Thomas Pilcher

Major @-@ General Thomas David Pilcher , CB (8 July 1858 ? 14 December 1928) was a British Army officer , who commanded a mounted infantry unit in the Second Boer War and the 17th (Northern) Division during the First World War , before being removed from command in disgrace during the Battle of the Somme .

Pilcher spent his early career as an infantry officer , first seeing active service on colonial campaigns in Nigeria in the late 1890s followed by field command in the Second Boer War (1899 ? 1902) , on which he published a book of lessons learned in 1903 . Following the war , he held a number of senior commands in India . However , further promotion was checked by his having come into conflict with his commander @-@ in @-@ chief , who regarded him as unsuited for senior command in part because of his writings ; Pilcher was a keen student of the German army and its operational methods , and an active theorist who published a number of controversial books advocating the adoption of new military techniques as well as an anonymous invasion novel .

On the outbreak of the First World War he was on leave in England , and eventually obtained the command of 17th (Northern) Division , a New Army volunteer unit . The division supported the initial attacks at the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 , where Pilcher again clashed with his superiors over his refusal to push on an attack without pausing for preparations , believing it would result in failure and heavy casualties . After ten days of fighting , Pilcher was sacked and sent to command a reserve centre in England . From here , he wrote a series of books before retiring in 1919 . He ran as a parliamentary candidate for the splinter right @-@ wing National Party in the 1918 general election , and continued a loose involvement with right @-@ wing politics which extended to membership in the early British Fascisti .

Pilcher had married Kathleen Gonne , daughter of a cavalry officer , in 1889 ; the marriage was strained , partly through Pilcher 's gambling habits and adultery , and partly through his dislike for Maud Gonne , Kathleen 's sister and a prominent Irish nationalist . The couple divorced in 1911 , having had four children ; one would later become a High Court judge , while another died on the Western Front in 1915 . Pilcher remarried in 1913 , and remained married to his second wife Millicent until his death in 1928 .

Early career

After being educated at Harrow School , Pilcher joined the Dublin City Artillery , a Militia unit , and from there transferred into the regular Army . He was initially commissioned into the 22nd Regiment of Foot , but transferred shortly afterwards into the 5th Fusiliers (later the Northumberland Fusiliers) .

Pilcher attended the Staff College , Camberley , passing the course in 1902 , and from 1895 to 1897 was deputy assistant adjutant @-@ general for Dublin District . From here , he took a posting in colonial West Africa in the late 1890s , where he was involved in raising a battalion of the West African Frontier Force and commanded an expedition to Lapai and Argeyah .

In 1899 Pilcher transferred regiments for the third time , to the Bedfordshire Regiment , where he took command of the 2nd Battalion . It served in the Second Boer War from 1899 to 1902 , during which time Pilcher was also given command of a column of mounted infantry , including a large contingent of Australians . He was promoted to Lieutenant @-@ Colonel on 20 October 1900 , and to Colonel on 29 November 1900 , and in 1901 he was made an aide @-@ de @-@ camp to King Edward VII . He returned to the United Kingdom in early June 1902 , and commanded regular brigades at Aldershot from 1902 to 1907 . From here , he was posted to India , where he held a variety of commands , culminating in that of the Burma Division , the senior military officer in the colony , from 1912 to 1914 . From 1914 to 1928 he was Colonel of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment . At the time of the outbreak of war , though still holding the Burmese posting , he was on leave in England .

Personal life and writing

In 1889 , Pilcher married Kathleen Mary Gonne , daughter of Colonel Thomas Gonne of the 17th Lancers ; her sister , Maude Gonne , later became a prominent Irish nationalist and mother of the politician and Nobel laureate Seán MacBride , as well as a close associate and muse of W. B. Yeats . Pilcher disapproved of his sister @-@ in @-@ law , particularly after her marriage to John MacBride , and relations were frequently strained ; however , the two sisters remained close . The couple would have a daughter , Thora , and three sons ? Toby , Tommy , and Pat . The elder son , Gonne (" Toby " , to his family) , became a Judge of the High Court of Justice , while Tommy would be killed at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle in 1915 , aged 21 .

Pilcher 's marriage was not a happy one ; a gambler and womaniser , he expected his independently wealthy wife to bail out his debts and turn a blind eye to his mistresses . The two gradually drifted into separate lives , and after finally confronted with an affair becoming public , Kathleen sued for divorce . The precipitating event was Pilcher having been named as co @-@ respondent in a divorce suit ; it was alleged that he had committed adultery with Millicent Knight @-@ Bruce , the wife of Major James Knight @-@ Bruce . The case dragged on through 1910 , delayed by Pilcher 's inability to return from India to attend the court . Pilcher did not contest his wife 's suit , and his own divorce was granted in 1911 ; he married Millicent , now divorced , in 1913 .

Pilcher was a particularly active observer of the German army , studying their military methods and attending German army manoeuvres . He would later publish a translation of Clausewitz . His writing was sometimes controversial , beginning with the 1896 Artillery from an Infantry Officer 's Point of View , in which he argued strongly in favour of adopting indirect fire techniques from concealed locations . Conventional doctrine held that artillery should be used to fire directly on its targets , as much from principle as from practical effect , with one prominent artillerist arguing that " firing from cover ... will destroy the whole spirit of the arm " . The argument ran for two years . As well as provoking debate , his writing proved problematic for his career ; in part because of a 1907 pamphlet , Fire Problems , he was twice blocked for promotion by the Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief India . In it , he had encouraged the development of machine @-@ gun tactics , and much heavier concentration and use of the weapons , an unusual position for the pre @-@ war period .

