

# Henry Wilson

by Alvin Ng



## EARLY LIFE

Sir Henry Hughes Wilson, Baronet, Army Officer and politician, was born on 5 May 1864 at the family home of Currygrane, near Edgeworthstown, County Longford, Ireland. Born to James Wilson and Constance Grace, he was the second son of seven children.<sup>1</sup> Henry Wilson came from a modestly prosperous Protestant family whose fortune was made through a shipping business in Belfast by his great-grandfather, Hugh Wilson. The inheritance was then used to purchase estates and the Wilsons became established landowners.

However, in the long term, the family estate was only large enough to sustain his elder brother. With no prospect of inheriting the estates and stiff competition, Wilson pursued another traditional Anglo-Irish outlet, the Military. However, Henry Wilson failed the entrance exams twice at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, and thrice at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. In addition, the competition in the late 1870's was stiff, with nine applicants for every place at Sandhurst.<sup>2</sup> He eventually entered the army through the Longford Militia, which was called the 'back-door' in those days, and was then inducted

into the prestigious Rifle Brigade in 1882 as a Lieutenant.<sup>3</sup>

In May 1887, Wilson was posted to Burma along the Irrawaddy River to assist with imperial policing duties and was seriously wounded in his right eye and became an invalid for almost a year. During that time, he became engaged to Cecil Mary Wray (1862-1930). However, as an impecunious junior officer he did not have enough money to marry her. Wilson resolved to secure some sort of advancement in the army in order to marry his fiancé and thus began working for the Staff College entrance exams which he passed in May 1891.<sup>4</sup>

## THE RISE OF WILSON

Henry Wilson's successful completion of the two-year Staff College course in 1893 promoted him to the rank of Captain and it sparked a promising army career that began to soar. He forged ahead as one of the most competent staff officers of his generation, becoming the youngest staff officer of the intelligence department in 1894. In June 1897, Wilson assumed the position of Brigade Major of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade and sharpened his staff-work skills.

However, Wilson had hoped for a chance of 'real' soldiering and this materialised when he received mobilisation orders and appointment as Brigade Major of the Light Brigade to South Africa. The battle at Spion Kop and Wilson's idea of diverting artillery, allowed troops to cross the river at Trikhardt's Drift without impediment.

Therefore, the Light Brigade as a whole sealed its status as the best brigade.<sup>5</sup> Wilson's performance and contributions in the war were significant and this impressed his Brigade Commander Major-General Neville Lyttelton. Wilson was then appointed Assistant Military Secretary to Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief in South Africa and remained with him for a year in the War Office and Staff College.<sup>6</sup>

## WAR OFFICE

In the War Office, Wilson served as Assistant Adjunct-General for military education and training as well as Assistant Director of Staff Duties. The strong relationship with Lord Roberts, otherwise known as Field-Marshal Earl Roberts, proved to be valuable in his career advancement. Lord Roberts recommended Wilson as Commandant of the Staff College. In October 1906, Henry Wilson succeeded Henry Rawlinson as

Commandant of the Staff College with the rank of Brigadier-General. With that, Henry Wilson rose from the rank of a Captain to Brigadier General in 5 years and 1 month.<sup>7</sup>

The position as Commandant gave him the power to put theory into practice and potentially influence the staff 'doctrine' of the army. He envisioned the college to be a 'School of Thought' and stressed the importance of administrative competence. He was recognised as a spell-binding lecturer who transformed the college into an effective, modern 'war school' which helped to prepare the British army for war in 1914.<sup>8</sup>

## POLITICAL STANCE

He became Director of Military Operations (DMO) in August 1910, one of the three directorates alongside Staff Duties and Military Training within the department of Chief of the Imperial General Staff.<sup>9</sup> His role as DMO was probably the highlight of his career where his devoted alliance and strategies with the Anglo-French started to bear fruit.

