father, October 28, 1918, private collection.

for the 8<sup>th</sup> Queens was one of the recurring themes in his letters home throughout the entirety of the war. This compassion undoubtedly served him well as a leadership attribute as it both enhanced his command presence as well as convinced those under his command that he genuinely had their best interests at heart.

Leadership is in many ways an intangible trait as it encompasses a wide body of other significant traits: courage, empathy, intelligence, competence, and command presence to name just a few. In WWI, officers had to balance their role as disciplinarian, combat leader, and paternalistic father to those under their command. Therefore, while competence and calmness when in combat were important aspects of good leadership, they were by no means the only desired traits. Officers were now encouraged to get to know the men under their command, to come to understand their interests and needs so as to improve morale, ward off combat fatigue, and increase combat efficiency. What emerged out of this desire for a dual-role leader was a new officer for a new citizen-soldier army. Peirs was by no means the only officer to leave behind letters, a diary, a memoir, or biography, but through his letters and correspondence one is not only exposed to the experiences of a battalion commander, but of an exceptionally talented officer, and a role model who I am proud to call my great grandfather.

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