In 1906 , Pilcher had also published an anonymous invasion novel , The Writing on the Wall , which described a German invasion of Britain ; The war he theorised was an invasion by Germany followed by a rapid collapse of the British forces , particularly the volunteers , which he saw as unfit for purpose ; he advocated a form of conscription and a mandatory reserve system to strengthen the Army . The Spectator was dismissive , comparing the novel unfavourably to The Invasion of 1910 (" many useful hints are given as to practical lessons ... [but] the general plot entirely destroys any value it might otherwise possess ") and noting that the suggestions were " highly typical " , but that it was counterproductive to simply malign the Army and encourage the country to adopt German military policies . It was translated and published in Germany the same year , as Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin : Englands überwältigung durch Deutschland .

= = First World War = =

At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 Pilcher was on leave in England , and offered his services to the War Office , but was initially turned down as unsuitable for command by Sir John French ; however , in January 1915 he was appointed to command the newly formed 17th (Northern) Division , a New Army division predominantly drawn from northern England .

The division moved to France in July 1915 , where it held a sector near Ypres for the remainder of the year . It fought in an action at St. Eloi in March 1916 , following which Douglas Haig considered relieving Pilcher of his command ? he was not highly rated by his superior officers ? but in the end his corps commander , Hew Fanshawe , was sacked instead . Pilcher was perceived by many as old @-@ fashioned and disengaged , rarely visiting the trenches ; the journalist Philip Gibbs remarked on his " courteous old @-@ fashioned dignity and gentleness of manner " , but concluded simply that " modern warfare was too brutal for him " . Pilcher 's command was certainly slack ; an observer in the summer of 1916 , recently appointed to 17th Division as a staff officer , recalled finding a

completely disorganised unit , with no central co @-@ ordination , no effective provision of laundry or comforts for front @-@ line units , and described the divisional staff as simply " of no value " .

The 17th was deployed for the Battle of the Somme in July . It was engaged on the first day of the Somme , 1 July , where it supported the capture of Fricourt and lost 1 @,@ 155 men killed or wounded . Following this , it was involved in the capture of Contalmaison and the capture of Mametz , and had taken a total of 4 @,@ 771 casualties by the time it was relieved on 11 July . Many of these casualties stemmed from an unsuccessful attack on the " Quadrangle Trench Support " on 7 July ; the division had captured the main trench system on 5 July and Pilcher ordered it to pause and prepare for a subsequent assault . However , he was over @-@ ruled by higher command , who forced an attack the next night ? which failed ? followed by a daylight attack on 7 July , which Pilcher strongly protested but eventually acquiesced in . He ordered an attack with the minimal amount of men necessary , assuming it would inevitably be doomed to failure and high casualties , which outraged his superiors . Pilcher later wrote that " It is very easy to sit a few miles in the rear and get credit for allowing men to be killed in an undertaking foredoomed to failure , but the part did not appeal to me and my protests against these useless attacks were not well received . "

Following the division 's withdrawal , Pilcher was promptly sacked by his corps commander , Henry Horne , along with the commander of the neighbouring 38th (Welsh) Division ; Horne considered him lacking in " initiative , drive , and readiness " , while Haig simply dismissed him as " unequal to the task " of divisional command . Pilcher was succeeded by Philip Robertson on 13 July 1916 . He was later appointed to command the Eastern Reserve Centre at St. Albans , and retired from the Army in 1919 .

= = Later life = =

Following the end of the war , Pilcher contested the seat of Thornbury in the 1918 general election . He opposed the sitting Liberal member Athelstan Rendall , a Coalition Coupon candidate , representing the splinter right @-@ wing National Party of Conservatives opposed to the Coalition . He was heavily defeated , taking only 38 % of the vote in what had previously been a relatively close seat . He continued a loose association with right @-@ wing politics , chairing the anti @-@ Bolshevik National Security Union , and joining the anti @-@ socialist and protectionist British Commonwealth Union . When the British Fascisti was formed in the early 1920s , Pilcher became a member and an official of its London branch .

Pilcher died in 1928 , aged 70 , of pneumonia . He was survived by his second wife .

= = Publications = =

Pilcher published a number of books through his career :
Man?uvre block (1895)
Artillery from an Infantry Officer 's Point of View (1896 [?])
Some Lessons from the Boer War , 1899 ? 1902 (1903) ? digital copy
Some considerations connected with the formations of infantry in attack and defence (1906)
The writing on the wall [published anonymously as " General Staff "] (1906)
Fire problems (1912)
A general 's letters to his son on obtaining his commission [published anonymously] (1917) ? digital copy
A General 's letters to his son on minor tactics [published anonymously as " X. Y. Z. "] (1918) ? digital copy
War according to Clausewitz [edited , with commentary] (1918)
East is East : stories of Indian life (1922) ? digital copy