It was in this position that Henry Wilson aimed to strengthen the relations of Britain with the Anglo-French against a potential war with Germany. He began plans for an expeditionary force to be deployed when war was activated. In addition, his knowledge of the French language and customs gave him an unparalleled and favourable

position to the French militaries and political elites.

Wilson was passionately committed to the political union between Ireland and Great Britain. His unwavering belief in the alliance with France saw him refining his ideas to convince the Committee of Imperial Defence on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1911.<sup>10</sup> Chaired by the Prime Minister and political elites, the eloquence and superior research of Wilson impressed the politicians who ruled in favour of the War Office. His stellar performance at the meeting catapulted him into closer relations with cabinet ministers and senior politicians. He was consistently consulted by the Secretary State of War and attended meetings with the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID).

In November 1913, Henry Wilson was promoted to Major-General and started dabbling in politics.<sup>11</sup>

## CURRAGH INCIDENT

The Curragh Incident of 20<sup>th</sup> March 1914, also known as the Curragh Mutiny, occurred in Curragh, County Kildare, Ireland. Wilson supported Ulster Unionist opponents of the Third Irish Home Rule Bill, which was due to become law in 1914.<sup>12</sup>

The Curragh was an assault on British democracy as well as Irish self-government. Henry Wilson was

noted as being 'anti-establishment,' which smeared his image in the eyes of Liberal politicians.<sup>13</sup> It was this incident that impeded his career advancement.

In August 1914, war eventually broke out and the successful mobilisation of the expeditionary force to France was his greatest military achievement. He became Sub-Chief of the General Staff and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) under Sir Archibald Murray. Together, they displayed a lacklustre performance during the Retreat of Mons.<sup>14</sup> This worsened Wilson's chances of military advancement. Murray's health broke down and Sir John French, Commander of the BEF was looking to replace Murray with Wilson. However, Wilson's involvement in the Curragh incident dashed his chances of becoming Chief of General Staff.

In January 1915, Sir William Robertson became Chief of Staff and Wilson was appointed Chief Liaison Officer to the French headquarters.<sup>15</sup> It amplified his position within the French military circle as he could superintend and facilitate high-level liaison with the French.

## THE FALL OF WILSON

At the end of 1915, Sir John French was replaced by Sir Douglas Haig as the Commander of BEF. Douglas Haig, however, liked Wilson and praised him for having a brilliant mind. Haig gave Wilson command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, a position of corps commander encompass the third level of the

high command of the BEF.<sup>16</sup> Wilson's years as a corps commander is said to illustrate his incapability as a fighting soldier, given that he had little regimental soldering experience. He was said to be a brilliant staff officer but not a great Commander.

This can be assessed in his poor performance in May 1916 when he temporarily took charge of the First Army. A surprise German attack captured three-quarters of a mile of his line near Vimy Ridge and a planned counter-attack with extra troops was rejected. His command began to wither away and his corps was transferred as a reserved army. By October 1916, Wilson had no more corps under his command and he saw his career floundering.

Fortunately, Lloyd George's appointment as Prime Minister jolted Henry Wilson's career back on form.<sup>17</sup> Lloyd George used Wilson as an alternative source of military advice and appointed him as Liaison Officer with French General Georges Nivelle. However, misfortune struck again when Nivelle's Offensive at Chemin des Dames failed and brought the house of cards down.<sup>18</sup>

## TWIST OF FORTUNE

All through 1917, Wilson pressed Lloyd George to improve the co-ordination of allied policy makings. He managed to convince Lloyd George to create a Supreme War Council (SWC) on 7<sup>th</sup> November

1917.<sup>19</sup> The SWC would supervise policy at high levels and to watch over the conduct of war on the Western Front. This was much to the delight of Wilson, given his intimate knowledge with the French Army. Wilson then wangled his way to become the British Permanent Military Representative on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1917.<sup>20</sup>

In January 1918, Wilson developed a scheme (backed by Lloyd George) for a combined general reserve of troops and this sparked a debate as to who should command it. Lloyd George seized this opportunity to replace William Robertson with his vehement objections to the scheme and appointed Wilson as Chief of Imperial General Staff (CIGS) on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1918.<sup>21</sup>

## CHIEF OF IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF

Wilson was now at the forefront of the British Military and strategic policy making and saw the Prime Minister on a regular basis. Wilson maintained good relations, sharing war strategies with the cabinet ministers and political elites, in which Robertson believed that civilians should not be in the loop. Henry Wilson displayed exceptional political skills and helped Lloyd George in drawing up the "Fontainebleau Memorandum" in March 1919, which laid down essential guidelines for a peace treaty with Germany.<sup>22</sup>

His role as the government's chief military adviser and his unequalled reputation in France to

oil the wheels of the Franco-British alliance helped win a victorious war against Germany. He turned out to be the most successful CIGS of the war and indeed, no other high-ranking soldier in the British Army could have made such a significant contribution both at home and to the Franco-British alliance.

In July 1919, at the age of 55, Wilson was promoted to Field Marshal, becoming the second youngest non-royal Field Marshal (after Wellington) in the history of the British army. He was the only man ever to rise from the lowest to the highest rank in the British army. A week later, Wilson was made a Baronet (a hereditary knighthood) and received a grant of 10,000 pounds.<sup>23</sup>

## SHELVED ASIDE

The end of European hostilities ushered in a new and uncertain road for Britain. After the peace conference in 1919, Lloyd George turned his attention towards domestic and foreign reconstruction. Therefore, the value of Wilson began to decline and again his career deteriorated.

Wilson was especially focused on the fate of Ireland. He was annoyed that the cabinet appeared to be abdicating their responsibilities in Ireland, while believing that the violence in Ireland should be calmed by martial law. The Irish Civil War

broke out as the Irish Republicans demanded an independent state. It was eventually won by the Irish Republicans with the aid of the British government.

The cabinet agreed to open formal negotiations with Irish Nationalist leaders which ended in the Irish signing the Anglo-Irish treaty on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1921. The treaty made Southern Ireland an independent state.

Henry Wilson opposed the treaty and felt it was a betrayal to the Irish State. He was disgusted when Lloyd George decided to negotiate with the Irish Nationalist leaders in mid-1921 and the two barely spoke throughout the rest of his time as CIGS.

Wilson retired in February 1922.

## POLITICIAN

Three days after he retired as CIGS, Wilson was offered an unopposed seat in Northern Ireland parliament. His high public profile in support of the Ulster Unionist Regime associated him with violence and oppression in the eyes of Irish Republicans. He wanted to overthrow Lloyd George's government.

It was apparent that Wilson's Irish roots remained important to him and he bitterly regretted partition and the breaking of the union between Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

Sadly, his political career was short-lived. He was assassinated by two members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who shot him nine times right at his doorstep. He died at a relatively early age of 58. He was accorded a state funeral and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral.

## CONCLUSION

Henry Wilson rose to the highest of ranks despite not being a 'fighting soldier.' He rendered three very distinguished services to Great Britain. Firstly, it was the excellent planning of the BEF in August 1914. Secondly, his vocal capability was instrumental in the political alliance with France. Lastly, it was his effort in creating a supreme war council and a unity of command in co-ordinating the strategies of the Allies in the war against Germany.

All these attributed to him as being a political strategist rather than a soldier. His stars were aligned perfectly to the right people and his persuasive skills brought him further than anyone ever did. Despite being kicked out of the military circle multiple times, he portrayed himself as a useful ally to the Prime Minister which saw him rise up again, this time in the political circle. It was a remarkable feat that was definitely unmatched and earned him the reputation of a 'political' general.

However, while the politicians themselves played an essential part in his advancement into the highest military level command, they also led to his decline as a senior commander on the Western Front and eventually, to his death. 🌐

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## ENDNOTES

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